

SWORD & SORCERY

# Ravenloft

# GAZETTEER



VOLUME IV

A Ravenloft Campaign Setting Supplement

# GAZETTEER

## VOLUME IV

### Credits

#### Authors:

James Lowder, John W. Mangrum, Ryan Naylor, Anthony Pryor, Voronica Whitney-Robinson and Andrew Wyatt

#### Developers:

Jackie Cassada and Nicky Rea

#### Editor:

Mike Johnstone

#### Sword & Sorcery Managing Editor:

Andrew Bates

#### Art Director:

Richard Thomas

#### Layout and Typesetting:

Ron Thompson

#### Interior Artists:

Talon Dunning, Jeremy McHugh, Veronica Jones, Richard Thomas, Beth Trott and Jason Walker

#### Front and Back Cover Designer:

Ron Thompson

#### Additional Thanks

Based on the Original Dungeons & Dragons © rules created by E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and the new Dungeons & Dragons game designed by Johnathan Tweet, Monte Cook, Skip Williams, Richard Baker and Peter Adkison.

#### Special Acknowledgements

Andria Hayday (1st ed. design)  
Bruce Nesmith (1st ed. design)  
Tracy & Laura Hickman (original concept)



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# Foreword

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep.  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.*  
— Robert Frost, *Stopping by Woods on a  
Snowy Evening*



I now take quill to the fourth *Doomsday Gazetteer*. Upon its completion I shall have dedicated two years of my life to this ambitious project, traveling over half the lands of the Core. My prior research had well established my own remarkable talent and resolve, and when Azalin, my patron, miraculously returned from the Gray Realm in 755 BC, he approached me for an epic undertaking. The king of Darkon retained me to survey all the lands of the Core. For nearly a year my patron chose to remain anonymous, and to date I have yet to face him in person. I am unsatisfied with the scant reason he has given for sponsoring this ambitious project. Perhaps a monarch of his stature mistakenly presumes that he can treat a peerless scholar such as myself like a common scraping courtier.

Your sheer confidence in your erudition and thoroughness continues to provide me with much amusement, little scholar. Let us hope that you remain amusing rather than annoying.

In the spring of 756, my journey began, while this spring saw my path wind through Dementlieu, Mordent and Richemulot.

Now the chill in the air has returned, and it is with a leaden spirit that I turn my eyes once more to the Balinok Mountains. Borca lies before me, as well as all the other lands of the southwestern Core. The recent months have been bereft of word from my patron, which vexes me. Yet I have undertaken this journey out of my own intellectual curiosity and not due to any loyalty to or fear of my patron.

The leather and onyx bracer that I have worn — as my patron requested — since I departed Darkon is the source of my current unease. Since I cannot remove it, I have found ample time to dwell on its purpose. I have seen no evidence that it is a “protective” device as my patron claimed, meant to shield me from his enemies abroad. Significantly, my patron has not contacted me since I first donned this bracer nine months ago. This silence invites one of two hypotheses. The first possibility is that my patron’s gift serves as an arcane monitoring device. If this is indeed the truth, I wish he would simply say so and save me considerable effort, parchment and ink.

The second, more unsettling possibility is that my patron is waiting for some event that will set a grandiose plan in motion. Is he anticipating some momentous occurrence that will reveal the reasons for this fool’s errand? Is this bracer a poisoned seed that only blossoms when the proper conditions are met?

I am my own woman, my patron. I have received nothing from you but sinister commands and the wholesale suppression of information. Though the challenge of these *Doomsday Gazetteers* appeals to me, I have no particular attachment to your patronage. The fate of your schemes means nothing to me, and if I chose to abandon our arrangement, my work would suddenly be available to the highest bidder.

Such insolence; such lethal presumption. Rest assured, my little scholar, the benefits of my patronage will become apparent soon enough. Talent can take you only so far, and your luck, however remarkable up to this point, can last only so long.

## Report format



I shall preface each volume of the *Doomsday Gazetteers* with a summary of my standard practices and formatting. I shall continue to uphold the regular travel schedule I have maintained this past year, allotting roughly six weeks to study each country, taking more or less time as required. I shall then immediately relay each report back to Darkon upon its completion. When so-called “local color” proves intriguing, I will provide direct excerpts of my interviews with the native populace. For clarity’s sake, I shall present these anecdotes in illuminated sidebars.

Given that my travels are taking me farther and farther away from Darkon, I will no doubt become dependent on my patron’s lackeys to deliver these pages into his moldering hands. To avoid confusion, all reports adhere to the following standard format:

## Landscape

In this section, I present a naturalist’s view of each region, focusing on noteworthy features of its



landscape, flora and fauna. I also take note of important waterways and trade routes, and I describe prevailing architectural styles.

### Local Animals and Native Horrors

These sidebars present natural wildlife and unnatural monsters that are particularly well-suited for adventures in the domain; they are not exhaustive lists of all the creatures to be found. Creature lists are divided into “Wildlife” (common, natural animals) and “Monsters” (uncommon, unnatural threats). To make it easier to prepare an encounter quickly, creatures are listed in order of ascending Challenge Ratings. Any creatures in italics are under the influence of the domain’s darklord (see “Enchantment” effects the **Ravenloft Player’s Handbook**). Unless noted otherwise, all creatures can be found in the *Monster Manual* or *Monster Manual II*. Creatures marked with an asterisk can be found in **Denizens of Dread**. Creatures marked with two asterisks are included in the Attached Notes.

### History

As this letter marks the opening of a new *Doomsday Gazetteer*, I should once again address the frustrations of historical study. Objectively speaking, many lands in our world have existed for only a very short time. On those occasions when the Mists have parted, the lands they revealed have typically appeared fully formed and fully populated. The inhabitants of these new lands own full memories of lives well before the emergence of their home. In addition, their historical records often stretch back centuries. In short, dear patron, these folk believe themselves to be as real as you or I, and in truth I cannot disprove the claim.

Common wisdom holds that these new lands were simply “revealed” to the world, having existed all along while hidden deep in the Misty Border. Occultists in some circles, however, posit the existence of other worlds — the supposed origins of the “outlanders,” with which my patron is assuredly familiar. These occultists theorize that each of these realms was possibly drawn into our Land of Mists from one of these so-called outlander worlds.



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I once scoffed at such wild theories, but I have now come to accept them on a theoretical basis. Yet when one probes into the recorded history — or even living memory — of a region before its emergence, such history often proves to be vague, incomplete, or even self-contradictory.

This situation leads me to the disturbing hypothesis that many lands in our world were potentially created from whole cloth on the day that they first appeared in the Mists. Every aspect of the region's history, memories and lives predating that day may be nothing more than an unfathomably complex phantasm. I hesitate to guess at the power of the nameless forces capable of such creation, but the facts speak for themselves.

For the sake of clarity, I endeavor to establish a "seminal event" during which each land first emerged — or, perhaps, materialized. Following this seminal event, cross-referenced historical documents from surrounding lands establish the region's objective existence. I cannot confirm that anything before this seminal event actually occurred in any real sense. Therefore, although I include this "false history" in my accounts, I endeavor to focus only on those historical events that still resonate in the present.

The historical record of some countries reads as a chain of usurpers, one tyrant overthrowing the next. If one or more of the past rulers of a country proves particularly interesting, I provide a brief biography in an illuminated sidebar.

## Populace

In this section, I present a census taker's view of each land. My survey includes physical characteristics, fashions, demeanor, customs, cuisine and an overview of prevalent religions. I also present brief primers on the foreign tongues that I encounter.

## The Realm

In this section, I turn my eye to the flow of power and the manner in which it is exploited. First, I provide an overview of each region's formal government, including law enforcement and pre-

vailing opinions regarding current rulers. Next, I turn to economic power, including forms of currency, natural resources and notable industries. Lastly, I focus on matters of diplomacy, examining how each nation interacts with its neighbors.

In addition, my Requiem research and my year-long trek across the Core have taught me much about the true nature of power. My patron is of course intimately aware of the legends of what I term "dread lords": vile individuals who mystically bind themselves to their realms in the pursuit of power, receiving dire curses in return. It has come to my attention that my patron almost certainly already knows the identities of these dread lords, but to assuage my own intellectual curiosity, I shall continue to ferret out likely suspects whenever evidence presents itself. Though I suspect that my endeavors have something to do with these dread lords, in recent months I have come to believe that my patron's true motivation lies elsewhere. Without a doubt, he is searching for something, and I am his proverbial eyes and ears. If my patron would be so kind as to tell me what my quarry might be, it would save us both time and aggravation.

## Sites of Interest

Here I present a brief travelogue of my journey through the significant settlements and other intriguing locales in each nation, including noteworthy structures and inhabitants. To capture the flavor — and at times, annoyances — of my travels, I list communities and sites of more esoteric appeal in the order in which I visit them.

Simply for my own reference, I also include a few notes on food and lodging for each community; to be thorough, my surveys have often required convoluted routes and extensive backtracking.

## Final Thoughts

Upon the completion of my survey of each land, I compile my notes and conclude with my executive summary of the region as a whole. For my patron's benefit, I shall distill my impression of the land, including potential causes for concern and weaknesses that might be exploited.



## How to Use This Book

The book you now hold is an annotated version of the *Doomsday Gazetteer Volume IV*, compiled from the narrator's reports and correspondence. The bulk of this text is a travelogue, relating the narrator's experiences and observations during a six-month survey of five domains of the southwestern Core: Borca, Invidia, Verbrek, Valachan and Sithicus.

The narrator's patron, Azalin Rex, may also occasionally remark on the narrator's commentary, perhaps to offer a differing opinion, as can be seen above.

Sidebars such as this one present special game material that should be read only by the Dungeon Master. If you are a player, reading these sections may spoil some of the mystery your Dungeon Master has in store for you. Keep in mind that Rule 0 still applies; "Dread Possibility" sidebars in particular present secrets and adventure ideas that may or may not be true. The Dungeon Master should decide whether these scenarios apply to her campaign.

The final section of this book, Attached Notes, covers new game rules, magic, creatures, NPCs and locations. Whenever the narrator refers to attaching extra notes at the end of a report, game material on that subject can be found in the appendix. As with sidebars, players should refrain from reading the Attached Notes.

A single copy of each *Doomsday Gazetteer* exists within the game setting, written in Draconic and carefully encoded (requiring a successful DC 30 Decipher Script check to interpret). Heroes may use the information found within these pages, but first they must obtain the book. This should entail an adventure in itself. Heroes would most likely intercept a *Doomsday Gazetteer* report as it is being delivered to the narrator's patron. Of course, Azalin will seek to recover his property....

While the primary purpose of the *Gazetteers* is to enrich the Ravenloft setting, Dungeon Masters are just as strongly encouraged to plunder these books for chilling NPCs, locations and concepts for use in any horrifying campaign. The Realm of Dread is a jigsaw world, and each element can be easily imported to other settings, including those the Dungeon Master creates herself.

## Domains at a Glance

Each domain report opens with a brief account of the domain's vital statistics, in the following format:

**Cultural Level:** The domain's degree of technological and cultural development, ranging from Savage (0) to Renaissance (9). See Chapter One of the *Ravenloft Player's Handbook* for more details.

**Ecology & Climate/Terrain:** The domain's ecology rating (Full, Sparse, or No) and terrain types (see the *Monster Manual*). These factors determine the effectiveness of summoning spells within that domain. (See "Conjuration" effects in Chapter Three of the *Ravenloft Player's Handbook*.)

**Year of Formation:** The year on the Barovian Calendar when the domain first appeared.

**Population:** The domain's approximate total population. Undead and full-blooded Vistani are not included in population statistics.

**Races:** A racial breakdown of the domain's population. "Other" indicates a mixture of standard nonhuman races that are not explicitly cited, as well as a smattering of living, intelligent monsters that can pass for human. When more than one human ethnic group lives in the domain, these groups are also broken down in descending order of social dominance.

**Languages & Religions:** Local languages and religions are presented in descending order of popularity. The official or dominant language(s) and religion(s), if any, are labeled with an asterisk.

**Government:** The domain's officially recognized form of government. In Ravenloft, however, the true, hidden chains of power may take a significantly different form. Not all domains have a centralized authority, and some have no formal government at all. When applicable, sidebars also include notes and game statistics for typical members of local law enforcement.

**Ruler:** The domain's publicly recognized political ruler, should the domain have a centralized government.

**Darklord:** The domain's *true* master. Individual darklords are described in full in the Attached Notes.

## The Native Hero

These sidebars offer special notes and advice on creating PCs native to the domain. Such notes include the local role of the standard races and classes, recommended skills and feats that capture the domain's atmosphere, and examples of typical names.

## Law Enforcement

For quick reference, each report includes a brief sidebar offering game statistics for the typical member of local enforcement.

## Sites of Interest

Each settlement includes a sidebar presenting full community statistics. (See "Generating Towns" in Chapter 5: Campaigns of the *D&D Dungeon Master's Guide*.)





# Report One: Borca

*... if he who rules a principality cannot recognize evils  
until they are upon him, he is not truly wise.*

— Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*



**A**s the barge carried me up the Luna, I noted the colors of the forests — not the red and orange of turning leaves, but tree bark choked by bluish-gray lichens and the livid violet of lethal fungus glistening in the shadows. The Borcan woodlands exhibited an aura of lurking, subtle sickness.

Several hours after we crossed into Borca, we encountered a tiny thorp, little more than a mill and a river landing. As we neared, the waterwheel turned and dredged up a thick, slime-coated chain from the riverbed, stretching from one bank to the other. River blockades are not unique to Borca, but we crossed no less than four before reaching Sturben.

At each blockade, coarse thugs bearing the Borcan colors rowed out to inspect the craft. These militiamen cared only about the cargo manifest; their interest in the crew and passengers extended no further than the bulge of our coin purses. After each band of enforcers extracted their toll, they would inevitably suggest that we make additional donations to their coffers, assuring us that these would fund extra patrols to combat murderous brigands who preyed on river traffic. Otherwise, they would be unable to guarantee travelers' safety.

Once payment was extracted, the chain was lowered and we continued on our way. As I disembarked, I asked the captain if the river guardians were always so effective at driving off brigands.

He shook his head in disgust and said, "They are the brigands." Such is Borca.

## Landscape

**B**orca lies near the heart of the Core, its hilly terrain climbing to the northwest-ern edge of the southern Balinoks. Cool, pleasant summers fade into crisp autumns. In colder months, frigid winds and severe blizzards scourge Borca. In both culture and geography, Borca is the borderland between the genteel western lands and the backward, mountainous realms of the southeast. Its oddly pinched shape is a remnant of its past; modern Borca is a melding of two formerly independent nations. Until the Great Upheaval, everything northeast of Sturben fell within the borders of Dorvinia.

Borca's hills rise from the convergence of two major river valleys, the Luna and the Vasha. Western Borca rolls in gentle slopes and ridges covered in verdant forests and grassy dales. Most commoners here fled when Richemulot first emerged, chasing dreams of economic freedom. Many hamlets emp-

## Borca at a Glance

**Cultural Level:** Chivalric (8)

**Ecology:** Full

**Climate/Terrain:** Temperate forest, hill and mountains

**Year of Formation:** 684 BC (Borca); 709 BC (Dorvinia)

**Population:** 34,200

**Races:** Humans 95%, halflings 4%, other 1%

**Languages:** Balok\*, Mordentish\*, Falkovnian, Luktar, Halfling

**Religions:** Ezra\*, Hala

**Government:** Pseudofeudal despotism

**Rulers:** Sefeasa Ivana Boritsi; Sef Ivan Dilisnya

**Darklords:** Ivana Boritsi and Ivan Dilisnya

tied virtually overnight. Today, the west is home only to a handful of thorps, river landings and remote country manors. The typical Borcan considers life in the western woods to be scarcely short of exile. Most local landholders either control their lands *in absentia* from the east or live as recluses, shuffled away from the dance of Borcan politics due to their incompetence or eccentricity.

Two vast forests cover most of western Borca. The House of the Sages continues from Richemulot to cover the lands northwest of the Vasha and lower Luna, while the Blightwood covers the southwest. Cross-country travel is a chore, but Borca's deepest forests are often safer to traverse than its back roads. Small bands of Borcan enforcers patrol the holdings of their aristocratic masters, and these supposed guardians often deal in extortion. Additionally, I collected numerous rumors of Falkovnia using the sparsely populated wilds to conceal large troop movements to and from Invidia. These soldiers may murder witnesses to avoid the attention (and taxation) of Borca's masters. I can confirm that Borca has rebuffed numerous Falkovnian attempts to establish a trading enclave along the Luna's banks.





Borca is much more densely populated to the east, along its major trade routes. With sprawling farms, vineyards, grazing lands and private estates, eastern Borca's woodlands have been tamed, reduced to private hunting preserves for the elite or kept as sources of timber and rare herbs. The Viorea Forest lies at the heart of central Borca, wedged between the Vasha and Luna Rivers. These woods were once thick and unbroken, but the Crimson Highway and generations of development split the Viorea into halves, surrounded on all sides by settled lands, including the communities of Sturben and Levkarest.

The Balinok foothills grow more rugged as one travels east into the Dorvinian uplands, rapidly ascending to the ragged, barren peak of Mount Gries (4,480 ft.), the highest point in Borca. A thriving source of silver in centuries past, Mt. Gries is now a forlorn reminder of past glories. A thin ring of clouds continually obscures its peak, and the mountain is riddled with caves and exhausted mines, home to uncountable hordes of bats that plague the surrounding slopes.

Borcans are not overtly superstitious folk, but many trace their ancestry to Barovia, and a few latent fears remain. A swarm of bats can drain an

unsheltered animal dry of its blood overnight. When combined with the appearance of unusual strangers, these exsanguinations occasionally spur lethal vampire panics.

Evidence indicates that Mt. Gries may be the origin of a legend I have traced throughout the Balinoks concerning the Night Swarm, a monstrous swarm of bats so vast that their leathery wings block out the moon, so voracious they can exsanguinate entire herds of goats overnight. Borcans who live in the shadow of Mt. Gries are often as terrified of sunset as the most superstitious Barovian.

Mt. Gries divides the Dorvinian uplands into two regions. The Steading spreads out from the southwestern slopes, while the Doldak Heights extend to the northeast. The settlement of Vor Ziyden marks the heart of the Steading. The Ziyden Woods spread north, while the Tainted Wood sits across the Strecura River, stretching to the border. Together, these forests have gained a reputation that extends even into Barovia. Lethal herbs and fungi sprout in such remarkable quantities — even for Borca — that they reputedly leak toxins into the soil, warping the trees and tainting the crystalline mountain streams around them. The Steading



is too rocky and hilly to support widespread agriculture and is thus occupied by grazing lands and highly prized vineyards.

The mountainous and forbidding Doldak Heights are treacherous and barren, sparsely populated by mining camps that seldom see visitors. The Royal Grove, the private hunting grounds of Ivan Dilisnya, clings to the jagged earth just east of Lechberg. Informally, this forest is better known as the Twinwood. Most trees here have two trunks growing from a single root system. In many cases, one of the trunks is parasitic, growing strong while the other shrivels and dies. In other trees, the trunks spiral and twine around each other, as if frozen in the midst of a dance — or a fight for dominance. To the north and west, the Doldak Heights reach an abrupt end at the cliffs of the Shadow Rift.

Three major rivers tumble down from the Balinoks to the east, with mountain runoff bringing floods each spring. The Luna River flows from Barovia, winding through the country's heart before joining the Musarde in Richemulot. Fed by numerous lesser tributaries, the Luna is navigable throughout its entire length, forming a crucial trade route with the west. Only small craft can continue upriver past Levkarest, however.

The Vasha River is Borca's vital northern thoroughfare, linking Lechberg, Ilvin and Sturben before joining the Luna. Prior to the Great Upheaval, the Vasha originated on the northern slopes of Mt. Gries, flowing into G'Henna before curving back around into Dorvinia. The Shadow Rift severed that natural course; now, the upper Vasha remains a whitewater brook, but uselessly pours into the abyss of the Shadow Rift. The lower Vasha is low and sluggish, particularly above its main tributary, the Strecura River, where only minor brooks and springs feed its flow. In summer, the morass is a breeding ground for stinging insects. Ivan Dilisnya, however, funded the construction of a levee near the Vasha's new headwaters and a series of new aqueducts to swell the river enough to support small vessels, though large craft still risk running aground upriver of Ilvin.

Lake Srebro, Borca's largest body of water, is a crystal pool at the southern foot of Mt. Gries. The Strecura River rises from these headwaters, but flows directly between the toxic Ziyden Wood and the Tainted Wood, so its waters do not remain pure for long. The Strecura curves around Vor Ziyden, often passing between high cliffs, before ultimately

bolstering the Vasha. Its entire length is navigable by small craft.

Borca's water supply is fed by lesser rivulets and Borca's natural hot springs. The country is geothermally active, but does not suffer from earth tremors. Mineral waters boil up from the earth in the form of geysers and natural, eternally steaming cauldrons. The sediment in their sulfurous waters produces garish colors and stone formations resembling molten wax. Tight clusters of these hot springs — traditionally called hellspouts — are scattered randomly, even appearing high atop hills and submerged in riverbeds. These latter hellspouts are known as river devils for the way they churn the currents like frenzied sharks.

Common lore holds that ancient Borcans feared and shunned the hellspouts as lairs of demons, dragons and similar bogeymen. Centuries ago, the Borcans lost their fear and developed methods of safely harnessing the springs' thermal power. Most modern Borcan settlements cluster around hellspouts, and the Borcans' irrigation and water engineering techniques are quite advanced. Aqueducts feed their towns' water reservoirs, cramped drainage sewers shield towns from spring thaws, and many hot springs have been harnessed to heat greenhouses or create fountains and soothing baths. A few manors even boast hot and cold running water. These structures, however, incorporate the waters through iron pipes and springhouses. All attempts to build large structures directly atop the hellspouts have been doomed, with the seething waters quickly undermining the buildings' foundations.

*Such boiling vats could doubtless hold appeal for other cunning predators as well, to say nothing of those who wish to dispose of unwanted corpses.*

Every Borcan knows tales of the super-heated water boiling the flesh from a hapless victim's bones. The most dangerous hellspouts cannot even be seen. On rare occasions, a cauldron forms just beneath a thin, brittle, cooked crust of earth, which can collapse under an explorer's weight. When walking near a hellspout cluster, one should be wary of round, barren patches of earth or wisps of steam rising from the soil. Many Borcans report seeing strange lights and shapes in hellspout vapors, particularly near dawn and dusk. Although I





am inclined to ascribe these apparitions to natural gasses escaping from the springs, Borcans claim they are the tortured spirits of those who lost their lives to the searing waters and now want others to share their misery.

## Hellspouts

Cauldrons are always dangerous, but geysers present a threat only when they erupt. Some geysers erupt on a regular, predictable schedule, while others erupt once every 1d20 minutes. Once it erupts, a geyser continues to billow boiling water for 1d6 rounds. Its steam offers concealment as the spell *obscuring mist*, to a radius equal to half the geyser's height.

Boiling water inflicts 1d6 points of heat damage if it splashes a victim. If a victim is standing in the same 5-foot area as a geyser when it erupts, she suffers 5d6 points of heat damage per round of exposure. In either case, the victim can make a DC 18 Reflex save for half damage. If a victim is completely submerged in boiling water, such as a cauldron, she suffers 10d6 points of heat damage per round of exposure and does not receive a saving throw. Fire resistance is effective against scalding damage, but creatures of elemental water are immune. If a water elemental is conjured from a boiling water source, it temporarily retains that heat, inflicting an extra +1d6 points of heat damage with each of its natural attacks for 1d10 rounds.

Borca sports numerous winding country roads and a pair of true highways, which the Borcans keep passable and in good repair throughout the year. The Scythe Highway crosses south from Falkovnia into central Borca, gradually twisting to the northeast, following the course of the Vasha and connecting Sturben, Ilvin and Lechberg before reaching the gates of Degravo, Ivan Dilisnya's private estate. The Crimson Highway, Borca's most vital and heavily traveled trade route, enters from Barovia to the south, passing through the city of Levkarest before terminating at Sturben. In addition to these interior highways, the Old Svalich Road emerges from Levkarest on an easterly route,

passing through the dreaded Svalich Pass to link Borca to the distant Vaasi Plateau. To the north, the seldom-used Lech's Road cuts west from Lechberg to join the Seelewald Road in Falkovnia, where its name has been spitefully corrupted into the "Lecher's Road."

The Borcan militia stamps out banditry on the highways by hiring out mercenary escorts for merchant caravans, but lone travelers can seldom afford such protection. The corrupt militia inevitably collects its due, caring little whether it does so as guardians or brigands.

Borcan architects are widely and deservedly praised for their artistry, skill and discretion. Many Borcan homes contain one or more secret passages, ranging from long escape tunnels to concealed doors that open to reveal a privy or servants' staircase. Borca's architects occasionally accept commissions in neighboring lands; one can safely assume that all such structures contain at least one secret their owners did not want revealed to local builders.

Most homes and businesses are broad, massive buildings of whitewashed brick, with gabled, steeply sloped rooftops shingled in thin wood of charcoal gray and topped with slender, knobby spires. Most are two stories high, but a few reach three or four. Interior walls are plastered smooth, often painted in lush colors. Arching wooden trim of dark green or blue graces the doors and windows, usually carved with stylized vines and toadstools. Most large townhouses center around an open-air atrium overlooked by balconies supported by distinctive, rounded arches. These courtyards sometimes house a private garden or mineral bath and are traditionally where the master of the house first greets visitors (perhaps with a phalanx of crossbowmen watching from the balconies). Country manors are sprawling affairs, with an extended family, guests and servants living in separate, connected wings. The surrounding grounds divide into numerous, lovingly organized gardens. Many of the herbs, vegetables and flowers grown here are known for their medicinal properties.

Borcan settlements follow the same basic principles as individual buildings. Narrow, winding streets covered in smooth flagstones seldom see daylight, cast into shadow by the buildings' overhanging upper floors. These dark mazes connect the great town squares, which emerge as islands of light and warmth in contrast. Depending on their placement and purpose, these plazas may be home





to marketplaces, fountains, monuments, or scaffolds for public announcements and executions. Any Borcan community worth mention also has at least one public bathhouse. Anyone can come to these elegant and airy — but often crowded — structures to avail themselves of the hellspouts' recuperative sulfur waters.

Most settlements are walled, as are most country estates. The cities' fortifications all date back at least to the Terg Invasion, but are still maintained today due to widespread unease concerning aggressive neighbors. The walls of country estates are built to delineate property lines and dissuade casual trespassers. Shards of broken glass are often sealed in the mortar atop these walls, but they present a minor obstacle to the dedicated intruder.

## flora

Hardwoods (beech, oak, cherry, hazelnut, chestnut) predominate in the hill country of western Borca, while evergreens dot higher elevations. Throughout warmer months, the forests produce a myriad of fruits and nuts and countless varieties of wildflower blanket grassy dales. A blight of blue-gray lichen afflicts most Borcan trees. While harmless to most forms of life, the lichen slowly chokes tree roots, stifling their growth. Should a tree reach its hundredth year, its stunted roots can usually no longer support its weight or supply it with nutrients. Such trees usually collapse to rot on the forest floor. The lack of ancient, immense trees allows sunlight to pierce the canopy much more effectively, dispelling the most ominous shadows and fostering a dense, thorny undergrowth of tangled brambles and ivy. Intriguingly, the blight shows no sign of spreading beyond Borca. Even though the House of the Sages and the Blightwood stretch into neighboring lands, the blight can provide the observant traveler with a telltale clue that he has crossed the border.

The rich soil and rotting tree trunks provide a fertile perch for countless spongy mushrooms and toadstools. The sheer diversity of poisonous plant life is astounding. Borca's plants lack the truly predatory nature of Forlorn's flora, but they are no less dangerous. Fortunately, most poisonous Borcan foodstuffs are marked by a telltale purplish tinge. The correlation is useful as a general guideline, but not all that is violet is deadly and not all that is deadly is violet.

Borcans are skilled herbalists, well schooled in the specific properties of individual plants and

fungi, but a few odd cultural traits have emerged. Purple, not black, is considered the color of mourning here, and people with violet eyes are often assumed to be untrustworthy. Plums are considered lethal, a reputation arising from dew plums, a dangerous look-alike that grows wild. Connoisseurs rightfully laud the quality of wines pressed from Borca's vineyards, yet even grapes are not above suspicion. On rare occasions, Borcan wines may spontaneously spoil, becoming deadly toxins, particularly if transported out of the country.

Two plants are of particular interest for their frequent appearance as symbolic motifs in the Borcan arts. The exquisitely sweet passionflesh fruit resembles an eggplant but is marked by deep purple and crimson striations. Regarded as an aphrodisiac, its pulp is addictive and mildly toxic. One slice does no real harm, but folk with uncontrolled appetites have died for its lethal pleasures. Passionflesh fruit is thus used to symbolize illicit love. In some circles, particularly among the darkly attractive courtiers of Lady Ivana Boritsi, erstwhile lovers who must remain chaste sometimes feed each other passionflesh fruit sections to sate their longings.

Caldura roses, notable for their long thorns and pink-tinged blooms of white, exhibit a delicate aroma that reputedly drives out disease and similar bodily taints. If a caldura rose is severed from its roots, however, its violet sap spoils, subtly subverting the aroma's properties. Cut caldura roses apparently drain the vitality of those who linger nearby. Caldura roses often symbolize marriage when intact, but adultery when cut.

## fauna

Borca's wildlife is less dangerous than its toadstools. As a heavily settled region, large predators are rare. Wolves are known to creep into the Blightwood from Verbrek, and the occasional bear wanders through the woodlands. The bats of Mt. Gries darken the nocturnal skies of eastern Borca, but their nefarious reputation exceeds the actual damage they cause. Borca's hills and forests are home to countless varieties of crawling insects and reptiles, some nearly as long as a human. Travelers should beware of any creature with luridly colored natural markings.

Borcans have little fear of the natural world, but they do have an avid appetite for the monstrous legends of neighboring realms. Superstitions often simmer beneath the surface until some disturbing



## Local Animals and Native Horrors

**Wildlife:** CR 1/10 — bat; toad; CR 1/8 — rat; CR 1/6 — donkey; raven; CR 1/4 — cat; owl; pony; weasel; CR 1/3 — dog; hawk; snake, Tiny viper; CR 1/2 — badger; eagle; snake, Small viper; CR 1 — dog, riding; horse, heavy; horse, light; horse, light war; hound, mastiff\*; mule; snake, Medium viper; wolf; CR 2 — bear, black; boar; CR 4 — bear, brown.

**Monsters:** CR 1/8 — monstrous centipede, Tiny; CR 1/4 — goblin; kobold; monstrous centipede, Small; monstrous scorpion, Tiny; monstrous spider, Tiny; CR 1/2 — geist\*; monstrous centipede, Medium; spider, hairy†; CR 1 — bakhna rakhna\*; bat, carrion\*; homunculus; CR 2 — dire bat; CR 3 — drowning\*; fungus, violet; remnant, aquatic\*; CR 4 — gargoyle; lycanthrope, werebat†; CR 5 Arak, shee\*; odem\*; wraith; CR 6 — corpse candle\*; ermordenung\*; red widow\*; will-o'-wisp; CR 7 — ghost; spectre; CR 8 — treant, dread\*; CR 9 — valpurleiche\*.

† See *Monsters of Faerûn*, published by Wizards of the Coast.

## Borca in the Spirit World

Most spirits haunting Borca's Near Ethereal died in agony, the victims of venomous duplicity or scalding hellspouts. These ghosts may choose the following as one of their special attacks:

*Death Rattle (Su):* With a successful melee touch attack, the spirit can affect a single living creature with the symptoms of the attack that took its life. The specific attack varies. For example, a ghost that died by poison inflicts a single dose of that poison; a ghost killed with a weapon rolls the same amount of damage used in the fatal strike (such as 1d10 for a halberd attack); a ghost submerged in boiling water inflicts 10d6 points of heat damage. The victim is entitled to a Will save (DC 10 + 1/2 the spirit's Hit Dice + the spirit's Charisma modifier); if successful, the death rattle has no effect. If the save fails, the wound seems entirely real to the victim, though other creatures cannot sense it. The death rattle remains an illusion, and cannot truly harm the victim. All hit point damage is automatically converted to nonlethal damage, and all other effects (such as ability damage) vanish after a number of minutes equal to the ghost's rank. If a death rattle reduces a victim's Constitution score to 0 or below, she falls unconscious for the effect's duration. A ghost can use its death rattle attack a number of times per day equal to its rank.

event brings their sleeping terrors gushing forth. When Borcans work themselves into a panic, they speak of shapeshifters living in their cities, goblins roaming the west, evil fey from the Shadow Rift, and hideous, man-eating ogres out of Invidia. When calm is restored, few Borcans worry about such "legions of the night" — the Church of Ezra's term for the forces of evil in the world. They have more pressing concerns. A musician in Lechberg explained the true focus of the typical Borcan's dread: "There is no demon so cruel, no dragon so rich, no wolf so ravenous as a Dilisnya."

Although few Borcans admit to fearing monsters, they hold strong beliefs concerning the spirit world. Many old homes and lonesome places here are said to be haunted by unhappy spirits. I suspect a hint of Mordentish cultural influence, though the Borcan tradition of ghost stories exhibits little of the elemental dread found in Mordentish folklore. Borcans, perhaps through ignorance, view the incorporeal undead as harmless oddities or amusing curiosities, not true threats. Borcans, however, do warn that the restless dead have been excluded from Ezra's grace and are considered potentially dangerous. Borcans believe that all spirits arise from sudden or violent deaths. Such ghosts obsessively seek vengeance for the betrayals that ended their days, but are unable to affect the physical world. When an angry spirit demonstrates that it can lash out at the living, this jaded dismissal of the dead quickly evaporates. I collected numerous outlandish ghost stories, such as those of the Pale Hog, the Headless Horseman, and the Scalded Waif. The most notorious was that of the House of Lament in the Blightwood. This grim manor, permanently held in the grip of autumn, allegedly appeared from nowhere eleven years ago and claims the lives of almost all who enter.

## History

**B**orca's history is deeply entwined with that of its neighbor, Barovia, and records I studied in Barovia's Teodorus Archives provide invaluable insights on Borcans' commonly accepted truisms. Most intriguingly, records predating 351 BC usually refer to Barovia's neighbor as *Borcha* or *Borjia*. "Borca" is a Barovian distortion and likely indicative of the pronunciation used by the Dilisnyas after their centuries of Barovian exile.



**Distortion? Bah. More taunting lies from the tormentors that built this wretched prison. No doubt the true "Borjia" still lies beyond the Mists, untouched and pristine.**

Having already presented my patron with an account of Borca and Barovia's mutual false history in my initial report last year, here I revisit a few crucial events from the Borcan perspective. The oldest extant records of Borjia depict it as a collection of independent city-states. A rising class of merchant guilds increasingly controlled the coffers and the true reins of power. When the nation of Barovia was founded in 1 BC, the city-states were united under the von Zarovich banner, and several mercantile families used their wealth and influence to obtain hereditary, aristocratic titles. Among these houses were names such as Cosco, Boritsi and Olszanik. The Dilisnya family of bankers rose to power at this time, though centuries would pass before their treachery distinguished them from their peers. The history of Borca is the tale of this infamous clan.

The portrait of modern Borca emerges in the War of Silver Knives. A century of bickering and perceived insults between the competing Dilisnya, Katsky and Petrovna families eventually coalesced into a heated dispute over the rights to the then thriving silver mines of Mt. Gries. In 314 BC, an unknown party murdered Izabela Dilisnya, the aged matriarch of her line, and her son Pidlwik swore bloody vengeance on his family's rivals. For the next two years, the noble courts of Barovia were beset by a vicious, escalating cycle of revenge killings. This was a war fought with assassins. Count Barov von Zarovich commanded an end to the strife in 316 BC, soothing the feuding families by granting them new lands.

The conflict left Barovia ill prepared to face the Terg onslaught that soon came and left Pidlwik Dilisnya nursing a private grudge against Barov, believing his mother's murder demanded much greater recompense. Pidlwik's resentment and power-lust infected his children as well, including his youngest, Leo, born in 320 BC, the year of the Terg invasion.

Then as now, Borjia lay west of the Barovian Balinoks, and the Tergs invaded from the east. The barbarian hordes conquered the entire nation with terrifying speed, shattering its power, but Barovian

armies pressed the Tergs back from the Borjia region by 325 BC. While Borjia sat behind the battle lines in relative safety and rebuilt, war continued to rage throughout the Balinoks for two more decades. Borjian craftsmen supplied the Barovian armies with all their needs and grew rich in the bargain. Petre Raluca's account of the war in *The Exile and the Return* reads:

*Resentment pecked at living hearts as ravens worried at the dead. Old women complained, "If your sons have spilled their blood, you are of Barovia. If your coffers have spilled their silver, you are of Borca."*

In 347 BC, Strahd drove out the last of the Tergs and claimed the Balinoks for himself. Borjia prospered as the rest of the nation struggled to rebuild. Pidlwik Dilisnya died in his bed, his dreams of vengeance unrealized, but his son Leo — now a man with a wealth of ambition and a paucity of pity — set forth on a murderous plot to ensure that the von Zaroviches never regained their dominance.

In the summer of 351 BC, the aristocratic families of Borjia left their estates to converge on Castle Ravenloft for the wedding of Count Strahd's youngest brother. The nobles were expected to return within a matter of weeks — they would be absent for centuries. Included in Leo Dilisnya's entourage were a score of disguised assassins concealing poison-tipped crossbows. Leo's killers came to the wedding intending to wipe out Strahd's kin and all of the Dilisnyas' rivals to the last, cementing his own family's power.

The resulting massacre is the stuff of legend, a nightmarish tale told throughout the Core. Mists swept across the land, cutting off Barovia from the rest of the world and engulfing the country in a haze that would not lift for centuries. A mere handful of guests escaped Castle Ravenloft, fleeing in terror with tales of butchery and rampaging monsters. Leo himself feigned illness and excused himself from the festivities before the ambush began, but he left all his relatives behind, unwitting sacrifices to cover his tracks. A paltry number of Leo's kin lived to see another dawn. Today, all Dilisnyas can trace their ancestry back to Leo himself or his eldest brother Reinhold, whose wife escaped with their children. All other branches of the family tree were sheared away.

Although Leo Dilisnya is reviled as a villain in Barovia, few Borcan commoners know of his role in the massacre. The Dilisnyas themselves consider him a source of shame, a man destroyed by over-reaching ambition; they rarely speak of him. Rumors







have arisen that Leo was a bastard, possessing no true Dilisnya blood. Of course, these dire accusations are more common on the side of the family that is not directly descended from him.

*A pity for the usurper's sake that he was unable to mold his reputation from the grave, unlike his vainglorious Barovian rival.*

The few surviving Dilisnyas fled from the wrath of the von Zaroviches. Leo coordinated the diaspora of his kin, helping them establish new identities in remote mountain villages. This done, he faded into obscurity, his final fate unknown. The Dilisnyas' eccentric reputation arose from the generations of seclusion that followed. Family records indicate that the false names and secrecy resulted in occasional, unintentional inbreeding, thinning the bloodline. Madness did not dull the Dilisnyas' keen minds or ruthless natures, however, and they slowly rebuilt a small measure of their former fortunes.

The Dilisnyas continued to spread to new lands as the Core expanded. Once safely beyond Barovia's borders, they reestablished their true identities and connections. Leo's descendants migrated west, primarily settling in rural Mordent, where the local gentry viewed them with much suspicion. One such scion was Lev Dilisnya, born 300 years after his infamous ancestor. Today, Lev is significant primarily for two of his six progeny: a son, Yakov, born in 641 BC, and a daughter, Camille, born in 662 BC.

At the age of twenty-five, Yakov suffered a seizure while out riding. Feverish and raving when found, upon regaining his wits he insisted that he was the chosen messenger of a goddess named Ezra. Yakov wrote what is today called the *First Book of Ezra* from his sickbed, then spent years unsuccessfully trying to attract worshippers to his private cult. His family considered him deranged but harmless, hoping he would prove the most eccentric member of his generation. Camille would prove them wrong. She was lovely and cultured, but jealous and prone to bouts of rage. In 681 BC, Camille married Siegfried Grymig, a minor Barovian *boyar*. Three years later, she caught him in an affair. Poison had been a subtle tool in the Dilisnyan repertoire since the War of Silver Knives, and Camille was an eager student. She murdered the lovers with a gruesome poison of her own design.

Like many of the deaths that plague this historical account, the murders were unsolved at the time but are now open secrets.

Camille's parents shipped her off to distant kin in Invidia to evade the Mordentish authorities. Her coach lost its way in a thick fog as it rumbled across the countryside. Camille emerged from the Mists in an unfamiliar land, which the locals called "Borca." Camille Grymig's rediscovery of her ancestral homeland is the seminal event that marks Borca's appearance in the Core. The Borcans acknowledge this date as well, believing that the same curse that fell on Barovia doomed their nation to 333 years of bondage within the Mists, completely isolated from the outside world. As the legend goes, only a drop of true Dilisnya blood upon Borcan soil could once again win their freedom. Records of the years 351-684 BC are suspiciously spotty, but indicate that this so-called "Vacancy of Power" passed remarkably quietly. In essence, Borca simply waited for the Dilisnyas to return.

Word of Camille's entourage quickly spread. A group of bankers and guildsmen soon presented themselves as the regents of the Dilisnya holdings, the descendants of the original seneschals appointed to watch over the departed nobles' estates. The regents had faithfully executed their duties during the Vacancy, craftily protecting — even expanding — their masters' properties. If Camille were indeed a blooded Dilisnya, she would now inherit all. Camille thus submitted herself to a long series of painful tests to prove her identity.

One regent, however, had developed a taste for power and sought to cheat Camille. She discovered the banker's plan to falsify the tests and sent a basket of ripe fruit to his home. The delectable gifts contained a slow, lethal poison, taking the lives of the traitorous banker and his entire family. Duly warned, the remaining regents confirmed Camille's identity and handed over the deeds. Camille Grymig had indeed inherited *everything*: she now owned Borca in its entirety.

Ruling as the sole, uncontested aristocrat in Borca, Lady Camille invited her scattered family to join her. Most Dilisnyas jumped at the invitation. As they converged, the Dilisnyas brought with them cultural traits and economic ties from half the Core. Within a decade of its emergence, Borca had firmly established its reputation as a cosmopolitan — even decadent — center of trade.

Lady Camille proved to be a competent ruler, frequently relying on her family's counsel. Her





closest advisor, her half-brother Yakov, still scabbled to establish a following for his goddess. Yakov proposed the Church of Ezra as a tool to control the hearts of the masses, but cunningly manipulated Camille toward his own ends. He persuaded Camille to sponsor the construction of a grandiose temple despite her utter lack of faith. Ground was broken for the Great Cathedral in 685 BC. Yakov ministered to the workers as they laid the temple's foundations, and although he failed to find an audience in Mordent, the downtrodden peasants of Borca responded to his teachings. Within a decade, the religion had spread throughout the country. The anchorites started holding services in the Great Cathedral's rising shell in 695 BC, and by the time the final stone was set in place just twelve years ago, the Church of Ezra had become a major power.

Due to her lethal temper, Camille was never popular among the members of her court. Forced to fend off numerous minor coups and infidelities during her reign, she particularly resented Yakov's growing popularity, eventually seeing his divine delusion as a challenge to her power. She married three more times during her life; all three unions ended in death and recrimination. She took her second husband, Klaus Boritsi, in 688 BC and bore him three children before she learned that he had taken a commoner mistress. She poisoned them both in 697 BC, then married Stephan Taroyan within the year. He too took a mistress and soon fled the country. In 698 BC, Camille entered into her fourth and final marriage, to Oleh Fortich. Soon after the wedding, Fortich attempted to murder Camille, but she turned the tables. In a desperate bid to save his life, Oleh confessed that he was a pawn and that her entire family had conspired to kill her. Whether this accusation was actually true is moot.

Camille poisoned Oleh. Then she poisoned everyone at his funeral. The killing spree nearly wiped out her entire branch of the family. The most significant victim was undoubtedly Yakov Dilisnya, by now the first Praetorius of the Church of Ezra. Rumors of Camille's guilt spread like wildfire, and Ezra's followers rioted in the streets. Camille's remaining advisors warned her that she must make amends to prevent a full peasant revolt; the murder had transformed the politically neutral Church of Ezra into the threat Camille had feared.

Camille publicly disassociated herself from Yakov's death, donated enormous sums for the

cathedral's construction, and offered to erect a memorial statue of Yakov on the steps of the Great Cathedral. Church records I examined in Mordent, however, indicate that the gifts came with strings attached. Camille privately warned the anchorites to do nothing to stir insurrection and that refusing her gifts would wreak dire punishments. Her public acts of contrition and mourning assuaged the commoners just enough to end the riots, but the statue would have entirely unexpected results, exposing a brewing rift among the clergy.

In the ecclesiastic debates now known as the First Schism, the majority argued that the Church's very survival depended on keeping Lady Camille and her ilk appeased, even arguing that Camille played some part in Ezra's Grand Scheme. The minority faction, led by Sentire Felix Wachter of Sturben, insisted that erecting a monument to Praetorius Yakov, a mortal man, before Ezra's own cathedral was complete blasphemy — a clear indication that the Church of Ezra had become too embroiled in materialistic concerns. In a momentous decision, Wachter's faction broke from the Home Faith and retreated to safer shores in Mordent, where Bastion Sarlota Otrava, a Borcan expatriate, today oversees the flock. The rift between Ezra's first two sects would take a decade to heal.

Any additional Borcan thoughts of revolt were stifled by Falkovnia's massive — if futile — invasion of Darkon two years later, marking the beginning of the Dead Man's Campaign. Borcan eyes fearfully turned to their northern neighbor, wondering if and when Drakov's aggression would turn to them. Borca had not seen battle since the Tergs, but the landholders now raced to repair town battlements. Drakov sent a small force into Borca in the fall of 706 BC, presumably expecting little resistance. A single soldier managed to stumble back to Falkovnia, his flesh bloated with toxins.

From the Borcan point of view, the Widow's Massacre was over before it began. While Drakov disparaged Borca's militia and female ruler as weak, he never concerned himself at all with the Borcan merchants operating in Falkovnia. Merchant, diplomat, spy — these words are interchangeable in the Borcan purview. As the Falkovnian troops stormed across the border, their food supplies had already been poisoned. Falkovnia would not intrude on Borca again.





*The tactics of the War of Silver Knives have not changed, it seems. Borcans always aim for the back.*

Borcans spent the next decade in a state of dread, likely the root cause of an alarming number of monster panics that claimed the lives of numerous scapegoats. The elite lived in fear of Camille's lethal outbursts, while Drakov's shadow loomed over all. Borca's economy remained steady, but Lady Camille's reign was still undermined by a string of unorganized attempted coups and assassinations. More sensible landholders bided their time, awaiting the day when Camille finally fell.

Ivana Boritsi, Camille's eldest child and heir, was considered a lovely girl, but starry-eyed and starved for affection. Her family's advisors expected her to be easily manipulated once she rose to power. Ivana's dreamy demeanor changed starkly in 706 BC, following the death of a paramour. Ivana threw herself into Camille's lessons on herbalism, alchemy and poison craft. Five years later, it is widely believed, Ivana used those skills to take her mother's life.

Ivana Boritsi inherited her mother's holdings and powers without incident. Rumors of the girl's complicity in her mother's murder were bandied about, but the elite landholders were glad to be

done with Lady Camille. The attempted coups stopped. Young Lady Ivana fulfilled her courtiers' expectations, showing little interest in the daily responsibilities of rule. Her advisors were happy to assume greater responsibilities. Ivana's most significant change to her mother's rule was the creation of a Borcan aristocracy from whole cloth, a decidedly eclectic class system. Although this appeased the elite, she also raised taxes significantly to support her lavish lifestyle. Borca's government had stabilized, yet its new ruler was sapping the strength of its economy.

If any of Borca's new nobles feared for their safety under Camille's heir, they had only to look to Lady Ivana's distant cousin, Ivan Dilisnya, to know that their lot could have been much worse. Ivan and Ivana were both born under the same new moon in 689 BC. Many folk still consider them soul mates, calling them the "Dark Twins." Ivan was unlikely to inherit anything of significance, but many courtiers mused that he was heir to Camille's madness. Even as a child, Ivan was surrounded by suspicious deaths and was unnaturally fond of his older sister Kristina.

When Ivan murdered Kristina and her husband in 709 BC, his own family pursued him into the foggy night. As dawn burned the mists away the next morning, a new realm had reshaped the Core. Ivan Dilisnya's flight from justice shares intriguing parallels with that of Camille before him. Some-

### **former Darklord: Camille Boritsi**

Camille Boritsi ruled Borca from 684711 BC. Like her daughter, Camille was the Borcan epitome of feminine beauty, but she aged normally. She earned her domain for fatally poisoning her first husband and his lover. The Dark Powers gifted Camille with the ability to create any poison she could imagine, even those with supernatural effects, but Camille was not herself immune to poison. The Dark Powers cursed Camille to be betrayed by every man who gained her trust. Her life was punctuated by an endless string of cheating lovers and backstabbing courtiers. Ironically, because she always suspected the motivations of her half-brother Yakov, he remained true to her to the day she killed him.

Camille had been jealous from childhood. She mocked the concept of romantic love, yet any hint of adultery would launch her into murderous rages. When Camille secretly discovered that her second husband — and father of her three children — was dallying with her handmaiden, Camille gave her servant a gift of aromatic body oils. When the lovers next fell into each other's embrace and used Camille's present, the oils caused their flesh to meld together. After a subsequent flurry of ruinous, politically motivated marriages, Camille reverted to the Boritsi surname and swore off all further unions entirely, poisoning any man who dared to appeal to her heart. So intensely did Camille despise the men in her life (even her sons), that she never suspected her *daughter's* resentment would bear deadly fruit.





how, his presence revealed more of ancient Borjia, this time the lands surrounding historic Mt. Gries. Ivan claimed the deeds to the entire demesne, which he then renamed "Dorvinia" after a distant ancestor. In an intriguing wrinkle to Dorvinia's false history, Dorvinians claim that their lands had lain next to Borca all along. To this day, old Dorvinians obstinately insist that their land emerged from the Mists in 684 BC. On this issue, Borcans find Dorvinians a bit odd, and vice versa.

Ivan ruled as he saw fit, demanding punitive bribes and actively turning his courtiers against each other for his own petty amusement. The combination of Dorvinia's wealth and Ivan's mercurial demands ensured that his court filled with the greediest and cruelest of Borjia's ancient families. This drew Falkovnia's attention. In 727 BC, late in the Dead Man's Campaign, Drakov's Talons launched a surprise attack on Lechberg, catching its corrupt and callous militia entirely off-guard. The raid seems to have been an impulsive, spiteful decision on Drakov's part, giving Borca and Dorvinia's spies no time to send warning. In the attack, now known as the Gold Claw Massacre, Talons butchered hundreds of Lechberg's men, women and children. No sooner had the raiders loaded their wagons full of pillaged goods than they started vomiting black blood and dropping dead. Supposedly, the corpses were so toxic several people died merely from touching their armor. They had to be burned where they lay. Ivan Dilisnya claims that he disguised himself in Talon armor and moved unseen among the enemy, personally poisoning them, but having met the man, I'd say his boasts are bluster.

*The fop's madness merely disguises his cunning, my little scholar. Do not underestimate the mouse that thrives among serpents.*

Ironically, prior to the massacre, Dorvinia had secretly considered proposing an alliance with Falkovnia. Dorvinia would have traded iron, weapons and even gunpowder in return for Falkovnian grain, gold and promises of peace. The plans were scrapped following the attack and two years later Ivan and Ivana eagerly signed the Treaty of Four Towers. As a note, only in Borca did I learn that the symbolic "Four Towers" refer to the ruling families who signed the pact — Guignol, Weathermay, Renier and Dilisnya — not the five countries they represented. The resulting alliance *was* known as

the League of Five Nations until the Great Upheaval.

I can find no record that Lord Ivan and Lady Ivana ever visited each other, but they remained on good terms and their lands were closely allied. When the Great Upheaval struck in 740 BC, the cousins reputedly fled to each other's arms in terror. When the tremors ended, the cousins decided to merge their realms peacefully under the Borcan banner. Weeks of intense bargaining followed, in which Ivan and Ivana — frequently overruling their advisors — traded deeds and indentures until they reached a new, integrated balance of power.

The years following the merger have not been kind to Borca. The bonds between the long-separated cousins quickly spoiled; they appear to have liked the *idea* of each other more than the reality. Elder Borcans whisper that their homeland now suffers under *two* Lady Camilles: Ivana has inherited her mother's misanthropy, while Ivan acquired her unpredictable rage. Borcan politics have degraded into gamesmanship and corruption as the two branches of the Dilisnya lineage struggle for supremacy.

## Populace



Borcans are a diverse ethnic group, united by culture and bound by indentures: a system of legal contracts central to Borcan life (see "Government"). Borca is also home to a significant halfling population, one of the largest outside Darkon. Despite their numbers, halflings have a negligible voice in Borcan affairs. They crave personal freedom, so few are willing to bind themselves to Borca's indentures. As such, they have disenfranchised themselves from Borcan society. Most drift from one community to the next, settling in ghettos within human towns for a few weeks or months before moving on. Without indentures, they subsist on menial jobs and frequently turn to criminal trades. Halfling pickpockets posing as human street urchins often plague Borca's towns. Unlike the human Borcans, however, these creatures of wanderlust are often well traveled. Those who respect the law hire out as guides and translators for travelers from distant lands.

## Appearance

Human Borcans have average, athletic builds, though both sexes tend to be slightly tall. Many are





graced with long, delicate hands, which they boast indicates an artistic nature. Borcans begin life with smooth complexions, ranging from fair to creamy tan. Their skin often ages with unseemly haste. A few healers blame this weathering on overindulgence in the mineral baths. I disagree. The wrinkles and liver spots are faintest among the rich recluses of the west and most prominent among the peasantry. Borca's underclasses work themselves to the bone to fill the nobles' coffers, while those nobles endlessly maneuver through the courts to protect their wealth. *Exhaustion* is the culprit here. Individuals are grist for the mill, fodder to maintain the nation's wealth. Borcans are resigned to lives of toil and trouble, with countless expressions of fatalism, such as the local folksong "My Bones Will Rest for Me."

Borcan hair and eye color varies widely, with dark brown most common for both. Men grow their hair roguishly long, letting it hang wild and loose to their shoulders, and typically go clean-shaven. Facial hair is seen as a sign that a man has gone to seed. Borcan women take great pride in their tresses, regardless of social class. They grow their hair extremely long, often below the waist, and adorn it with whatever they can afford, from painted wooden

pins to thin ribbons to tortoiseshell combs and clasps to fresh flowers during the summer.

The aesthetic ideal for both sexes is a statuesque figure, with smooth porcelain skin contrasted against inky black eyes and hair. This aptly describes both Lady Ivana and Church iconography of the goddess Ezra, but this is not why I note it. Simply put: in Borca, beauty can kill.

Lady Ivana has a keen eye for beauty, but few of the lusty young men who enter her parlor live to kiss and tell. Borcans dub her the "Black Widow." Those suitors who survive the Black Widow's web often win lives of idle luxury in Ivana's circle of courtiers and confidantes.

While many Borcan women use herbal cosmetics, Ivana is widely rumored to have derived an alchemical method of subtly and permanently perfecting beauty. Lady Ivana and a significant percentage of her entourage have not visibly aged a day in decades, leading to widespread gossip that Ivana possesses a mysterious elixir of life. This elixir would be invaluable if it exists, and numerous aging patrons in Borca and beyond have reportedly hired adventuring mercenaries to steal Ivana's secrets. I have heard of no successes.





Ivana's hangers-on supposedly repay her gifts of vigor, beauty and wealth by obeying her orders without question. In their roles as spies and assassins, the members of this select society are called *ermordenung*, a term incorporated from the Falkovnian that refers, intriguingly enough, to the act of murder rather than a murderer. Many Borcans darkly muse that their mistress is literally "followed by her murders."

When I learned of the existence of these pale, ageless aristocrats, I first suspected that Borca suffers from an infestation of *nosferatu*, a strain of vampire that has no fear of daylight. Yet when I studied likely suspects from a discreet distance, I discerned no taint of undeath. My spells indicate

that these *ermordenung* are living humans, but I did invariably detect poison on their persons; their reputation as Ivana's assassins thus seems warranted. Sadly, I was unable to indulge in more intensive analysis. Unlike the Kargat, Ivana's courtiers are prominently positioned in society, and disappearances would be noticed.

## fashion

As with much of Borcan culture, fashion represents a mix of east and west. Commoners often barely own the shirts on their backs and dress for practicality. Men wear loose shirts, usually left hanging open during the warm summer months, and loose britches tucked into tight stockings at

## Secret Society: The Ermordenung

Most Borcans believe the *ermordenung* are a secret cabal of poisoners reliably identified by their dark beauty and their loyalty to Ivana Boritsi. In fact, the *ermordenung* are a loose social clique of individuals who are no longer entirely human. Ivana poisons most of the young men and women who catch her eye, but over the decades a few have impressed her both with their charm and grace and by their skill in negotiating her seductive overtures. When Ivana chooses to share her empty existence with these "worthy" folk, she infuses their bodies with a horrific mixture of deadly toxins. Most subjects die thrashing in agony, but a few survive (requiring a successful DC 18 Fortitude save) and lapse into a coma that lasts 1d4 weeks. The subject awakens permanently transformed into an *ermordenung*, the embodiment of venom.

The *ermordenung* template is found in the forthcoming *Denizens of Dread*. Ivana chooses subjects based on aesthetic appeal, always selecting attractive and charming humans. She may have inadvertently transformed one or more living subjects that merely *appeared* human over the years, however. Most *ermordenung* focus on the skills of etiquette and seduction, with high ranks in Bluff and Diplomacy. Artistic talents, such as Craft (painting) and Perform skills, are also common.

Ivana Boritsi infused her own body with unnatural toxins in 706 BC. In 711, as part of a plan to avenge herself on Camille, Ivana attempted to refine those same poisons to give the carrier a lethal touch at will. Ivana's closest friend and confidante, Nostalia Romaine, volunteered to be her first test subject. Nostalia became the first *ermordenung*, the living weapon with which Ivana took her mother's life. The *ermordenung*'s ranks have since swelled into dozens. Doomed to kill all they touch, they share the intense loneliness of their creator. Ivana can survive an *ermordenung*'s embrace, but her venomous kiss remains lethal to them. Ivana encourages her creations to drown their sorrows in hedonistic pursuits, further alienating them from society and deepening their loyalty to her.

Nostalia Romaine (female human *ermordenung* Ari4/Wiz4/Rog2, LE) is still devoted to Ivana. She is the informal leader of the *ermordenung*, relaying orders and helping new members adjust to their changed lives. Decades of murder and solitude have petrified Nostalia's passions. She feels only the empty husks of love and remorse and draws her only satisfaction from the suffering she inflicts. Nostalia is still haunted by the sensation of Camille's lips upon her own and finds the touch of other women loathsome. She will not use her toxic touch attacks against female foes, instead relying on her *dagger of venom*, the only weapon she carries.

Although she is actually 66 years old, Nostalia appears to be in her early twenties. After becoming an *ermordenung*, Nostalia turned to the dark arts of alchemy. With Ivana's aid, she created *venom of life* (see the Attached Notes) and shares its formula with any *ermordenung* willing to collect the needed ingredients. The *ermordenung* try to be subtle in their harvests, typically selecting prisoners, paupers, or foreigners as their victims.





the knee. Here and there the traditional Barovian sheepskin vest makes an appearance, particularly in the uplands. Women wear loose, modest blouses under tight bodices and loose, knee-length layered skirts over stockings. Working women also don the *cusma*, a tight leather bonnet that protects their precious hair. Commoners prefer drab, earthen shades such as black, gray and various shades of brown, a good match for their dour demeanors. Their clothing is often heavily patched.

Landholders are expected to engage in ostentatious displays of wealth. They borrow their fashions from the west, particularly Dementlieu, though Borcan styles typically lag at least a year behind the trends in Port-a-Lucine. Borcans have their own stylistic flourishes. They eschew the bright colors of the Dementlieuse gentry for strikingly stark garb of black on white and traditionally don long, fine gloves of satin or silk. The elite adorn themselves with copious amounts of jewelry, usually crafted from silver or precious stones, and their finest garb is often delicately embroidered with silver thread. The Borcans' cultural ties to silver date back to the War of Silver Knives; while gold is perfectly acceptable as adornment for one's manor, to wear gold is seen as laughably *gauche*. As a note, courtesans — regardless of gender — are legally forbidden from wearing jewelry of any kind, to distinguish wealthy concubines from the true nobility.

Ezra's congregations traditionally dress all in white during worship ceremonies, while nobles reserve their colorful coats and gowns for the most prestigious festivals and banquets, favoring vibrant hues and patterns inspired by insect or reptile markings.

During the frigid winters, Borcans don thick felt caps and wrap themselves in long cloaks of leather or wool. The elite typically line their cloaks with fine furs such as ermine or rabbit and warm their hands with matching muffs. Some hunters and guards prefer the *pardesiu*, a sheepskin coat that hangs to the ground. Like the Barovian vests that inspired them, these coats are woolen within and exquisitely embroidered without.

## Language

Historically, Balok is Borca's native tongue. When the Dilisnyas returned at the end of the Vacancy, however, they also brought Mordentish with them; the two languages are now thoroughly intermingled here. High Mordentish is the language of court, while Balok largely replaces the Low dialect for common talk and daily trade. Nearly all Borcans are at least functionally fluent in both tongues, and they casually switch between them to best express themselves. Borcan merchants typically have rudimentary familiarity with one or more foreign tongues. The Borcan accent is easily distinguished by its soft consonants. On Borcan lips, guttural Balok is very nearly pleasant. Tellingly, the Halfling tongue has become something akin to the language of crime.

## Lifestyle & Education

Borca is home to a highly baroque society, intricately structured yet capable of grandiose emotional gestures. Many aspects of Borcan life seem inherently contradictory to outsiders; these are people who have knowingly constrained intense passions within a rigid web of allegiances and obligations.

## Borcan Language Primer

English	Balok	Mordentish Dialects	High
man	<i>om, oamensc</i>	Low <i>carl, mann, rinc</i>	<i>homme</i>
woman	<i>femeie</i>	<i>fæmne, wif, (married) æwe</i>	<i>femme</i>
child	<i>copil</i>	<i>bearn</i>	<i>enfant</i>
life	<i>viata</i>	<i>feorh, gast, lif</i>	<i>vie</i>
death	<i>moarte</i>	<i>feorhgedal, swylt, (murder) cwealm</i>	<i>mort, (murder) meurtre</i>
love	<i>iubire</i>	<i>lufraeden</i>	<i>amour</i>
poison (n.)	<i>méreg</i>	<i>ator, lybb</i>	<i>poison, toxine, venin</i>
conspire	<i>comploia</i>	<i>reonian</i>	<i>comploter</i>
money	<i>bani</i>	<i>mynet, sceatt</i>	<i>argent</i>





Technically, all Borcans are born as freemen, but lest they spend their entire lives begging from the gutters, they must enter into indentures. All Borcans of any means are indentured servants, voluntary slaves more tightly bound to their masters and peers than any true serf. The indenture system's impact on Borcan culture is vast. Borcans place great significance on the written word, disdaining oral agreements as vaguely illicit. It is said that Borcans demand to know the rules that shape their lives — if only to learn how to cheat. They know countless ways of subverting their own moral and ethical tenets; the “subtle slumber” of poison, for instance, often solves what debate cannot.

The vast majority of Borcans spend their lives trapped in crushing poverty. Despite the pretensions of its elite, Borca has no true aristocracy; its nobles are merchants playing at being princes. All power rests in the hands of Borca's two owners, who grant and retract it at their whim. A pauper who impresses Lord Ivan with cunning or Lady Ivana with charm may be elevated into the gentry overnight. The fall from grace comes with equal speed, often arriving in a bottle of tainted wine. Thus, any ambitious Borcan must be a master schemer. This inherent instability of power stresses the importance of family. A supporting family stabilizes the social status of the individual; the more relatives one can call upon for aid, the greater the odds that all family members will be able to meet their responsibilities. In a sense, each great house is a nation unto itself, and its members grant their allegiances accordingly.

Borcans have a wildly romantic view of love, but never confuse it with marriage. Wedlock is seen as an inviolate legal contract, politically and economically strengthening two houses by uniting them on a common foundation. Both rich and poor observe arranged marriages and often marry young. Legally, they can wed as soon as they learn to sign their names, but few marry before the age of fourteen; marrying off a child bride or groom is seen as a sign of desperation. Borcans never marry outside their social class; only fools would bind themselves to debtors. Details of the marriage contract are determined through lengthy negotiations between the two families. All such contracts include the expected oaths of fealty between the spouses, but many include dowry demands, mutual assistance pacts, or even additional stipulations such as the husband maintaining a minimum income or the wife producing a certain number or gender of heirs

within a set number of years. Technically, Borcans do not divorce; they simply annul their marriage contracts if either spouse fails to meet his or her obligations. Annulments are just as involved as marriage negotiations, with a focus on finding fault; the spouse guilty of renegeing on the contract typically faces steep monetary repercussions and has difficulty remarrying.

*One wonders how many errant spouses have been saved from their indiscretions by lethal happenstance. Better to be widowed than ruined, no doubt.*

Married Borcans who desire true love often turn to illicit affairs. Unfettered by economic concerns, romantic affairs frequently cross class boundaries. Some folk manage to elevate their social station by becoming the “kept” lovers of wealthy patrons, while courtesans make it a true profession. Adultery seems to be far more common than the Borcans will admit; Borcan spouses are not so much *jealous* as extremely *possessive*. In a sense, spouses are each other's property, and adultery is seen as a form of trespass.

Borcan herbalism is quite advanced, with local healers diluting numerous lethal poisons to create natural medicines. Borcans also regularly indulge in mild stimulants, narcotics and aphrodisiacs, but overuse is disdained as weakness.

Thanks to Borca's herbs, women need not bear unwanted children, and childbirth itself is relatively safe. Infant mortality remains high, however. Borca has no orphanages, so unwanted babes are often smothered. Numerous toddlers succumb to Borca's enticing but deadly flora, while many others starve or fall to disease. Children are the legal property of their parents until they learn their letters, usually at the age of six, at which point they can sign their first indentures. Families typically groom their children to fill specific roles from birth; indeed, producing a child without a clear niche for it to fill is considered as reprehensible as bastardy. Peasant families require laborers, while more powerful houses require scholars, scribes, accountants, healers and other specialized roles. Lesser children exist simply to be married off.

Borca's formalized schooling is no match for that found in the lands to the west. Elite families utilize private tutors; older children may be sent to expensive finishing schools in Levkarest, where







providing a classical education takes second place to lessons in poise and etiquette. The most promising heirs of wealthy families often complete their education in Richemulot or Dementlieu. By no coincidence, this practice also removes such ripe young men and women from the Black Widow's view. Commoners rely on apprenticeships to teach their children basic trades. Peasants strive to provide their children with the basics of arithmetic and — above all else — literacy. Those folk who cannot or will not enter into indentures are nonpersons in the eye of the law. These nothings hold no legal rights. Beyond the fundamentals, Borcan commoners are wretchedly ignorant, often spreading pseudo-scholarly blather as trusted wisdom.

Away from the hellspouts, Borca's lowlands are fertile but underutilized; shortsighted landholders refuse to pay the considerable costs of clearing their lands to create arable fields, and most food is channeled directly to the tables of the elite. Thus, despite Borca's respectable yields, most peasants still go hungry, requiring Falkovnian grain to survive each winter. Commoners subsist largely on grains, potatoes and beans, occasionally supplemented by eggs, poultry, hard-crustured breads, goat's milk, butter, or cheeses. Mutton is a rare treat usually saved for feast days. Most commoners sup on *ciorba* as their daily meal, a charmless buckwheat porridge mixed with lentil beans. Commoners of all ages drink heady, dark barley beer from local breweries.

Borca's elite enjoy countless delicacies from across the Core. Affluent Borcans partake of three meals a day, each served in several courses. These meals are heavily spiced and frequently include tender cuts of beef, veal, or mutton as the main course. A popular dish is *foie divisé en beurre*: thinly sliced liver and diced onions cooked in olive oil and butter. The main course is accompanied by dishes of chicken, duck, goose, or freshwater fish, as well as mixed fruits or vegetables such as corn, apricots and peppers. The meal concludes with small cakes, nuts, or similar treats; honeyed almonds are particularly popular. Breakfasts





are simpler affairs, usually consisting of omelets.

The Borcan elite accompany their luxurious meals with fine wine and apricot brandy, produced in their own vineyards. Many folk carry small flasks in their coat pockets. Taking a sip from the flask before offering it to a companion is a sign of trust and confidence. Borcans are also notably fond of *coffee*, an exotic beverage imported all the way from the Amber Wastes. Coffee is a status symbol, rare even among the elite.

Rich or poor, families use mealtimes to commune or discuss business. Borcans take great pleasure in their cuisine and in observing strict etiquette. Meals are traditionally served in common bowls and platters, from which everyone at the table takes their own portion. The head of the household or host is expected to take the first bite of each dish or provide a taster to do so. In the case of inns and eateries, the server fills this role.

Ingrained by their indentures, Borcans interpret the written word entirely too literally. Literature has little audience here. Local written works are generally restricted to contracts, holy texts and the boastful memoirs of successful merchants. Other forms of art — portraiture, sculpture, music and theatre — fare better. Borcan chamber music focuses on strings and woodwinds, featuring elaborate, baroque sonatas. She may be a dilettante, but many artists live or die by Lady Ivana's patronage. Indeed, many of Levkarest's resident artists are rumored to be *ermordening*.

Lord Ivan has long supported the theatrical arts. Ivan pays acting troupes exorbitant fees to perform at his manor, but few accept the invitation twice. Ivan considers himself a master thespian and is a notorious meddler. When viewing a new work, he often shouts out "improvements" from the audience. When he is familiar with the play, he is prone to storming onto the stage, mid-performance, to replace actors who displease him. Troupes who cannot or will not comply with his demands often pay for their perceived lack of talent with their lives. Lord Ivan's tastes have shaped a distinctly Borcan style of opera, focusing on grandiose tales of passion, treachery, justice and revenge.

On the rare occasions that Borcans relax, they prefer intellectual pursuits over the physical. Gambling is endemic, with commoners often squandering their few coppers on cockfights. Borcans prefer tests of skill to games of chance, so cards and chess are favored over dice. Particularly

popular among the elite is a complex board game known as Debts and Favors in which four players move their pieces around a checkered board. Pieces may be traded between players after being captured, as players try to rebuild their positions on the board. Players can even trade opponents' pieces if it nets them a better bargaining position to recover one of their own tokens. Some jaded aristocrats are rumored to make private wagers about how skillfully they can manipulate their peers or lessers, often ruining lives for nothing more than their own jaundiced amusement.

## Attitudes Toward Magic

Borcans have little experience with or talent for arcane magic, but most are familiar with alchemy and elixirs both wondrous and foul. No Borcan expects ever to see a display of arcane might, and none hope to; however, I sensed a subtle yet pervasive fear that supernatural forces lurked unseen within their society. In times of unrest, this suspicion can curdle into dread, producing panics. Culturally, Borcans associate mages with poisoners, but this connection is not as nefarious as it may seem. Both poison and magic are seen as means of circumventing standard rules.

While the price of poison is the risk of discovery, the supernatural world demands its own costs. Parents teach their children countless tales about spellcasters — arcane and divine — bargaining with dark faeries or signing pacts of blood with gloating devils. These contracts all offer power in return for dreadful sacrifices — lives, souls, happiness, beauty. Such tales are commonplace across the Core, of course, but many stories here have a distinctively Borcan twist: the mortal sorcerer often successfully pays the price or in some way twists the wording of the contract to his advantage, winning power without inviting doom. Every new pact carries new risks, however, meaning new occult forces with which the mage must bargain. Mages who meet their diabolic match are ushered into the so-called "Legions of the Night." Corrupted in life, the Legions cannot join Ezra beyond the Mists in death and thus must wander the world as spirits or worse. Ezra herself is viewed as one of these supernatural patrons, though she is considered unique in her benevolence.

The moral of such tales is clear: supernatural boons demand steep costs, but all is well if the bill is paid. Corruption is by no means certain for the skillful.





## Religion

Surviving ruins indicate that the ancient Barovian sun god Andral was once worshipped in Borca, but the religion faded during the Vacancy, replaced by centuries of distinct apathy toward divine meddling. The explosive growth of the Church of Ezra over the past century represents a remarkable cultural shift.

Today, Borcan veneration of the goddess Ezra is nigh unavoidable. Most manors feature private shrines, and small, white marble statues of Ezra grace the main entrance of many homes. The icons act as spiritual wards, symbolically placing those that enter the home under Ezra's gaze. Ezra's followers are dismissive of other creeds, but seldom hostile. Not all faiths are tolerated, with worshippers of the rival Lawgiver faith particularly loathed.

Borca's temples are grandiose affairs, but its graveyards pale in comparison. The morbid grandeur of Darkon and Mordent's memorials are here replaced by rows of bland, numbered posts. The reason is simple: Borca's graveyards belong to the Dark Twins. To remain in the earth, one must have descendants willing and able to pay rent on the grave. Most Borcan dead remain interred for only five years, after which the bones are exhumed and cleaned, the skull labeled with the deceased's name and date of death, and the lot stacked in catacombs beneath the local temple. Only the most stable and affluent families bother to honor their ancestors' corpses with ornate headstones or mausoleums, usually erected on their private estates.

Borcans celebrate many of the same seasonal festival days found throughout the Core, including the Feast of the First Epiphany, held by each temple of Ezra on its first worship day in May. A commemoration of Ezra's visitation to Yakov Dilisnya, this joyous celebration is the most enlivening holiday for Borca's masses and a popular day for marriages. December brings Winter Festival, an event of great political significance. Privately known to many as Night of the Dead Moon's Get, this event marks the Dark Twins' mutual birthday. Nobles await Winter Festival with a growing sense of dread. Since the unification of Borca, both cousins have taken to inviting all of Borca's landholders to their separate galas, using the respective attendance as a petty contest of allegiances. Ivan and Ivana also use these gatherings to tally harvest incomes, settle year-end payments, and reallocate titles. Fortunes — even lives — can ride on whose party an individual attends. The great houses al-

ways divide their most prominent members between both galas, wisely playing both sides against the middle.

**Ezra:** At long last, after studying each of the three breakaway sects, I have arrived at the wellspring of the Church of Ezra, known as the "Home Faith" by the faithful. As elsewhere, anchorites of the Home Faith steadfastly seek to protect Ezra's faithful from the monstrous Legions of the Night. Unlike the Nevuchar Springs sect, however, the Home Faith is content to clearly separate the blessed from the damned, trusting their ultimate fates to Ezra.

The heart of the Church lies within the Great Cathedral, which towers over the rooftops of Levkarest. With its last stone set in place just twelve years ago, the Great Cathedral remains a gleaming monument to Ezra's glory — and less overtly, to the wealth and power of her church. The Great Cathedral is a fortress of white marble and stained glass, employing its own phalanx of guards. With such extensive material holdings, the clergy is deeply embroiled in courtly politics. The anchorites under Levin Postoya, Ezra's fifth Praesidius (high priest), tend toward pragmatism in politics, remaining neutral whenever possible, but holding frequent meetings behind closed doors to appease prickly nobles and appeal to them for donations. The Home Faith also serves as a hub between the Church's splinter sects. Envoys from

### The Church of Ezra Revisited

Ezra (EZ-ra)

**Symbol:** A silver longsword superimposed on an alabaster kite shield and adorned with a sprig of belladonna.

**Alignment:** Lawful neutral.

**Domains:** Destruction, Healing, Law, Mists, Protection. The Mists domain is unique to anchorites; see the **Ravenloft Player's Handbook** for details. Anchorites of the Home Faith typically select the Mists and Law cleric domains.

**Favored Weapon:** Ezra's blade (longsword).

More extensive details on the Home Faith can be found in **Ravenloft Gazetteer III**.



each sect can always be found at the Great Cathedral, though few choose to stay longer than a year before being transferred back to their homelands.

Ezra is the only true source of refuge for Borca's downtrodden commoners. Worship ceremonies are held every five days, measured from the founding of each temple, but scores of people pass through the Great Cathedral's cavernous worship hall each day to offer thanks or to pray for aid. The Church of Ezra has become the opiate of the masses that Yakov Dilisnya promised.

**Hala:** Hala's witches maintain several small hospices in Borca, particularly in the rural west, but

keep a low, wary profile. Their unease stems from 701 BC, when Praesidia Donella Borovsky issued an edict bluntly calling witchcraft hag magic, declaring that it invariably produced physical and spiritual corruption. The Home Faith never actively persecuted witches, but Borcans grew cold toward Hala's followers. Ironically, common Halite myth holds that the mortal Ezra was herself one of Hala's priestesses, a legend the Home Faith declares as heresy. Praesidia Kristyn Stoyista, Borovsky's successor, rescinded the edict in 732 BC, but to this day, Hala's witches often become scapegoats when "panics" arise.

## The Borcan Hero

This section presents information potentially useful in creating PCs native to Borca. They can choose either Balok or Mordentish as their native language; whichever they pick, nearly all Borcans take the other as their first bonus language.

**Races:** Humans are the overwhelmingly dominant race in Borca; halflings hold no true power. Other races are extremely rare, and Borcans generally see them as freaks and curiosities, reacting with disdain rather than superstitious fear.

**Classes:** Bards, clerics, fighters and rogues are the most common classes here. Bards are seldom traveling minstrels; instead, they appear as actors, composers, or musicians who channel their tortured imaginations into arcane artistry. Many Borcans are devout followers of the Church of Ezra and hold anchorites in high regard, but reactions toward druids and clerics of other faiths range from indifference to mild hostility. Fighters can easily find employment as enforcers, but are usually dismissed as mindless thugs; they are paid to fight, not think. Rogues are common, but depending on their role in society may be respected or despised; Borcans admire cunning as much as they loathe thievery. A few rangers monitor undeveloped estates in the western lowlands for absentee landholders. Borca has few talented sorcerers or wizards. Those who do emerge typically conceal their abilities, hoarding their gifts as a valuable commodity. A tiny handful of folk have been popularly labeled as paladins of Ezra over the years, but these holy warriors remain largely the stuff of legend. Other classes are virtually unknown.

**Recommended Skills:** Bluff, Craft (alchemy, leatherworking, painting, poison-making, sculpture, stonemasonry), Diplomacy, Forgery, Intimidate, Knowledge (architecture and engineering, local, nature, nobility and royalty), Profession (apothecary, bookkeeper, brewer, farmer, herbalist, herdsman, miner, scribe), Sense Motive.

**Recommended Feats:** Dodge (plus derivatives), Exotic Weapon Proficiency (firearms), Jaded, Skill Focus (Craft [alchemy, poisonmaking], Profession [herbalist]), Sympathetic Spell (see Attached Notes), Voice of Wrath, Weapon Focus (dagger, musket, pistol).

**Borcan Male Names:** Arturo, Cheslav, Edik, Fredrik, Kiryl, Lorenz, Raphael, Rodrigo, Salvatore, Stepka, Zivon.

**Borcan Female Names:** Acquilina, Charlotta, Duscha, Irena, Katarina, Lubmilla, Miranda, Natasha, Oleska, Urola, Zinerva.

## Outcast Ratings in Borca

If an *ermordenung*'s true nature is revealed, her OR increases by +2.



## The Realm



he Borcan insignia depicts a black and silver serpent on a burgundy field, its coils severed into nine parts and flanked by nine silver stars. Officially, it symbolizes the nine original city-states of Borjia,

though cynics muse that it now aptly represents the foundations of Borcan culture: wine, wealth and treachery. Money and power are inextricably intertwined here. Despite its pretensions at a traditional feudal society, at heart Borca is a crass plutocracy. All power flows from wealth, all wealth flows from property, and ultimately all property belongs to just two landowners. Lord Ivan still retains a few properties in the Doldak Heights, including his estate and the city of Lechberg, but the rest of Borca is wholly Lady Ivana's. Since the Unification, Ivana and her advisors have primarily focused their control on Borca's trade guilds and other economic matters. To the horror of many, Ivan now oversees Borca's law enforcement and military defense.

The Dark Twins are highly public figures, frequently touring the country to cordially intimidate their elite tenants. Ivana's entourage is often seen in Borca's more luxurious establishments, while Ivan inspects his militia on an erratic schedule. Despite their visibility, the cousins are remarkably unpopular; many folk consider them dangerously mad. Ivana, of course, is the notorious Black Widow of Levkarest, a temptress whose past is littered with poisoned paramours. Ivan is particularly volatile, prone to ordering executions at a whim and possessed of unseemly appetites. He adopts new "roles" as the muse strikes him, donning one of his many theatrical costumes. Ivan may spend a given day posing as anything from a prince to a pauper, but demands the respect due a king.

In truth, most folk reserve the brunt of their hatred for the Dilisnya clan as a whole. They believe that the cousins' advisors are Borca's true rulers, using their demented kin as scapegoats to distract the populace from their own excesses. In my brief dealings with the cousins, I observed keen, tactical minds hiding behind eccentricity. The Dark Twins are their own masters, and I posit that one of them is Borca's true dread lord. Ivana is my prime suspect, due to her political dominance and prolonged youth, but I cannot fully dismiss Ivan's infamy.

Most Borcans would gladly see their rulers dead, but few think that coups or killers stand a

chance. The only assassins that concern the cousins are those they throw at each other. Rumored reasons for the collapse of their relationship abound, but most folk blame Ivan's jealousy toward Ivana, be it due to his reduced holdings, a thwarted desire to share her vital elixir, or even a rejected marriage proposal.

Neither cousin is ever seen without a phalanx of private bodyguards and trusted courtiers. Ivan's closest protectors are informally known as his "Borrowed Men" — borrowed from death, that is. Ivan has reputedly assured their allegiance by addicting them all to a narcotic only he can create. Subjects addicted to Ivan's elixir cannot survive without it. Fortunately, Ivan can create only so much elixir; otherwise, he would doubtlessly attempt to addict the entire populace.

Ivana has a high turnover rate among her guards, but does boast two stalwart companions. The first is her lifelong friend and aide Nostalia Romaine. A classic Borcan beauty, if chillingly passionless, Romaine oversees most of Ivana's daily affairs. Ivana's primary guardian is a lithe mute called the "Jongleur" for his colorful, concealing garb and the bells and ribbons he ties to his double-bladed sword. As much a dancer as a duelist, the Jongleur has served Boritsi for nearly a decade — remarkable tenure for any man in her company. The puckered scars that mar what little of his skin is visible lend credence to the theory that the Jongleur is too hideously burned ever to catch Ivana's eye. Rumor holds that the Jongleur is of Vistani blood; supposedly, his gypsy parents cast him into their campfire when he was born, but the infant crawled to safety. The Jongleur is no less tenacious today.

### Intriguing. Is power drawn to power?

Despite the claims of wagging tongues, neither of the Dark Twins has produced a legal, surviving heir. Should both die, the Dilisnyas will likely collapse into bitter, internal squabbles for power — a revisited War of Silver Knives.

## Government

I hesitate to call Borca's system of rule corrupt, for corruption is the system. Borca does possess a codified set of laws, built up over time from the original trade agreements that united the city-states of Borjia.





The foundation of Borcan law — and the only element still considered sacrosanct — is the *indenture*, a binding legal contract detailing the duties, entitlements and duration of an agreement between two parties. The contract is written and signed in duplicate on two halves of a single sheet, which are then carefully torn apart along a unique, jagged line. Each party keeps his half of the indenture, using it as proof of the agreement during further negotiations. As the most basic defense against forgery, the jagged edges (called teeth) must match.

Indentures are used for every conceivable social contract, from inheritance to employment, from property leases to the guestbooks I signed at inns. Signers who fail to uphold their end of the contract face steep repercussions. A typical peasant has only a few indentures (binding him to his work, his home and perhaps a spouse), but typical *stapans* (landlords) fill their safes with employee and tenant contracts. Borcans consider these scraps of parchment more precious than any coin. To call a Borcan “toothless” is a dire insult, indicating he does not honor his contracts. Even the Dilisnyas find such folk contemptible. Of course, they craft their indentures so that fault can *always* be found under the right circumstances.

Property leases give Borca’s government its structure. Ivan and Ivana rent large properties to their favored landlords, who then sublet their lands to their own tenants, and so on. In a large town, two or three tiers may separate a commoner from his landowner. A seamstress rents a room from her employer, a fabric guildsman who rents a workshop from *his* stapan, an idle landlord who rents several city blocks from *his* stapan, who is the baron renting the entire town from Lady Ivana. Indentures usually express rent as both a percentage of tenant earnings and a minimum based on population; the tenant must pay the higher of the two. The Dark Twins typically demand 20% of all earnings made on their properties, with each successive stapan raising the rent on his own tenants to support himself; many commoners pay fully half their meager wages to their landlords. Most stapans employ *tolleres* — a sort of investigating accountant — to scrutinize suspicious bookkeeping practices.

Aristocratic titles are based on the amount of annual tribute a stapan pays to his landowner. A few hundred gold earns one the title of *baron* or *baroneasa*, while more than a thousand buys a *conte* or *conteasa* before one’s name. These lofty titles are

purely honorary. A Borcan *conte* has no more true power than a Barovian *boyar*. The result is a grossly bloated pseudo-aristocracy: more than a score of “noble” houses, most of which exist solely to leech off the peasantry while providing Lady Ivana with fashionable companions and playthings. Titles are not hereditary and can fluctuate each year as rent payments are tallied. Ivan and Ivana reserve the title of *sef* and *sefeasa* for themselves, respectively, a generic honorific meaning leader. Etiquette permits a simple Lord or Lady to suffice when addressing any noble.

Stapans are largely free to rule their properties as they see fit. The revenue they draw from their land is limited only by their own greed. Stapans facing a shortfall often invent or inflate fees to preserve their station, but landlords who consistently overtax their tenants eventually see their income collapse with their population. Failed stapans are stripped of their holdings and replaced, but this is little comfort to those tenants who have been worked to death in the meantime. Most stapans bleed their tenants for no more — and no less — tribute than they can sustain. In my time in Borca, I crossed not one bridge, entered not one town, and followed not one road or river without having to scoop a copper from my purse for the privilege.

Leases also require stapans to hire enforcers to collect fees and keep the peace. Prior to the Unification, stapans employed small, individual units of bodyguards to oversee their lands. None of the mercenaries in this ungainly patchwork held any power beyond their employer’s lands, but were largely honest in their dealings. Ivan expanded his power by consolidating these private armies into a unified militia, and stapans are pressured to sign indentures adding their enforcers to his troops. Militiamen can sew the Borca insignia onto their uniforms, and their jurisdiction extends to the estates of every stapan in the coalition, giving them the ability to coordinate their efforts. In larger communities, guard captains in Ivan’s direct employ further organize the militia. The Church of Ezra has not joined the coalition, so the militia has no jurisdiction within the Great Cathedral.

Borcan law reveals the true corruption in its execution: Ivan’s militia is a grandiose extortion scheme. In addition to the rent and tolls they collect for their stapans, the militia demand bribes for the smallest basic services — investigating crimes, dispensing justice, providing information,





or just leaving folk unaccosted as they travel, work their fields, or operate their businesses. As such, the modern militia is a haven for Borca's greediest thugs. Their employment indentures brazenly stipulate that Ivan receive a percentage of every sundry bribe and protection payment they collect.

Accused criminals and feuding parties go before their stapan for trials. Such trials are almost invariably decided in favor of whoever throws the most money at their case. Parties can appeal rulings to their stapan's stapan (and so on up to their sef), but a noble's time is bought, not borrowed. A landlord can confirm or overrule any of his tenants' rulings, at his whim.

Criminal sentences focus on restitution. The guilty party must repay all damages suffered by the wronged party, with tolleres on each side debating the exact amount owed. This is normal in cases of theft, fraud and vandalism, but Borcan law goes so far as to codify the monetary value of human life: a murderer must pay the next of kin a sum equal to twice the victim's annual net income. A noble's life can thus be worth thousands, but the price to kill a peasant is exactly 73 gold coins.

Criminals who cannot promptly pay restitution are imprisoned in wretched, privately owned workhouses. There they toil until their debt is repaid, with all earnings going to the wronged party after the workhouse's operator takes his cut. Naturally, skilled craftsmen can repay their debts much more quickly than untrained laborers. If the court decides that a debt is utterly beyond a criminal's ability to repay, then it invokes the dreaded death debt: the condemned loses his life.

In this debased and biased system, it is no surprise that many Borcans take the law into their own hands. Vigilante justice is common, be it mobs chasing suspects through the streets or more affluent folk hiring adventurous mercenaries to conduct private investigations. When tempers flare, many individuals invoke the death debt and settle grievances through duels. So long as both duelists are willing participants and provide witnesses, such duels are legal and socially acceptable. Even here, justice favors the rich; duelists are entitled to hire "seconds" to take up a blade or pistol in their place.



## Law Enforcement

The enforcer below can represent any typical bodyguard or militia member. The veteran enforcer represents an older, more experienced guard. Veteran enforcers usually appear as elite bodyguards or guard captains.

**Borcan Enforcer:** Human War1; CR 1/2; Medium humanoid (human); HD 1d8, hp 4; Init +0; Spd 30 ft.; AC 12, touch 10, flat-footed 12; Base Atk +1; Grp +1; Atk +2 melee (1d10/x3, halberd) or +1 melee (1d6 nonlethal, sap) or +1 ranged (1d8/19–20, light crossbow); Full Atk +2 melee (1d10/x3, halberd) or +1 melee (1d6 nonlethal, sap) or +1 ranged (1d8/19–20, light crossbow); AL NE; SV Fort +2, Ref +0, Will +0; Str 11, Dex 11, Con 11, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 10.

*Skills and Feats:* Handle Animal +2, Intimidate +4, Listen +2, Ride (horse) +2, Spot +2; Alertness, Weapon Focus (halberd).

*Possessions:* Halberd, sap, light crossbow, 20 bolts, leather armor.

**Veteran Borcan Enforcer:** Human War4; CR 3; Medium humanoid (human); HD 4d8, hp 18; Init +0; Spd 20 ft.; AC 15, touch 10, flat-footed 15; Base Atk +4; Grp +5; Atk +6 melee (1d10+1/x3, halberd) or +5 melee (1d4+1, bayonet) or +4 ranged (1d12/x3, musket); Full Atk +6 melee (1d10+1/x3, halberd) or +5 melee (1d4+1, bayonet) or +4 ranged (1d12/x3, musket); AL NE; SV Fort +4, Ref +1, Will +1; Str 12, Dex 11, Con 11, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 10.

*Skills and Feats:* Handle Animal +3, Intimidate +7, Listen +3, Ride (horse) +2, Sense Motive +2, Spot +3; Alertness, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (firearms), Weapon Focus (halberd).

*Possessions:* Masterwork halberd, musket with bayonet, 20 bullets, chainmail, gunpowder horn.

## Economy

The Borcan economy operates on two distinct tiers. At its base, commoners labor at agrarian tasks, providing basic necessities. Farmers raise poultry and harvest numerous crops, with wheat, rye, corn and potatoes most dominant. Others tend orchards of succulent fruits, such as apricots, cherries and peaches, or a wide variety of nuts. In the western woods, folk set traps for small game, fell trees for timber, or gather valuable herbs and exotic fungi, either through their own skill or with prized, trained hogs. Herdsmen tend their cattle and sheep in the grassy hills of the Steading, the region of

Borca's finest vineyards. The silver mines of the Doldak Heights are exhausted, but the region remains rich in lesser mineral resources. Miners still toil beneath the earth to produce iron, copper, lead, salt and finely veined marble.

Most workers are destitute. Stapan claim the goods produced, then pay them a pittance. Commoners receive most of their wages as meager meals and cramped lodgings provided on their employer's property. Employees cannot legally quit their job. Those that try lose both their income and their home.

Most stapan are bankers, craftsmen, or artisans. Borca's craftsmen take the raw materials produced by their tenants or import it from foreign lands, then their workshops transform it into exquisite luxury items. Livestock and trappers' pelts become fine fur rugs and leather goods. River mud and sand is baked and blown into fine ceramics, mirrors and glassware. Herbs are used to create medicines, cosmetics and perfumes, while timber becomes furniture and housing fixtures. Ores are forged into everything from weapons to delicate birdcages. Still others create artwork and baubles. They cater to an exclusive market, as wealthy as it is small: the nobility of the Core.

Borca's most significant industry is usury, the trading of money itself. Borca's banking families possess wealth to rival some countries, and they wield their assets with all due power. The vaults beneath Borca's banks could keep a dragon's hoard secure, while a signed Borcan promissory note can bankroll the creation of a vast manor or a mercenary army. So long as the money's usage will not threaten the bankers' personal interests, they have little interest in the borrower's intent. Bankers, however, are not so foolish as to hand their riches to itinerant adventurers. To qualify for a loan, a borrower must prove that he can repay the debt. This comes in the form of collateral: property that, once appraised by the bank's tolleres, is signed over to the bank until the debt is repaid (with interest). Should the borrower miss even a single payment, the bank swoops in to claim the collateral for itself. Obviously, bankers prefer collateral that cannot be hidden should the borrower default. Land is most favored, but banks accept valuables so long as they remain in their physical property.

Borcans sneer at barter; even commoners prefer hard currency. Each Borcan coin displays a valued herb on its tails side: the *foxglove* is the copper piece, the *hemlock* is the silver and the





nightshade the gold. Heads sides feature the profiles of significant historical Dilisnyas, ringed by the phrase "Laws Are Written In Silver" in Mordentish. Specific portraits depend on the identity and mood of the sef who had the coin struck. Note that Borcan merchants often devalue foreign currency, while moneychangers are ubiquitous in even the smallest communities. Both options are opportunities for the local stapan to skim a tithe from foreign pockets for the dubious honor of access to Borca's markets.

## Diplomacy

By necessity, Borca is one of the Core's most diplomatically active countries. Flanked by expansionist tyrants and no-man's lands, yet dependent on steady trade for its economic survival, Borca's continued existence stands as testament to the skill of its foreign merchant-envoys. Most operate under the guidance of Lord Ivan, whose tactics follow the adage, "Stab the hand that hides the blade." These emissaries quietly seek out and smother smoldering threats before they ignite, always by the most expedient means. The untimely deaths of many prominent folk in surrounding realms have been blamed on Ivan's poisoners over the years — so many, in fact, that I believe Ivan's neighbors use him as a convenient scapegoat for their own machinations.

**Barovia:** Many Borcans have distant kin in Barovia, Borca's gateway to the south and the Vaasi Plateau. Still, Borca keeps its neighbor at arm's length. The ancestral rivalry of the Dilisnyas and von Zaroviches has long since faded into history, yet some of Borca's elite remain wary. Most Borcans have heard the rumors that Count Strahd XI is a vampire, though few admit to believing them. Overall, the countries' relationship parallels that of Dementlieu to Mordent: most Borcans see the Barovians as their simple cousins, stifled by rulers with no taste for progress. Borcans were unnerved when Barovia first invaded Gundarak, but a generation later, no trader would dream of trading Count Strahd's steady fist for Duke Gundar's mad fits.

**Falkovnia:** Borcans live in fear of Drakov's bellicose whims and deeply resent the suspected intrusion of his troops as they cross the western lowlands. Falkovnia remains Borca's link to the economic titan of Darkon, however, and Borca's larger towns depend on Falkovnian grain each winter. Thus, like the rest of the League of Four

Nations, Borca still trades with Falkovnia out of cruel necessity.

**Invidia:** Borca engages in little direct trade with Invidia, and their relationship has deteriorated since the rise of the warlord Malocchio Aderre a decade ago. Aderre frequently sends his mercenaries across the border to engage in clandestine Vistani hunts. This flagrant violation of Borcan sovereignty rankles Lord Ivan. For years, his threats of armed retaliation accomplished nothing, so Dilisnya has hired his own squads of killers to play cat-and-mouse with the Invidians in the increasingly bloody borderlands. Lord Ivan reportedly wants to place an open bounty on Aderre's head, but the Invidian tyrant hides behind his alliance with Drakov. Should Ivan overplay his hand, he may well provoke Falkovnia and Invidia into closing their jaws around Borca, an assuredly brutal conflict.

**Richemulot:** Richemulot is the gateway to the west and the Musarde and is Borca's one true ally. The two share cultural and ethnic ties and are bound by the Treaty of Four Towers, but most Borcans are confounded by the Richemuloise rejection of Borca's stringent social and legal commitments. Borcans find the fact that vast portions of Richemulot's cities are legally unclaimed nigh inconceivable. Even as Borcans eagerly import Richemulot's arts and fashions, they consider Richemuloise soft, irresponsible and directionless. Most Borcan commoners who *could* comprehend Richemulot's freedoms fled there generations ago. Now, the Borcan elite spread exaggerated warnings that Richemulot's lax property laws and lack of a strong, centralized leadership leaves it vulnerable to hostile forces and even contributes to the disease and vermin that supposedly overrun its cities.

**The Shadow Rift:** Borcans shun the Shadow Rift as an unnatural wound in the earth. Ivan Dilisnya is an exception. His estate once looked out over the arid valley of G'Henna, but since the Great Upheaval he has enjoyed a prime view of the void. Something in this bottomless abyss seems to inspire Ivan, and he has recently had a large balcony constructed at the (literal) edge of his estate, to better take in the scenery.

**Verbrek:** Beyond fireside tales about fearless wolves that slink into the Blightwood, Borcans know little about Verbrek and care less. As far as they are concerned, Verbrek is nothing but wasted space flanking the invaluable Musarde River.



## Sites of Interest



My journey through Borca truly began as I stepped onto the docks in Sturben. With summer coming to a gentle end, I chose to focus first on the densely populated eastern uplands.

## Sturben

Sturben sits in central Borca, hugging the northern banks of the Vasha River near the Falkovnian border. Its fortifications are well manned and still scarred from the Widow's Massacre. Several stapan's expansive estates overlook the southern banks, protected by the Vasha itself. The Scythe Highway enters Sturben from Falkovnia through Commerce Hall, where merchant cargo is inspected and transit papers issued. Commerce Hall provides offices for Sturben's various guildmasters, including Baroneasa Ritter, the meticulously attentive head of the trade guild and stapan of Sturben. The Scythe Highway turns to exit Sturben through the east gate on its way to Ilvin. The Crimson Highway approaches from the south, crossing the Vasha via ferry before meeting the Scythe in Sturben's large central plaza.

Sturben operates primarily as a trade crossroads. Goods are collected here before being shipped north, so workshops and long rows of warehouses line its main thoroughfares. These lanes slice Sturben into three "quarters," tucking its residential areas out of sight. Western Sturben, a crime-ridden slum, teems with cramped tenements and gambling halls. The northeast quarter is home to the townhouses of the middle class and the elegant stone House of Grace, wellspring of the First Schism. This edifice is the oldest standing temple of Ezra (disregarding the debate surrounding Ste. Mere des Larmes in Port-a-Lucine), its construction started after but completed well before the Great Cathedral.

The southeast quarter houses marketplaces, hot springs, Sturben's bathhouse, and its most notorious landmark, the Wyrmsbreath. This looming marble fountain depicts a legendary two-headed dragon hunched over a large iron cage. Condemned prisoners are locked in this cage to meet their doom; once every three hours, the geyser ingeniously incorporated into the sculpture blasts a torrent of scalding water from the dragon's maws, dousing the cage's contents. I witnessed the execution of a smuggler, and I can attest that the end was

quick, if not painless; however, I observed a few folk in the eager crowd wagering whether the man would survive the first gout, only to have to wait for the next.

## Where to Stay in Sturben

Sturben's finest inn is the Green Mirror (good quality rooms, good quality meals), just off the central plaza. Rooms are warm and finely furnished, and the inn claims a private mineral bath for the use of its guests. Lesser folk can turn to the Plum Truffle (common quality rooms, common quality meals), which sits on the northern docks by the ferry. It caters primarily to boatmen, but the sparse décor of its rooms also draws a fair amount of Falkovnian emissaries, should they travel openly through the country. A few townhouses in the northeast quarter are also kept vacant, rented out to visiting nobles on the occasions that they converge on Sturben's central location to debate policy.

**Sturben (large town):** Conventional; AL NE; 3,000 gp limit; Assets 303,000 gp; Population 2,020; Isolated (human 94%, halfling 5%, other 1%).

**Authority Figures:** Baroneasa Beatrice Ritter, female human Ari5; Captain Marcu Nutretta, male human Ftr8.

**Important Characters:** Sentire Geofri Solda (anchorite), male human Clr6; Samuel Iacomo (merchant guildmaster), male human ermordenung Exp7.

## Lechberg

Another cab coach bore me north to the city of Lechberg, Dorvinia's former capital. Lech's Road and the Scythe Highway merge on the sluggish Vasha's west banks before crossing the Raudraci Bridge, so named for the hellspouts around its foundations. East of the Vasha, Lechberg's heart rises nearly 800 feet above the river on a broad, rocky tor. Lechberg's main thoroughfares gradually coil their way up the hillsides, which the residents' ancestors worked into wide terraces onto which they built their homes. Numerous steep staircases provide shortcuts for foot traffic.

Originally, this hill was home to a remote monastery dedicated to the Barovian sun god Andral. Roughly 600 years ago, the Borjian merchant-prince Lech Cosco seized the tor, dubbing it Lech's Mountain. Under his reign, the monastery was expanded into a fortress, and its support build-





ings gradually spread down the slopes. The vertical city's natural defenses proved invaluable during the Terg Invasion, and although the sprawl surrounding the tor is unfortified, central Lechberg is considered a natural stronghold. Lech's small, weatherworn fortress is now incongruously called the Golden Palace, housing both the headquarters of Lechberg's militia and Ivan Dilisnya during his visits.

Lechberg lies off the major trade routes, so it relies on industry and bloody lucre to support itself. Miners in the Doldak Heights cart their ores to refineries along the city's eastern edge, while the tor itself is home to Borca's largest currency mints and banking houses. Complex subterranean vaults carve deep into the tor, storing treasures most of Lechberg's inhabitants can scarcely imagine. These vaults are fearsomely guarded via methods both mundane and arcane.

Lechberg is home to a thriving theater community, thanks largely to Ivan's patronage and the popularity of Cezar Vercezzo, resident composer for the cavernous Sommet Theater. When the weather cooperates, the rear wall of the stage can be opened to use the stunning Balinok Mountains for a backdrop.

Lord Ivan divides power between two stapans, Conteasa Buchvold and Conte Dilisnya (a cousin to Ivan), who are the heads of the two largest banks. Neither has held a noble title for long, and considering Ivan's erratic habits, neither is likely to do so.

## Where to Stay in Lechberg

The first inn most travelers encounter is the Tarnished Cup (common quality rooms, poor quality meals), which rests at the base of the tor, just past the bridge. The rooms are bland but agreeably warm, not unlike the nightly specialty, cheese and onion soup. The clientele leaves much to be de-

**Lechberg (small city):** Conventional; AL NE; 15,000 gp limit; Assets 4,125,000 gp; Population 5,500; Isolated (human 74%, halfling 5%, other 1%).

**Authority Figures:** Conte Edmondo Dilisnya, male human Ari8; Conteasa Sofia Buchvold, female human Ari9; Captain Zivon Doritor, male human Ftr12. (All are addicted to Borrowed Time.)

**Important Characters:** Sentire Benci Cochetari (anchorite), male human Clr8; Cezar Vercezzo (composer), male human Brd10; Ambrosia Hillstride (city guide), female halfling Com10.

sired, however: a seedy throng of gamblers and likely criminals. More affluent visitors should continue uphill to the Outlook (good quality rooms, common quality meals), a stout little inn sitting halfway up the tor. The Outlook's rooms are quiet, secure and provide commanding views of Mt. Gries.

## Degravo

I knew enough of Borca's sefs to see that their vanity could become my skeleton key. I wrote to Lord Ivan, presenting myself as a travelogue writer and claiming readers would be fascinated by Sef Dilisnya's exploits. A week later, I received an invitation and proceeded to Degravo in the company of a small troupe of Dementlieuse actors invited to perform there.

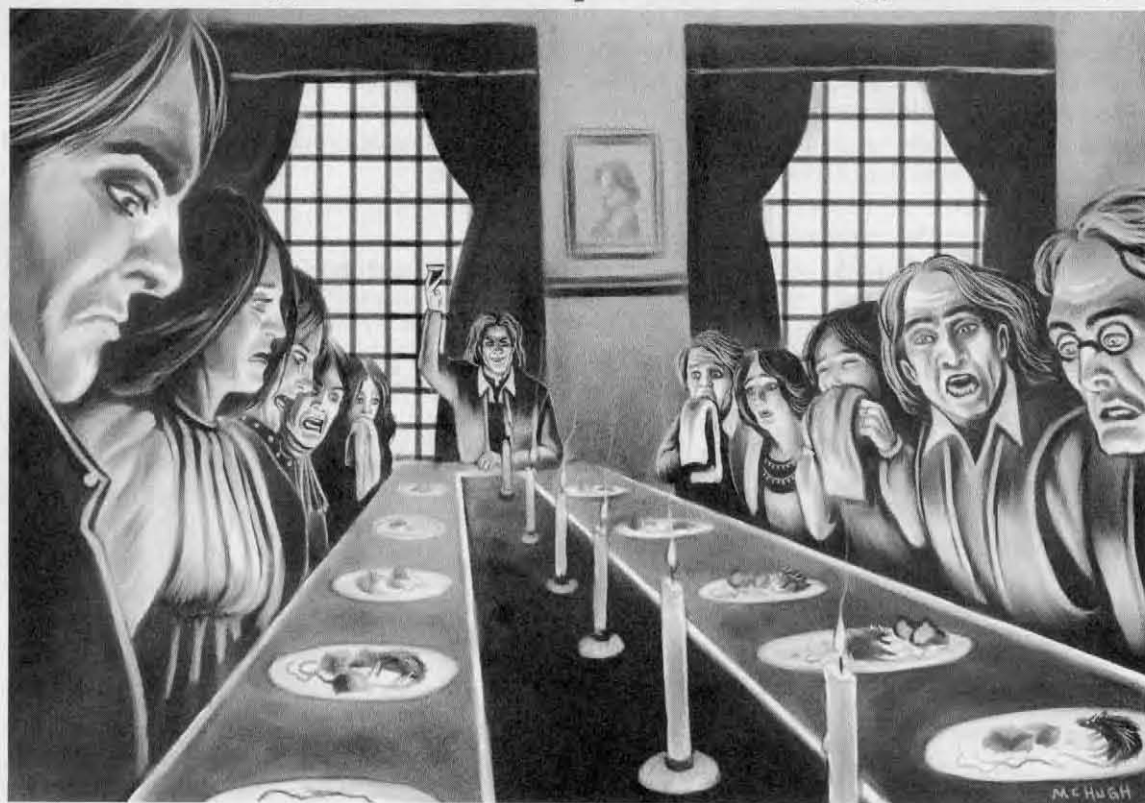
North of Lechberg, the Crimson Highway narrows to a hilly road leading directly to the wrought iron gates of Ivan's manor. The walled estate chokes with overgrown gardens and brambles. Most are poisonous and dead or black with rot, with only the kitchen and medicinal gardens tended.

A dozen bodyguards met us at the gates, confiscating our weapons and anything they thought suspicious. Ivan presented himself once we were disarmed, "idly" carrying a few pages of an operetta he claimed to be writing and offered us the grand tour.

Degravo is built in a variation on the classic Borcan style. Numerous interconnected branches coil around a massive central hall like a maelstrom — or a viper poised to strike. Ivan calls the central hall his "Laughing House." Our tour through its twisting corridors passed lofty ballrooms and dining halls; Ivan's private theater; display chambers for toys, weapons, clothes and all manner of esoteria; and opulent lounges thick with the aroma of incense and exotic narcotics. We soon had dinner, the first social obstacle course Ivan subjected us to throughout our stay. The opening dishes were exquisite, but were soon followed by courses of live worms, rancid horseflesh and worse. My Darkonian palate served to mask my distaste well; Ivan partook of both opulence and offal with the same jaded discontent, reacting to his guests' pleased sighs and stifled gags with the same sneers of contempt. After the feast, we moved to the theater, where the troupe attempted to perform despite Ivan's obtrusive and bizarre advice.

The wings surrounding the Laughing House are separated by use. The help live and work in the servants' wing, while Ivan and his few kin dwell in





the family wing. The latter is divided into numerous separate suites, most of which go vacant. Our guestrooms shared yet another wing with the garrison for Ivan's enforcers. Ivan moves his own living quarters from wing to wing with the changing of the seasons, displacing other residents at his whim.

One last major wing stands at the rear of the manor. Ivan calls this hall his "Playroom." Servants murmured that no one is allowed inside the Playroom without Ivan's invitation; none of them had ever seen its interior. One of the actors, however, earned just such an invitation after he finally broke down and railed against Ivan from the stage. With a wave of Ivan's hand, guards swarmed the fool and escorted him through the Playroom's doors. I strongly doubt he will ever emerge.

## Levkarest

I turned south to the bustling capital. Levkarest is a roughly heart-shaped city that straddles a low rise along the western banks of the Luna, just upriver from where the great river's twin heads merge. Its marble fortifications are well maintained but sparsely patrolled. The Crimson Highway cuts a winding path through the city's heart, bookended

by two gatehouses: towering Sunset Gate to the west and smaller Sunrise Gate to the southeast. Just beyond Sunrise Gate, the long, low Fen Bridge spans the marshy outlet of one of many rivulets in the region. The Old Svalich Road comes in from the northeast, terminating at Caina, a small satellite community that largely acts as a fortified landing for the Luna ferry.

Levkarest is a major trade center; the shops and eateries offer goods from throughout the world, for the right price. What the merchant guilds do not have, the trade guilds can obtain. Locals also see their city as a cultural center to rival Port-a-Lucine, but most foreigners would call this overstated. Levkarest is home to the Academy of Style, a respected finishing school, and numerous art galleries and music halls. Friends of Lady Ivana operate many of these establishments; some folk whisper that she sponsors the arts solely to ensure Levkarest does not lack for entertainment.

Levkarest is undeniably scenic, surrounded for miles by the rolling farms and estates of Ivana's favorite stapans. The city houses several stunning monuments to the artistry of Borca's architects, most notably Marsav Hall and the Great Cathedral.





Marsav Hall is a true palace, hidden behind high walls at the northern edge of town. Marsav is the official seat of Borcan government; its expansive grounds include record halls, militia barracks and private quarters for the family of Levkarest's stapan, Conte Sulo Boritsi. Boritsi is Lady Ivana's brother, though at 63 he more closely resembles her grandfather. He is also her closest advisor.

The Great Cathedral looms a few blocks away. Its cavernous worship hall's ceiling is covered in marble gargoyles that represent the Legions of the Night, all shying away from the serenity of the huge icon of Ezra above the altar. I was more intrigued by the Cathedral's ecclesiastic library, which is open to scholars only by appointment and under strict supervision. These quiet halls are a literary treasure hoard, storing supposed religious relics, holy texts of countless religions, the original copies of each *Book of Ezra*, and scores of heretical works collected over the years.

Levkarest's main thoroughfares are broad, colorful and remarkably clean, kept so by the dictates of Lady Ivana and with the aid of several aqueducts supplying water to the city's fountains and waterworks. The true cleaners, however, are a ragged army of peasants sent out each day from workhouses, and once I wound my way into the narrow side streets, I quickly encountered squalid slums. Sludge oozing from the city sewers has rendered the marshes beneath the Fen Bridge toxic, perhaps even producing the huge vermin supposedly sometimes seen squirming through the muck. Levkarest is not a pristine city; it merely sweeps its wretches beneath the proverbial rug.

## Where to Stay in Levkarest

Affluent visitors should turn to the Rosebud's Thorn (common quality rooms, good quality meals) at Sunset Gate; the inn boasts an extensive selection of liquors. Desfraya Manor (good quality rooms, good quality food) is an aristocratic townhouse turned boarding house. Camille Boritsi favored the Desfraya family, but their fortunes fell with her. Debts shriveled their holdings to this manor, but the eccentric ex-aristocrats seem to enjoy their lesser station. Staying here is as close as most folk will come to staying as the guests of nobility. Patrons of lesser means can stay in the old servants' quarters, or they can cross the Luna to the Sun's Peak in Caina (common quality rooms, common quality meals), which caters to Barovian tastes in both décor and cuisine. Last and least is the Dark

Maiden (poor quality rooms, poor quality meals), a squalid gambling den near Sunrise Gate that apparently adopted its current name (and lurid sign) in a cynical — yet successful — bid to attract Lady Ivana's patronage when she and her entourage go slumming.

**Levkarest (small city):** Conventional; ALNE; 15,000 gp limit; Assets 6,375,000 gp; Population 8,500; Isolated (human 94%, halfling 5%, other 1%).

**Authority Figures:** Conte Sulo Boritsi, male human Ari6/Exp4; Captain Victor Momeala, male human War13.

**Important Characters:** Praesidius Levin Postoya; Clotilda Taroyan (tollere), female human ermordening Wiz8; Garret Tallgallows (burglar), male halfling Rog12.

## Misericordia

While in Levkarest, a repeat of the tactics I had used in Lechberg earned me an invitation to a social gathering at Misericordia, home to the Black Widow. *Misericordia* means "loving kindness," but many Borcans secretly call it *Miseria Corpa*: the "body of misery." The sprawling estate covers a high hill southeast of Levkarest, overlooking the Old Svalich Road.

The manor boasts several "widow's walks" that stand atop the steeply sloping roofs, accessed by trapdoors. Ivana reputedly haunts these walkways whenever one of her lovers dies.

Most of the party guests were as lovely and shallow as panes of stained glass. I quickly tired of pale young things offering me advice on how to make my face less "harsh." Misericordia's interior is ostentatious, a collection of spacious chambers linked by narrow passageways. Vaulted ceilings soar above floors of polished marble or inlaid hardwoods. Fine, soft carpets mingle with heavy, faded tapestries. Ornately carved furniture and tasteful statues and paintings fill the galleries.

By all accounts, Misericordia is riddled with secret passages. I found three while wandering the halls, but all of these proved to be innocuous routes for servants. According to rumor, escape tunnels run the length of the estate, and Ivana's private suite can be accessed only through a series of concealed corridors.





I eventually found Ivana herself, gossiping amid a circle of overly eager young men while the Jongleur looked on from a discreet distance. I introduced myself, and Ivana graciously turned all of her attention to me, granting me an interview as we strolled through the party. During our conversation, Ivana struck me as charming, if vapid; most of her questions to me focused on my knowledge of the latest fashions in Dementlieu, Hazlani cuisine and other such trifles. I was almost convinced she was the wounded, naïve innocent many suitors believe her to be. Only as I reviewed my notes during my trip back to Levkarest did I realize that Ivana's "vacuous" questions had drawn travel details of my entire itinerary for this past year and a half.

### **Final Thoughts**

Borca possesses vast wealth, its purse strings clutched by corrupt and unpopular rulers. It would

be a great prize for the conqueror who can claim it, even more so if its guilds and trade routes remain intact. Yet a steady stream of erstwhile usurpers have lost their lives in pursuit of that prize, learning too late that the glittering jewels of Borca lie at the heart of a nest of vipers. Not even Borca's feuding sefs have succeeded in their schemes to eliminate each other, despite their best attempts.

Assassins aiming for one of Borca's sefs should choose their target carefully. If Ivan Dilisnya dies, laws would stabilize and commoners' lives would likely improve, strengthening Ivana Boritsi's rule. Without Ivan's treacherous diplomacy, however, Borca's borders would be far more vulnerable to its foes. Were Ivana to die, Ivan's militia would likely expand its corrupt control even as society spiraled into total collapse. Ultimately, the choice is whether Borca would rot from the inside out or vice versa.





# Report Two: Invidia

*When lovely woman stoops to folly,  
And finds too late that men betray,  
What charm can soothe her melancholy?  
What art can wash her guilt away?*  
— Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield*

*'Twixt kings and tyrants there's this difference known:  
Kings seek their subjects' good; tyrants their own.*  
— Robert Herrick, *Kings and Tyrants*



**P**referring to risk a seldom-used road between Borca and Invidia rather than the highways (and rapidly lengthening autumn nights) in Barovia, I set out on foot from Levkarest to my next destination. It was a dark day when I crossed the frontier into the sad realm of Invidia. The land's bright leaves had only recently fallen, leaving behind trees like twisted skeletal hands reaching desperately toward the slate gray sky. Cold winds blew, chilling me to the bone despite my heavy woolen cloak and setting the trees into ominous motion. On occasion, icy rain rattled against the coach's glass windows. My thoughts turned inward, for Invidia seemed likely to hold some of the darkest secrets of all the Core.

*More than you or anyone can possibly imagine, my little scholar. The secrets you uncover may yet shake this wretched prison to its foundations.*

My unease was made greater by the fact that my visit to Invidia was to take place *incognito*, for the land's ruler, the tyrant Malocchio Aderre, is infamous for his brutality and suspicion of strangers. His hatred of the Vistani is well known, but of more personal concern was his sensitivity to criticism and outside "troublemakers" who might expose his excesses to the rest of the world. Additionally, his military allegiance with Vlad Drakov, whose personal hatred toward my patron need not be recounted, meant that this visit would be scarcely less risky than my survey of Drakov's own demesne, Falkovnia.

After I trudged across the Borcan frontier, the tyrant's hand made itself evident in the form of a squad of Invidian soldiers, who confronted me with spanned crossbows, then searched my person and packs. I was then subjected to harsh questions about my intentions and business in the realm. I presented myself as Chantal Leroix, a Dementlieuse author visiting relatives in Karina. The guards took particular interest in a few items — notably my dissection kit, encoded notebooks and the strange vambrace given me by my patron, but the Invidians eventually allowed me to go about my business.

At the time, I suspected that the soldiers' main concern was determining whether or not I was a spy sent by the house of Dilisnya. Later I learned that the presence of Gundarakite rebels, based at Castle Hunadora to the south, were making Invidian patrols in the region even more watchful and

## Invidia at a Glance

**Cultural Level:** Chivalric (8)

**Ecology:** Full

**Climate/Terrain:** Temperate forests and hills

**Year of Formation:** 603 BC

**Population:** 6,900

**Races:** Humans 99%, other 1%

**Human Ethnic Groups:** Mixed (primarily Barovian/Kartakan)

**Languages:** Balok\*, Mordentish, Falkovnian, Luktar, Vaasi

**Religions:** Ezra, Hala

**Government:** Formerly independent villages shifting to despotism

**Ruler:** Malocchio Aderre

**Darklord:** Gabrielle Aderre

suspicious than normal. Had I been suspected of dealing with the Borcans, Gundarakites, or — worse in the view of the realm's ruler — the Vistani, my fate might have been grim indeed. It was with this most unpleasant incident that I began my sojourn in Invidia, a realm of hatred, violence and betrayal.

## Landscape



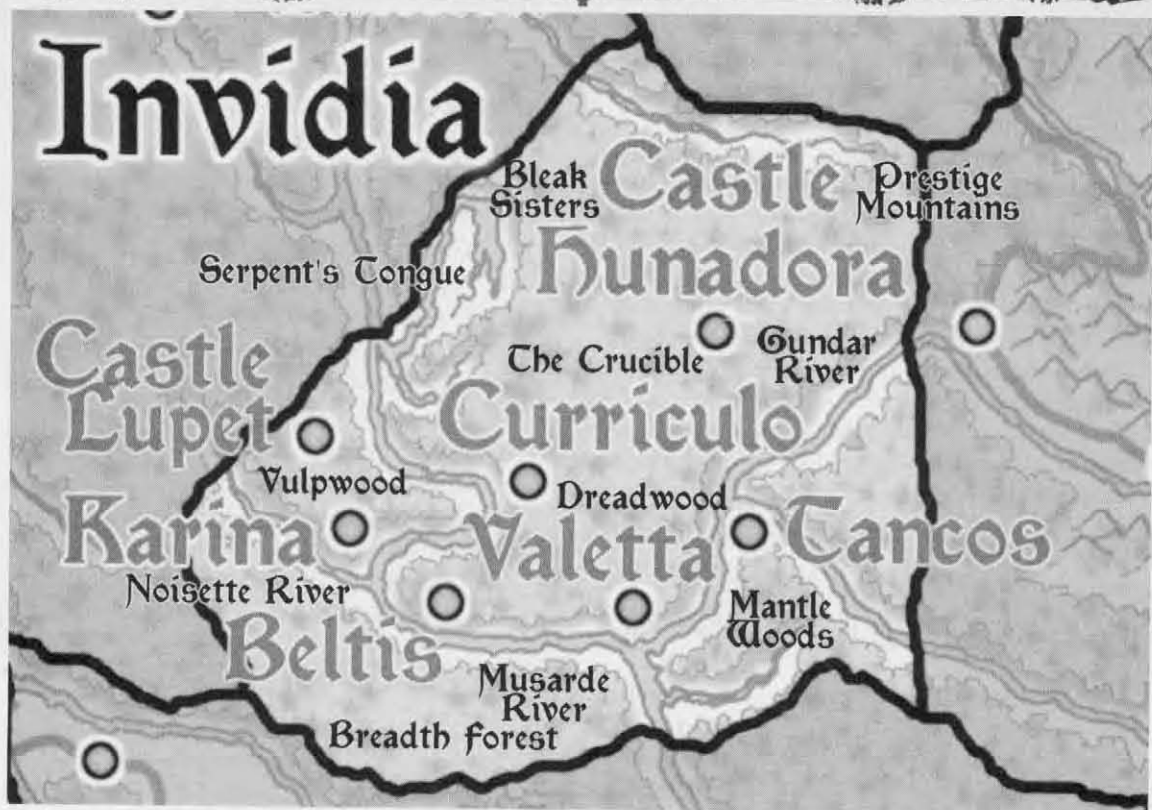
Invidia is a wild, sparsely populated realm, with vast stretches of dark and forbidding forest; rounded hills; broad, slow rivers; no real mountain ranges; and no major settlements outside of Curriculo and the capital, Karina. Civilization is limited to isolated farms, vineyards and hamlets with populations of fifty or less. Invidia's inhabitants are a suspicious and insular lot.

The realm's frontiers stretch from the Bonesliver River along the northern frontier with Borca to the meandering, somewhat arbitrary western border with Verbrek, and the southern border with Sithicus, cutting through the thick, fey-haunted reaches of the Breadth Forest. Invidia's eastern border is likewise arbitrary, a straight north-south line drawn when Invidia and Barovia divided Gundarak's territory between them in 740 BC.

Between these borders lie vast forests of oak, redwood and maple rising from tangled undergrowth,







and the deep, rich Musarde River Valley, which harbors most of Invidia's villages and farms. In the north, the ancient oaks and firs of the *Padure Duce* — or Ducal Forest, so named because they were originally the exclusive territory of Gundarak's ruler, Duke Gundar — harbor the Gundarakite rebels, Vistani refugees, outlaws and other undesirables, including rumors of wolfweres. Lord Malocchio wishes to pacify these woods and drive out their inhabitants, but so far the renegades, as well as the woods' wild animals and monstrous residents, have frustrated the tyrant's plans. Among eastern Invidians, the Ducal Forest has been synonymous with danger and death since the day Duke Gundar claimed it, and few go there willingly.

The black, forbidding trees of the Dreadwood dominate the central highlands of the nation. Growing along the slopes of the Crucible Hills, the Dreadwood is aptly named and largely avoided by Invidian commoners, who believe it to be haunted both by spirits and by more substantial horrors such as wolves (both of the natural and unnatural sort), trolls and gremishka. This ancient, tangled wilderness of oak and maple contains only a handful of human settlements, most clustered along its southern edges.

The realm's capital city Karina lies at the south end of the *Padure Lup*, also called the Wolfwood or the Vulpwood. The forest's proximity to Invidia's largest settlement makes the Vulpwood reasonably safe for travel and settlement despite its ominous name, and a majority of the land's villages and farms are located within a day's ride of Karina. The woods are sometimes troubled by wolves — lycanthropes, according to some peasants — and undead, but Lord Malocchio's troops are quick to respond to such immediate threats.

The dense and intimidating Breadth Forest covers the southern portion of the country along the frontier with Sithicus. The Breadth's towering redwoods and hardy pines stand like guardians, and in their shadows live some of the strangest creatures in the realm. A few human outlaws and rebels inhabit the Breadth, but various forces — both natural and arcane — keep civilization from encroaching too closely.

Between the Gundar and Narov Rivers lie the *Mantie Padure* or Mantle Woods, another tangled and inhospitable wilderness, shunned and almost entirely unsettled, save for the occasional brave hunter or foolhardy traveler. Once part of Gundarak, the Mantle Woods are a great mystery





to the Invidians and the subject of many legends. One such tale claims that it is secretly controlled by a powerful hag or sorceress, who can offer supplicants a glimpse of the future through her scrying crystal but almost always demands a fearful price for the service.

Invidia is a rolling, hilly land, though few of these hills rise high enough to be considered mountains. Exceptions are the Bleak Sisters, which taper off into Borca's Blightwood, and the low and rugged Prestige Mountains, which form part of Invidia's northern frontier. Travelers entering the realm from Borca pass between these two ranges, skirting the edge of the Ducal Forest before turning south to Curriculo.

In the central part of the country, a small range of hills rises into granite slopes called the *Creuzet*, or *Crucible*. Cold, lonely, and mostly uninhabited, they serve primarily as a barrier between Lord Malocchio's troops and the Gundarakite rebels to the north. The Crimson Hills — or *Rosudeal* — surround Castle Hunadora itself and help provide the rebel stronghold with additional defenses. These hills are also called the *Sangerosdeal*, or *Bloody Hills*, since they were the scene of a fearful incident

in which Duke Boldiszar Gundar crucified and dismembered hundreds of rebellious nobles and their followers after the Third Unwise Rebellion. It is said that the spirits of the tormented rebels haunt these hills.

Many Invidians consider their homeland to be at its most scenic when viewed from the deck of a riverboat. Invidia's rivers are broad, sluggish and dark, but they are important to travel, trade and the economy of common citizens. Most Invidian settlements are small thorps clustered along the rivers, connected to each other by rough, often impassible roads. The two major rivers are the mighty Musarde, which has carved a fertile valley through the realm's central portion, and the Gundar, which links Invidia to its uneasy neighbor, Barovia. Most Invidian towns and villages are clustered along the Musarde's banks. The settlements of Curriculo and Karina depend upon the trade carried along the region's rivers, as they provide the major travel routes to lands beyond her borders.

Though relations between Invidia and Barovia are increasingly strained, traffic continues to flourish along the rivers, and the docks of Karina are crowded with Barovian trade vessels, many of which





continue on to Verbrek and points north. The route back to Barovia is a bit more problematic, as vessels must be rowed or poled against the current, but the value of trade between realms ensures its continuation.

Boats and barges from other lands throughout the western Core also pass through Invidia, and tariffs on goods are an important source of income for Lord Malocchio. Recently, the tyrant has increased these fees, prompting grumbling among merchants, some of whom consider bypassing this troubled realm altogether.

A small tributary of the Musarde, the *Limbasarpe*—or “Serpent’s Tongue”—flows north from the rugged Barské Hills, then abruptly turns south to join the Musarde. The *Limb\_sarpe* begins with two forks that join as they leave the hills. An unusually clear and fresh river, it harbors several species of fish and sports bustling villages along its banks.

The capital Karina sits along the northern bank of the small Noisette River. Well patrolled and settled, the Karina Valley to the north of the city is probably the richest and safest region in the realm.

The Nharov River flows in from Barovia before joining the Gundar. As it passes unsettled wilderness, however, the Nharov is not well traveled. Only a few tiny thorps cling desperately to its banks. Beyond these, grim and forbidding forests rise.

Invidia has only two significant roads, neither of which is well maintained. The Duke’s Road winds its way from Borca, passing between the Bleak Sisters and skirting the western edge of the Ducal Forest before reaching Curriculo. Bandits and rebels often prey on travelers here. It then turns southwest, crossing the Musarde River via ferry before reaching Karina. Few travelers continue on the Duke’s Road after it leaves Karina, where it crosses the Noisette via another ferry, then plunges into the Breadth Forest, eventually entering Sithicus.

The other major road, the Gundar Road, extends from Curriculo to the Barovian border, across what was once Gundarakite territory, eventually reaching Zeidenburg. Normally, this road would be an important trade route, but the rebels of Castle Hunadora control it, seizing goods or levying heavy tariffs. With such problems, most commerce with Barovia takes place via the Gundar River.

Invidia’s climate is temperate, with long, pleasant summers, wet springs and cold, rainy winters. In the fall, the vast forests burst into color. Harvest time is a joyful occasion, with many raucous celebrations and much drinking and singing.

Regrettably, my journey took place soon after harvest, when the autumn winds began to blow. The bright leaves turned brown and gray, falling from trees and choking the rivers or lying in stagnant ponds surrounded by tangled blackberry thickets. During these days, greenish moss grows from tree trunks or waves in the wind among high branches, and black balls of mistletoe cluster in the branches of ancient oaks. When cold rain does not lash the land, chill fog clings to hills like a gray shawl or blankets the wet, muddy farmlands. The people stay indoors during late fall and winter, emerging only out of necessity, spending most of their time huddled around fires, desperately trying to hold the cold at bay.

Invidian architecture varies depending on the size and wealth of the individual village. In small, rural settlements, stone- or wood-and-plaster huts with wooden or thatch roofs dominate. In Curriculo, Karina and some larger villages, buildings are reminiscent of the Barovian style, with steep gabled roofs covered in black wooden shingles. These buildings are either wood or brick, usually covered with dun-colored plaster. They tend to be tall and narrow, with three or more small floors, and are often in poor repair, their façades crumbling, their weak foundations causing them to lean at alarming angles, especially in poor neighborhoods. Cupolas, gables, towers and other architectural flourishes are common, most often on the mansions and villas of the wealthy. When night-fogs creep through the streets of Karina, the sight is grim and forbidding indeed, as the chill seeps through doors and windows and causes occupants to shiver and draw blankets closer.

## flora

In the north, mixed forests of evergreen fir, pine and redwood with deciduous oak and maple predominate. Undergrowth is thick here, with salal, blackberry, rhododendron, trefoil and numerous species of ferns making travel difficult. Fallen timber disintegrates quickly on the moist forest floor, sprouting with mushrooms and other fungi. Several types of shelf fungi sprout from the trees; some are quite colorful, with rich browns, yellows and oranges. Most notable of these fungi is





a nondescript gray polypore called hermitshawl, which can be turned into a potent sleeping potion and — in higher concentrations — a poison that causes a death-like coma that can last for days or weeks. Hermitshawl is said to be used to simulate death in those who wish to disappear or escape their foes, but there are many tales of such schemes backfiring and ending with the victim returning to awareness only to find himself buried alive. A number of malign plant species are found throughout Invidia as well, though they do not pose a major threat.

Central Invidia boasts deciduous forests consisting primarily of oak, birch and ash, with occasional stands of fir and cedar. Undergrowth here is also thick, with many species of edible berries and roots. Some Invidians keep orchards of apple and pear trees; a few of these orchards still exist in the hills near Curriculo, but since the Great Upheaval, many have been abandoned. These old orchards are slowly returning to their natural state and lie choked with brush, their fences rotting away, their barns and farmhouses collapsing.

South of the Musarde River, the grim spirit of Sithicus has spread to the Breadth Forest, where the trees are thick and seem intent on actively preventing intruders from entering. Here, nettles, blackberries, ivy and unhealthy looking ferns crowd together in the trees' shadows, and club moss, mushrooms and fungi grow in great profusion. Mobile, carnivorous trees are said to inhabit this region as well, causing most Invidians to avoid the forest, though travel is possible along the Duke's Road.

## fauna

Even the mundane creatures of Invidia represent a challenge to lone travelers. Great packs of wolves roam the realm's forests and hills, and many accounts speak of travelers being stalked by the beasts, which keep pace but never attack unless an animal or party member falls behind. Unlike the beasts roaming many of Invidia's neighbors, these wolves do not seem to carry a malign taint, but are simply influenced by hunger and an instinctive drive to hunt. The humans of Invidia are not numerous enough to drive out or otherwise damage the wolf populations, and so the creatures have little fear of humanity.

Elsewhere, the forests harbor deer, elk, fox, badger and wolverine, as well as small rodents and flocks of birds including ravens, crows, starlings and many species of thrush. Besides the wolf, the largest significant predator is the cougar or mountain lion, found in substantial numbers in the realm's northern portion.

Hawks and eagles are less common, but can sometimes be seen. Invidia harbors several species of snakes, but non-venomous and lethal, and the rivers and ponds are home to countless salamanders and frogs, whose loud songs are known to keep travelers awake during the springtime.

Most of these creatures represent a minimal threat. Not so the realm's unnatural beasts, which hold the wilderness with a ferocity that sometimes implies malign intelligence and hatred of civilization. Huge breeds of the region's animals — most prominently wolves, foxes and mountain lions — stalk prey with great cunning and tenacity, and draw no distinction between ordinary animals and humans.

## Hermitshawl

Travelers occasionally encounter hermitshawl spores in the wild. When five doses of these spores are combined and distilled by a skilled herbalist or poisoner, they can be used to create hermitshawl elixir.

**Hermitshawl spores:** Inhaled, Fortitude DC 12, initial and secondary damage drowsiness. A victim who fails one saving throw is fatigued for 2d4 minutes; a victim who fails both saving throws falls asleep for 2d4 minutes. If the sleeping victim is awakened, she remains fatigued for the remainder of the spores' duration. *Market Price per Dose:* 30 gp.

**Hermitshawl elixir:** Ingested, Fortitude DC 17, initial and secondary damage 1d6 Wisdom; Craft (herbalism or poison-making) DC 15. *Market Price per Dose:* 150 gp.





Invidian legend is rife with lycanthropes and other shapechanging monsters. Some wolf packs initially appear natural, but prove to be led by (or worse, consist entirely of) deadly wolfweres, while Invidian legends often speak of werewolves who live as normal humans by day and then stalk the land as beasts when the moon grows full. Outbreaks of lycanthropy have been known to devastate entire hamlets, and other settlements — particularly those located far from main roads or larger villages — have been completely wiped out by savage shapechangers. Fortunately for the Invidians, many of these creatures seem to despise each other as intruders on their territory. Vicious infighting appears to keep Invidia's shapechanging population in check.

The southern portions, particularly the Breadth Forest bordering on Sithicus, are said to draw outsiders such as shadow fiends and fenhounds, as well as various hostile fey such as baobhan sith, drownling and teg. More exotic shapechangers such as wereravens and wereravens dwell in the deep forests of southern Invidia as well. Tales also speak of shadow unicorns, dread hounds and deadly fiends, but none of these has ever been conclusively proven.

## History



nvidia has always been a violent realm, governed by the passions of its people and the ruthless brutality of its rulers. Its false history chronicles a series of decadent, bloodthirsty rulers more intent on their own personal vendettas than on the welfare of their subjects. This sad tradition continues to this day, though now the unfettered passions of the Invidians may bring them all to ruin.

*Once again, my little scholar, your observations are at the same time insightful and naïve.*

Roughly three centuries ago, a nobleman named Treholan rose to power by his merciless willingness to use more violence than any of his rivals. The region was divided then, with petty local dukes controlling their own minor domains and fighting incessantly with their neighbors. Treholan invited several powerful nobles to his estate, saying that he wished to hold a grand council whereby the land could be united under a single ruler. Not all nobles responded, but enough did so that when Treholan ordered his soldiers to slay his guests and their escorts, he was left as the most powerful warlord in the land. Claiming the crown of Invidia, Duke Treholan proceeded to exterminate all his rivals, hunting down and destroying the remaining lords and their families. He then erected the now-infamous Castle Loupet as a symbol of his power and sired a long line of treacherous heirs.

This terrible crime, involving not only murder but the betrayal of guests by a supposedly honorable nobleman, was apparently *not* the seminal event that brought Invidia from the Mists. That came in 603 BC, the year Treholan's direct descendant Bakholis, known to history as the Traitor King, came to power. Bakholis savagely suppressed dissent, murdering suspected rivals and ruling entirely by terror and intimidation. In addition to levying crushing taxes on his peasantry, Bakholis considered them his personal labor pool, abducting young men from their farms to build his palaces and young women from their beds to serve his perverse pleasures.

One such young woman was the peasant girl Marta, to whom Bakholis took a fancy when his hunting party passed through the village of Grūnlan. As he had done dozens of times in the past, Bakholis

### Local Animals and Native Horrors

**Wildlife:** CR 1/10 — bat; toad; CR 1/8 — rat; CR 1/6 — raven; CR 1/4 — cat; owl; weasel; CR 1/3 — hawk; snake, Tiny viper; CR 1/2 — badger; eagle; snake, Small viper; CR 1 — razorback\*; snake, Medium viper; wolf; CR 2 — bear, brown; boar; CR 4 — bear, black.

**Monsters:** CR 1/3 — dire rat; gremishka\*; skel-eton, Medium; CR 1/2 — stirge; zombie, Medium; CR 1 — bakhna rakhna\*; dire raven (see **Ravenloft Gazetteer 1**); hound, mastiff\*; dryad; ghoul; plant, bloodrose\*; CR 2 — dire badger; dire bat; lycan-thrope, wererat; plant, crawling ivy\*; worg; CR 3 — ankheg; baoban sith\*; dire wolf; drownling\*; lycanthrope, wereboar; lycanthrope, werewolf; shadow; CR 4 — dire boar; dire wolverine; ettercap; owlbear; plant, lashweed\*; unicorn, shadow\*; CR 5 — ettin; lycanthrope, loup garou\*; lycanthrope, werebear; troll; winter wolf; CR 6 — troll, dread\*; will o' wisp; CR 7 — dire bear; vampire; CR 8 — mohrg; treant; CR 9 — plant, death's head tree\*; plant, undead treant\*; CR 10 — plant, quickwood\*; roper; CR 11 — fomorian.





ordered his soldiers to seize the girl, but when they arrived, Marta's lover Karlus as well as her father and brothers resisted, killing an Invidian soldier. In retaliation, Bakholis ordered the entire village razed and its citizens crucified. Marta's father sacrificed himself to allow Karlus to escape, and from a nearby hill, the young man saw his village burned and watched as his friends and family died in agony. That night, Karlus swore vengeance against Bakholis and set off on a career of banditry, gathering an army of outlaws and eventually attacking Bakholis' castle north of Karina.

Karlus' act proved reckless, however, for Bakholis was ready for him. The outlaws were put to flight and Karlus was captured. Bakholis dragged both the young rebel and Marta to his dungeon, where he showed them a bloody pit filled with ravenous, rabid wolves. His torturers then chained Karlus' arms and suspended him above the pit, slowly lowering him to the maddened beasts as Marta was repeatedly ravished and brutalized by Invidian soldiers. When at last Karlus was torn apart, and the wolves fought over his bones, Bakholis smiled and told Marta that she would now join her lover.

As her broken body was carried toward the pit, Marta fixed Bakholis with a hate-filled stare and, as famously told in Invidian legend, uttered a dying curse:

*As a traitor were you born, as a beast did you live, and as a monster did you kill. Let all know that you are a beast without as you are a beast within, and let your foul jaws never be free of the blood of your loved ones.*

Bakholis laughed loudly at this and watched with pleasure as the wolves dismembered his victim. After a hearty feast, Bakholis retired to his bed. That night, a strange mist descended upon the land, taking the entire kingdom in its cold embrace. The next morning, the sun rose above a realm that was changed forever.

As far as the local commoners are concerned, the land of Invidia has always been part of the Core, but it was at this point that neighboring Gundarak first noted the appearance of a new land, and pondered whether it would prove a rival or an ally.

Here I should note an especially troubling historical contradiction, of which I have already spoken in my report on Kartakass. The Kartakans claim that they were once conquered by a neighboring realm also called Invidia, which brutally

occupied the land for many years until they were at last expelled by a rebellion led by the bard Harkon Lukas. As I wrote in my earlier report, I do not believe the Invidians of Kartakan history to be the same as the Invidians that we know today. Yet, the powers of darkness are indeed subtle and devious, and there may be an answer to this riddle that no one has yet guessed.

For his part, Lord Bakholis continued on as normal, oppressing and exploiting his suspects and brutally killing any who even contemplated plotting against him. Not until the next full moon rose did the peasant girl's curse made itself known.

That night, Bakholis took to his bed with a blinding headache. The next morning, he awoke alone to find his entire castle awash in blood, with the ravaged corpses of his servants and councilors strewn about the halls, rooms and stairs. Horrified, Bakholis rushed through the castle, searching for the bedchamber of his son and heir, Rukhen. When he saw the boy's sundered remains, so it is said, Bakholis suddenly remembered Marta's curse and touched his own face, only to find his fingers red with congealed blood. The tyrant wandered the halls in a daze, finding his wife and daughter also savagely slain, and realized that he himself had committed these terrible murders. Soon, it became obvious what had happened: Marta's curse had transformed Bakholis into a bloodthirsty werewolf and very likely the first dread lord at Invidia's heart.

From that day forward, Bakholis' rule grew harsher. He employed new guards and councilors and bade them bring peasants to him to feed his insatiable bloodlust. Those he drafted for slave labor often suffered foul deaths at his hands; the few who escaped spread lycanthropy across the land. Within a few years, pleasure and violence became indistinguishable to the cursed lord.

In time, Bakholis learned to live with — and even revel in — his cursed condition. He forged trade alliances with Arkandale (modern Verbrek) and Gundarak and maintained polite relations with the von Zaroviches of Barovia, though the rulers kept each other at arm's length. Bakholis' curse soaked the land in blood, and the true nature of their ruler became apparent to the common folk within a few years, though no one spoke of it openly.

Bakholis' rule continued for a century and a quarter, ending abruptly at the hands of the most unlikely of saviors — a peasant girl named Gabrielle Aderre.





Born around 710 BC, Gabrielle was the daughter of Isabella Aderre, a half-Vistani woman, and a Falkovnian nobleman who kept her mother as a captive and cruelly used her for his pleasure. Escaping with her daughter, Isabella wandered the realms, making a living by fortune telling, petty larceny and begging. Gabrielle grew into a beautiful young woman, only her dark eyes and lustrous hair betraying her Vistani heritage. After Isabella was slain by a murderous werewolf in 729 BC, Gabrielle was transported to Invidia, where Lord Bakholis' troops found her. After a brief pursuit, the Invidians captured Gabrielle and dragged her to Bakholis' castle for his pleasure.

The act proved Bakholis' undoing, for when he approached Gabrielle, she realized that he was a lycanthrope like the one that had killed her mother. As the monster approached, Gabrielle fixed him with a fearful gaze, and Bakholis froze in terror, seeing the same look of hatred that Marta had given him years before. As her foe stood transfixed, Gabrielle drew a hidden silver dagger and plunged it into Bakholis' throat. The tyrant staggered back, gaping in horror, then collapsed in a pool of black blood, his reign of terror at an end. It is said that every wolf in Invidia uttered a fearsome howl at Bakholis' death and that his soul still wanders the land, pursued by the ghosts of those he slew.

Within days, the flames of rebellion had spread across the land, and Bakholis' toadies — a sadistic lot never terribly loyal to begin with — were utterly overthrown. As symbols of the tyrant's bloody reign, Castle Loupet and the keeps of many of his vassals were set to the torch, leaving most as gutted shells; in some cases, the land beneath was sown with salt. Many of the sites remain cursed and haunted places to this day.

Proclaimed queen by the grateful rebels, Gabrielle claimed the still-smoldering Castle Loupet for herself and settled into rulership, but soon grew as lax and uncaring as Bakholis had been brutal and repressive. She amused herself with lavish entertainment and took many lovers, while the peasants were abandoned to go their own way, degenerating into independence, free of the iron hand of their rulers. Of course, they were also free of their rulers' protection as well, and bandits or what remained of Bakholis' lycanthropes soon overran many settlements. Within a decade of Bakholis' demise, Invidia had degenerated into an anarchic

realm with little, if any, central authority. In 730 BC, Falkovnian merchants established a trading colony in Karina. Under the watchful eye of Drakov's soldiers, they slowly expanded their power until several city blocks were effectively under Falkovnian rule. Thus was created the first, and to date only, Falkovnian "trading enclave" to survive and succeed.

Gabrielle was driven by boredom, anger at the failures of her past life, frustration at her mother's cursed legacy, and hatred of the Vistani who had rejected Isabella and condemned them to a life of misery. In those days, the first persecutions began as Gabrielle seized and imprisoned Vistani, punishing them harshly for the most minor of crimes and allowing her followers to spread foul legends about Vistani treachery and wickedness. Though brutal, Gabrielle's persecutions were nothing compared to what was to come. She was a queen who ruled not through proclamations, but by whispers in the ear and, so it is said, incantation. "Queen Gabrielle" was soon forgotten, all but replaced in the commoners' minds by "the witch Aderre."

Gabrielle's tastes grew more lavish and jaded, and she diverted huge amounts from the treasury to pay for her amusements. She took on more and more unusual lovers, among them a Kartakan bard named Matton, and treated each of them with increasing cruelty. Though a thoroughly malevolent individual, Matton nevertheless felt affection for Gabrielle and was heartbroken when she abandoned him. He never stopped loving her and later proved a valuable ally.

In 736 BC, Duke Gundar of Gundarak was assassinated by Dr. Henrik Dominiani, warden of an asylum near Teufeldorf. Gundarak plunged into chaos, and in 740 Strahd XI of Barovia ordered his boyars to annex the realm. As Barovian armies struck deep into Gundarak, Aderre went from village to village, advising the militia captains to take advantage of the situation. Soon Invidia had occupied Gundarak's western regions, facing surprisingly little resistance from the Gundarakites, and had taken Castle Hunadora. Invidia barely possessed the means to occupy western Gundarak, much less stave off the incoming Barovian forces, but the expected clash of arms never occurred. The Barovians simply ceased their westward march after claiming Gundarak's cities, never making any serious attempt to seize Hunadora.





### Former Darklord: Duke Nharov Gundar

Duke Gundar ruled Gundarak from its creation in 593 BC to his apparent assassination in 736 BC. Gundar was a vampire and ruled for centuries by masquerading as his own descendants. Older and more physically powerful than Strahd, Gundar was already an ancient vampire when granted his domain, but he was not equal to Strahd in spirit. A hero in his long-distant life, Duke Gundar became deranged in undeath, a rampaging sadist who delighted in crushing throats with his bare hands. He ruled through the power of fear alone, and when word came of his death, he was not missed. Neither were his children, when they in turn perished.

Remnants of the Gundarak population resisted, and low-level uprisings continued for several years thereafter, but they never amounted to the level of the revolution Strahd now faces. The light touch of the Invidians is no doubt at play here; for several years, the Invidians were entirely content to leave their new lands to Gundarakite rebels and their anti-Barovian plotting.

The end of Gabrielle's reign began inauspiciously enough late in 746 BC, when a handsome, dark-eyed gentleman caller appeared at the gates of Castle Loupet and immediately swept Gabrielle off her feet, despite all reason. The two spent a torrid night together, after which the stranger vanished, and Gabrielle discovered that she was pregnant.

Aderre's son, Malocchio, was born the next spring, seemingly normal save for a sixth finger on each hand. Gabrielle was overjoyed, but within days, the baby learned to walk and talk, attaining the stature of a young boy within weeks of his birth. Gabrielle's divinatory gifts revealed that her progeny was actually a Dukkar, a legendary anti-messiah destined to bring death and despair to the Vistani.

Gabrielle was at first happy with this turn of events, for her hatred of her mother's people had grown even blacker and more ferocious over time. Malocchio proved a truly miraculous child, growing into adolescence in mere months, reading and

absorbing every book in the castle and showing himself to be a talented and intelligent politician and schemer. He also possessed occult gifts, commanding the lesser creatures of the forest at his whim. Gabrielle began to plan a future for her son — a future that would see the final destruction of the Vistani at his hands.

Her son had no intention of serving as her puppet. Slowly, he turned the tables on his mother, corrupting her servants, buying her lovers, restricting her movements about the land, and eventually imprisoning her in her own manse.

Events came to a head during Karina's Harvest Carnival in 747. Malocchio had now reached adulthood, and his mother was no longer useful to him. Having come into his full power, Malocchio intended to discard his mother and spread his evil across the world. The emergence of a new Dukkar had not gone unnoticed by the Vistani, however, who wove a powerful incantation to forever bind Malocchio's evil to his homeland. His plans thwarted, Malocchio vented his rage upon his mother, fraying her sanity and leading her into the hands of her enemies. Gabrielle's life was spared only through the direct intervention of Gabrielle's spurned lover Matton, who found her body abandoned in the Dreadwood, battered and near death.

Matton retreated into the Invidian wilderness with his lover. While Malocchio Aderre announced his emergence to the world and used his mother's resources to seize control of Invidia, Matton spent months in hiding, slowly nursing Gabrielle's mind and body back to health. Together, the pair plotted Malocchio's downfall. Matton journeyed to Kartakass, where he began to recruit woodsmen — wolfweres, by some accounts — to his cause. Meanwhile, Gabrielle found her way to the Ducal Forest and made contact with the Gundarakite rebels. As the Gundarakites in Invidia had generally been well treated, the rebels accepted her as a figurehead leader, and by mid-750 BC they were strong enough to storm and hold Castle Hunadora.

Alarmed, Malocchio sent a small army to take back the fortress, but they were driven off with heavy losses, and Gabrielle's position as the rebels' patron was set in stone. For the moment, Malocchio turned his attention from the rebels, consolidating his rule throughout the rest of the nation and launching murderous pogroms against the Vistani with even greater zest and hatred than his mother.

Throughout the land, Malocchio's mercenaries pursued, arrested, robbed, tortured and executed







Vistani with the full force of law. Where Gabrielle's persecution had been random and impulsive, Malocchio's campaign was systematic, official and institutionalized. Anti-Vistani laws were posted in every town and village. Rewards were offered for anyone who provided the authorities with the location of Vistani, and harsh punishments were imposed on those who offered them refuge. One strange facet of the anti-Vistani pogrom stands out. Other than the magic that binds him, Malocchio seems neither afraid of nor affected by the wrath of the Vistani, despite the many dying or wronged gypsies who cursed his name with all the venom they could muster. Vistani curses, feared throughout the Land of Mists, appear to be totally powerless against the Dukkar, and the Vistani have suffered all the more for it.

*Were you not so intent on your own agenda, my little scholar, you might now see exactly how this demonspawn fits into my plans. But you will see someday, little one. You will indeed.*

To bolster his forces, Malocchio spent much of his resources to draw mercenaries from across the Core and soon thereafter brokered an alliance with Vlad Drakov. The alliance brought an influx of Falkovnian soldiers, bolstering Invidia's army and providing Malocchio with sufficient troops to contemplate action against the Gundarakite rebels and disliked neighbors. The details of this pact remain unknown; in fact, I could find no written records of any official treaty. The relationship between Malocchio Aderre and Drakov seems to be personal, if distant. They are, simply, two men bound by the common desire to grind the world beneath their heel.

Meanwhile, all was not well with Gabrielle and the Gundarakites. After several years, the rebels began to grumble that their leader was more interested in her vendetta against her traitorous son than in the cause of Gundarakite independence. After all, they said, she had seized huge portions of their realm for herself and claimed their ruler's castle as her own. She had not been as merciless as the Barovians, true, but still she only endorsed the Gundarakite cause when the rebels seemed useful to her. Though Matton's wolfwere allies were kept secret from the Gundarakites, rumors of its existence circulated throughout Castle

Hunadora and its environs. Some rebels began to talk openly of replacing her with a true Gundarakite who would fight openly for the cause.

In 748 BC, the Gundarakites of Barovia came under the leadership of the young and charismatic separatist Ardonk Szerieza. A master strategist and talented propagandist, he wove tales of an ancient, idealized Gundarak that never existed. The bloodthirsty, corrupt rulers were recast as patriots, their excesses conveniently ignored. Slowly, the Gundarakites of Barovia rallied to Ardonk's banner, and the rebels of Invidia, seeing in Ardonk the leader they so desperately needed, talked of joining with him in a grand alliance for Gundarakite independence.

### **Secret Society: The Sons of Gundar**

Most Invidian Gundarakites live in the northeast, the heart of their old country. Not all are rebels—the militant wing of the Gundarakite independence movement consists of only two or three hundred dedicated members. The remainder of the region's populace either maintains neutrality, hoping not to attract too much negative attention from Malocchio's soldiers or police, or secretly supports Invidian independence through a hidden brotherhood called the Sons of Gundar.

Though not as blatantly violent as the rebels, the Sons of Gundar are nevertheless a potent threat to Malocchio's rule. Members of this society give aid and comfort to the rebels, observe Invidian activities and troop movements, help with rebel communications by a series of secret signs and code words, sabotage Invidian supplies, and generally harass and delay Malocchio's forces wherever they can.

Malocchio has met with little success at infiltrating the Sons of Gundar or learning the true extent of their conspiracy, for most are unwilling to betray their comrades.

Clearly, this was a situation that Gabrielle would have to nip in the bud, lest her army of retribution be taken away from her, along with her best chance at a return to power. She presented





herself to Ardonk Szerieza when the great liberator visited Castle Hunadora, and within a few days the Gundarakite messiah openly endorsed her leadership of the Invidian rebel forces. Several rebels, who still resent Gabrielle's presence and wisely insist on remaining anonymous, offered their suspicions that Ardonk and "the Invidian witch" were secretly involved in a passionate affair and that she had gained his allegiance by placing him under her spell.

Should this be the case, Gabrielle maintained a delicate balancing act for several years, continuing beneath the noses of her two oblivious lovers. Befuddled by emotion, Ardonk remained ignorant of Matton and his werewolf allies, while Gabrielle assured Matton that Ardonk was nothing more than a political ally. Gabrielle knew that one day the gambit could explode in her face, yet she likely had no choice but to continue her deceptions.

Both Aderres have recently suffered setbacks. After years of saber rattling and escalating tempers, Malocchio sensed frailty in Sithicus' ruler and amassed a mercenary army in 752 BC. Intriguingly, none of the Falkovnian troops participated — apparently, their Talon leaders received orders from the north that this folly should be left to Malocchio alone. This bodes ill for Invidia's other neighbors, indicating that the Falkovnians wished to keep their forces strong for some conflict not yet come. Regardless, Malocchio ordered his motley army across the Sithican border that autumn, with orders to seize Castle Nedragaard and put its ruler to the sword. What occurred at the castle remains poorly understood in these lands; all that is widely known is that this battle somehow sparked the infamous Night of Screaming Shadows. The Black Rose of Sithicus was slain, his castle shattered, and not a single Invidian soldier present at the siege was left to tell the tale.

The troubles that befell Gabrielle in 753 BC were less epic, though they may prove scarcely less catastrophic. Gabrielle discovered herself to be pregnant again, and her daughter Lucita was born later in the year. Gabrielle has never spoken publicly about the father of this child, though disgruntled rebels say she has told both Matton and Ardonk that they fathered the child. Apparently, she may not know the truth herself. Gabrielle must know that she is only delaying the inevitable. Blood will have blood, and eventually the child will show her heritage. When that day comes, she

will lose one of her lovers and the allegiance of that man's forces will be so much dust.

Today, Invidia hangs in a precarious state of balance. Malocchio's persecution of the Vistani has reached new heights of cruelty and fanaticism. His troops pursue fleeing Vistani across the frontiers into foreign lands. In Barovia, Count Strahd's own forces have intervened, enforcing the count's edict that no Vistani in his realm be harmed. Likewise, Malocchio has enraged Ivan Dilisnya, who recently decreed that Invidian troops on his soil will be attacked and demanded that the pursuits cease. So far, Malocchio has responded to the demands with icy silence, and relations between the two realms have deteriorated.

Gabrielle's rebellion hangs by a thread. She supposedly considered sending Matton, Ardonk, or both in a direct assault against Malocchio, a fight in which they will certainly perish. Other rumors claim that she has toyed with telling one that the other violently forced himself on her, a falsehood that would surely bring the rivals rushing at each other's throats. Some claim she has considered taking her daughter and fleeing, traveling the realms as her mother did, passing the pain and tragedy of her past onto another generation.

## Populace



Invidia is a place of unbridled passions, where love and anger are frequently indistinguishable and where hard work leads to equally hard play. Though their faults are well known (and in many places infamous), the Invidians have many better qualities as well.

## Appearance

The Invidians are primarily descended from Barovian and Kartakan root stocks, with mixed heritage being common. They greatly vary in appearance, with hair ranging from black to blonde and complexions from swarthy to deathly pale. Eye color is similarly varied. Most men wear their hair above the shoulder, women below, but styles range across a wide spectrum. Describing a definitive Invidian phenotype is impossible, but it is fair to say that they tend to exhibit the best physical traits of their ancestors.

In the north, the ethnic Gundarakites have olive or swarthy complexions, stocky builds and dark hair usually worn shoulder-length by both sexes. Unmarried men tend to have thick beards,





while older men shave theirs off, ostensibly as a sign of their married status. Others believe that this is simply a sign of how well the Gundarakite women have cowed their men, but suggesting this in northern Invidia is tantamount to an invitation to fight. Ethnic Falkovnians also have a visible presence, though they seldom intermingle with the larger populace.

## **fashion**

Invidians consider excessive decoration to be foppish and decadent, suitable only for festivals. Men wear tunics, breeches and boots or soft leather shoes, while women dress in loose blouses and layered skirts. Usually these clothes are of neutral colors — white, gray, tan or pale yellow, with occasional flashes of color in the form of scarves, belts, or undertunics. Jewelry is worn by both sexes, usually in the form of single earrings. Women have more options and can wear more jewelry before being accused of excess — rings, necklaces and bracelets in moderation.

Nobles and wealthy individuals wear the same styles of clothing as commoners, though they are made from finer cloth and are more carefully tailored and crafted. As with the peasants, the nobles

are conscious not to wear too much jewelry or dress in inappropriately fancy clothing.

The only exceptions to this austerity in dress come during celebrations. At weddings, brides and grooms are expected to wear their best, most colorful and elaborate clothing. Guests also wear their finest attire, but purposely trying to outshine the newlyweds is considered poor taste. Wedding clothes are never worn again, but are kept in the married couple's home as a reminder of their vows and the happiness of their wedding day. Festival garb is nothing short of outlandish, as the Invidians clothe themselves in garish colors, twirling beads, and ribbons for their merry-making. Such costumes are often completed with brightly colored wooden masks, carved in elaborate, animalistic shapes and adorned with found materials such as polished stones and feathers. Those Invidians who can afford festival garb often wear it year after year.

In the north, the Gundarakites stubbornly maintain their own individuality even as Lord Malocchio's troops try to transform them into good, law-abiding Invidians. Breeches and loose shirts are the rule for men, usually worn with embroidered woolen vests. Women wear longskirts, blouses and shawls. Unmarried women typically





wear colorful head scarves. Gundarakite clothing is more colorful than that of the Invidians, usually in muted shades of gray, blue, green or red. Falkovnians, for their part, are rarely seen out of their military uniforms.

## Language

Balok is the land's official language, spoken by almost all native inhabitants. Those descended from the Kartakans sometimes speak Vaasi as a second language or speak it in the home, reserving Balok for public discussion. The Gundarakites stubbornly stick to their melodious native tongue Luktar, though most have learned Balok out of necessity. Some nobles speak Mordentish, but knowledge of this scholarly tongue sometimes causes difficulty, with other Invidians considering it snooty and suspiciously intellectual. Falkovnian soldiers serving in Invidia continue to speak their native language, though most know a smattering of Balok.

### Language Primer

Once again, I expand on the vocabulary established in earlier reports.

English	Balok	English	Luktar
day	<i>zi</i>	man	<i>bábu</i>
night	<i>noapte</i>	woman	<i>no</i>
sun	<i>soare</i>	child	<i>gyermek</i>
moon	<i>luna</i>	life	<i>élet</i>
town	<i>oras</i>	death	<i>halál</i>
inn	<i>han</i>	love	<i>szerelem</i>
betrayal	<i>tradarare</i>	betrayal	<i>elárulás</i>
jealousy	<i>gelozie</i>	jealousy	<i>féltékenység</i>

## Lifestyle & Education

Among Invidians, appearance is less defining than character, for they are known throughout the Core for their passionate, hot-tempered nature. Bitter, brooding and given to sudden explosions of temper, Invidians never forget a slight and bear grudges for generations. Long-standing feuds over forgotten insults have claimed hundreds of lives over the years, and duels (or brawls) of honor are commonplace. An evening at an Invidian tavern is considered dull if only one fight occurs.

My own experiences bear out the popular image of these tempestuous, fiery people. As I wandered through the small settlements north of

Curriculos, I saw no fewer than six fights, two of which involved a half-dozen combatants on each side. I must admit that at times, I felt as if I had wandered into a Borcan opera.

Given the Invidians' passionate natures and the fact that they tend to marry young, usually impulsively, it is not surprising that marital infidelity is common, as are duels and fights resulting from adulterous liaisons. At an inn one night, a merchant said he never dealt with Invidians, for a man who agreed to a deal one day might be slain the next. When I asked why he didn't deal with the women, he informed me they were worse than the men, with stabbings, poisonings and murder by proxy (such as persuading a lover to kill on their behalf) favorite weapons of Invidian females.

I do not mean that the Invidians are devoid of good qualities, though the heat of their passions colors all reference to them by the outside world. To have an "Invidian heart" is a terrible insult elsewhere, implying that one is ruled by his passions and acts without thinking. Yet when they are not trying to kill one another, the Invidians are an industrious, hard-working folk, who love as fiercely as they hate. They are well adapted to the outdoors and skilled in the ways of the farmer, the vintner, the herdsman and the woodsman. Despite their relatively small population and the fact that many farms exist in a virtual state of siege, assailed on all sides by bandits, beasts, and the soldiers and tax collectors of the tyrant Malocchio, the Invidians produce far more food than they need. They are able to export some produce outside their borders.

The Invidians are — surprisingly — not terribly warlike. In the past, local nobles maintained their own small retinues and fought in feuds that were almost comical in their ineptitude and size. Bakholis expanded the Invidian military, but Gabrielle Aderre allowed it to collapse entirely once more. It was her soldiers who occupied western Gundarak, but this is one of only a handful of Invidian military adventures. For the most part, the typical Invidian prefers to fight his kinsmen far more than his distant neighbors.

As in most places, the rich tend to look down upon the poor, while the commoners consider the nobles to be stuffy and decadent. There is some truth to this, for Invidian nobles (whose titles are either hereditary or rewarded to valuable servants by Lord Malocchio) are notoriously ineffectual, and commoners tend to be fairly obstinate and ignorant. There is little real distinction among the





classes, and until recently, Invidian society tended to be fairly open, with opportunities for all to better their lives through work and determination. Malocchio's iron-fisted rule has changed this somewhat.

Education is a rare — and distrusted — commodity. Anyone who reads too much or owns more books than a religious text or a farming manual is treated with suspicion. Spells come out of books, and spells are dangerous (see below), and those who read too many books inevitably come up with wild, disruptive ideas that bring sorrow and pain to those around them. Reading is uncommon among the peasants and only slightly more widespread among the nobility. Most education takes place in the fields, where sons and daughters learn the ways of the farm, vineyard or herd from their parents.

When it comes to outsiders, the Invidian's darker nature once more asserts itself. Foreigners are distrusted, nonhumans feared, and the nomadic Vistani hated with unbridled ferocity.

Both Gabrielle and her son take great pains to exploit the common folks' prejudices, engaging in extensive, slanderous campaigns against the Vistani, spreading black and ugly rumors about their secret practices and blaming the nomads for almost every ill that plagues Invidian society. Some even believe that Vistani witches are responsible for the violence of common Invidian life, claiming their sorceresses drive men and women to assault and murder through magic.

**How foolish. One does not need to waste valuable magic in order to make peasants kill one another. They will do it readily enough without arcane intervention.**

Invidians enjoy relaxing with a mug of ale and a fine joint of beef. Their bounty of inns and taverns are usually brightly lit, joyful centers of community activity. Loud and frequently ribald songs and exuberant dances are common, especially during festival times at harvest, planting and midsummer. Invidians have little tolerance for those who cannot hold their liquor.

Even the food of the peasantry is satisfying, if somewhat plain. Soups such as sour chicken, sour mutton, cauliflower, or egg soup usually start the meal, followed by a main dish, often a stew or roast of pork, beef or chicken. Fish stew is served seasonally in river villages. Hunters and those in rural

areas prefer rabbit and venison. Spicy sausage called *karmtzlach* is standard fare for all three meals at Invidian inns and taverns.

Meats are mildly spiced with parsley, peppers, onions, or juniper berries, though occasionally more daring spices such as cumin, anise and even saffron are used (this last is reserved for the wealthiest families, for it is quite rare in the Core). Barovian pastries such as *placinte* turnovers are sometimes served for dessert, but considered an expensive and unnecessary luxury by most Invidians, who feel that a nice apple or pear is treat enough.

Drink is simple and plentiful, with black beer and ale as the realm's most popular intoxicants. Barovian plum brandy is a common export, but most Invidians prefer wines from local vineyards, which produce a wide variety of grapes, yielding wines ranging from crisp, pale white to dark bloody red.

## Attitudes Toward Magic

Invidians tend to be superstitious and fearful of magic. Most believe magic an evil, dark force. The Invidians make a distinction between "miracles" (their name for divine magic) and "ensorcelments" (arcane magic). Mages must be careful about casting spells where they can be seen, lest local militia or guards arrive with swords drawn, demanding explanations.

In a few villages, hedge wizards or wise women practice their art, so long as their spells are all helpful and they never charge too much for their services. Elsewhere, spellcasting crones or ancient wizards live in isolated, wild regions, secretly visited by commoners seeking potions, divinations, or magical vengeance against rivals. Though the Invidians claim that only a handful of these spellcasters exist, they all do brisk business, never lacking for clients.

Druidic magic holds an unusual and precarious position among the Invidians. Neither miracle nor ensorcelment, druidic spellcasting has elements of both, some of which are considered beneficial (aiding crops, enhancing growth, calling upon friendly animals, and so forth), while others are clearly harmful (causing damage, summoning dangerous animals, turning natural forces and elements against enemies). In general, druids are tolerated by common unspoken agreement unless they are known to cast destructive spells, in which case they are driven from their community, assaulted, or even killed.





Of course, necromancy is feared even more than ordinary magic, for the farms and villages of Invidia sometimes must deal with the shambling results of death magic, and Invidian folklore is filled with stories of vampires, ghouls, ghosts and other undead monstrosities. Necromancy is officially illegal, but those caught practicing it rarely make it to Karina for trial. Usually, they are dispatched by mob justice and hanged from trees, their remains cremated and scattered on the winds lest they return demanding vengeance. In some villages, simply accusing another of necromancy is tantamount to a death sentence and is a well-known way of disposing of a rival or enemy.

## Religion

Though most Invidians claim to be devout, most also say that they have little time for religion and do not worry too much about the afterlife. We are all going to the same place, they say, and if one lives a good life and does as little harm as possible, there is little to fear after death (save of course

reanimation as one of the undead, but that is a common fear everywhere).

### As well it should be.

The majority of Invidians profess belief and faith in Ezra, and many practice the Home Faith of Borca. Some Invidians adhere to the Mordentish See, while a few embrace the apocalyptic faith of distant Nevuchar Springs.

Religion is only a minor part of daily life. The few true clerics who follow Ezra are usually itinerants, moving from village to village in a pre-ordained route. Traveling anchorites spend a few days in each settlement, curing wounds, helping the sick, and casting beneficial spells for those who ask. A small tithe is expected in exchange, but few turn away a destitute peasant.

A single Ezran temple exists in Invidia; located on the road between Karina and Beltis, it is under the authority of Sentire Gudrescu, the highest-ranking anchorite in the land. She is served by

## The Invidian Hero

This section presents information potentially useful in creating PCs native to Invidia.

**Races:** Invidians are almost exclusively human, of mixed Barovian and Kartakan heritage. Nonhumans make up less than 1% of the total population and are regarded with superstition and distrust by commoners. Half-Vistani risk their lives by entering the domain. In the north, the Gundarakites descend from the same root stock as the Barovians, but stick doggedly to their own culture.

**Classes:** Most Invidian heroes are either fighters or rogues. Bards are fairly common, some of whom learned their craft from the famous Kartakans. Sorcerers are not uncommon, but usually practice their craft only in the larger towns. Magic in rural areas is a delicate matter, as spellcasters must carefully avoid displaying any destructive magic. Wizards fill the same role, but are far less common. Clerics are rare and usually serve Ezra as wandering healers and priests, but are generally trusted. Druids lie somewhere between sorcerers and clerics and must be careful what kinds of spells they cast lest they trigger an angry response from the common folk. Paladins, barbarians and monks are all but unknown.

**Recommended Skills:** Bluff, Gather Information, Intimidate, Profession (brewer, herbalist), Sense Motive, Survival.

**Recommended Feats:** Combat Reflexes, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (firearms), Improved Initiative, Lunatic, Quick Draw, Weapon Focus (dagger, musket).

**Invidian male names:** Adi, Adrian, Badun, Costine, Dimitru, Gogu, Haslav, Horatu, Mikal, Petre, Radu, Vasili, Vaslav.

**Invidian female names:** Ameli, Antoaneta, Celestina, Diona, Elena, Florenta, Gabrielle, Ileana, Ivona, Ligia, Lizuța, Marilena, Nicoleta, Ridița, Teadora, Zina.



ten acolytes and provides worship services, monetary assistance, and accommodations to the Ezran anchorites who wander the realm.

Though Ezra is the predominant faith, another, hidden in the shadows and rarely spoken of, remains potent and influential. The worship of the goddess Hala has always existed in the region and continues to be practiced, despite popular dislike and fear of its practitioners. Witchcraft has been officially forbidden since the days of Bakholis. Those openly practicing witchcraft risk arrest, trial and imprisonment, for common wisdom declares that witches are dark, malevolent beings intent only on inflicting pain and suffering. Recently, as Malocchio's grip on the nation grows tighter, those found guilty of multiple instances of witchcraft have been executed, many by burning or hanging.

Still, worship of Hala continues in secret, with parents passing down wisdom and religious faith to their children, and Hala's witches learning their spells in dark glades, isolated clearings, or ancient ruins. Of course, the secretive nature of the faith only enflames common superstition and is seized upon as proof positive of the witches' malevolent nature.

## The Realm



ever the strongest or most wisely-ruled of realms, Invidia remains a divided land in the ever-closing grip of tyranny. The excesses of its rulers polarize the populace, though besides the northern Gundarakites, few have been driven to open rebellion. This may change as the conflict between Malocchio and his mother moves to the boiling point or if a powerful neighbor chooses to retaliate over Malocchio's persecution of the Vistani.

The realm's lord and master is Malocchio Aderre, self-proclaimed Dukkar and also called (in the manner of his forebears) the Traitor King and Scourge of the Vistani. Malocchio's strange origins have led to endless speculation among the masses over his true nature. None of the tales are flattering. I find it difficult to identify a specific dread lord in Invidia; the country's soil is red with the blood of former rulers. Although evidence indicates that Gabrielle Aderre may have claimed the mantle from Bakholis, Malocchio is now rapidly eclipsing her in both power and infamy. If Malocchio is not the dread lord, it may well be his goal to become so.

Unlikely, little scholar. I know his kind, with much thanks to you. He chafes enough under the chains he already bears; killing his mother would simply add another. The answer required here is how to give him that which he *does* seek.

Gabrielle remains leader of the fractured and scattered Gundarakite rebels. Professing to a change of heart and offering the rebels valuable information about their foes, Gabrielle maintains her power through the sly manipulation of fact and emotion and by keeping the rebel leader Ardonk Szerieza wrapped around her finger. In this way, Gabrielle now holds the strings of independence movements in both Invidia and Barovia, though her control may be slipping.

Initially defeated by the rebels, Malocchio has since turned his attention to the Vistani, whom he has sworn to destroy utterly. No one knows why Malocchio hates the Vistani so; a hatred of this intensity can scarcely be measured by sane minds. Some speculate that he inherited his passionate abhorrence for the gypsies from his mother, who blamed the Vistani for *her* mother's exile and poverty, but I am of the belief that something far darker is at work here. The Vistani roam wherever they wish, scoffing even the dictates of the dread lords — but this land, they avoid like a plague.

Aside from the *pogrom* against the gypsies, Malocchio has set himself to unite Invidia, forging it into the mold of Falkovnia, Barovia and Darkon. He expanded the realm's military, training his soldiers in mass tactics, bolstered with Falkovnian troops. Large portions of the kingdom's treasury fund weapon and armor production, and much of the nation's harvest surplus is requisitioned to feed Malocchio's mercenaries.

## Government

Invidia has long been a realm with inconstant rulers; even when united under a single banner, a ruler's authority never extended much beyond the larger settlements. Recently, Lord Malocchio entrenched hired swords and established a far stronger central authority.

Expanded authority means that Malocchio can no longer afford to rule alone, exclusively by decree. He has established the King's Chamber, an





assembly of nobles and wealthy Invidians tasked to advise and counsel the king in all of his decisions. Currently, the Chamber has sixteen members, ranging from the elderly *duce*, Ciudaru of Tancos, to the youthful Sir Stefan of Curriculo, who was knighted at the tender age of fifteen when he helped save a merchant caravan from Gundarakite bandits.

In reality, the Chamber serves little purpose other than to endorse Malocchio's decisions. It mollifies the populace, who feel that their nobles and prominent citizens have a say in national affairs. This is important, as Malocchio is expanding Invidian authority beyond larger settlements — indeed, beyond Invidia's borders.

He cannot do this without troops, and in a land with fewer than 7,000 inhabitants, a large army is hard to come by and even harder to maintain once assembled. Despite the laxity of her rule, Gabrielle left her son a small but well-trained militia, numbering a few hundred among the various settlements. Malocchio expanded this army to nearly a thousand, though not enough to fulfill his ambitions. He hired foreign mercenaries and allows Vlad Drakov, whom Malocchio greatly admires, to send a regiment of his best soldiers. Malocchio's army has swollen to nearly 1,700, an enormous force given the size of the populace.

Most Invidian units are armed with swords and crossbows, but a small number of troops are being trained to use muskets. So far, this impressive force has been employed to suppress banditry, secure the borders, and keep smaller villages in line. Malocchio hopes soon to unleash his forces on the Gundarakite rebels of the northeast.

The villages of Invidia, once largely independent, have been drawn under Malocchio's control. Small garrisons have been placed in settlements of more than 50 individuals, and others are regularly patrolled. Taxes, once collected sporadically or not at all, are now demanded on a regular basis and have been increasing of late. Malocchio's tax collectors are among the most feared individuals in the kingdom, for they have almost limitless power to enforce the tyrant's decrees.

Malocchio does not tolerate dissent. He has spies and informants in many settlements and recruits wandering merchants and clerics to report back to Karina with information on dissent, rebellion or subversive activities.

Recently, Malocchio has begun to recruit agents into his secret police, the Lord's Men. This

## Law Enforcement

Invidian mercenaries are well trained and equipped, and Malocchio gives them considerable authority within the nation. Still, their numbers are not sufficient to patrol or govern the entire realm, so much local defense falls to ill-equipped militias. The Lord's Men are Malocchio's elite agents. Though few in number, they are charged with keeping the peace and maintaining security at all costs and with virtually unlimited powers.

**Invidian Mercenary:** Human War2; CR 1; Medium humanoid (human); HD 2d8, hp 9; Init +0; Spd 20 ft.; AC 17, touch 10, flat-footed 17; Base Atk +2; Grp +2; Atk +3 melee (1d8/19–20, longsword) or +2 ranged (1d8/19–20, light crossbow); Full Atk +3 melee (1d8/19–20, longsword) or +2 ranged (1d8/19–20, light crossbow); AL LN; SV Fort +3, Ref +0, Will +0; Str 11, Dex 11, Con 11, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 10.

*Skills and Feats:* Intimidate +4, Listen +2, Sense Motive +2, Spot +2; Power Attack, Weapon Focus (longsword).

*Possessions:* Longsword, breastplate, light crossbow, 10 bolts, large steel shield.

**Invidian Militia:** Human War1; CR 1/2; Medium humanoid (human); HD 1d8, hp 4; Init +0; Spd 30 ft.; AC 14, touch 10, flat-footed 14; Base Atk +1; Grp +1; Atk +1 melee (1d8/19–20, longsword) or +1 ranged (1d6/x3, shortbow); Full Atk +1 melee (1d8/19–20, longsword) or +1 ranged (1d6/x3, shortbow); ALLN; SV Fort +2, Ref +0, Will +0; Str 11, Dex 11, Con 11, Int 10, Wis 11, Cha 10.

*Skills and Feats:* Handle Animal +3, Intimidate +3, Listen +1, Spot +2; Dodge, Endurance.

*Possessions:* Longsword, short bow, 20 arrows, studded leather armor, small wooden shield.

**Lord's Man:** Human Ftr5; CR 5; Medium humanoid (human); HD 5d10+10, hp 35; Init +2; Spd 20 ft.; AC 19, touch 12, flat-footed 17; Base Atk +5; Grp +8; Atk +10 melee (1d8+3/19–20, longsword) or +8 ranged (1d8+3/x3, composite longbow [+3 Str bonus]); Full Atk +10 melee (1d8+3/19–20, longsword) or +8 ranged (1d8+3/x3, composite longbow [+3 Str bonus]); AL LE; SV Fort +6, Ref +3, Will +3; Str 16, Dex 14, Con 15, Int 12, Wis 10, Cha 10.

*Skills and Feats:* Climb +5, Gather Information +2, Intimidate +4, Ride (horse) +6, Sense Motive +2, Swim +4; Cleave, Dodge, Iron Will, Power Attack, Quick Draw, Weapon Focus (longsword).

*Possessions:* Masterwork longsword, masterwork composite longbow (+3 Str bonus), 20 arrows, masterwork chainmail, masterwork large steel shield.





select group is even more feared than the tax collectors, for no one truly knows who they are. Any stranger could be one of the tyrant's secret agents, making the insular Invidian peasantry even less friendly toward outsiders than they were before Malocchio came to power.

These deadly individuals are all living blades, dedicated utterly to their ruler and ready to root out even the slightest hint of disloyalty in his subjects. Empowered to arrest, try and execute on the spot, they seize luckless dissidents and carry them off for interrogation (which usually ends with the victim dead or hopelessly crippled). All are trained in combat and skilled in surreptitious observation, entry, intuition and the finding of the truth. The Lord's Men are utterly incorruptible, and no amount of gold will stay them from following their Malocchio's edicts to the letter. Bribing a Lord's Man to arrest or prosecute falsely an innocent subject is even worse in their eyes, and anyone so foolish as to attempt such a thing will find his life ending swiftly and very painfully. Commoners usually ascribe this unwavering loyalty to one of two reasons: either Malocchio has recruited them by granting them the ability to enact their most sadistic fantasies, or he has simply bewitched them.

Away from the larger towns, beyond the view of most of his populace, the Dukkar is said to command even stranger minions. Supposedly, the beasts of the forests and the birds of the air are his to command, and he has even found some way to recruit — however temporarily — the monstrous, man-flesh eating ogres and other lumbering hulks said to roam the southwest wilds.

## Economy

The Invidian economy was never well centralized, with each individual village an independent economic unit. Since Malocchio chose to unite the country under his bloody banner, Invidia's economy has become more sophisticated and integrated.

Invidia's farms are notably productive, bringing in more food than the nation needs in all save the most desperate famine years. Barley, rye, wheat and oats are most common; hops are also grown for the brewing industry. Potatoes and cabbages raised in poorer soil have been known to succumb to blight. Fortunately, other food crops took up the slack and there has rarely been any starvation.

Vintners and brewers take the grapes and grains and transform them into wines, beers, ales

and other intoxicants. These beverages are probably Invidia's most profitable export and are actually well known outside the realm. Today, Invidian wines and beers are popular in Falkovnia, Barovia, Borca and Kartakass.

Mining is rare, but what little there is provides sulfur and salt. Sulfur is used to bleach dried fruit for export and is sent to other nations for use in the production of gunpowder. Salt also provides a small but important source of income.

Finished goods — tools, armor, weapons, clothing and utensils — are imported from other realms. Malocchio has started building armories and forges around Karina, but so far only a trickle of native-produced weapons and armor has emerged.

Invidia maintains strong trade relationships. Trade with Barovia, most of which takes place along the Gundar River, is heavy even as Count Strahd calls for an end to cross-border raids. Borca and Falkovnia remain important partners, though once more tensions may disrupt trade as Borca's rulers grow impatient with Malocchio's pogroms.

Much of the Invidian economy operates informally by the barter system. National currency exists as nondescript coins known as the bitterbit (copper), which features a stylized bear's head on one face and a symbolic heart on the other; the sweetpiece (silver), a silver coin with crossed swords and a man's hand on either side; and the drymark (gold). One face of the drymark bears a trout, considered a symbol of luck and prosperity, while the other features the image of the land's ruler when the coin was struck. Currently, most drymarks have Malocchio's face, but some have Gabrielle's, and a few can still be found bearing the hated image of Bakholis.

## Diplomacy

Initially, Lord Malocchio seemed ready to make diplomatic inroads in the Core, replacing his mother's lackadaisical governance with strong rule and active relations with other nations. Within a few years, his true nature emerged. Though he was indeed the strong ruler that Invidia watchers expected, his firm rule quickly transformed into steel-booted tyranny as his soldiers occupied towns, savagely suppressed dissent, and set out on a bloody pogroms.

For the most part, the rulers of the Core have little care for how other nations are ruled. So long as nothing crosses the frontier to unsettle a ruler's own peasantry and nobles, a monarch or darklord





can spill oceans of blood and persecute the common folk to his heart's content. Yet Malocchio's hatred of the Vistani extends beyond his own borders, as his troops pursue fleeing Vistani into Borca, Barovia, Verbrek, and even Sithicus. Neighboring realms have complained, but their increasingly angry responses have fallen on deaf ears and the incursions continue.

In spite of growing tensions, its position as a nexus for river travel allows Invidia to maintain strong trade relations with its neighbors, and its increasingly affluent merchant class secretly wishes that the tyrant would keep within his own frontiers and stop antagonizing potential customers.

**Barovia:** Relations with Barovia are tense and problematic, even though wealth flows between both realms. Until Malocchio's ascension, the realms maintained a friendly if somewhat distant relationship and were united by their mutual occupation of Gundarak. Though interaction between Invidia and Barovia got off to a promising start, Malocchio's hatred of the Vistani — who dwell in Barovia under the official protection of its ruler, Strahd — has since brought the two nations to the brink of open conflict. Invidian forces pursuing Vistani across the border have entered Barovia on several occasions, triggering a strong response from Strahd's army. After several dozen Invidian soldiers perished under Barovian swords, Malocchio reconsidered his policies and has since forbidden his troops from crossing the border — openly. Despite his public retraction, the Barovians claim that the pursuits continue and have even produced some Invidian prisoners to back up their claims. Exacerbating the situation is Castle Hunadora, haven to many of the rebels who plague Strahd's forces in western Barovia.

Even though he has strengthened and united his chaotic realm, the tyrant would be hopelessly outmatched in a conflict with his most powerful neighbor. Barovia can field an army that outnumbers Invidia's entire population, and Strahd's armed conquest of eastern Gundarak stands as bloody evidence of the count's willingness to employ force when necessary.

### This might be used.

**Borca:** Trade with the sullen Borcans has declined in recent years as tensions between the two states increase. Ivan Dilisnya has sworn armed retaliation against any Invidian troops found within

his borders. There have been no major incursions since Dilisnya's declaration, though a few minor incidents occurred, involving squads of Invidian mercenaries who were quickly driven across the border by angry Borcan troops. Malocchio may have told his soldiers to be more discreet in their pursuits, but no one believes that the crisis will abate any time soon.

**Falkovnia:** Invidia has few contacts beyond its immediate neighbors, the prime exception being Falkovnia, whose ruler Vlad Drakov sees in Malocchio a younger version of himself and an invaluable military ally. Falkovnian troops patrol the roads, guard the borders, escort tax collectors and from time to time burn down the farmsteads of uncooperative peasants. This duty grates on the normally bellicose Falkovnian troops, most of whom wait with bloodthirsty anticipation for Lord Malocchio to unleash them upon the recalcitrant Gundarakite rebels. About 600 Falkovnians serve in the Invidian military, and more are expected soon, though Ivana Boritsi has forbidden Falkovnian troops to cross her territory.

**Kartakass:** Kartakan history claims that the Invidians once occupied their realm. This ancient enmity made relations between the two lands rocky and distrustful, at least until the overthrow of the werewolf-lord Bakholis, when the Kartakans threw off their dislike of their northern neighbor and embarked on more friendly relations. Trade routes sprang up, via Sithicus and Barovia, and Kartakan bards roamed the land, singing and entertaining the Invidian peasants. As with most other nations, Malocchio's excesses have alienated the Kartakans as well; since the tyrant's rise, trade between the realms has fallen off, and Kartakan minstrels are not so welcome as they once were.

**Sithicus:** To the south lies Sithicus, another realm with a weak central authority. The Invidians fear the unknown reaches of the elven forest, particularly after the nightmarish failure of the Night of Screaming Shadows. Several secret paths lead through the Breadth Forest into Sithicus, but these are known only to the Vistani, who use them to flee the realm if pressed by Malocchio's troops. For their part, Invidians are reluctant to follow, and the few units that have done so — mostly foreign mercenaries restless for real bloodshed — have not returned.

A single precarious trade route cuts through the northeastern corner of Sithicus, linking Invidia with Kartakass. The Sithican Passage is reasonably



safe, though travelers often speak of mysterious lights, strange sounds in the forest, and annoyance by fey and other sylvan creatures. Most trade between Kartakass and Invidia takes the longer but more reliable river route through Barovia.

**Verbrek:** Invidia maintains no formal relations with its wild neighbor, for there is no real government to be found. Sparsely populated and haunted by monstrous wolves and other creatures, Verbrek has proved a frequent refuge for the Vistani; they alone can travel those unbroken woods without fear. Invidian troops have no qualms and suffer no real consequences for pursuing the Vistani into Verbrek. Verbrek's masters take little notice of Invidian activity, save when their precious wolves are endangered. Woe unto any Invidians who harm the region's wolves, for they invariably find themselves pursued, lucky to escape the realm with their lives.

Little if any trade exists between Invidia and Verbrek, for the fearful peasants of the latter realm have little money to spare, and the Invidians have no real motivation to brave the wolf-haunted depths of the forests. The Musarde remains a vital trade route, however, so Invidia cannot afford to put the Verbrekers too far out of their minds.

## Sites of Interest



Invidia is not terribly civilized — less than half its small population live in its two major towns, with the remainder living in tiny settlements. Most villages cluster along the river, with a few isolated farms, vineyards and ranches sprinkled nearby. Few live more than an hour's ride from a town or village.

### Karina

The realm's capital lies on the northern bank of the Noisette River. A decaying town, Karina is kept alive with trade from Barovia, Falkovnia and Borca. Its docks crowd with small merchant vessels taking on cargoes of grain, wine, beer and produce, and unloading finished goods such as textiles, tools, weapons, clothing and leather items. Although the town looks and feels deserted throughout most of the year, its population swells to as much as 7,000 during its Harvest Carnival, a weeklong festival that ends with the first full moon of each October. So famed is this revelry, that it draws affluent celebrants from across the western Core. The locked and empty taverns and inns one sees during the rest

of the year exist simply to handle this annual overflow.

Karina's stone walls are low and in poor repair, but rigorously patrolled by Malocchio's guards. Generally, these guards are native Invidians. Not even Malocchio is willing to risk popular disapproval by giving such sensitive duties to foreigners.

Architecture is typical of the realm: tall, narrow buildings with steep gabled roofs packed together in seemingly random order. Karina's streets are a confusing labyrinth, and outsiders may wander for hours before finding their way out — or, worse, into the thieves' quarter, from which they are lucky to emerge with only their purses missing.

Foreigners usually stay in the areas around the docks or the bridges, where most of the town's inns and taverns are located. Law enforcement in these areas is reasonably lax, as merchants are still welcome and encouraged. Flagrant abuse of the law will bring a quick response from the city watch or, in especially violent situations, squads of Falkovnian soldiers detailed to keep the peace in these areas. The Falkovnians are billeted in a small neighborhood on the west side of town, once the site of the Falkovnian trade enclave. Talon Commander Anton Regess, a veteran of the Dead Man's Campaign, leads them.

Divided in two by the north-south Tower Road, Karina's wealthy eastern half is inhabited by nobles, merchants and more prosperous members of the middle class. West Karina is more jumbled, dirty and dangerous, crowded with dilapidated buildings, slums and burned-out ruins. This side of town is home to criminals, madmen and worse.

Towering above the twisted streets is the Citadel, the city's administrative center. An ancient-looking fortress of black stone, the Citadel has grown in recent years, and the main structure is now surrounded by a tangle of wooden structures. Some sections of the structure have fallen into disrepair or show signs of having been gutted by fire, but Malocchio has better things to do than renovate and abandons older sections as they fall out of use. It is said that much of the place is haunted, especially by the ghosts of those who perished when Bakholis was overthrown. The best known of these spirits is named Manfred Taige: once chief steward, he was slain when the fortress' garrison rose up after Bakholis' death.

Constantly guarded by Malocchio's best native Invidians (service here is open only to those soldiers who are utterly above suspicion), the Cita-





del headquarters the Lord's Men, while the realm's tax collectors are housed in one of the fortress' subterranean chambers. The city treasury is close by, constantly monitored by Malocchio's scribes and accountants.

At one corner of the Citadel is the dreaded black tower, where Malocchio's enemies disappear and rarely, if ever, return. The tyrant is known to employ a squad of especially accomplished torturers, several of whom were trained in the dungeons of Vlad Drakov. Passersby claim that the screams of Malocchio's captives can be heard from the street.

Adjacent to the black tower is the prison tower. Ordinary criminals, bandits, beggars and other undesirables are kept here, and although they are not tormented as systematically as the prisoners in the black pits, their lives are not appreciably better. The prison's warden is Captain Johannes van Deusen, who does double duty as captain in charge of the city's defense. He is known to be corrupt and easily bribed, but so far he has not been caught in the act.

The city's other best-known landmark is the tall yellow granite clock tower known as the Goldfinger. Built by and home to a cantankerous old hermit known only as the Engineer, the tower has a large clock on each of its four faces and is invaluable when negotiating the city's winding, twisted streets. The Engineer is an expert clockmaker, responsible for building all of the clocks presently in the city. Years have passed since he last left the tower, and the place is now patrolled by Malocchio's guards.

Nobles and wealthy Invidians live on the east side of town, where one also finds the *Art\_Colegiu*, a small but exclusive art school that has drawn students from as far north as Darkon. The poverty and danger of the city increases the further west one goes from Tower Road. The westernmost slums are the worst; here, the city's small but efficient thieves' guild holds sway. Bribes and blackmail keep local guards and meddling noblemen quiet, while local merchants operate only if they keep up their protection payments. The Vistani outcast known as Scar Tabor controls the Karina thieves' guild, ruling through violence and ruthlessness.

The city's leading citizen is Mayor Zachary Beauchamps, a fussy and officious man who lives in a tidy mansion near the Citadel. Despite his annoying demeanor, he is an efficient and intelligent politician who survived the rise of Malocchio and

who keeps the city running despite its disorganized, wild nature.

Karina's most infamous resident is also its most mysterious. The fearsome Midnight Slasher has plagued the poorer sections of Karina for nearly twenty years. Rumored to be a cloaked madman who wishes bloody vengeance upon all who would harm children — and Gabrielle Aderre — the Slasher appears to have committed a rash of murders and senseless crimes in Karina and elsewhere.

## Where to Stay in Karina

Visitors can choose from a wide variety of inns and hostels, with prices for almost any budget; many of the better inns and taverns are associated with their own small vineyards or breweries. The most luxurious and expensive of these is the Silver Wolf (good quality meals, good quality rooms), located not far from the Citadel, with a fine view of the rest of the city. Elsewhere, the Traveler (good quality meals, common quality rooms) is one of the best inns on the east side, while the Platter and Candle (common quality meals, common quality rooms) is probably Karina's most popular inn. Lower class establishments such as the Crimson Dagger (low quality meals, common quality rooms) and the Wild Boar (low quality meals, low quality rooms) function on the west side of town.

**Karina (large town):** Conventional, AL N; 3,000 gp limit; Assets 345,000 gp; Population 2,315; Isolated (human 99%, other 1%).

**Authority Figures:** Mayor Zachary Beauchamps, male human Ari5; Captain Johannes Van Deusen (wall captain, prison warden), male human Ftr3; Commander Anton Regess (Falkovnian leader), male human Ftr5.

**Important Characters:** "Scar" Tabor (leader of thieves' guild), male Vistani darkling Rog10; "the Engineer" (reclusive clockmaker and mechanist), male human Wiz9; the Midnight Slasher (signature killer), female human Rog4/Avn\*4.

\*See Van Richten's Arsenal for more information on the avenger prestige class.

## Curriculo

The only other Invidian town worthy of the name lies northeast of Karina, along a great curve of the Musarde. Its docks are nowhere near as extensive as Karina's, but they are just as busy. Little more than a roadside inn and a single dock at





the time of Bakholis' demise, it has grown as the town fathers present their young, prosperous community as an economic alternative to the expensive, decaying Karina. Curriculo has steadily grown in importance and prosperity, and numerous new warehouses have been built to house the trade goods unloaded from its docks. The rivalry between Karina and its upstart neighbor grew increasingly bitter during Gabrielle's inattentive reign, with many accidents blamed on sabotage. Malocchio has repressed the violence, but not the underlying sentiments.

Curriculo's timber walls are in better repair than Karina's, and Mayor Raduz Sczeçti takes pains to keep them in good condition. Raduz suspects that dark days are coming and so hired his own mercenaries, independent of the Invidian military, to keep order in the town.

The core of the town is much like its larger neighbor to the south. Tall buildings crowd together in picturesque chaos, narrow cobbled streets wind in seemingly random directions, and numerous shops offer a wide range of goods. Beyond the central part of town, Curriculo is less claustrophobic, with wider and straighter streets, as well as smaller wood-and-plaster buildings, usually no higher than two floors.

A central marketplace provides Curriculo's inhabitants with a common area for daily interaction, commerce and gossip. Here, produce and grains can be obtained, along with beer and wine, livestock, horses, clothing and leather goods.

## Where to Stay in Curriculo

Curriculo boasts two inns of note: the Lady's Veil (good quality meals, common quality rooms) and the Plowshare (common quality meals, common quality rooms). Both are small and comfortable, if plain. Non-merchants who stay longer than two or three days are likely to attract suspicion, for the townsfolk are distrustful of strangers and usually imagine the worst.

**Curriculo (small town):** Conventional; AL N; 800 gp limit; Assets 45,200 gp; Population 1,135; Isolated (human 99%, other 1%).

**Authority Figures:** Mayor Raduz Sczeçti, human male Com6; Vaslav Credzû (militia commander), human male War6.

**Important Characters:** Bela Ghuitau (merchant's guild leader), Exp 5; Commander Rubeus Wahrmer (Falkovnian trade colony commander), Ftr6; Shythe the Bonepyre (saboteur/ arsonist), Nec3.

## Castle Hunadora

Once the center of Gundarakite strength and national unity, this old and decaying fortress has since become the rallying point for the increasingly militant Gundarakite separatists. Once scattered and divided, the Gundarakites rallied under Gabrielle Aderre's banner and stormed Hunadora in 750 BC, driving out the token Invidian garrison holding it.

Since then, Hunadora continues to plague Malocchio, festering like a sore in the north of his nation, defying his mighty army and serving as a constant reminder of the tyrant's failure to dispose of his detested mother. About 200 Gundarakite rebels actually occupy the place, and the surrounding woods and countryside are dotted with the concealed camps of sympathizers and refugees of all sorts, including select Vistani who have declared common cause with the Gundarakites.

The castle sits atop a constructed mound of earth, its dark stone keep surrounded by a square curtain wall and a wide moat filled with dark, stagnant water. Slithering things occasionally ripple the moat's oily surface. Supposedly these spawn are experiments that escaped from Medraut's arcane laboratories decades back. Although Gundar allowed the tangled forest of the Crimson Hills to grow right up to the moat's edge, the rebels have taken pains to clear the trees. They have also reinforced many of its crumbling defenses, but despite having held the castle for more than seven years, the rebels have yet to explore many of Hunadora's dungeons, sewers and hidden passages. Numerous devious traps and pitfalls remain untriggered throughout the castle, a remnant of its former masters. The rebels disarm these deathtraps as they find them, but more than a few lives have been lost in the process.

Gabrielle Aderre resides here and has appropriated the entire keep for her personal use. Since her seduction of the Gundarakite leader Ardonk Szerieza, the Gundarakites have grown more confident about her leadership — or at least have kept their complaints to themselves.

Matton's wolfweres occupy the woods to the north of the castle, and he has given them strict orders not to prey on the Gundarakites or Vistani. Instead, they periodically emerge to raid farms and settlements, carrying off captives and supplies for the army. So far, neither the Gundarakites nor Malocchio suspects the wolfwere force's existence, but this may change should open warfare break out.



## Final Thoughts

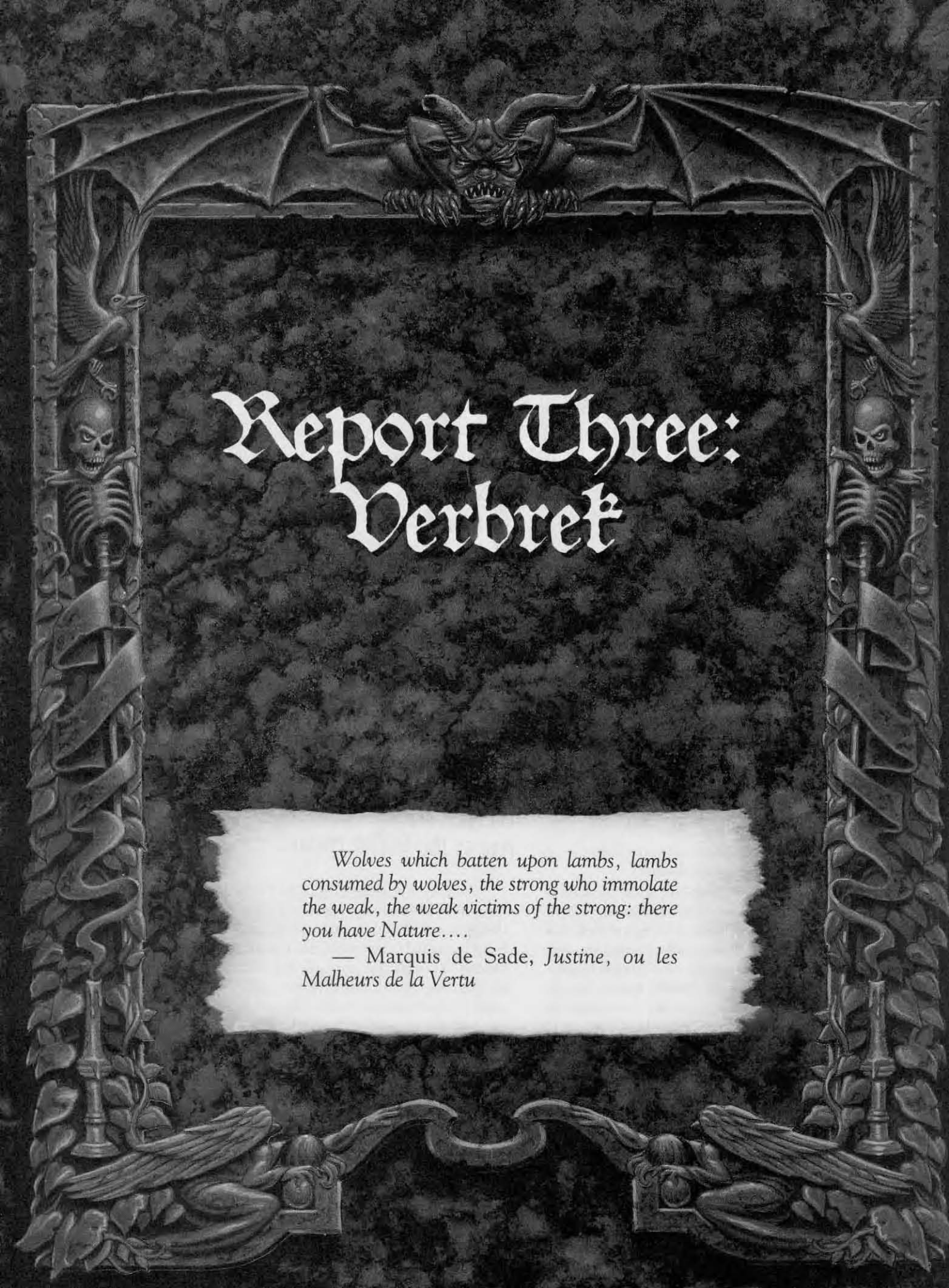


hankfully, my identity was never challenged as I traveled through Invidia, and I was able to observe much without attracting suspicion. I saw great potential for cultural richness and prosperity wasted by a mad ruler whose irrational hatred leads his nation headlong toward disaster.

In the two months that I traveled the realm, I never saw the tyrant himself or his infamous mother. I did observe the grim packs of hungry wolves that kept pace with me mile after mile, waiting for a sign of weakness, a single mistake, or a luckless laggard. Naturally, I offered none. Invidia and her neighbors are like those wolves, I mused — ever pacing, ever waiting, ever patient. And should any of its neighbors fall behind or show an instance of weakness, that realm will be awash in blood.

*Bah. Let the witch and the demonspawn have their little wars. Let them taunt the vampire; let them crush the rats and bankers between their jaws. Let these realms drown themselves in blood, so long as this Dukkhar remains.*

As I set out from Karina and hiked up the banks of the Musarde, I suppressed a shudder at the thought of the lonely forests of Verbrek, yet in my heart I was glad to leave this divided, unhappy land behind. Though the passions of Invidia's people are rich and their commendable qualities many, there is a dark undercurrent of hatred, boiling just beneath the surface of their wild, wooded land. I hope not to be there to see the results when this hatred finally boils over.



# Report Three: Verbret

*Wolves which batten upon lambs, lambs  
consumed by wolves, the strong who immolate  
the weak, the weak victims of the strong: there  
you have Nature....*

*— Marquis de Sade, Justine, ou les  
Malheurs de la Vertu*



As I entered the trackless forests of Verbrek, a prick of panic crept into my mind and lingered as I pushed deeper into the wilds. I could not place its source immediately, but after less than a league I caught a flicker of creatures lurking just beyond the foliage along either side. These, I surmised, were the notorious wolves of Verbrek, perhaps even werewolves plotting a most unpleasant demise for me. If they were lycanthropes, I thought it wise to stand my ground and assert my authority. I was not unprepared; my pistols held silver bullets, and I stood ready to unleash a devastating arcane attack if necessary. The wolves drew near, never taking their glacial eyes from mine. They did not growl and bristle, but studied me with guarded hunger. Then, suddenly, they turned and withdrew, as if they had reached some conclusion. I did not take my hand from my pistol until the last of the creatures bounded out of sight. The bestial eyes that had met mine were not those of animals sizing up potential prey. They seemed more akin to the eyes of murderous and sadistic men, bent on proving their strength through cruelty.

## Landscape



The wild, forested land of Verbrek, largely untamed by axe or scythe, sprawls in a low region of the southwestern Core, where the Arden and Musarde Rivers skirt and slice through vast, cyclopean woods. The touch of humanity is nearly absent here. Verbrek has no ancient constructions from a glorious history, no well-worn roads that testify to generations of commerce and conquest. Nothing here suggests that Verbrek has ever or will ever be the dominion of humankind.

The woodlands grow heavy with age and malice as one crosses into Verbrek. Sites of breathtaking beauty and natural serenity are scarce. Alternately marshy and stony, the ground turns ankles and renders travel arduous. The dense canopy of trees casts the forest floor in thick shadow; even those folk who travel by day must bring lanterns to light their way. Thick snarls of undergrowth entwine the legs and sketch bloody scratches on exposed flesh. Wildfires are rare here, and dead wood chokes the forests. The best fortune that the traveler can hope for is to stumble upon a narrow deer run of muddy, flattened vegetation.

Few outsiders regard Verbrek as possessing any kind of noteworthy geography, often ambiguously

## Verbrek at a Glance

**Cultural Level:** Medieval (7)

**Ecology:** Full

**Climate/Terrain:** Temperate forest, hills and swamp

**Year of Formation:** 730 BC

**Population:** 830, and 1,140 werewolves

**Races:** Humans 97%, half-elves 1%, half-Vistani 1%, other 1%

**Human Ethnic Groups:** Verbrekers 98%, other 2%

**Languages:** Mordentish\*, Balok, Vaasi, Sithican

**Religions:** The Wolf God\*, Hala, Ezra

**Government:** Independent gerontocratic settlements and farms

**Ruler:** None

**Darklord:** Alfred Timothy

referring to the whole region as the “forests of Verbrek.” My initial travels in the realm confirmed this impression. The endless landscape of dense thickets, eerie hollows, and forest bogs quickly grows wearisome and strangely featureless. Even on short journeys, I found myself overcome with a sensation of being utterly lost, as if I were walking in circles. As the natives were quick to point out, however, Verbrek reveals a diverse landscape to those who know the ways of the wilds.

Though a single, unbroken forest covers the whole of Verbrek, the rivers that flow through the realm divide the landscape into several distinct regions. At the northeastern edge lies a rugged upland, thrust up against the noxious Borcan Blightwood. Known as the Bleedingbarrow, the region drops away as perilous limestone bluffs overlooking the Musarde and Bonesliver Rivers. The Bleedingbarrow derives its name from the rust-colored mineral streaks that mar the pale bluff faces. Occasionally, river travelers encounter curious petroglyphs carved into the bluffs or paintings of strange hybrid beasts rendered in earthen pigments. Verbrekers rarely venture into the arid evergreen woodlands atop the Bleedingbarrow. Some whisper that the ridge is a haven for other werebeasts that dare not stand against the realm’s werewolves.





## Dread Possibility: The Brood of the Purple Moon

It is often said that evil does not cooperate save in the face of a common, hated enemy. Even then, alliances are tenuous, disintegrating into treachery the moment the mutual foe has been destroyed. Such is the case with the Brood of the Purple Moon, a loose clan of outcast lycanthropes who wage a futile territorial war with Verbrek's werewolves. Named for the lunar eclipses they regard as particularly auspicious, the Brood lairs in the forest atop the Bleedingbarrow. Drawn from evil lycanthropes that consider temperate, forested lands such as Verbrek their rightful hunting grounds, the members of the Brood share little but an undying hatred for the werewolves. The Brood werebeasts run in small gaggles of their own kind rather than as a united group and constantly maneuver for dominance. The numbers of the Brood shift, as members join up, die in battle, or lose interest in the conflict. No one creature has been able to stand as a leader for the disparate Brood, though Broderic the Bonecracker (male caliban werebear Bbn7, CE), has emerged as a bully of chilling ambition. Although the Brood would be a powerful ally against the werewolves, heroes should question whether Verbrek would be better off terrorized by a single race of werebeasts or half a dozen warring tribes.

South of the Bonesliver River and east of the Musarde valley are the Carrion Downs, a region of rolling hills shrouded in dense forests. The Downs have a reputation for dooming foolish travelers, who often stumble into the region's treacherous sinkholes. In these steep pits of rotten, slimy leaves, such trapped souls become easy prey for wolves. Dead trees are also ubiquitous here, their ashen, twisted trunks toppling to the ground with no warning. Verbreker legends say that the restless victims of wolf attacks haunt the Downs, blighting the forest out of hatred for nature and all her creatures.

Northern Verbrek rises to a gentle summit at the Winterfang Crests, an upland area where the Quivermoon and Rarung rivers arise as artesian springs. Here, mossy boughs press even closer, roots rise from the ground in gnarled arches, and creep-

ing ivy mantles every surface. The rugged terrain pitches up and down over twisting saddlebacks and misty ravines. Boulders and cobbles of rosy sandstone peer through the undergrowth, often grouped and stacked together in strange arrangements or marked with smudged paw prints. The Winterfangs are the most hostile region in all of Verbrek to the typical humanoid traveler, for here the werewolves watch over their most sacred sites. Those who do not understand the severity of their trespass on such unholy ground do not live to commit the same transgression twice.

South of the Winterfangs lies a gentle valley that carves out a shallow scoop in central Verbrek. Known as the Vale of Memory, it is a testament to the unforgiving nature of life in this realm. Natives speak of a time when the forests of the Vale were safe to travel, and a fertile tributary of the Musarde River flowed through the valley. In this era, numerous tiny settlements took root in the Vale. Emboldened by the ease of life here, the Verbrekers began to cut back the forest for their farmsteads. In retribution, the Wolf God that stalks Verbrek unleashed the fury of nature. The waters of the river dried up, packs of ravenous wolves devoured babes in their cradles, and the trees of the forest swallowed hamlets overnight. Today, the Vale of Memory is a misty valley choked with dense forest and fetid pockets of marsh. Evidence of the lost hamlets litters the former riverbanks. I stumbled upon skeletal farmhouses long cloaked in moss and creepers, and glades where countless human bones and corroded tools lay among the ferns.

Beyond the southernmost crest that borders the Vale of Memory are the Ghostflame Bottoms, a foul swampland of black mud hidden under the forest canopy. Nestled between the uplands that give rise to the Noisette and Ulvflod rivers, the Bottoms are riddled with gloomy hollows that collect the spring rains. Throughout the remainder of the year, the forest floor remains a treacherous morass of mud and rotting vegetation. The stench of decay is overpowering, and during the summer voracious mosquitoes fill the air.

The southern tip of Verbrek ends at the Mourning Ridge, a jagged spine of wooded hills that rises from the Ghostflame Bottoms to the Sithican border. From here, one can see all the way to the summit of the Winterfang Crests to the north and southward into the valley that clutches the Sithican village of Mal-Erek. Perhaps owing to their proximity to eldritch elven magic, the trees here are



soaring and massive, while florid toadstools and lichens encrust their bark. The name of the region stems from the ghostly wailing that echoes over the hills at night. Some Verbrekers believe that this is the sound of those claimed by lycanthropy, lamenting their lost humanity in moments of lucidity. Others whisper that the elves of Sithicus wander into the Verbrekan wilds when their time in the mortal world ends and that the wailing portends the forest claiming their souls.

Rivers serve as the primary conduits linking the people of Verbrek with the outside world. The realm's scattered hamlets are always built along riverbanks, a stone's throw up a nearby ridge to stave off flooding. The only significant infrastructure in Verbrek is the string of massive, sturdy docks that the natives have built up and down the rivers. These docks allow the Verbrekers to reach neighboring settlements and farms via their modest river launches without undertaking a treacherous forest journey. They also permit vessels from neighboring realms to moor safely to conduct trade with the natives.

Verbrek's tiny, wretched settlements seem one bitter winter from starvation. Constructed for safety rather than tidiness or aesthetics, a Verbreker

hamlet is a desperate, ramshackle place. Muddy paths serve as village streets, while trenches and crude wooden palisades surround the community. These protections also serve to guard the natives' small livestock pens from wolves, though the predators exhibit remarkable cunning in circumventing them.

Folk have learned to rely on the resources of the forest for their building materials. Anything that cannot be constructed with timber, cobbles, or clay is probably not worth constructing. The locals utilize imported iron, glass, and hewn stone only when absolutely essential. Verbrekers build square, squat structures from roughly cut logs fitted together without nails and sealed with pitch. The thatched, gabled rooftops are green with moss, while chimneys of smooth river stones puff smoke into the misty air. Both within and without, buildings are bereft of ornamentation or creature comforts. Single room structures are the norm. Luxuries such as wood stoves and window glass are rare.

Verbrek's climate follows a temperate pattern, characterized by hot, humid summers and bitter winters. Violent thunderstorms descend without fail the first week of May each year to bring torren-



tial rains. Flash floods transform the ravines that wind through the hollows into roaring streams. Just as quickly as they appear, the rains depart by the second week of June.

## Flora

Verbrek's forests are a prime example of ancient, virgin woods, untouched by humanity since the dawn of time. Only at the fringes of rivers do the Verbrekers dare to carve back the forest for their own purposes. Some Mordentish naturalists speculate that Verbrek represents that ancient state of Mordent's open coastal plains and heath before they were cleared for agriculture and pastoral use.

The domain's forests are predominantly broadleaf, though hardier stands of evergreens cling to the rocky ridges and saddlebacks. Alder, ash, hazelnut, sessile oak, rowan, and willow are the primary trees, though one can also find rarer downy birch, crab apple, juniper, wild privet, whitebeam, and yew. Beneath the forest canopy lie an abundance of gorse, wild marigold, saxifrage, sedges, and ferns in every possible shade of green. Lichens and lugworts blanket the tree bark and stones in the darkest thickets.

Carnivorous plant life is a constant hazard in the wilds, where the forests seem possessed of an unnatural vitality. Many trespassers have fallen victim to bloodroot, lashweed, quickwood, and stranger things while preoccupied with the threat from lurking werewolves.

Countless useful botanicals grow amid such lush surroundings, and most Verbrekers have at least a practical knowledge of herbalism. One plant in particular prompts even outsiders to brave the

## Moonflowers

A single moonflower plant produces 1d4 blossoms each lunar cycle from spring to fall. An afflicted lycanthrope that consumes a moonflower blossom receives a +10 circumstance bonus to her Control Shape checks for 8 hours. Moonflower blossoms can be pressed and dried once picked, potentially preserving their benefits for years if properly stored, but live plants have a 50% chance of withering if transplanted to soil beyond the shadows of the Wolf God's standing stones.

forests. The moonflower boasts a delicate silver blossom that opens only under the light of a full moon. Endemic to the Winterfang Crests, patches of the flower spring up near stone cairns and other suspected werewolf holy sites. Essential oils from the blossoms are reputed to calm a bestial mind, and many souls afflicted with lycanthropy seek the flower in a desperate attempt to control the change.

## Fauna

Verbrek's vast forests shelter wild boars, fallow deer, roe deer, elk, river otters, weasels, and smaller animals such as dormice, hares, moles, red squirrels, and voles. Significant predators include badgers, brown bears, wild cats, red foxes and the gray wolves for which Verbrek is notorious. Goblin scavengers are notably absent, said to shun Verbrek for fear of these wolves.

Following an encounter with Verbrekan wolves, even an outsider must confess to the unnatural size, strength, and cunning that characterizes the beasts — provided, of course, that he lives through said encounter. Though realms such as Barovia and Kartakass boast equally robust wolf populations, Verbrek stands apart due to the extraordinarily vicious, tenacious temperament of its native man-eaters. Wolves relentlessly shadow travelers in the Verbrekan wilderness, waiting for their prey to let their guard down or for a straggler to fall behind the group.

Verbrekers fear and loathe wolves. They attribute demonic qualities to the beasts, regarding them as evil to their very core. Wolves slaughter livestock, snatch babes from their mothers' breasts, and drag the old and the infirm screaming into the night. Even more significantly in the minds of the Verbrekers, however, any wolf that they encounter could be a werewolf in its natural guise. Unlike their mundane kin, lycanthropes attack armed adults without fear and are known to capture their victims for ritual hunts and sacrifices. Of course, most feared of all, werewolves carry the dread disease that allows them to swell their ranks.

Though werewolves are foremost on the minds of natives and outsiders alike, other unnatural creatures stalk the wilds. The forest is home to enormous forms of mundane animals, including badgers, bats, bears, boars, weasels and wolves. Thankfully, such giants are usually solitary, though as a rule they are voracious and unafraid of humans. Some travelers have reported gigantic vermin, such as ants, stag beetles, spiders, and wasps.





Encounters with incorporeal undead are not unusual. Perhaps this is because so many foolish souls meet their end in the forests, far from their homes. One also finds other “phenotypes” of lycanthropes here (to borrow an awkward term from van Richten), though they remain rare. Notably, wererats have never been sighted within Verbrek. The natives believe that the werewolves despise the creatures and ruthlessly hunt down those that enter their territory.

## Local Animals and Native Horrors

**Wildlife:** CR 1/10 — bat; toad; CR 1/8 — rat; CR 1/6 — lizard; raven; CR 1/4 — cat; owl; weasel; CR 1/3 — hawk; snake, Tiny viper; CR 1/2 — badger; eagle; snake, Small viper; CR 1 — wolf; snake, Medium viper; CR 2 — boar; CR 4 — bear, brown.

**Monsters:** Any Large or smaller giant or monstrous vermin; CR 1/2 — geist\*; CR 1 — fungus, shrieker; plant, fearweed\*; CR 2 — dire badger; dire bat; dire weasel; plant, crawling ivy\*; *worg*; CR 3 — assassin vine; dire toad; *dire wolf*; fungus, violet; lycanthrope, wereboar; *lycanthrope*, *werewolf*; plant, bloodroot\*; remnant, aquatic\*; CR 4 — dire boar; lycanthrope, werebat (see *Monsters of Faerûn*); CR 5 — *lycanthrope*, *loup-garou*\*; lycanthrope, werebear; plant, lashweed; winter wolf; wraith; CR 6 — shambling mound; tendriculos; will-o'-wisp; CR 7 — dire bear; ghost; *legendary wolf*; spectre; CR 8 — plant, dread treant\*; CR 9 — plant, undead treant\*; CR 10 — plant, quickwood\*.

## History

**D**robing the history of Verbrek has proven a challenge, to say the least. While I have encountered unnatural obstacles to my historical research in other realms, never have I been hindered by the stunted culture of the realm in question. Lacking royal or academic libraries, Verbrek is virtually bereft of archival evidence. It offers no noteworthy ruins to wander, no crumbling murals to tell the tale of the land's past, however fictitious it might be. The handful of books and parchments I discovered were usually the tattered works of neighboring realms.

To uncover the origins of Verbrek, I was forced to turn to the oral history of its people, a notoriously unreliable source. Though a touch scornful of prying outsiders, Verbrekers were generally eager

to share their folktales. They warmed to an audience quickly, as if keen to share the truth of things as their grandparents had told them.

According to legend, the tale of Verbrek begins ages ago with the birth of the Wolf God, an entity that sprang fully formed from the Mists themselves. My patron may ponder certain similarities between the Verbrekers' Wolf God and the Kartakans' Grandfather Wolf, but rest assured the Verbrekers view their primal god with none of the whimsy of their foppish counterparts. The Wolf God's coming was no gentle dawn, for it tore itself from the womb of the Mists — bloody, ravenous, and howling at the agony of life. Some Verbrekers say that the Wolf God arose out of necessity, a raging counterpoint to the cold enigma of the Mists. While the Mists react, the Wolf God acts. While the Mists watch and wait, the Wolf God hunts and devours.

The Wolf God wandered the Mists for untold ages, slaking his hunger on weaker creatures that crossed its path. None of the faceless spirits roaming the Mists dared to challenge the god-beast, for they saw that he was a herald for all the terrors of the flesh. Eventually, the Wolf God grew weary in his solitude. Like all wolves, he longed for a pack. Remembering his own violent birth, he inhaled deeply, taking in the Mists that surrounded him. Within him, the fell vapors mingled with his bone, flesh, blood, and bile. Wracked by pain, he disgorged a brood of children formed in his own image. These became the first wolves.

As the Wolf God led his new pack forth, the Mists opened before them, revealing lands covered in vast, ancient forests. In these plentiful lands, rich in prey, the Wolf God taught his children the ways of beasts — how to hunt to sustain themselves and the harsh truth of death, but also how to cheat death by mating and birthing pups. The wolves learned to take pleasure in the squeal of frightened prey and the taste of blood on their tongues.

Eventually, the wolves encountered creatures they had never seen before. These seemed weak, for their fangs had fallen off and they were forced to carry them. Unlike all other prey, however, they had the power to change the face of the world as they saw fit. In this, they were not unlike the gods. When these humans began to destroy the forests with axe and flame, the wolves sent their strongest hunters to devour them. The beasts struck a vicious blow, but the humans routed them and pursued them into the forests, their hatred stoked. The





wolves struck again with newfound bloodlust, ravaging human cubs in their dens. Then the forests burned while howls of carnage and sorrow echoed across the hills.

The conflict degenerated into a bloody stalemate, as the strength of wolf and human waxed and waned. One night, when the moon was full, a small band of humans slipped unseen into the heart of the wolves' territory. These men fearlessly approached the den of the Wolf God himself and hailed their enemy to show himself. Alerted to the trespass, countless wolves prepared to descend on the intruders, but the Wolf God emerged from his lair and commanded his children to stand down. Perplexed and amused at such suicidal foolishness, the god bade the humans to speak. To the utter shock of the assembled wolves, the humans responded by sinking to their knees and bowing before the Wolf God.

The humans explained that they had seen the strength of the Wolf God and his children, in contrast to the pitiful softness of humanity. Civilization, they claimed, had made humanity weak, and their tenure as masters of the world had lasted too long. The humans offered the Wolf God a monstrous covenant. They and their families would call the god master and would secretly aid the wolves in their war against humanity. They would reveal traps hidden in the forests, sabotage village defenses, and draw their kin away from wolf dens and into ambushes. In return, the humans asked not only to be spared the wrath of the Wolf God, but that he would bless them with his strength.

The wolves growled their disapproval of this alliance, but the Wolf God pondered the words of the traitorous humans. He knew that his children would never be able to destroy them utterly. He secretly feared the cleverness of humans, and he suspected it was only a matter of time before they created some terrible machine that would turn the tide against his children. The Wolf God's gaze fell upon a brown toad hidden among the dead leaves on the forest floor, and a dreadful scheme came to him. He agreed to the deal that the humans offered, and then suddenly seized them in his jaws, tearing a bit of flesh from each man in turn. He then sank his fangs into his own flesh and allowed his steaming blood to wash over the wounds of each man.

Through his blood, the traitors discovered the strength of wolves and the power to pass on this boon through their bite. Their flesh became a cloak worn to fool their weaker human kin, for under-

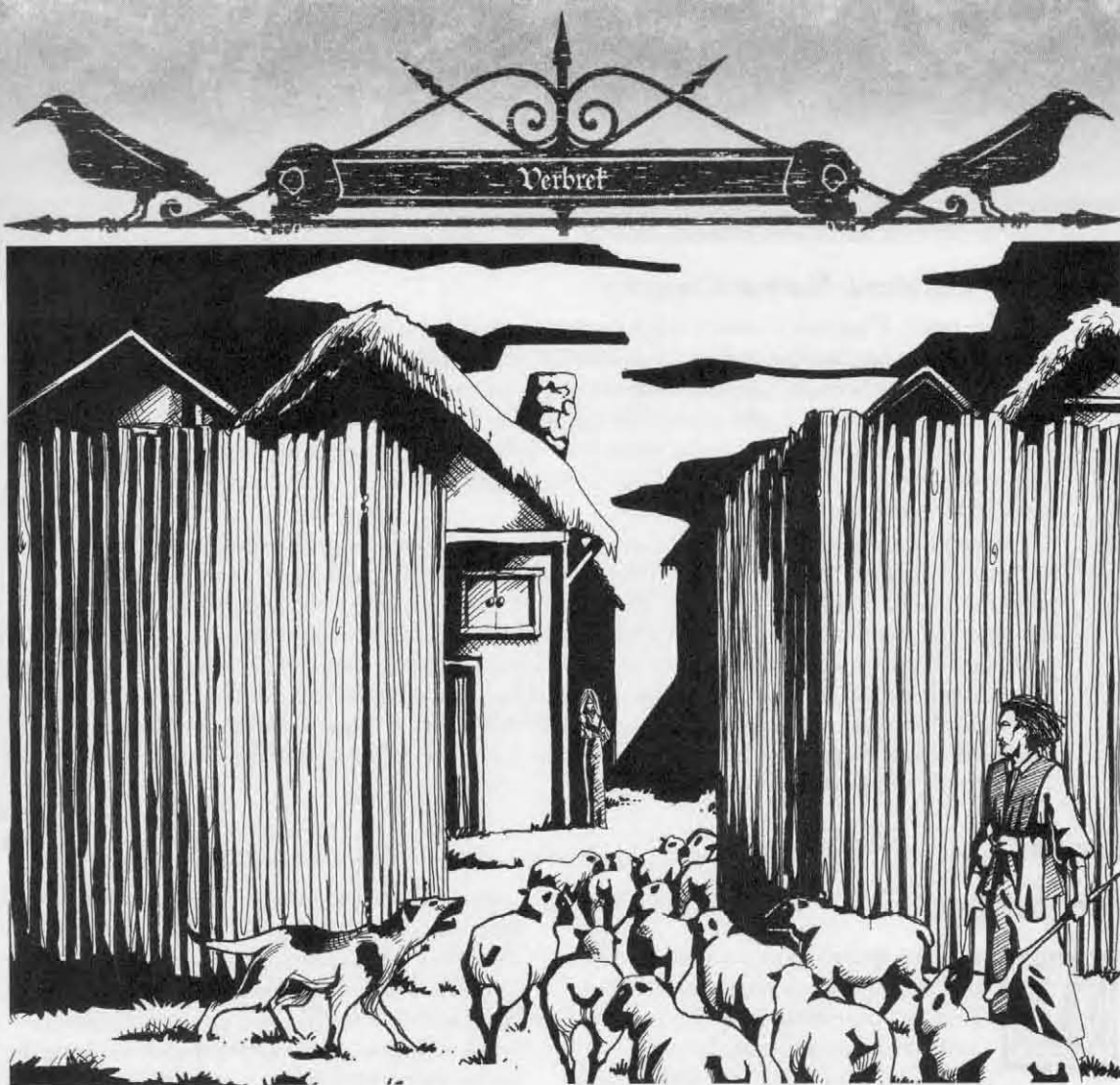
neath they bore the shape of wolves. The Wolf God commanded his bastard children to honor the moon, who had witnessed their birth, and to fear her sacred metal, silver, as it bore knowledge of their secret. He ordered them to lead his firstborn children in a final battle, to drive the humans from wolf lands and return his children to their place as masters of the wilds.

The werewolves did so, laying claim to a vast, untouched forest at the borders of a human kingdom. Though they slaughtered countless men, women, and children, the werewolves could not bring themselves to chase the humans from their lands utterly. Though they dared not admit such things to the Wolf God, many of the werewolves grew to believe that they were favored creatures, greater even than the wolves themselves. They reasoned that since they bore the strengths of both humans and wolves, they were superior to either race. Other werewolves simply grew accustomed to the taste of human flesh and did not wish to chase away their favored prey for good. Regardless, the werewolves allowed a handful of humans to remain in their new homeland, but took pains to keep them in their proper place. The forests that the werewolves claimed they called *Rrrv-brehk*, which in the primitive language of wolves means "Unwelcome Place." Uttered by the tongue of a human form, it became *Verbrek*.

The myth of the Wolf God holds a vital clue regarding the seminal event that marks the emergence of *Verbrek*. The creation of the werewolves and the subsequent subjugation of humankind signals the beginning of *Verbrek* as it exists today. From this point on, the werewolves rule *Verbrek*, while humans cower in fear. Even if one rejects this folktale as peasant superstition, one is naturally led to conclude that the seminal event is related to a shift within the culture of werewolves, a shift toward more violent savagery and even deeper hatred toward humanity. If the dread lord of *Verbrek* is a werewolf — as I have come to suspect — then he was probably the first among his kin to act upon these fanatical beliefs. Given the emphasis placed on the Wolf God in the origin myth, it is likely that the werewolf master of *Verbrek* views himself as an emissary or avatar of this god-beast. As Low Mordentish is *Verbrek*'s language, this werewolf, or at least its ancestors, were probably of Mordentish blood.

Although tales of a land to the south of Richemulot first surfaced around 708 BC, this





realm was not known as Verbrek, but “Arkandale.” I discovered a brief description of Arkandale in the *Catalogue of the World Entire*, a shoddy work commissioned by Camille Boritsi of Borca shortly before her death. It hints at a land not unlike Verbrek, where “wolves that walk like men” stalked along muddy riverbanks and through vast, untouched forests. Meanwhile, Mordentish anchorites first note a realm called “Verbrek” in the early 730’s, observing that wolves attacked any lumberjacks who took axes to its forests. I have not been able to determine whether Arkandale and Verbrek were distinct realms during this period. It may be that the residents of neighboring realms applied differing names to the region, or perhaps they were simply confused.

You seem equally confused, my little scholar. You should know better by now. The most petty, ordinary conflicts — even, say, a son rebelling against his father — can shape these realms of darkness in profound ways.

Following the Great Upheaval, however, Arkandale seems to have vanished from memory, and the lands south of Richemulot have since been called Verbrek by natives and outsiders alike. Much to the horror of those who live on the edges of Verbrek’s forests, the werewolf population of the realm has expanded significantly since then. This is evidenced not only by the testimony of Verbrekers themselves, but by the rising number of unusually brazen and cunning wolf attacks beyond Verbrek’s borders. Over the past decade, neighboring realms have spread tales of marauding werewolf packs ravaging their frontiers in search of victims for their unholy rites or simply reveling in bloodshed for its own sake.

If the history of Verbrek seems long on speculation, my patron should rest assured that this is by necessity. I can offer no names or dates from the Verbrekan past. The Verbrekers never speak of revolutions or battles, scandals or assassinations. They teach their children grim myths and fables, or anecdotes of devastating famines or blizzards in years past. Apparently, fear is the only truth worth remembering in this land.

### former Darklord: Nathan Timothy

The truth of Verbrek's history is tightly entwined with the whims, ambitions and hatreds of the Timothys, a family of natural werewolves originally from Mordent. Modern Verbrek arose from the wanderlust of Nathan Timothy, a shrewd young werewolf. Nathan felt compelled to seek out new lands, convinced he could uncover an egress from the Realm of Dread. In 708 BC, the Dark Powers saw fit to grant Nathan the domain of Arkandale, encompassing lands that are now northern Verbrek. Arkandale was quite similar to modern Verbrek in its landscape and culture, but home to far fewer werewolves.

Nathan was aloof and unusually content. He was generally satisfied with life on the River Musarde aboard his paddleboat, the *Virago*. Nathan's son Alfred, however, was a creature of profound hatred and bloodlust, who felt his father was too tolerant of humankind. When he betrayed and murdered a generous Vistana in 730 BC, Alfred became darklord of Verbrek, a wilderness of savage werewolves to the south of Arkandale. During the Grand Conjunction in 740 BC, Arkandale and Verbrek merged into a single domain bearing the name of the latter. Nathan was released to wander the rivers of the Core, while Alfred found himself sole master of his newly expanded realm. To this day, Nathan continues to traverse the Core aboard the *Virago*, posing as a genial and enterprising river captain.

## Populace



erbrek is sparsely populated, its humanoid inhabitants numbering less than 2,000 by my estimation. The vast majority of these natives are humans — or *appear* to be — but one also finds a growing population of half-breeds and outcasts such as half-elves, half-Vistani, and even calibans. These folk tend to be recent arrivals, often refugees and fugitives who feel safer in the wild forests than the wider world beyond.

## Appearance

Verbrekers are sturdy, hardened by life on the fringes of civilization. Generally shorter in stature than folk from neighboring lands, they possess a rugged comeliness with lean, athletic builds. Hard labor and meager food ensure that they never grow portly, while frailer children rarely survive to adulthood. They tend toward sharp cheekbones, handsome brows, and full lips. Verbreker skin is fair, ranging from pale and freckled to softly tanned. The harshness of the forest weathers even the young and toughens their hands with calluses. Verbrekers have a reputation for wide, arresting eyes, usually a bold shade of blue or green. Hair color runs from honey blond to rich brown, though auburns are not uncommon.

Verbreker hair is naturally straight or slightly wavy, but neither men nor women are bothered

with style. They allow their hair to grow wild and unkempt, men cutting it savagely just above the shoulder and women growing it throughout their lives. The result is a snarled and matted mess, often filthy with leaf detritus or even — in the elderly — green with moss. Full mustaches and beards are the norm among men, who consider them symbols of respect toward the wild. The clean-shaven outsider stands out as one who arrogantly challenges nature.

## fashion

The challenges and threats of wilderness life dictate that Verbreker attire be simple and functional, while allowing for comfortable movement. Men wear snug jerkins over their shirts, with trousers and a sash wrapped comfortably about the waist. Women don loose blouses and long skirts, slit up the thigh a touch too far for conservative outsiders. Loose clothing is designed for quick removal with a tug at a slipknot or two; in these woods, time spent to unlace a snagged cloak could cost the wearer his throat. Both men and women wear heavy woolen socks and simple shoes of soft leather. The natives exploit the resources that surround them whenever possible, reducing their dependence on outside goods. Rather than slaughter their milk cows, they use buckskin for leather. Dyes are expensive and unnecessary, so fabrics are almost always natural hues of cream, grey, tan, and earthen brown.



One exception is the hooded wool cloak ubiquitous among male and female Verbrekers alike. These heavy garments protect the natives from the elements and are the most valued possessions that most Verbrekers own. Dyed dappled green and brown on one side, and white and brown on the other, they are reversible according to the season, camouflaging the wearer when he moves through the forest. Every Verbreker also carries a hand hatchet and hunting knife at all times, strapping them on the moment they arise in the morning. Though these items provide some minimal protection against predators, they actually serve a far more practical purpose: Verbrekers detest being caught without the proper tool.

## Language

Verbrekers speak their own curious dialect of Low Mordentish. Its characteristics include protracted vowels and the hissing of air over the teeth. Few other tongues are spoken widely; even High Mordentish sounds stilted and unfamiliar on Verbreker tongues. The trickle of desperate outsiders who seek refuge here, however, ensures that

there is always an unexpected voice or two to be found.

## Low Mordentish Primer

English	Low Mordentish
forest	<i>weald</i>
river	<i>éa</i>
moon	<i>móna</i>
hunter	<i>hunta</i>
wolf	<i>ulph</i>
werewolf	<i>worulph</i>
dangerous, unwise	<i>bealu</i>
fool, outsider,	
civilized person	<i>ceasterbuend</i>

## Lifestyle & Education

To say that Verbrekers “make a living” at anything is misleading. Verbrekers concern themselves first and foremost with survival. They







steadfastly pursue any task that aids them in their ceaseless struggle against nature.

Some Verbrekers lead lives not unlike other peasants of the Core, farming and herding along the riverbanks. These folk usually raise a single crop or stock, selling whatever surplus they produce to the river merchants. Having bound themselves so tightly to river commerce, such natives nurture close relationships with traders, who return to the same Verbreker farmsteads on a reliable schedule.

Other Verbrekers follow a pattern closer to raw subsistence, raising plots of several grains and vegetables for their own needs, perhaps with chickens and a cow or two. The plants and creatures of the wild provide almost everything else they require. Rarer are the Verbrekers who forsake the plow, hunting for game and gathering the fruits, nuts, and roots of the forest. These "wild men" dwell in wretched shelters or grottos deep in the wilderness, or they live an entirely nomadic existence, sleeping high in the trees beyond the reach of the wolves.

The harsh realities of daily life in Verbrek forge families with tight bonds. A strong, almost desperate sense of solidarity forms among kin; survival depends on each member of the family contributing to the grueling struggle of everyday life. Many Verbreker children grow up in a single-room cottage in a remote hollow, rarely coming into contact with anyone outside their families.

When a young Verbreker man reaches the age of fourteen or so, he leaves his home for a time and sets out alone into the forest in search of a wife. Verbrekers refer to this tradition as *Thæt Lang Fær* — the Long Walk. Parents do not lightly send their adolescent boys out among the wolves. The Long Walk is a serious affair, and the natives regard it as a test of courage, resolve, and resourcefulness. As he journeys, the youth sings uneasy prayers to the Wolf God, asking him to stay his hunger and allow "his prey" to find a mate, thereby ensuring a plentiful herd. Usually, the youth courts the first lass of similar age he stumbles upon, obtains the blessing of her family, and returns home within a fortnight. Nearly all marriages in Verbrek are arranged for convenience. Rarely, a boy may wander for months or even years, his familiarity with the forest growing and the appeal of settled life waning.

Envisioning sentimental romance thriving among people who think of themselves primarily as wolf fodder is difficult. Married couples cling to one

another more out of a sense of survival than marital fidelity. Nonetheless, Verbrekers exhibit strong devotion to their spouses, protecting one another fiercely until death. Verbrekan couples have exactly two children, no more, no less, controlling such matters through ancient herbal secrets. There is deeply rooted belief — not entirely unfounded — that the survival of the race depends on this standard. With a smaller population come deformities and vulnerability to catastrophe. Greater numbers risk culling by the fangs of the realm's werewolves; I collected numerous anecdotes of the beasts carrying off the third child born into a family. Such anecdotes promote the superstition that a third child is always cursed with lycanthropy and that such attacks merely restore the child to its rightful kin.

Parents teach their children the fundamentals of forest survival at an early age. Before they learn to read or write — if they learn at all — youngsters learn to shoot a bow, snare a rabbit, gather edible plants, navigate a river raft, and build a snow shelter. This emphasis on practical skills dominates Verbreker culture. The natives see little need for book learning and other "civilized" pursuits. They have nothing but contempt for the "soft-bellied" privileged folk who waste their lives in pursuit of science, politics, or philosophy.

Though fortunate Verbrekers keep draft horses as beasts of burden, these creatures are unfeasible as mounts in the dense forests. Travel on foot is preferred. Racing home before packs of pursuing wolves has bred stamina and fleetness into the Verbrekers' blood. Light on their feet, Verbrekers dash over rugged terrain with a deftness to make an elf envious. Natives also boast skill in navigating the modest river launches that carry them up and down the realm's waterways. They pilot these craft with simple pole oars, slipping between treacherous eddies, gravel bars, and logjams.

Verbrekers subsist on simple fare, preparing meals from the forest's bounty. Though some supplement this with grains and vegetables from gardens, the wilds provide the bulk of their sustenance. There are no signature Verbreker recipes, *per se*. The natives eat whatever is at hand, prepared in the simplest manner possible. Game such as venison, rabbit, squirrel, and quail are staples. Natives roast meat without spices over an open flame, consuming it on the bone, then preserve uneaten portions as a jerky, mixing it with sweet berries. River trout and salmon are prominent food sources,





frequently salted and dried for the harsh winters. Stewed cabbage and potatoes from tiny gardens accompany edible grasses, roots, mushrooms, nuts, and fruits from the forest. Despite their normally simple tastes, Verbrekers are fond of fine beer, brewing with careful attention to flavor and body. Their golden lagers carry the distinct bitterness of local hops and an array of subtle flavors derived from forest wildflowers.

Verbrekers are at home in the wilderness. The untamed forest is a familiar landscape to them. Nature and humankind coexist under an uneasy truce, and humanity is clearly the weaker faction, surviving through deference and passivity. Verbrekers readily admit to a healthy respect for the natural world, but their respect is tempered with fear. They witness the savagery of nature every day and feel its hot, cruel breath on their necks at night. They accept that they are doomed to be food for either wolves or worms, yet they harbor a passionate pride for their miserable way of life. They believe that to live close to the rhythms of the forest is to live honestly, nobly, and with honor — traits they see in short supply in the world beyond.

Verbrekers live according to the patterns they see around them. They note that all their survival strategies came from watching the creatures of the forest and mimicking or adapting their tricks. Following the lead of all prey creatures, Verbrekers prefer to flee or work around difficulties rather than confront them. Observation, patience, and wisdom are their virtues. Verbrekers say outsiders who speak of “instinct” are missing the tapestry of sights, sounds, and smells that creatures absorb and act upon. Accordingly, Verbrekers are as edgy as any forest deer, vigilant for the slightest changes in their surroundings.

Concerned with the fundamentals of survival, they devote little time to life’s pleasures. They seize upon moments of delight and amusement, usually in the slow hours of the night. Folk whittle tiny woodcarvings or play mumblety-peg when they have free moments. They find music in the sound of clapping hands and the buzz of flutes crafted from green shoots. Storytelling is the only enduring tradition, with the elderly as keepers of the folktales. Grandparents retell their favorite stories as the children in a household drift asleep to the sound of wolf howls. The only characters these legends feature are wolves, men, and beasts that merely *walk* like men. The eternally malicious wolves

speak in such legends, yet the humans outwit them with amusing frequency.

*Charming. I would wager that the werewolf masters of this wretched land tell similar legends, albeit featuring greedy, gibbering apes wielding axe and flame, and the noble beasts that challenge them.*

Verbrekers are generally rough and churlish in their demeanor, especially with genteel outsiders. Though my attire, speech, and manner did not endear me to the locals, most recognized that a foreigner who had obviously been traveling alone through the Verbrekan wilds for weeks was not to be underestimated. Complete strangers often mocked and browbeat me at our first encounter, advising me to hasten my own death by offering myself to the wolves. This, I discovered, is as close as Verbrekers come to complimenting outsiders. To those they judge as lackwits, they cheerfully offer fabricated advice on wilderness survival — advice that is likely to weed the hapless soul out of the herd, so to speak.

## Attitudes Toward Magic

Verbrekers respect and fear the might of spellcasters, despite exhibiting poor understanding of the arcane arts. Some Verbrekers go their whole lives without even meeting a spellcaster. To the natives, magic is merely another strategy for staying ahead of the natural world, and like any strategy it has its advantages and drawbacks. The respect Verbrekers show spellcasters correlates to the nature of their magic. They treat sorcerers with reverence, believing their magic primordial and untainted by human meddling. Druids and rangers draw their power from nature itself and deserve awe and respect. Bards, clerics, paladins, and wizards are cast in a more suspicious light. To Verbrekers, studied magics are little different from science, philosophy, or any other useless discipline from the civilized world.

## Religion

Verbrekers dwell in a twilight world of fear and scabbling desperation, a world the prominent churches of the Core are generally unable to illuminate. No cathedrals or temples adorn this realm; shrines in the homes of the faithful are the grandest places of worship. Most Verbrekers have little time





for faith, and they see few answers in the prayers and posturing of clergy. Under the crown of the ancient forests, the needs of the soul are ancillary to those of the body. Those Verbrekers who do turn to faith are usually seeking assurances in their daily lives rather than spiritual comfort. They do not want succor. They want a prolonged growing season, true aim with their hunting bows, and swiftness and luck when wolves are at their heels.

**Ezra:** Even the treacherous forests of Verbrek cannot bar the Church of Ezra, and today one finds a handful of Verbrekers who have accepted the grace of the Guardian. These rare souls follow not the teachings of the Mordentish See, but the Home Faith of Borca. I suspect the Mordentish doctrine of absolution and salvation for the wicked (including the legions of the night) is a touch too naïve for Verbrekers. Stoic guardianship and mercy for the wounded are easier commandments to swallow when howls fill the dark of night.

**Hala:** Most religious Verbrekers count themselves among the faithful of Hala. The goddess' message of harmony and wisdom appeals to the Verbreker sensibility, even if her mystical doctrine is sometimes lost on them. The Church of Hala is said to have arrived in Verbrek through a courageous warlock from Mordent, who came not to proselytize, but to protect the natives from the werewolf scourge. This warlock is thought to be responsible for the *cossetung carr* scattered throughout the Verbrekan forests. These tiny cairns, hidden among the ferns and bearing the symbol of the goddess, are rumored to conceal hunters from voracious predators when blessed with a kiss.

**The Wolf God:** Despite the fact that the Wolf God is the most widely worshipped entity in Verbrek, few Verbrekers can speak with authority on the fundamentals of his faith. The Wolf God is the unholy patron of the werewolves, worshipped by no sane humanoid. Though he is a central figure in Verbreker myths, the Wolf God's true followers are lycanthropes and a handful of deranged human cultists. He represents everything that the Verbrekers hate and fear about nature. They hold him in awe only inasmuch as they live in terror of his children.

This is not to say that the Verbrekers do not acknowledge the power of the Wolf God. They never speak his name aloud in Low Mordentish — *Mæstealdulph* — and take pains to avoid his wrath. No Verbreker would ever construct a shrine to the Wolf God or mark a possession with his holy

symbol. They are not, however, above whispering prayers to the Enemy of Man in moments of fear. They flatter the Wolf God by extolling his strength and ferocity, beseeching him to show mercy to prey that is beneath his notice. They craft tiny effigies of forest creatures with twisted twigs, leaving them in the woods as sacrifices. Superstitious hunters offer the first animal they kill each autumn to the Wolf God, seeking to satiate him. Mothers swaddle their infants in cloth saturated with polecat musk, believing that it conceals their scent from the Wolf God as he roams the forests at night.

Once in a great while, Verbrekers whisper tentatively of humans who stand defiantly against the Wolf God and his children. Most Verbrekers chafe at the thought of these fools stoking the wrath of the werewolves. Members of the Woodcutter's Axe, as they have been dubbed, believe the Wolf God hates humans because he fears them and covets the fruits of civilization. Members refuse to offer prayers or sacrifices to the Wolf God even out of fear. They seek to break the stranglehold of the werewolves in Verbrek and ultimately to topple the Wolf God himself. How they aim to accomplish this is unknown, as the Axe keeps close to the shadows and covers its tracks diligently, admittedly out of necessity. If I encountered a member of the Woodcutter's Axe during my travels in Verbrek, I was unaware of it at the time. Yet one old Verbreker woman assured me in low tones that there are prophecies in the oldest legends, legends told only on nights of the new moon. These speak of a third born child who will one day slay the Wolf God and drive the werewolves from the forests forever.

Sadly, there exist aberrant individuals in every culture, and in Verbrek rumors persist of men who revere the Wolf God as master. These folk are solitary madmen rather than a cohesive cult or conspiracy, yet their sheer lunacy haunts the Verbreker consciousness, as exemplified in the myth of the Wolf God. It may be reverence for power, craven sycophancy, twisted attraction, or even grim fatalism that drives the rare Verbreker to betray his entire race. The realm's werewolves supposedly claim as their own any humanoid who exalts the Wolf God; such zealots likely view lycanthropy as an honor and a divine blessing. Personally, I suspect that most of these madmen are more likely to supplicate themselves right into the werewolves' gullets.



## The Wolf God Revisited

This section expands upon the information presented in the *Ravenloft Player's Handbook*.

### The Wolf God

**Symbol:** A snarling wolf's head or a single, bloody paw print.

**Alignment:** Chaotic evil.

**Portfolio:** Predators, the wilderness, hunting, savagery, blood, the moon, wolves, werewolves.

**Domains:** Animal, Chaos, Slaughter (see Attached Notes), Strength, Trickery.

**Favored Weapon:** Natural weapons.

Nearly all of the Wolf God's worshippers are werewolves, and only werewolves may become divine spellcasters in his clergy. The natural werewolves of Verbrek are the Wolf God's most devoted followers, but scattered clans of lycanthropes throughout the southwestern Core also worship him. Those humanoid Verbrekers who choose to throw their lot in with the werewolves and their malicious deity are rare in the extreme. Elder priests among the Verbreker werewolves select only an honored few to join their ranks. Since they act as emissaries to the endlessly ravenous Wolf God, priests must follow strict taboos, lest their deity devour them. They must not be tainted with the scent of prey creatures, and any wounds on their bodies must be concealed at all times. The Wolf God has no holy text or orthodoxy; priests pass on the traditions of the faith to their successors through vicious, gruesome ordeals.

Clerics of the Wolf God pray for their spells at sunset, when twilight shadows provide concealment to predators. Their worship bears little resemblance to the hymns and sermons of civilized faiths. Hunting is itself a sacred act, and the werewolves worship their god simply by following their natural inclinations. Priests engage in strange rites intended to prove their fanaticism and bestow terrifying visions. The Wolf God has a fondness for the sacrifice of powerful humanoids and other werebeasts, whose throats are torn out and bled to death.

The Wolf God has no temples. Devout werewolves construct crude cairns of stone to honor him, adorned with bloody paw prints and the bones of slain victims. The Wolf God demands that his children respect and fear the moon, which is thought to hold power over fate. Rituals are coupled to the waxing and waning of the moon, and priests are always watchful for lunar omens, with eclipses considered particularly dire. The werewolves who serve the Wolf God are usually adepts, although clerics, druids, and even rangers are not unusual. Priests rarely pursue more than one class, as their duties demand vigilance and devotion.

**Dogma:** Hunt. Kill. Feast. You are master of the forest and the nightmare of the civilized world. Do whatever it takes to survive, thrive, and breed. Slay the weak, even among your own kin, for they diminish your race. Revel in the crack of bone and the screams of prey. Follow your instincts. Do not let pity or remorse trouble you. Offer howls to the moon, for she knows your secrets and your fate. Honor wolves as your allies. All other creatures are prey to be eaten or rivals to be slain.



## Secret Society: The Woodcutter's Axe

The legends most Verbrekers know comprise only half the tale. Though the children of the Wolf God have taken Verbrek from humanity, humanity is destined to take it back. The Woodcutter's Axe has faith in the resolve and fortitude of humankind and in ancient tales that portend salvation from the werewolves' jaws. Solitary avengers have hunted the lycanthropes since Verbrek first emerged from the Mists, but the Woodcutter's Axe is the first organized plot against the werewolves' supremacy. The Axe shuns those motivated by vengeance, preferring visionaries who are willing to risk their lives for a Verbrek free from fear.

Secrecy is the foremost tenet of the Axe. Its members believe the werewolves' eyes and ears are everywhere and spend considerable energy rooting out moles. Despite the lack of any formal organization or cell structure, the Woodcutter's Axe maintains a remarkable network of mutual support among Verbrekers from all walks of life. Members provide safety and shelter to one another without question, recognizing their fellows by crude axe tattoos over the breastbone.

Despite its noble rhetoric, the Woodcutter's Axe is a ruthless gathering of rebels at heart. The prospect of a future free from werewolves justifies nearly anything in the minds of its members. They have burned swaths of forest, poisoned water supplies, and executed those who could not be released from the lycanthropic curse. The Axe lacks a commander, but the spiritual center of the organization is Noella Marshford (human female ex-Pal4/Rgr6, CG), a native Verbreker who entered the priesthood of the Church of Ezra in Borca, only to return to her homeland to liberate it from the werewolf menace.

## The Verbreker Hero

**Races:** Most Verbrekers are humans, though the domain is home to a smattering of calibans, half-elves, and half-Vistani. Verbrekers generally accept these outcasts, provided they have dwelled among the native humans for some time. The Verbrekers reserve their suspicion for civilized outsiders, regardless of their race.

**Classes:** Druids, fighters, rangers, and sorcerers are the most common classes in Verbrek. Druids and rangers act as emissaries between nature and humankind, promoting respect and caution toward the wilds. Fighters follow a less spiritual path, perfecting tactics that provide an edge in the forest landscape. Sorcerers are relatively common here, and many Verbrekers believe that the forests themselves touch these souls with eldritch power. Barbarians are uncommon, but not unheard of among the werewolves and toughened wanderers who dwell deep in the forests. Other classes are curiosities or outlanders far from civilization.

**Recommended Skills:** Balance, Climb, Craft (bowmaking, carpentry, leatherworking), Heal, Hide, Jump, Knowledge (nature, shapechanger lore), Listen, Move Silently, Profession (boater, brewer, farmer, fisher, guide, herbalist, lumberjack, tanner), Sense Motive, Spot, Survival, Swim.

**Recommended Feats:** Alertness, Back to the Wall, Dodge (plus derivatives), Great Fortitude, Jaded, Lunatic, Point Blank Shot (plus derivatives), Run, Skill Focus (Knowledge [nature], Survival), Sworn Enemy\*, Track, Warding Gesture\* Weapon Focus (battleaxe, dagger, handaxe, longbow, longsword, quarterstaff, shortspear, throwing axe).

\*See Van Richten's Arsenal Volume I

**Verbreker Male Names:** Agnan, Cadoc, Drenig, Ehoarn, Gilduin, Herveig, Jaoven, Kerrian, Maugan, Privael, Riwallan, Sklaer, Teyrn, Vonig, Youenn.

**Verbreker Female Names:** Aven, Biganna, Enora, Flamenn, Goulvena, Joela, Kavanenn, Lennig, Maiwenn, Nevena, Paola, Rivanon, Sisilia, Vouga, Yuveot.

## Werewolves

In Verbrek, the societies of humans and wolves blend at the edges, so establishing the exact proportion of werewolves within Verbrek's total population is difficult at best. By some accounts, werewolves outnumber humans here by as much as three to one. The renowned werewolfslayer Patrick Conner advised me that the natives have exaggerated this figure out of fear. Nonetheless, he estimates that the beasts number well over a thousand. All signs suggest that their population is burgeoning. I was fortunate to encounter Conner and his companion-in-arms Lynnet Tharel as I traveled through the Vale of Memory, and they provided me with fundamental details on werewolf society. Unfortunately, the pair obstinately refused to serve as guides through the Winterfang Crests. I gathered other facts from the anecdotes of numerous Verbreker commoners, as well as my own encounters with the werewolves, which were fleeting but vivid.

The natural werewolves of Verbrek generally follow one of two lifestyles, although the distinction between the two is not always easy to draw. The creatures I shall term *deceivers* spend most of their lives in human form, masquerading as Verbreker commoners. These creatures dwell in river hamlets, leading seemingly normal lives as farmers, fishermen, or trappers. When night falls, however, they shed their peasant garments and human guise, loping through the forest in search of prey. They seem to thrive on this trickery, often maintaining the ruse for years or decades for their own perverse amusement. Deceivers tend to occur as lone wolves, if my patron will excuse the pun, or tight family groups. Yet Verbrekers often whisper fearfully of whole settlements of deceiver werewolves. Should an unlucky traveler stumble upon such a hamlet, he rarely leaves alive the next morning.

Not all werewolves are content to live as humans, however. Those who reject this deception I call *primitives*, for they choose to exist as backward aboriginals. Dwelling in the wildest regions of the forests, they emerge to stage bloodthirsty raids on farmsteads. Primitives employ their shapeshifting ability only as an evasion or confusion tactic. They prefer their hybrid form, clothing themselves in little but savage regalia such as bones, feathers, and designs painted onto their hides with river mud or dried blood. Primitives worship the Wolf God openly, and their priests command terrifying di-

## Wolves at the Door

The natural werewolves of Verbrek generally live in small family groups called *packs*, comprised of a mated pair of werewolves, their offspring, and perhaps a kinsman who is too young or old to lead his own pack. The pack's survival rests on the strongest male, called the *alpha*. Packs maintain close ties with kin packs, with which they form a *clan*. Werewolves mate only with fellow clan members. In some clans, they earn the right to mate only after "blooded" by taking a human life. The status of the clan determines the hunting rights of affiliated packs. Accordingly, they fiercely defend the honor and territory of their clans, and any meeting between rival clans is likely to result in a bloody challenge between alphas. Clan names are derived from wolf-speak and are simplistic and fearsome — Sharptooth, Snowstalker, and Blackslayer Clans are typical examples.

Clans follow one of three paths in their endless struggle for power. Clans that pursue similar strategies are not allied with one another by any means and tend to be bitter rivals. Clans living close to humanity are termed *Sheepskinners*. Sheepskinners are cunning and arrogant, delighting in trickery and violence in equal measure. They reason that shapeshifting is a blessing from the Wolf God, allowing them to hunt and observe humans with ease. Some Sheepskinner clans regularly venture outside Verbrek to forge alliances with other creatures or sample the pleasures of civilization. Other clans deride Sheepskinners as lazy, domesticated mongrels, hopelessly consumed with the ways of humans.

*Stonebreakers* are savages and ruthless advocates of werewolf supremacy. Stonebreaker clans believe they must forge their own society, free from the corrupting weakness of humanity. They raze human settlements and refuse to plunder, crafting their own crude tools and weapons from bone, wood, sinew, and stone. Stonebreakers are zealous followers of the Wolf God, believing that their race will one day rule the world. Other clans snicker at the ridiculous sight of Stonebreakers in feathers and war paint, dancing and chanting before a bonfire.

*Ghosthowlers* are the most reclusive and vicious of all. Ghosthowler clans spend most of their lives in wolf form, running alongside wolves as their equals. They believe that the other clans have forgotten their roots and lurk in the wildest regions of the domain, rarely showing themselves to the Verbrekers. Ghosthowlers know that humans fear the unknown and contend that the other clans often forget this, foolishly exposing themselves to humans. They would rather abandon a woodsman's maimed corpse in the forest for others to find than engage in raids and mass murder. Other clans regard howlers as dullards and backward beasts, little better than mundane wolves.



vine magic during hunts and raids. When Verbrekers speak of ghastly werewolf rites and blood sacrifices deep in the forest, they are referring to primitives. I suspect the crude stone monuments and strange glyphs in tree bark found throughout the realm are the handiwork of such.

Witnesses have reported unmistakable hostility between these two groups, but such conflicts seem territorial in nature. Practically speaking, human prey is limited in Verbrek, and werewolves compete ruthlessly for it. Patrick Conner described a revealing encounter, wherein he observed a raiding party of primitives who surrounded a solitary cottage to slaughter those within. A woodsman emerged from the hovel and began arguing venomously with the lycanthropes in the wolf-tongue. Much to the chagrin of the primitives, the woodsman was also a werewolf, a deceiver enraged that the primitives had encroached on his hunting territory.

Despite this rift, common threads run through the entire werewolf population. All acknowledge the Wolf God as creator and patron. All are ruthless predators, unable or unwilling to rise above their feral urges. To say that they have their own values, however monstrous, is erroneous. They value only survival, understand only strength and fear, and take pleasure only from their carnal pursuits. While some exhibit remarkable cleverness and charisma, even the most elaborate werewolf scheme is limited in its aims. Werewolves rarely undertake anything that does not contribute to the survival and prosperity of their race or to their personal amusement. Even acts of malicious cruelty ultimately serve to terrorize the humanoid populace, break its spirit and ensure its submission.

## The Realm



erbrek has no centralized authority or government. The Verbrekers recognize no monarch as master, nor do they appoint councilors to administer matters of state. In truth, there is no "state" to speak of in Verbrek. The Verbrekers live without the paternal watchfulness of a government; they have no army, no laws, and no courts. They are quite literally on their own.

The sheer wildness of the realm's landscape proves a hindrance to any authority that sought to assert its power throughout the land. The fundamental actions of government, such as taxation and the raising of an army, are unfeasible when

even the most primitive infrastructure is lacking. Kings cannot exercise their authority without roads on which to move soldiers and bureaucrats (it goes without saying that Falkovnian attempts to establish enclaves along the Musarde have ended poorly).

The character of the Verbrekers may be a more significant hindrance than the realm itself, however. The natives do not seem the type to suffer the stifling hand of law and order. The presence of the merciless wilderness, so close to their doors, has lent a savagery to the Verbreker outlook. Just as any attempt to tame the wilds can only result in misery and death, the Verbrekers believe that any attempt to enforce laws and control folk is foolhardy and counterproductive.

Verbrekers see the natural state of humanity as scattered thinly through the wild, living together in families or tiny communities. Each man is responsible only to himself and his kin. His survival depends on his own resourcefulness and fortitude alone. Catastrophic changes would accompany the "civilizing" of Verbrek: slavery, plague, famine, fanaticism, oppression, and war. Such changes would be contrary to nature and would likely drive Verbrek's werewolf masters to further acts of carnage and cruelty.

## Government

Each settlement and farmstead in Verbrek is a state unto itself. They answer to no one and have no one to turn to in times of hardship. Hamlets with more than five or six families usually organize a council of elders, or *gemot*, to resolve matters that affect the whole settlement. The eldest male from each household sits on the *gemot*, which assembles whenever there are pressing concerns to discuss. There are no formal rules governing how the *gemot* conducts itself. The *gemot* may meet spontaneously, as discussion turns to serious local matters during a neighborly gathering. Elders take turns speaking, with each man offering his thoughts. The *gemot* attempts to reach a consensus when possible, but matters that cannot be resolved are put to a simple majority vote. The elders do not conceal their proceedings from others; even women and outsiders may bring their concerns to the table.

Verbreker hamlets have no laws. The *gemot* resolves any disputes between neighbors and pronounces punishments when necessary. This is a rare occurrence, as Verbrekers have little time for troublemaking. With every household teetering on the edge of survival, jealousy and resentment





find no room to find root. Verbrekers see peace and unity as the essential feature that distinguishes them from beasts. Why waste energy on bloody struggles for resources and power, when simple respect and decency contribute to the survival of everyone? Such a naïve sentiment functions well here, even if it is folly in the world beyond.

There is no need for law enforcement, but natives require protection from natural predators, marauding werewolves, and hostile outsiders. Verbrekers tutor all male children in wrestling, boxing, archery, and swordplay. Hunting sharpens their skills, and all youths are seasoned warriors by the time they enter manhood. Every male Verbreker defends his home at need. Hamlets have no standing militias, but fathers encourage their oldest sons — and occasionally their daughters as well — to organize the settlement's defenses. It is these bold youths, called *hleo*, who construct crude fortifications and pore over evacuation plans. The *hleo* are the first defenders rampaging wolves and lycanthropes encounter should they assault a Verbreker hamlet.

## Law Enforcement

A Verbreker defender can be used to represent any native who takes up arms to protect her home and family.

**Verbreker Hleo:** Human War1; CR 1/2; Medium humanoid (human); HD 1d8, hp 4; Init +0; Spd 30 ft.; AC 12, touch 10, flat-footed 12; Base Atk +1; Grp +2; Atk +2 melee (1d8+1/19–20, longsword) or +2 melee (1d6+1/x3, handaxe) or +2 melee (1d4+1/19–20, dagger) or +2 ranged (1d8/x3, longbow); Full Atk +2 melee (1d8+1/19–20, longsword) or +2 melee (1d6+1/x3, handaxe) or +2 melee (1d4+1/19–20, dagger) or +2 ranged (1d8/x3, longbow); AL N; SV Fort +4, Ref +0, Will +0; Str 13, Dex 11, Con 11, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 8.

*Skills and Feats:* Climb +3, Jump +3, Sense Motive +1, Survival +2, Swim +3; Run, Weapon Focus (longbow).

*Possessions:* Longsword, handaxe, silver dagger, longbow, 20 arrows, leather armor, Verbrekan cloak (+2 circumstance bonus to Hide checks).

## Economy

For all its wildness, Verbrek possesses many valuable resources, and the kingdoms beyond its forests will go to considerable lengths to obtain

them. This is fortunate, for though its native folk would never admit as much, Verbrek's fragile society would almost certainly wither away without the commerce flowing along the Musarde and Arden rivers. The Verbrekers wouldn't starve without trade. Natives could survive on the bounty of the forest, but without steel, salt, horses, and wheat, Verbrek would revert to a primitive state of savage clans and beast cults.

The soil of Verbrek's forests is rich and black, the realm's climate excellent for growing crops. When the gnarled undergrowth is cleared away, an array of grains and vegetables can flourish wherever rays of sunlight break through the canopy. Though wheat grows stunted on Verbrekan soil, oats, barely, and hops thrive. Massive ginger-colored local potatoes prosper in the damp earth along with cabbages, leeks, and parsnips. Mild green peppers, brought to the southwestern Core from a distant realm, also grow well.

Most settled Verbrekers raise cattle and sheep for their own needs, but the lack of extensive grazing lands precludes broad commercial husbandry. Nonetheless, some natives have adopted fine cheesemaking techniques from Richemulot, enhancing the curd with forest lichens and wildflower pollens. Hogs and chickens both fare well in crowded pens, growing fat on fodder mixed with native nuts and seeds.

Domestic plants and animals provide a supplement to the abundant foods and resources the forest already holds. The natives gather a staggering array of plants from the wilderness: wild cherries, acorns, hazelnuts, juniper berries, fern fiddleheads, and a plethora of mushrooms. Many Verbrekers are skilled herbalists, but their expertise tends to be limited to simple curatives and poisons.

River merchants seek brown trout, salmon, and freshwater oysters from Verbrek. Unfortunately, Verbrekers still fish with modest nets and archaic methods, and cannot keep pace with the demand from beyond their borders. The hunters and trappers of the realm cull a wealth of game and furs from the forest. Nobles in other realms clamor for wolf pelts from Verbrek, attracted to their sinister mystique as much as their warmth. Industrious Verbrekers carve soft river clay from exposed ridges, selling it for use in fine ceramics in the workshops of Invidia and Richemulot.

Timber is a sensitive matter in Verbrek. Generally, the natives only believe in felling what they need to construct proper homes for themselves and







to produce essential weapons and tools. They gather dead wood for fuel in their hearths, steadfastly refusing to clear forest merely to civilize the landscape. Rarely, the Verbrekers negotiate the harvesting of a solitary copse when there is a critical need for goods from outside realms. Such harvests have a sinister repute, as the lumberjacks often go missing or fall victim to strange accidents. Merchants who lay claim to timber without any cooperation or consent from the Verbrekers usually suffer a far more gruesome fate at the hands of the werewolves.

Verbrekers produce little of value beyond what they coax from their surroundings. One finds few forges or workshops, though a smattering of artisans produce simple goods in their homes to sell to the rivermen. Verbreker folk crafts tend toward simplicity and practicality, ranging from quilts, to dolls, to wooden chests, to (supposedly) protective amulets and talismans — all manner of moderately artistic but unspectacular trinkets. The principle workplace is the local brewhouse, a communal cottage in most hamlets of half a dozen families or more. Here, Verbreker men gather to develop distinctive brews with sour hops, their labors more a social pastime than a commercial endeavor.

Verbrekers deal in barter rather than currency, and exchanges between Verbrekers tend to be pragmatic and straightforward. A farmer may exchange several bushels of vegetables for a trapper's pelts. Verbrekers are shrewder with outsiders, negotiating with the skill of seasoned city shopkeepers. An unspoken perception of mutual dependence exists between the Verbrekers and foreign river merchants, however, and the natives are careful not to antagonize their patrons. Settlers along the riverbanks may occasionally consent to payment in Mordentish, Richemuloise, or Invidian coin, provided that there are forthcoming opportunities to dump the currency on river traders.

## Diplomacy

If one were to ask the ruler of any neighboring realm about their "diplomatic relations" with Verbrek, the response would probably be either laughter or a grim scowl. Without exception, other lands regard Verbrek as a trackless backwater populated by filthy peasants who spend most of their time fleeing from fearless beasts. Verbrekers have a low opinion of the world outside the forests. Civilization, as they see it, is a ruse promoted by nobles smitten with luxury.

While few folk outside of Verbrek give the Verbrekers themselves a second thought, the werewolves are always on the minds of those who dwell close to the realm's borders. Every year, more victims suffer encounters outside Verbrek with marauding primitives, who seem to slaughter and abduct hapless folk at random. Even more troubling, packs of deceivers have been found in villages as far-flung as Karina, Levkarest, and Mordentshire. These creatures may merely be wandering in search of twisted diversions, or they may be conducting reconnaissance and forging ties with other hostile groups.

**Borca:** Situated upstream of Verbrek on the Luna River, Borca reaps scant wealth from trade along the Musarde, while still suffering from werewolf attacks. Nonetheless, Ivan Dilisnya has little interest in expending the realm's energies on patrols for its southwestern border. For as long as the victims are limited to peasants from the rural fringes, Borca's owners will likely remain apathetic to the werewolf threat.

**Invidia:** Perhaps more than any other ruler whose lands border Verbrek, Malocchio Aderre has grown annoyed at the presence of the werewolves. Commerce between Verbrek and Invidia is extensive, but has encouraged the movement of werewolves across the border. In 748, Malocchio's army rooted out an underground community of werewolves in Karina, where they had been staging blood sports with a rogue Falkovnian merchant colony. Determined to ferret out Verbreker werewolves in his demesne, Malocchio has ruthlessly hunted down one pack after another. Being predators, the werewolves are unable to back away from the conflict and respond by venturing into Invidia in even greater numbers.

**Mordent:** The Mordentish fear Verbrekan forests, which skulk beyond the southeastern tip of their homeland, seemingly steeped in shadow and fangs. They nonetheless feel a distant kinship with the Verbrekers, regarding them as unfortunate victims of a hostile landscape. The Verbrekers, however, do not necessarily welcome the paternal pity of the Mordentish.

**Richemulot:** Richemulot profits from trade with the Verbrekers. Many commodities brought downstream find their way to Richemuloise plaza markets. Nonetheless, the lupine threat remains a wildcard. Escalating wolf attacks add to the unrest that already plagues rural western Richemulot. Eventually, the patience of Jacqueline Renier may



reach the breaking point, and her elite soldiers will push into northern Verbrek in search of werewolf prey.

**Sithicus:** Sithicans have little use for Verbrek, since there are few goods the Verbrekers produce that they cannot obtain themselves. Sithicans consider Verbrekers beneath their notice, while Verbrekers regard Sithicus as the Sunset Lands, where civilizations older than humanity have withdrawn to molder. The elves cautiously patrol their northern border with Verbrek, watchful for werewolf marauders. These forces stand ready to strike should the need arise, but menaces often pass by the time the elven nobles resolve to act.

**Valachan:** The Valachani harbor a lifestyle and an outlook similar to those of the Verbrekers, yet hold its neighbor at arm's length. The Valachani are wary of the ravaging wolves and fear that more extensive contact might provoke further attacks. Verbrekers see this reluctance as a sign that they have no allies in their battle against nature. Interestingly, the enforcers of Baron von Kharkov, hated though they may be, do a commendable job of butchering any wolves they find wandering the borders.

## Sites of Interest



My route through Verbrek was far more circuitous than those I followed in other realms, as I entered the forests with no notion of what landmarks lay ahead. I relied solely on my own judgment, following the rivers and sparse signs of civilization. On more than one occasion, I wandered for days in the wilds without encountering a single soul. The hamlets scattered across Verbrek are wretched little way stations, and only two deserve note, for very different reasons.

### Fylfot

The hamlet of Fylfot huddles northwest of the Vale of Memory, along the Rarung River. The folk survive by raising vegetables and gathering the bounty of the forest. Fylfot contends with persistent wolf and werewolf attacks. The hamlet's hleo constructed the mightiest palisades I saw in the whole realm, complete with gates, traps, and primitive siege defenses.

### Where to Stay in Fylfot

Fylfot offers no inns or spare housing of any kind. If one intends to spend the night under a dry

roof, one must make arrangements with the owner of that home. I was able to acquire lodging in the hovel of Ivona Miller, Fylfot's midwife, with the gift of a few rare Borcan herbs.

**Fylfot (thorp):** Conventional; AL CN; 40 gp limit; Assets 134 gp; Population 67; Isolated (humans 100%).

*Authority Figures:* Tremeur Hallowmore, male human Ftr2 (hleo watch commander).

*Important Characters:* Ivona Miller, female human Exp3 (elderly midwife and herbalist).

## Alyssum

At the eastern edge of the Ghostflame Bottoms lies Alyssum, a hamlet that has prospered from trade with Karina along the Noisette River. The fur trade in particular is a strong component of village life, and most locals are trappers by trade. This struck me as odd, since when Verbrekers gather together, it is almost always in farming communities. Outwardly, Alyssum resembles any

### A Town Without Pity

Every resident of Alyssum is a Sheepskinner werewolf, arising from three packs of the Whiteye clan, which, in a unusual move for their race, banded together to exploit the brisk Invidian trade along the Noisette. The lycanthropes presented a prosperous, open face to the traders that moved through their hamlet and remained discreet with respect to the wanton murder of strangers. They select only victims who will not be missed. Most Verbreker werewolves regard the Alyssums as freaks, sneering that they have forgotten how to hunt, growing fat like swine living on the slop poured into their troughs.

**Alyssum (thorp):** Monstrous; AL NE; 40 gp limit; Assets 124 gp; Population 62; Isolated (werewolves 100%).

*Authority Figures:* Meogon, male human werewolf Rgr3 (prominent Whiteye Clan alpha).

*Important Characters:* Gwennaël, female caliban werewolf Brd2 (mistress of the challenge); Catamanus, male human werewolf Adp3 (bonecaster and alchemist).





other Verbreker hamlet — that is, plain, grubby, and rough around the edges. The villagers, however, were exceedingly warm and pleasant, which at once raised my suspicions. They seemed too keen to learn who I was, where I had come from, and where I was headed. They offered food and lodging out of the goodness of their hearts, encouraging me to spend the night. Having already dealt with the gruff, pushy, independent Verbrekers for several weeks, the demeanor of Alyssum seemed out of place. Fortunately, three riverboats were docked there, and with foreign merchants and laborers milling nearby, I did not feel quite so vulnerable. Still, tales of werewolf villages were fresh in my mind, and I elected to leave Alyssum and its unsettling civility well before sunset.

## Duskpeace Lodge

Northwest of the Winterfang Crests, a day's journey from the Valachan border, stands Duskpeace Lodge. I stumbled upon it quite accidentally. The Lodge is a massive stone structure, its construction more befitting a fortress or prison than an estate. Oddly enough, every one of the structure's heavy steel doors and barred windows possess sturdy locks both within *and* without.

The masters of Duskpeace Lodge, Argent and Celia Whitmoor, proved to be courteous hosts, but the strangeness of their home suggested that not all was as it appeared. The Whitmoors claimed to be recent Mordentish émigrés, having built the Lodge as a sanctuary for lost travelers and outcasts seeking refuge in Verbrek. They hosted at least a dozen guests beside me at the time. All had a haunted desperation about them; most huddled in their quarters as secure as any dungeon captive. The Whitmoors were pleasant but evasive; they served me a surprisingly appetizing meal, but despite their professed generosity would not permit me to spend the night.

When I spoke over dinner of the Winterfang Crests and my failure to retain a guide who would venture into the region, a grizzled woodsman by the name of Gwalon offered his services. Though the Whitmoors voiced concern at my undertaking such a journey, I brushed aside their protests and departed at once with my newfound guide. Gwalon confided that he knew the location was the most significant werewolf site in all Verbrek. Even approaching the area was exceedingly dangerous, but he acknowledged my uncommon courage and resolve and consented to take me to this sacred site, which he called only the Circle.

## Secret Society: The Duskpeace Outcasts

In Verbrek, natural werewolves rarely molest those they have already afflicted. Some afflicted werewolves live in awe of the creatures that cursed them and act as willing accomplices to their unholy deeds. Rare souls among the afflicted call for harmony between humans and werewolves, encouraging their natural kin to hunt humans only when hungry and to limit their quarry to the old and the frail. The majority, however, contend with the hunger alone and in secret. When they are far from settlements there is little risk of them harming fellow Verbrekers, and natural werewolves suffer them to live.

Argent and Celia Whitmoor are afflicted lycanthropes from the same bloodline, progeny of a "Black Wolf" they could never find. They possess a strong degree of sympathy for those similarly cursed and believe that afflicted lycanthropes can live peacefully if they withdraw from civilization. To that end, Duskpeace Lodge serves as a sort of halfway house for afflicted lycanthropes. Within, fugitives who struggle with their curse find a secure haven to spend their "bad nights." The sturdy construction of the Lodge ensures that those who wish to remain within do so, while its remoteness ensures that those who wander when the curse takes hold pose no risk to innocents. Some guests apply themselves to the mastery of the beast within, as Argent and Celia have done, often pursuing the moonchild prestige class (see the Attached Notes).

Over time, as more werewolves have been drawn to the Lodge, Argent (human afflicted werewolf ex-Pal7/MnC3, LG) and Celia (human afflicted werewolf Ftr4/MnC4, LG) have gained some measure of fame beyond their home. Afflicted lycanthropes throughout Verbrek and surrounding domains have begun to carry word of Duskpeace Lodge and the succor that one can find there. Gradually, a network of support and sympathy for afflicted lycanthropes is growing throughout the southwestern Core.



## The Circle and final Thoughts

Before I turn to my last destination in Verbrek, allow me to conclude my thoughts on the realm as a whole. Verbrek is a hostile wilderness with little to offer an ambitious ruler. Its resources can be obtained from other realms with far less effort and risk. Its sparse populace of coarse commoners is unlikely to bend to the will of any potentate. Its werewolves are numerous, and in their native forests they have a distinct advantage. Conquering Verbrek is not an appealing prospect. Annihilating Verbrek would be equally challenging, requiring a mammoth effort of manpower or magic to clear and burn back the forest to the last tree.

The Circle is the subject of much fearful legend among Verbrekers. Though a few natives spat that it is no more than a folktale, many assured me that it is the most holy of werewolf sacred sites. Here, werewolf primitives supposedly conduct blood sacrifices and other gruesome rites under the full moon. The Wolf God himself is whispered to appear to his fearsome followers on rare holy days, towering over the stones that ring the circle.

The moon provided ample illumination as Gwalon and I carefully picked our way through the dense forests of the Winterfang Crests. Eventually, my guide wordlessly noted that we were close to our destination, and I took the opportunity to conceal ourselves from the sharp senses of any lycanthropes we might encounter. As we pressed forward, my eyes caught the baleful glow of a bonfire and the silhouettes of loping creatures. Through the trees I at last glimpsed a throng of lupine figures dancing, chanting, and howling amid a ring of dolmens.

I stood transfixed, unable to look away from such a sight. An enormous circle of upright stones spread out before me in a forest clearing, each dolmen carved with crude glyphs and spattered with the blood of countless sacrifices. Humanoid bones were scattered everywhere, so thick in some places that I could not see the trampled earth beneath.

Among the stones, over 200 werewolves in hybrid form capered like demons. Clad in bone trinkets and savage war paint, they chanted in a growling mishmash of Mordentish and wolf-speak. Some beat relentlessly on hollow logs, filling the





glade with a frantic heartbeat. Others writhed on the ground as though possessed or danced in unsettling patterns. Fresh blood covered their maws, and many bore hideous scars — some recent battle wounds, others apparently the products of ritual scarification. The undead of Necropolis seemed like guttering flames compared to the raw rage and vitality in these creatures. Here was life, in all its hideous, unfeeling, brutal, frenzied majesty.

My eyes settled on a werewolf who could only have been the high priest. It was a terrifying creature with dense, silver hair, dressed in elaborate ceremonial garb that marked it as an emissary of the Wolf God. In contrast to its kin, the creature stood like a stony judge, surveying the bloody revelry with an unfeeling gaze.

Unfortunately, a sudden shout brought my reverie to an end. To my shock and rage, I discovered that my guide had risen to his feet and was bellowing loudly in Mordentish, "Messenger of the God! I bring you a sacrifice! I bring a man-bitch that dares defile these stones! Her flesh is yours to feast upon!"

The beasts suddenly ceased their vile festivities and, as one, turned to glare where I was concealed in shadow. Bloodlust and frenzy glittered in their eyes, and in a heartbeat the entire pack was rushing toward me on all fours, while the high priest urged his faithful on with a hideous howl.

Feeling only boundless fury, I lunged toward my traitorous guide. His flesh rippled as the lycanthropic change began, but he would have no chance to claim any glory from my death. If I was doomed, my betrayer would not taste another breath. I unsheathed my pistols, forced both muzzles savagely into his chest, and pulled the triggers. His wolf eyes opened wide as the hot silver ripped his heart asunder. I did not even linger to see him hit the ground, but as I turned to flee, the first werewolf in the onrushing pack struck me like a thunderbolt. It snatched me in crushing jaws, and, turning with its pack mates back toward the Circle, dragged me like a bloody rag doll before the high priest.

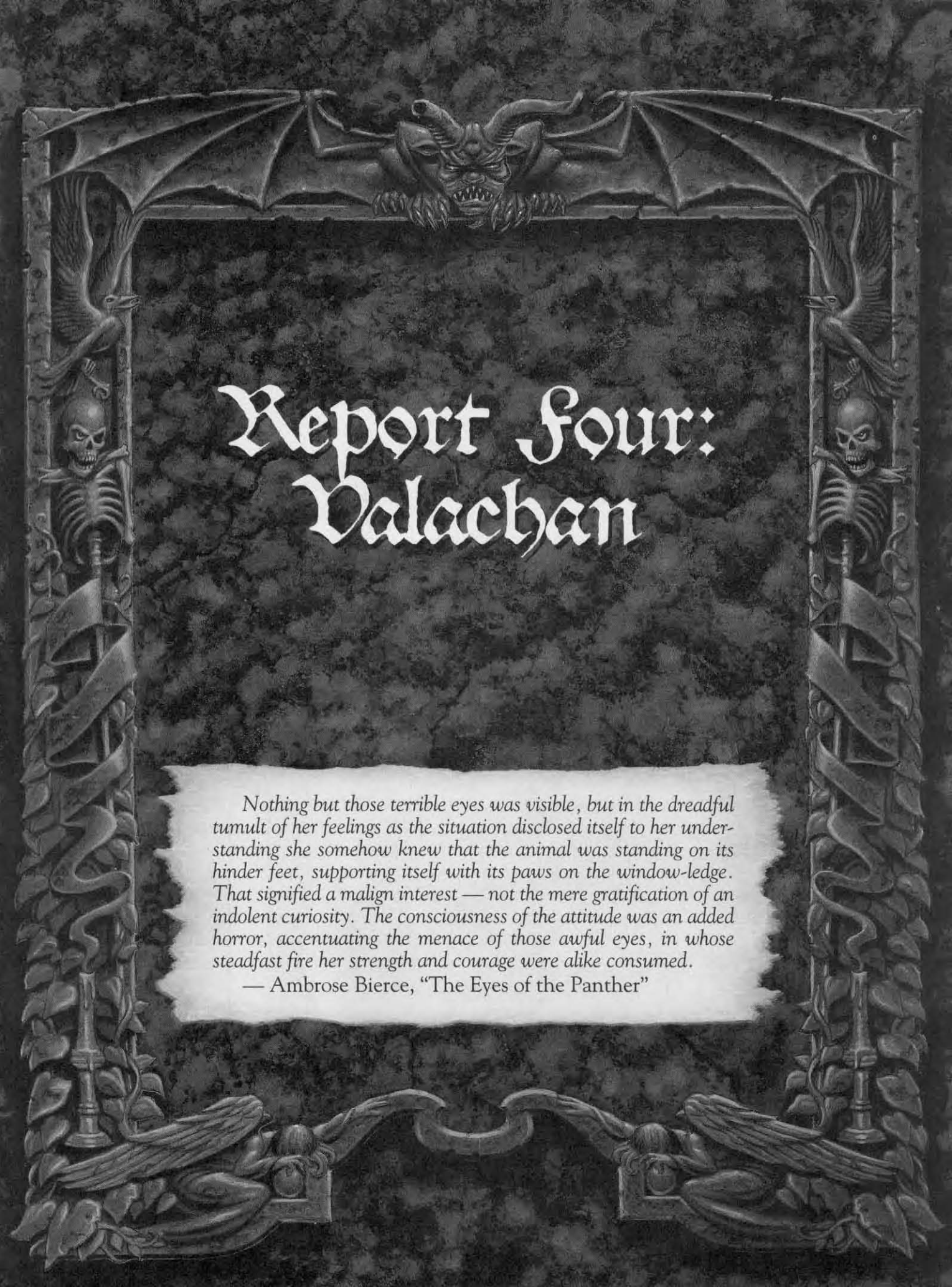
Stunned, I was only vaguely aware as the creature pinned me beneath its massive paws. It sneered in garbled Low Mordentish, "You trespass, prey. Now you will feed the God." The assembled werewolves then parted, revealing a gloomy deer trail that ran from the edge of the clearing deep into the forest. "You will run. Then we will chase. If you are strong, maybe you get away. If you are weak, we eat you while you still scream." Mauled and bewildered, I at last gathered the creature's meaning. They wished to make a game of my death — and "game" of me.

No matter how remote my escape seemed, I could not reject a slim chance to reach safety, or, barring that, at least to die on my feet. Still dazed, I rose and stumbled out of the clearing, brushing aside thorny briars and slipping on damp leaves. Gradually, the surreal reality of my circumstance dawned on me, and I began to run as I have never run in my life.

My recollection of my flight remains hazy and disjointed. Even as my chest burned with fire and my limbs pulled me down as if made of lead, the howls and rushing steps at my back drove me on. I ran blindly, heading what I assumed was west toward the Valachani border. Eventually, above the maddening howls, I heard the rush of a swiftly flowing river ahead of me. The trees parted, and I saw the glittering black waters of the Ulvflod before me. For a moment, I allowed myself a glimmer of hope, as the river might offer an egress from this cursed realm.

It was not to be. Within sight of the river, the jaws of one of my pursuers closed around my leg, tearing my hamstring and crushing my bones. I fell, the cold, damp carpet of leaves beneath me and the hot fur of a hulking beast above me. My final moments were a fading whirlwind of feral snarls, as the werewolves swarmed over me to feed. Blackness and teeth enfolded me, and pain surrendered to sweet oblivion....





# Report Four: Valachan

*Nothing but those terrible eyes was visible, but in the dreadful tumult of her feelings as the situation disclosed itself to her understanding she somehow knew that the animal was standing on its hinder feet, supporting itself with its paws on the window-ledge. That signified a malign interest — not the mere gratification of an indolent curiosity. The consciousness of the attitude was an added horror, accentuating the menace of those awful eyes, in whose steadfast fire her strength and courage were alike consumed.*

— Ambrose Bierce, "The Eyes of the Panther"



**I** suspect that my escape from the Circle will come as no surprise to my patron, although the exact method of my doing so remains mysterious to me.

I returned to my senses to find myself far from Verbrek, draped over a luxurious woolen rug beside a merrily crackling fire. Disoriented, not understanding how I had escaped from the werewolves, my first action was to check the back of my neck. The skin was unbroken; the fierce pressure had left no trace upon me. My clothes and gear, however, were oddly unsettling. To any standard inspection they were unchanged, yet they felt... unfamiliar. Admittedly, my nebulous unease was based on nothing more than a misplaced stitch here, a missing scuff there, and likely the result of rattled nerves following my inexplicable escape. Only the bracer my patron had given me felt the same.

The scent of fresh, hot food reached me from a bowl beside the fire. When I went to the door, I discovered that I was in a private home in Helbenik and there was fresh mud on the door jam. Whoever

brought me here had left moments before I awoke, leaving me confused and feeling violated. Although I waited several hours, the householders never returned. I did find a spot of blood on one of the rugs. Later, I established that at least two weeks had passed since my last recollection.

Does the key to my mysterious escape belong with you and your magical bracer, patron? Every instinct and scrap of evidence tells me that it does, but I also know you will never willingly reveal the truth to me. Once more, I am forced to play the simpleton while you toy with petty secrets.

*Such truths are worth discovering on your own, little scholar. All will become clear in time.*



## Valachan at a Glance

**Cultural Level:** Medieval (7)

**Ecology:** Full

**Climate/Terrain:** Temperate forests and hills

**Year of Formation:** 625 BC

**Population:** 19,100

**Races:** Human (97%), gnomes (2%), other (1%)

**Languages:** Vaasi\*, Mordentish, Gnome, Sithican

**Religions:** Yutow\*, Ezra, Hala

**Government:** Aristocratic monarchy

**Ruler:** Baron Urik von Kharkov

**Darklord:** Baron Urik von Kharkov

from narrow, unmade tracks to sequoia trunks, split in half and buried longways in the mud to provide a flat, stable surface for wagons. Once across the Valachan border, the road from Mordentshire to Helbenik becomes known as the New Road, so called because it was hastily constructed after the Great Upheaval. Another road, more carefully made but now falling into disrepair, curves slowly east-northeast from Helbenik before stopping abruptly at the Verbrek border. This Old Road linked Helbenik to Hroth until Valachan's violent relocation during the Great Upheaval.

Heading south from Helbenik, the Broken Road stretches past Castle Pantara to Rotwald and then Ungrad. The latter takes its name from its frequent interruptions by rough terrain, prompting hair-raising descents into canyons, rickety bridge crossings and swift river fords. In truth, however, those roads with more inviting names are equally difficult to traverse, and the Broken Road has the advantage of being well-traveled and dotted with small settlements where one can stay the night. Finally, five miles south of Rotwald, the Broken Road spawns the Elf Road, which leads to Mal-Erek.

Given the difficult nature of Valachan's roads, most travelers unsurprisingly use the Arden River. Both Rotwald and Helbenik are built near the Arden's tributaries. Helbenik is on the violent River of Salmon, which provides an obvious staple for the Helbeniki. Rotwald sits near the more sedate River of Gold, so named for the flecks and small nuggets of gold that appear in the water as it erodes the precious metal deposits below the river bed. The Arden's other main tributary is the wide, slow *Uwflod* (Wolf River), which flows from Verbrek and is closely guarded to protect Valachan from vicious beasts and raiding parties. All of these rivers and thousands of rocky streams across Valachan teem with salmon and trout.

The Valachani have taken a characteristically pragmatic approach to naming their forests. The Broad Forest stretches from the Mordentish border to Ungrad and from the edge of the world to the Broken Road. Home to hundreds of tiny hamlets, it also holds vast tracts of forest where humanity rarely intrudes. These areas grow more frequent toward the Misty Border, where spirits and unnatural occurrences are more common. The colder forested hills southeast of Ungrad are known as *Bakkelande* (Hill Country). Somewhere south of Ungrad in *Bakkelande* is the Path of Innocence, a

## Landscape



Valachan's most notable feature is the lush evergreen forests that cover almost the entire region. Ancient, massive trees shrouded by cool fog and a thick beard of moss host eerie hoots and growls that echo through the hollows. The chill air breathes heavy with the primeval scent of damp redwoods. Beneath this verdant canopy, the treacherously rugged ground winds in ridges and narrow canyons through the realm, providing shelter for predators, and preventing easy travel. Though temperate, Valachan is exceedingly wet, with frequent, heavy rainfall, which makes the ground near the lips of these canyons exceptionally unstable. Landslides and rock falls are frequent.

Tiny thorps and hamlets cluster densely in Valachan, bustling pockets of industry in the eldritch wilderness. Most are only a few miles apart, but broken ground means travel takes far longer than linear distance would suggest. I found the trackless forest almost impossible to navigate; without sun or stars to guide you, the fog quickly becomes disorienting and you walk in circles. Some locals claim the forest spirits deliberately mislead travelers for their own amusement. Local guides are essential for all but those with a faultless sense of direction.

One road crosses the country from north to south, linking Mordentshire and Ungrad via Helbenik and Rotwald. The road varies in quality





poor quality one-way Mistway that *Allandar's Travelogue* (the overly sensationalistic gazetteer for supernatural events) claims leads to a village inhabited only by children and a mad puppeteer.

The long, thin forest east of the Broken Road and west of the Arden is the Forest That Watches, named for the uncanny sense one feels beneath its boughs. Although I had no problems passing through the forest, it is said to be home to unusually vicious panthers, which I suspect to be von Kharkov's werepanther minions coming to or from Castle Pantara. Finally, east of the Arden is the northern Forest of Beasts and the more southerly Forest of Streams, separated by the Ulvflod River. Although both forests are rich in game and fish, few humans make their home here. The Black Leopards that constantly rove along the Verbrek border assume any travelers in this region are lycanthropes and attack on sight. Hunting in these forests is dangerous, but game is plentiful enough to reward those who try their luck.

Temperatures are moderate all year round, but sweltering summers occur occasionally. Deep, wet snowfall blankets the countryside during winter months, rendering travel slow and laborious. My

schedule did not allow me to dig in and wait for spring's thaw, as the locals are wont to do.

Valachani buildings are windowless lodges made of heavy logs or planks, with gabled roofs of black slate. Large, single-roomed houses are common even among wealthy nobles, who take great pride in their cavernous abodes and encourage villagers and travelers alike to socialize within. The buildings are elaborately carved with stylized animals, plants and fey, and proudly adorned with the heraldry of the lodge's matriarch.

A careful eye may note something slightly askew about many buildings and communities. In many lands, windows tend to face east or west, both to draw in daylight near dusk and dawn and to block chilling northern winds. In Valachan, however, many openings face the north, admitting cold and darkness. The simple, if somewhat staggering, reason for this lies in the Great Upheaval. Today, a map would show Valachan running vertically along the southwestern corner of the Core; prior to that cataclysm, however, it stretched horizontally along the southern border of Sithicus. From the Valachani point of view, the Great Upheaval wrenched their sunrise and sunset nearly 90 degrees from the norm.





## flora

Valachan possesses rich, largely untapped plant resources. By far the most dominant species is the redwood, used across the country by builders, road workers, furniture makers and carpenters. Redwood is remarkably pest resistant; I saw a fallen tree trunk, untouched by rot or insect pests, that my guide swore had been in that state since his grandfather was young. An undergrowth of ferns thrives beneath their boughs. Cherry, willow, oak, yew and beech are not uncommon in the north, but the area around Ungrad is known for its vast variety of fungal life. These fungi range from common field mushrooms and toadstools to dangerous species such as brown and yellow molds, violet fungus and striped toadstools that are zealously destroyed whenever an infestation is discovered. Truffles are rare but highly valued.

Barley, hops, peas, apples and flower bulbs are both widely cultivated and grow wild. Wheat was introduced from Mordent soon after Valachan emerged from the Mists decades ago and has since proved extremely successful.

Valachan has one unique plant, the *lily of eternal slumber*, also called *Yutow's blood*. Though extremely rare, the flower potentially grows anywhere in Valachan. It strongly resembles a normal lily, but opens nocturnally and is splashed with crimson inside. According to legend, the lily only grows where Yutow's blood fell during the Pacification. I can attest that my efforts to transplant it failed. The lily is reputedly a powerful weapon against vampires, keeping them at bay and burning their flesh like sunlight or holy water. The flower remains fresh for seven days after being picked.

## fauna

The forests of Valachan teem with life, both natural and unnatural. Boar and deer are common, while moose roam the south and wild sheep thrive in the canyons. Wolves are common only in Bakkelande; elsewhere, dire weasels, dire badgers and dire wolverines have displaced them and filled their niche. Black and brown bears are also often sighted. Of course, the top predator throughout Valachan is the *mørkenkat*, or panther, although the Valachani use that term in a frustratingly vague fashion to refer to any cat-like creature with a black pelt. The most common breeds are 4 feet long and weigh 120 pounds, but I discovered foot prints in the muddy banks of the Arden River that suggested a beast five times as large. Rotwald's Singing Bone Inn has a claw hanging above the bar that must have come from an animal 35 feet long. Regardless, Valachan's peasants obstinately refer to all these monstrosities as mere "panthers."

The Valachani also have a hopelessly muddled view of spirits that live in their forests. This multi-purpose term refers to fey, ghosts and personifications of forest creatures. Something about the Valachani forests does suggest alien eyes are watching. Several times I heard strange music on the wind or half-glimpsed a sudden movement. The very name "Valachan" is derived from the Vaasi word for "haunted." The most popular stories feature shapeshifters. Legends are unclear whether the natural form of these creatures is humanoid or animal; the ability to change shape is far more important than what they originally looked like. In the two experiments I was able to perform on

### Lilies of Eternal Slumber

Anyone holding a lily of eternal slumber gains a +4 sacred bonus to Will saves to resist a vampire's domination. Those already dominated may make another save with no bonus to break free when they touch the flower, although they feel a strong aversion to doing so. The lily can be used as a lawful good holy symbol to keep vampires at bay and acts like holy water if used to strike a vampire, although this destroys the lily. If a wreath of four or more lilies is placed around a vampire's neck, the vampire is affected as if by full sunlight until the wreath is removed. Thus, nosferatu lose their powers while the wreath is around their neck, and normal vampires are disoriented and then destroyed. If the vampire tries to remove the wreath, each flower inflicts damage as a vial of holy water before being removed. Finally, if a lily is placed on a vampire's coffin while the vampire is inside, the vampire is trapped in a deathly slumber (effectively hibernating) until another creature removes the bloom. The vampire can regenerate normally while inside the coffin, but may eventually face starvation.





captured shapechangers, I discovered that both subjects were lycanthropes, susceptible to silver, not cold iron.

*Skogsra* and *elvsra* are mercurial forest and river fey, respectively, that appear in a myriad of forms, although those in animal shape are supposedly far more common than humanoid fey. Their moods are notoriously volatile, and gift-giving is widely used to placate them. I often came across little treasures, their value largely sentimental, hidden near brooks and old trees for these spirits. The legendary king of the *skogsra* is *konge skyggehest*, a shadowy, horse-like creature that lives at the heart of the Bredskoven.

Corporeal undead are almost unheard of in Valachan and usually represented in folktales as mindlessly destructive creatures filled with nothing but hatred. In the entire time I was in Valachan, I only heard one story about vampires, which were described as foul beasts that spread disease and cannot bear the touch of moonlight. Although such creatures do exist, I suspect the lack of legends concerning vampires is due to a conscious and subtle effort by von Kharkov to discourage their telling. I will discuss my theories on how he accomplished this in *The Realm*, below.

### Local Animals and Native Horrors

**Wildlife:** CR 1/10 — bat; toad; CR 1/8 — rat; CR 1/6 — raven; CR 1/4 — cat; owl; weasel; CR 1/3 — hawk; snake, Tiny viper; CR 1/2 — badger; eagle; snake, Small viper; CR 1 — snake, Medium viper; wolf; CR 2 — bear, brown; boar; *leopard*; snake, constrictor, wolverine; CR 4 — bear, black; *tiger*.

**Monsters:** Any Large or smaller giant or monstrous vermin; CR 1/2 — *geist*\*; plant, *bloodrose*\*; CR 1 — fungus, *shrieker*; plant, *fearweed*\*; *razorback*\*; sprite, grig; sprite, *nixie*; CR 2 — assassin bug, giant\*; *dire badger*; *dire weasel*; plant, *crawling ivy*\*; satyr; CR 3 — allip; assassin vine; *baobhan sith*\*; *boowray*\*; *drownling*\*; fungus, violet; lycanthrope, *wereboar*; *midnight cat*\*; shadow; CR 4 — *dire wolverine*; *dire boar*; *lycanthrope*, *werepanther* (see Attached Notes); *nosferatu spawn*\*; plant, *lashweed*\*; unicorn, shadow\*; vampire spawn; CR 5 — *dire lion*; hag, green; troll; *werebear*; *weretiger*; CR 6 — hag, annis; nymph; CR 7 — ghost; *nosferatu*\*; spectre; vampire, *vrykolaka*; CR 8 — *dire tiger*; *dread treant*; CR 10 — plant, *quickwood*\*. *Nosferatu* and *nosferatu spawn* are under von Kharkov's control only if they are his progeny.

## History



lthough the two groups share no ethnic ties, Valachani have a few tenuous cultural threads in common with the Kartakans. Primarily, they make little distinction between myth and history.

The Valachani's suspicion of any kind of education means most possess only rudimentary literacy. Few people keep records beyond those necessary for tax purposes. Highly social people, the Valachani's rich oral history is preserved in both immutable rituals and less rigidly preserved folktales. Although I checked my history against available tax records and those kept at the Hospice of Healing Hands, once again I am forced to rely on a weak foundation of rumor, gossip and legend.

Deep in Valachan's false history, a nameless race of dark-skinned barbarians inhabited the land, living as hunter-gatherers in the primeval forest, perfectly at one with nature. Yutow the Provider (a "green man"-like figure depicted as partway between a human adept and a fey god) lived among them, maintaining the natural balance of the forest with his magic and fey servants.

Sometime around 320 BC, a tan-skinned folk the Valachani call the Vaasi appeared out of the Mists and embarked on a terrible war called the Pacification. Intriguingly, these Vaasi share little in common with the modern inhabitants of Nova Vaasa, though their depiction is vaguely similar to the notorious invaders of Kartakan folk history. I look forward to examining this matter further when I survey Nova Vaasa, as I suspect I will once again discover that this mysterious race of invaders has no basis in objective reality.

Over the next twenty years, the Vaasi slaughtered hundred of natives and enslaved hundreds more. The Vaasi also arrived carrying White Fever; this was a minor illness for their people, but with no resistance, countless natives lost their lives to the disease. The Vaasi felled trees, opened mines near Rotwald, founded villages and hunted game almost to extinction. The Arden flooded from the torrent of blood and tears flowing into it. Each act of devastation opened a new wound in Yutow's body. The god was supposedly unable to stop the devastation because the Vaasi lived "outside nature," where he had no power.

Finally, the panther, most cunning of animals, discovered the only way Yutow could save his realm. Yutow sacrificed himself to bring both sides





to harmony, merging the two races into one. The newly created Valachani possessed the independence and wilderness skills of the natives, and the language, complex society, and tendency toward tyrannical governments of the Vaasi. Valachan's confused theology maintains that Yutow is indisputably dead but still conscious and able to guide his followers. My attempts to probe this contradiction only solicited the vague explanation that "gods are not alike to men"; my comparison with undeath was not taken well, to phrase it mildly. In any event, because the dead have no place in the natural world, Yutow departed Valachan for the moon, and the Valachani were left as a scattering of city-states for more than two centuries.

In 576 BC, Heinrich von Ostlin, the tyrannical mayor of Helbenik, united Valachan with a cunning mix of assassination, blackmail and political marriages, welding the independent villages into one nation. Von Ostlin declared himself baron and ruled with unyielding savagery for nearly 50 years, publicly slaughtering any who spoke against him and imposing massive taxes to pay for the construction of a huge keep near Helbenik.

In 625 BC, an unusually inquisitive Rotwaldi man named Urik von Kharkov returned from travels abroad (including Darkon, notably) and began to ferment dissent in his home town. This activity quickly attracted von Ostlin's attention; von Kharkov was arrested, beaten and dragged before the baron. Common myth holds that von Kharkov stared his captor in the eye despite his injuries and swore to kill Ostlin for his crimes against Valachan. While von Ostlin laughed mockingly, the bonds inexplicably fell from von Kharkov's arms. He immediately leapt forward and broke the ancient baron's neck. Von Kharkov assumed the barony; in a sign of "divine approval," the Mists parted to the north, revealing Valachan's neighbors in those days: Invidia, Gundarak and Kartakass. I conclude, therefore, that von Kharkov's ascendance marks the beginning of Valachan's true history.

The well-loved Urik I ruled for fifty-one years from von Ostlin's old castle, which he converted with the help of a levy taken erratically from one of the three main towns into the shape of his heraldic animal and renamed Castle Pantara. During this period, he created a private army, the Black Leopards, and gave the mayors of Helbenik, Rotwald and Ungrad a seat on his council for them to air their grievances. Urik I was by no means an even-tempered or kind man, but compared to his

predecessor he ruled lightly so long as his rule was respected, his taxes paid, and his privacy left inviolate. All this came to an end in 671 BC, when he was killed by the *Cat of Felkovic*, a magic statue created by a mad wizard. His son, Urik II, emerged from seclusion to gain the throne.

Urik II ruled slightly more capriciously than his father, instituting a bridal lottery to find a wife. These women invariably died of White Fever, ran away, or simply disappeared within a year, prompting an unloved tradition of near-annual lotteries. (Intriguingly, the few records I uncovered suggest the lottery already operated under Urik I, although everyone I spoke to swore Urik II created it.) Urik II's biggest mistake was likely the appointment of Lady Adeline, a sadistic, foreign elf, as chief tax collector. Her vile behavior sparked several revolts between 680 and 730 BC, which quickly spiraled into protests over the work levies at Castle Pantara, the lottery and Urik II's oppressive taxation. All uprisings were brutally stamped out and their leaders made into grisly examples.

The most recent revolt occurred in 740 BC, notable because it almost succeeded. Urik II barely survived a magical assassination attempt. As he was struck down, terrible earthquakes shook Valachan. The country was physically wrenched away from its bed south of Sithicus and slammed into its current position. This event was taken as another sign from Yutow that the von Kharkov dynasty is divinely appointed to rule; I see it as clever propaganda used to explain the events of the Great Upheaval.

Valachan has been relatively peaceful since the Great Upheaval, though White Fever remains an epidemic. Fortunately, the country has suffered few truly lethal outbreaks since the Great Epidemic of 736 BC, a terrible plague that nearly devastated Ungrad.

## Populace



Valachan is home to a single ethnic group, albeit one that is unusually heterogeneous in appearance. Most Valachani live in tiny villages scattered across the heart of the realm, growing scarce near the borders with the Mists and Verbrek, and around Castle Pantara and the Scarlet Maze. Valachani are steadfast folk who greatly prize their unique culture. Although they are undeniably ignorant, superstitious and backward, something in their stern, quiet bearing makes them compelling.





## Appearance

Valachani are tall, muscular people, with broad shoulders and long, sturdy limbs. They lead rough lives — most subsist as hunters, furriers, fishermen, or farmers — shaped by necessity into hard, fit, no-nonsense folk completely at home in their wild environment. Predators and the often-dangerous terrain quickly weed out those who take to flights of fancy or laziness. Scars are frequent and often worn with pride; both sexes consider it advantageous to marry those who can support themselves and their families, and scarring is strong evidence that they have survived everything the forest can throw at them. Of course, too much scarring is a sign of foolhardiness and is avoided as strenuously as cowards who are scar-free.

Most Valachani have dark skin the color of Borcan coffee, though colors ranging from a creamy tan to nearly charcoal black occur, relics of the imperfect melding of the Vaasi and the indigenous race in Valachan's false history. Common lore holds that those with darker skin are more passive but better attuned to natural cycles, while pale skin implies a passionate nature. In my experience, however, this folk wisdom is simply unthinking

stereotyping, and skin color suggests nothing of an individual's talents or flaws.

Despite the variation in skin color, hair color is inevitably glossy black, worn long and straight by both genders. Beards and moustaches are never worn (foreigners who do so can expect stares), but long sideburns are popular. Eye color is usually dark brown, but occasionally an individual is born with disturbing bile-yellow eyes. These rare folk are said to have panther spirits somewhere in their ancestry and are regarded with a mixture of fear and awe. These "cat's-eyes" are said to be the (often unwitting) servants of Yutow and capable of controlling the god's panthers. Less fancifully, they are remarkably long-lived and gifted hunters. Conversely, they have a tendency to cruelty and narcissism and are doomed to tragedy in their personal lives.

The paragon example of this curse is Urik II. He has ruled Valachan for nearly eighty years and still seems in his prime, but all of his marriages ended badly. Many see this trend as proof of the curse of bearing spirit blood. Others say these sinister facts show the baron's heritage has made him truly inhuman, and his wives flee or are killed by his attentions.





This curse is also often applied to any mortal liaisons with the fey or fey-born. Legends of people damned to eternal misery for a single tryst with a half-elf or elf are common throughout Valachan.

## **fashion**

Valachani clothing is simple, durable and well suited to wilderness life. Both men and women prefer loose trousers and tunics made of leather or wool, occasionally trimmed with fur in the colder months. Thicker fabric and more fur are worn in Bakkelande, which is notably colder than the rest of Valachan. Faded black or white are favored, accented with bold reds, blues and greens and further decorated with fringes and animal teeth. The dyes used on these clothes are all prepared with a variety of plant products, and a quiet rivalry occurs among the young men of a village to prove themselves the most accomplished woodsmen by preparing the brightest and most unusual colors. Nobles import exotic dyes and so show the greatest variation and finest color of all. Long cloaks of waterproof leather are worn to keep out the rain, but more often the Valachani simply ignore rain until they can dry out by a fire. Valachani wear laced, knee-high boots of plain, soft leather throughout the year, even when not outdoors.

Simple, naturalistic jewelry is common to both sexes. Leather necklaces and bracelets are most common, adorned with animal teeth, shaped copper, gold medallions and intricately knotted leather thongs. Nobles display their wealth by replacing their leather cords with gold chains, from which hang precious stones, minted coins, and their coats of arms.

## **Lifestyle & Education**

The Valachani have a reputation as being stern, silent and proud. They are also considerate to travelers, respectful of women, and engage in a rich social life among themselves. Like the Verbrekers, they see themselves as struggling to survive against the forces of nature, but unlike their neighbors, they wear their hardship with pride. All Valachani, regardless of gender, are taught from a young age the basic principles of farming, fishing, hunting and survival in the wilderness. Woodsmanship is the only way to earn respect, so those who take up any profession that does not let one demonstrate wilderness lore is doomed to disgrace and dishonor. The Valachani reputation for arrogance in other lands stems from this attitude: they believe that

most cultures have become lazy and fat with their settled lives and book learning. Education and literacy are symptoms of cultural decline from a fierce, honorable rustic society to a valueless, decadent cityscape. I have never encountered a populace so *willfully* ignorant. In the last century, less than a dozen books have been printed in Valachan, most of those the work of a single arcanist, Perseyus Lathenna. Despite my best efforts, I was unable to locate this mysterious scholar, but the rest of Valachani society is unanimously contemptuous of Lathenna's work.

Once one has proved one's worth to the Valachani, their demeanor changes completely. They think nothing of inviting neighbors into their homes for meals—a far cry from the cautious natures of their Barovian or Verbreker counterparts. Individualism is still evident. No customs require special treatment of guests, who are expected to pull their own weight, and hosts frequently ignore or abandon guests who place demands on their independence. Families are close-knit, however, knowing they have only each other to depend on. Each settlement is like a large family; individual families in each settlement may squabble and feud in times of plenty, but unhesitatingly pull together in emergencies. The folk of each village secretly consider themselves superior to neighboring communities.

Women are seen as the primary protectors and defenders of the home. The wife is responsible for the overall welfare of her family; any important decisions are hers to make, and as the head of the household, the matriarch commands the respect of those who live with her. During a marriage ceremony, the groom places himself under his bride's protection, taking her name and coat of arms and moving into her house. In return, she ritualistically swears to protect her family from everything from bad luck and spirits to predators and thieves to immorality and malnutrition. For example, in Ungrad, many poisonous species of mushroom look similar to edible species, so the wife must taste any food before the rest of her family, to ensure it is safe to eat. In cases where a wife fails to fulfill her duties, Valachani law permits the husband to divorce her if he can prove her negligence to an aristocratic court. Such divorces are rare and treated very seriously. Even when found negligent, the mother retains control of most of the family's assets. Women can begin divorce proceedings for any number of reasons, although doing so is equally serious.





I suspect this respect for women is why von Kharkov's long parade of abused wives so horrifies the baron's opponents. They can live with his violent minions and the levy — when seemingly random numbers of people are conscripted from Helbenik, Rotwald or Ungrad for unpaid work at Castle Pantara for anything from a single night to a month. The bridal lottery, however, ferments distress like nothing else. Each year, von Kharkov forcefully takes a random woman as his bride; to date, each unfortunate soul has vanished within a matter of months. A few are said to have died from White Fever; others, to have fled Castle Pantara for distant lands. A journal from the Hospice of Sheltered Grace near Castle Pantara records that in 696 BC the baron's bride of a few months fled to the Hospice for shelter, covered in bruises and cuts and begging the witches to protect her from her monstrous husband. The poor woman was apparently killed when the building collapsed shortly after her arrival. Such brutality to Valachani women is otherwise unheard of, and von Kharkov is regarded with unbelieving horror whenever rumor brings his crimes to light.

In addition to marriage, other milestones are celebrated with exceedingly complex rituals, the words of which are strictly preserved in an otherwise antiquated form of Vaasi. Births, coming of age, seasonal changes and deaths all have their own rituals and are accompanied by lengthy festivals in which handcrafted gifts are exchanged and magnificent feasts devoured. As an example, funerals are highly ritualized, including standardized words of mourning, particular hymns sung only at funerals, and the requirement that the corpse be exposed to moonlight all night so the deceased's spirit can find its way to Yutow. Even storytelling (a favorite Valachani past time) is preceded by a ritualistic "Listen to me!"

Gift giving is another way to increase or demonstrate status. Giving an elaborate gift shows that one not only has the skill to create the gift, but is a talented enough woodsman to have the time to create it. Thus, gifts hold an important place in courtship, and many families silently jockey for position with the quality of their gifts. Each extravagant present means another rung up the social ladder; each gift not repaid in kind is a loss of status. These gifts are almost always impractical. Giving a weapon or tool implies that the recipients possess neither the talent to craft their own nor the wealth to buy it — a grievous insult.

Valachani eat fruit, vegetables and roast meat, though stews and soups are also popular. Offal meats are marinated with herbs, baked over coals and served with baked apples in a delicious meal called *deiligmat*. Most meals are accompanied by sweet yogurts, custard and candied fruit. Mushrooms provide a staple in many communities, particularly during the winter, when a village's middens often provide important food reserves. Fungi are particularly popular in Ungrad, where they form the basis of every meal, but are eaten only occasionally elsewhere. The pickled and salted foods produced at Castle Pantara are a popular, if acquired, taste. Staple drinks among the Valachani include the heavy, dark stout brewed in Rotwald and the north, water, herbal teas and *drikke*, milk mixed with sheep or goat's blood, which is used to aid recovery from White Fever. A small portion of each meal is usually left at the foot of a nearby tree or dumped into a stream to appease the spirits.

White Fever is a disease of epidemic proportions in Valachan. Not to be confused with the deadly Sithican White Fever, the Valachani disease is a mild cold-like illness causing lethargy, dizziness, weakness, listlessness and the pallor that gives the disease its name. In victims suffering from particularly lengthy bouts, the fingernails thin and then begin to bend upwards. Most cases recover fully, given bed rest and a diet rich in red meat, but some die, simply wasting away. It is said that victims killed by White Fever are tied to the places of their deaths as ghosts.

Folklore maintains that White Fever is spread through insect bites or patches of fog tainted by the Misty Border. Although cases are commonly reported all over Valachan, the insects reputedly infesting Castle Pantara are apparently particularly virulent, as the disease strikes almost everyone who spends any time at the castle, including a significant number of the Baron's wives. Although I claim no expertise in diseases, even to my untrained eye these symptoms are remarkably similar to those of anemia, while the "insect bites" that spread the disease almost invariably appear in pairs near a major blood vessel. Wounds such as these *do* appear in other lands, though there they go by other names in which I am fully conversant: strigoi, nosferatu, vrykolaka. In my estimation, the White Fever epidemic is caused by nothing less than vampire feeding, though I shudder to consider the implications of such widespread predation.





## Shallow Feeding and White Fever

Vampires must feed every night, typically by inflicting permanent Constitution drain. Given time, a vampire's predation can decimate the population of its feeding grounds. A vampire who wants to preserve its feeding stock or simply keep a low profile can instead rely on "shallow" feeding, inflicting only temporary ability score damage rather than permanent drain. A vampire utilizing shallow feeding must consume twice as many points of the applicable ability score each night to slake its thirst, however. The typical vampire would thus need to inflict 8 points of temporary Constitution damage each night to sustain itself.

Valachan's White Fever epidemic is entirely the result of the widespread shallow feeding of Baron von Kharkov and his handful of nosferatu spawn. Von Kharkov prefers to take just a single point of Constitution from eight separate victims each night, giving him more *dominated* servants and indefinitely preserving his food supply.

## Language

Valachani speak a coarse dialect of Vaasi. As long as both parties speak slowly and carefully, Valachani can understand the dialects spoken in Kartakass, Hazlan and Nova Vaasa, and vice versa. In Valachani Vaasi, the "r" is rolled and vowels extended, giving the language a purring, relaxed lilt.

### Vaasi Primer

Having already examined Vaasi in my reports on Hazlan and Kartakass, here I expand on that vocabulary.

English	Vaasi
day	<i>daag</i>
night	<i>natten</i>
sun	<i>solen</i>
moon	<i>moarne</i>
town	<i>byen, plads</i>
inn	<i>kroen</i>
thank you	<i>takk</i>
spirit	<i>spøkelse</i>
tax	<i>skatt</i>

## Attitudes Toward Magic

In many ways, Valachani have a contemptuous view of magic. To gain access to divine magic, clerics must devote themselves to their communities, an occupation that does not allow them time for more honorable pursuits such as fishing and trapping. In return for their sacrifice, they are

equipped with control over animals, plants, humans and spirits, but few Valachani would honestly say the rewards are worthwhile. Often, they respect the office, but not the priests themselves.

In contrast, arcane magic is the worst form of blasphemy against the natural order. Somewhat incoherently, "unnatural" wizards and sorcerers are said to be in league with natural spirits and are regarded with terror. Arcane spellcasters who practice their craft openly can expect to be reviled, driven from villages and almost certainly arrested by the Black Leopards.

## Religion

Most Valachani are deeply religious and devoted to their unique moon god, Yutow the Peacebringer. Their existence is precarious, surrounded by fierce predators, mercurial fey and an oppressive ruler, and religion grants the Valachani some feeling of control, however negligible. Typically, Valachani see prayer as another tool to increase their odds of survival. Very few actually become ordained. Priests of any faith are expected to act as a foil of Valachani isolationism and devote themselves to their community as a whole. They arbitrate disputes among nobles, ensure taxes are paid, appease spirits and Black Leopards alike, and care for those unable to support themselves. These duties leave little time to hunt or farm, so priests instead rely on weekly tithes from each family in their village to survive. As discussed above, this "urban" lifestyle dissuades most Valachani from the priesthood. Most villages have only a single priest of Yutow (called a *moarne*, meaning "married to the moon") and an acolyte, and in the largest communities a smattering of anchorites or witches as well.





The faithful of Yutow believe he watches over them constantly, protecting them, alert to any signs of immorality, and occasionally testing their faith. He is said to take priests who grow too strong in their faith (or draw too much attention to themselves) to serve him, either in their physical bodies or as spirits. A more analytical observer might conclude that most priests eventually disappear or are torn apart by panthers. Foreign faiths see this as a warning, and have learned to keep to themselves and not interfere in Valachan's political machinery. Moarnecone, however, actively look forward to the day Yutow will take them.

**The Church of Yutow:** Yutow was originally the god of Valachan's indigenous folk, but he killed himself to end the Pacification. The Dead God now watches over Valachan from the moon, guiding and protecting his people via his clerics and fery servants. His special servants are panther spirits and those who bear their blood. The religion is monotheistic; although minor spirits abound, Yutow is the only one with the power over life and death and so the only one fit to be called a god. Other gods such as Hala and Ezra are spirit trickery or misinterpretations of Yutow caused by the sedentary lifestyles and over-education of other lands.

Although each moarnecone's authority ends at the borders of the village he watch over, it is a social priesthood, with members frequently traveling to neighboring villages to meet their peers and discuss matters of faith. They also serve as diplomats: if two villages have a dispute over fishing or farming rights, the moarnecone will meet to work out a solution. Once a year, under a full moon, all moarnecone congregate at a sacred site near Castle Pantara to pray for Yutow's blessings for Valachan as a whole.

Valachani churches, which also act as homes for the moarnecone, have no roof over the nave, allowing moonlight to shine on the icon of Yutow each night. These icons depict Yutow just before he died: a green-skinned man with wild yellow eyes, his face creased with pain and his body covered in bleeding wounds and bruises. His broken legs trail uselessly behind him as he supports himself on one hand and raises the other to protect his charges. "That which is dead cannot suffer still" is carved onto the icon's base. The Valachani supposedly find these statues both sorrowful and uplifting. I found them disturbing.

## Yutow the Peacebringer, the Dead God

**Symbol:** A silver circle split by a vertical diamond, representing both the phases of the moon and a cat's eye.

**Alignment:** Lawful neutral.

**Portfolio:** Law, obedience, fate, order, nature, fertility, protection, the moon, cats.

**Domains:** Animal, Law, Plant, Protection.

**Favored Weapon:** Sickle.

All clerics of Yutow, even evil ones, turn undead rather than command them. Clerics of Yutow pray for their spells when the moon reaches its zenith and hold services at moonrise. If they multiclass, it is often as druids.

**Dogma:** The state of all things is mandated from above and is not to be questioned. As Yutow himself suffered to protect his charges, so must his worshippers uncomplainingly undergo trials in this life to prove themselves worthy of his devotion. Those who do will be given immortality as a natural spirit; those who do not are reincarnated to suffer again until they learn their lesson. Those who live as rebels or lawbreakers will be annihilated, their spirits dispersed into the Mists. Those who worship Yutow will be protected from nature's fury and granted good harvests and plentiful game. Those who do not will face nature in all its untamed splendor, red in tooth and claw. Unnatural things — arcane magic, corporeal undead and so forth — are the worst forms of blasphemy.

**Ezra:** The Mordentish sect of the Church of Ezra has only limited success in Valachan, founding a moderately sized temple in Helbenik and a few smaller shrines in surrounding villages. The more compassionate teachings of this church appeal to a few Valachani, and the anchorites' ability to take care of themselves improves their standing. Von Kharkov has done little to control the Church's presence in his domain, although I suspect that



## The Valachani Hero

**Races:** Humans are by far the most common race in Valachan, but many gnomes have been tempted to settle the domain from Darkon, Hazlan and Nova Vaasa by the fierce demand for their skills. Calibans are frequently born, but are then abandoned to the elements.

**Classes:** Valachan is a wild land, and rustic classes such as barbarians, druids, fighters, sorcerers and especially rangers are common. Rangers and barbarians are held in high regard as the defenders and providers for their villages; their ability to survive in Valachan's eldritch forests is seen as particularly praiseworthy. Although bards' tales are enjoyed, Valachani tend to regard the musicians as shiftless fops and layabouts, and keep close watch on them to ensure they pull their own weight. Of the spellcasters, clerics command some respect among the common folk, but those who proselytize too vigorously have a tendency to vanish. Druids are more common and are less likely to disappear than priests of more public churches. Sorcerers are relatively common but are vilified for their unnatural talents. Along with wizards, they are often arrested or executed by the Black Leopards.

**Recommended Skills:** Climb, Craft (basketweaving, bowmaking, carpentry), Hide, Knowledge (nature), Move Silently, Profession (farmer, guide, herbalist, hunter, lumberjack), Spot, Survival.

**Recommended Feats:** Alertness, Courage, Haunted, Improved Critical, Point Blank Shot (plus derivatives), Portents\*, Reincarnated, Skill Focus (Survival), Track, Warding Gesture\* (fey, shapechangers, undead), Weapon Focus (composite longbow)

\* See *Van Richten's Arsenal*.

**Male Names:** Aksell, Arkin, Audun, Brand, Davin, Egil, Erik, Jens, Kristen, Mikkel, Mogens, Morten, Nils, Oleg, Ragnar, Rurik, Skjöld, Stefan, Trigue, Varik.

**Female Names:** Aleksia, Andras, Birget, Dakin, Faiga, Falda, Grette, Katarine, Kristen, Liese, Magna, Nissa, Rakel, Reidun, Saffi, Semine, Sula, Unni, Vanja, Ylwa.

## Outcast Ratings in Valachan

Gnomes and Vistani possess the virtues of self-sufficiency, practicality and an active communal life. As such, they enjoy a -1 bonus to their OR among Valachani. Elves, halflings and calibans are seen as fey creatures and suffer a +1 penalty to their OR, as do "bookish" characters from Chivalric and Renaissance cultures (CL 8+) and those unable to survive in the wild.

would change in an instant if it started seriously eroding the Church of Yutow's influence or opposed the baron.

**Hala:** The unobtrusive Church of Hala seems to thrive in Valachan. They run small hospices just outside the boundaries of many villages, cleverly escaping any clashes that could arise with the Church of Yutow. (I remind my patron that a moarnecone's authority traditionally halts at the borders of her village). The witches never proselytize, help only those who seek them out, and spend much of their time in research. Their naturalistic faith appeals to many Valachani, who allow them to lead lives relatively free of persecution.

## The Realm



aron Urik von Kharkov rules in much the same way as his father — lightly while his word is respected, but tyrannically crushing any opposition or dissent.

If my theory is correct, this similarity is because they are actually one person: Valachan's true dread lord. Descriptions of father and son are uncannily similar: tall, muscular, handsome warriors with yellow eyes and a commanding presence, who are known for their eccentric obsessions with privacy and obedience. Both always wear gloves in public and (according to written records, at least) draw the levy and the bridal lottery from each of Valachan's three main towns in turn. I submit that von Kharkov is a nosferatu, a form of vampire that





gains control over its victims by drinking their blood. White Fever infection is particularly likely to occur near the baron and certain of his servants.

A magical charm would account for the love many Valachani hold for the baron despite his constant abuses, while the fact that nosferatu draw their power from moonlight could also explain the Valachani's reverence for the moon and von Kharkov's occasional appearances in daylight. To claim that one being could so influence a culture may seem absurd at first, but I remind my patron that von Kharkov has controlled the minds of his subjects through magical and mundane means for more than a century. This is easily sufficient time to remake a culture into something more beneficial to himself.

*I recall von Kharkov from his time in the Kargat's service: a beast who dreamed of being a man. Such intelligent, sustained control would not be beyond him, especially given the spur of his paranoia.*

### Government

Baron Urik von Kharkov is the undisputed ruler of Valachan, having weathered several revolts and a number of assassination attempts. On the rare occasions he gives an order, it is obeyed without question or severely punished. More frequently, the Veiled Mistress Lady Adeline, his chief tax collector, acts with his authority, dispersing the baron's commands and edicts as she compiles the tithes. Even more frequently, the Black Leopards, the baron's private army of expert woodsmen and soldiers, protect von Kharkov's interests, collecting tariffs, enforcing the bridal lottery and rounding up anyone unfortunate enough to draw the baron's ire. Monstrous sadists and zealously loyal to their lord to the last, when left to themselves the Black Leopards amuse themselves by bullying, robbing and even murdering passers-by. They are quite literally a law unto themselves; Valachani have nowhere to complain about the soldiers' behavior.

My few experiments into the matter lead me to conclude that the Black Leopards are heavily infiltrated by, if not completely composed of, lycanthropes — specifically, werepanthers. Conversely, werepanthers are almost always members

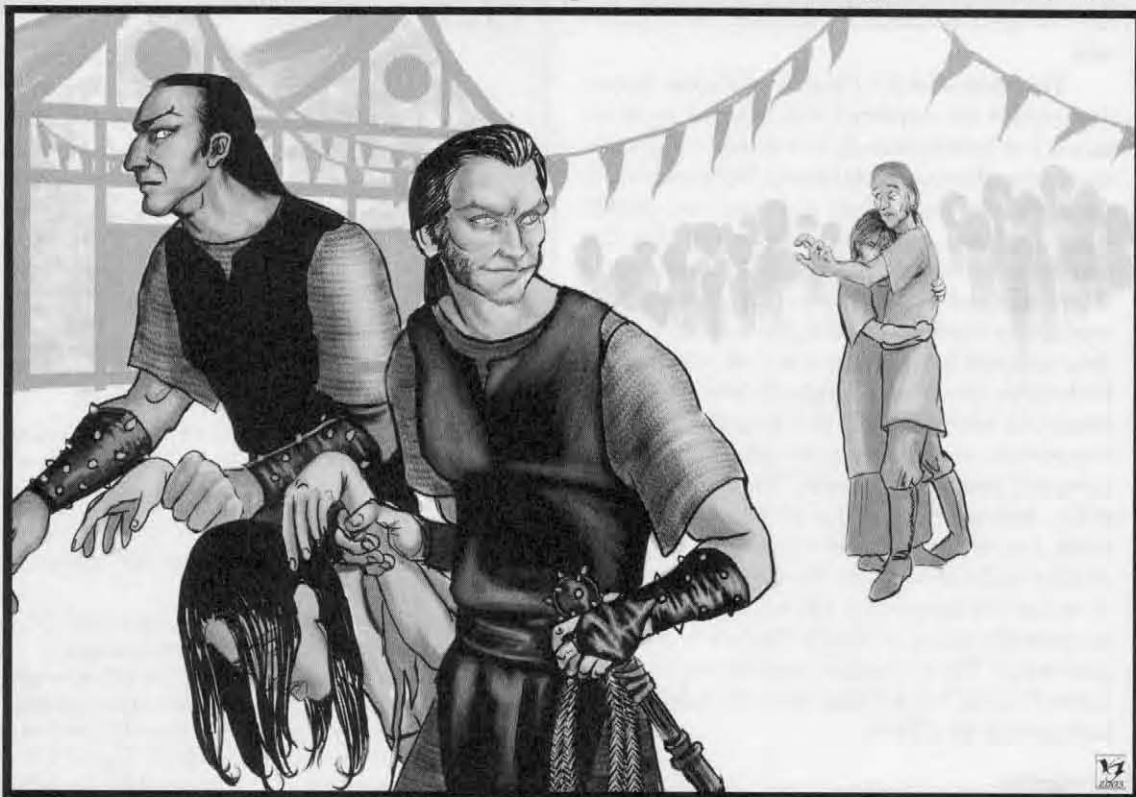
of the Black Leopards; those that are not still act on the baron's orders and operate as spies or assassins. Black Leopards are never stationed in villages where they grew up — or at least, those that do are no longer recognizable. I managed to capture a Black Leopard in Helbenik, and with gentle persuasion she produced a most rewarding interview. I discovered werepanthers are susceptible to silver weapons, and utilizing such a device, I found that my subject's facial muscles showed evidence of displacement. Muscles that were now slack had once been much tighter, and vice versa. I was fortunate to have a living subject to work with, as the clues were subtle and would have been lost in death. I believe that something about being infected with this strain of lycanthropy alters the facial structure of the victims, changing their appearance enough to render them unrecognizable to those who used to know them, while still allowing them to use their local knowledge.

*How convenient for the panther. Our tormentors were most creative to grant my ex-slave such a boon.*

Black Leopards rely on fear to keep the Valachani in line, and those who refuse to be bullied are attacked. Luckily, most Leopards wear black chain shirts that hamper their ability to change form, so combatants are likely to retain whatever form they started with in a fight. The Black Leopards wield horrific magic weapons called *baron's arms*, akin to a small, bladed whip attached to a heavy mace. *Baron's arms* inflict terrible scars when wielded properly and are most often used to punish lawbreakers. The fear these weapons inspire is grossly inflated from their ability to actually damage flesh. Although von Kharkov himself is loved by many and respected by all, the Black Leopards are only reviled.

The baron is rumored to have another secret police force known as the Cat's Claws, although I could uncover no real proof of their existence. Some say the Cat's Claws are composed of spirits of air, who snatch secrets from conspirators' lips and whisk them to the baron's ear. The baron's ability to uncover secrets is certainly unrivaled and has often let him move in time to solve problems before they could truly begin.





### Secret Society: The Cat's Claws

There is no proof of the Cat's Claws' existence because no such organization exists; the truth is far more insidious. Instead, von Kharkov controls a huge network of *charmed* and *dominated* slaves across Valachan.

Von Kharkov and his handful of nosferatu slaves feed shallowly on a number of victims each night. Thus, every night a score or so of Valachani are dominated. Whenever a controlled person discovers something he believes needs von Kharkov's attention, he reports it to a moarnecone or Black Leopard, who passes it on until it reaches the baron himself, creating the largest network of unsuspecting informants in Ravenloft.

Taxes form the root of von Kharkov's control over Valachan. Every border crossing, including those on rivers, has a customs house where Black

Leopards assess the value of goods passing either way and extract a tax. They also note the names, professions, destinations and nationalities of travelers and confiscate any exotic weapons they carry. Folk who seem to be arcane magic users are closely questioned and, if unlucky, may be executed on the spot for unnatural acts. Each season, Lady Adeline leads a squad of Black Leopards to each village in turn to collect taxes — a flat rate based on the number of adults in the settlement, regardless of seasonal variations in productivity. Arrogant and extraordinarily vicious, Adeline can be bribed to forget the taxes if a handsome youth will accompany her into the forest. If the youth emerges at all, he is bearing scars within and without. Technically, Adeline is head of the Black Leopards as well as chief tax collector, but Varik Dakk represents the Black Leopards in matters unrelated to taxation, such as the defense of the realm.

Generally, as long as taxes are paid, life in Valachan is peaceful. The most powerful noble families administer justice and arbitrate disputes as they see fit. When necessary, moarnecone arbitrate disputes between nobles in which an aristocratic tribunal might be biased. Corruption is





rare. Nobility is hereditary through the mother's side.

Tradition and the Church of Yutow dictate that nobles are respected and deferred to at all times, but commoners do not tolerate incompetence or weakness in their betters. Nobles who lack the guile to defend their positions are quickly eliminated and their assets divided among the remaining aristocrats. Although Yutow's dogma claims that nobles are divinely appointed, a successful revolt indicates a noble is no longer favored; thus *successful* insurrection is not an immoral act. Each noble family has the right to raise a militia to protect its settlements. This is frequently a lucrative pursuit, as soldiers are rewarded with wealth, titles and arranged marriages. The most powerful noble, selected by majority vote from his or her peers, acts as mayor of the settlement. Mayors of smaller settlements report their concerns to those of one of the three main towns, who in turn are occasionally called to Castle Pantara to air their grievances. These irregular councils are called the Baron's Table. Varik Dakk and Lady Adeline also have seats at the Table.

## Economy

Most of Valachan's economy is understandably tied to the realm's thick forests. Due to the combined chance of accidents, panther attacks, and angering the *skogsra*, logging is too dangerous to appeal to many Valachani. Those who do become lumberjacks, however, can quickly make their fortunes. Redwood timber is unusually resistant to insect and fungal damage, and is prized along the Arden as a building material. Almost all Valachani buildings are made of redwood, making internal trade even more profitable than exporting the wood. A huge secondary industry of sawmills, bowyers, furniture makers and carpenters has arisen to make use of the logs, and these products are sold even further afield than the timber itself.

Once cleared, the soil produces rich crops of wheat, barley, hops, cherries, apples, peas, flower bulbs and lucerne, most of which grow wild as well as in cultivated farms. Brewers use the hops and barley to prepare a heavy stout, which the Valachani and Verbekers enjoy but is too dense for more refined palates. Herders also use cleared land to raise flocks of sheep, goats and pigs, their flocks tended by large groups of children and adolescents. Most earn their first scars this way. Meat from these animals is traded with Mordent and Verbek, while

## Law Enforcement

A typical Valachani militiaman serves a noble family, enforcing edicts and keeping the peace. Black Leopards are von Kharkov's elite enforcers, collecting taxes, guarding the borders and serving as spies, assassins and executioners.

**Valachani militiaman:** Human War1; CR 1/2; Medium humanoid (human); HD 1d8, hp 4; Init +0; Spd 30 ft.; AC 13, touch 10, flat-footed 13; Base Atk +1; Grp +1; Atk +1 melee (1d6/19–20, short sword) or +2 ranged (1d8/x3, composite longbow [+0 Str bonus]); Full Atk +1 melee (1d6/19–20, short sword) or +2 ranged (1d8/x3, composite longbow [+0 Str bonus]); AL LN; SV Fort +2, Ref +0, Will +0; Str 11, Dex 11, Con 13, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 10.

*Skills and Feats:* Climb +1, Handle Animal +2, Listen +1, Spot +1, Survival +2, Swim +1; Track, Weapon Focus (composite longbow).

*Possessions:* Shortsword, composite longbow (+0 Str bonus), 20 arrows, studded leather armor.

**Black Leopard:** Human werepanther Rgr2/Rog1; CR 5; Medium humanoid (human, shapechanger); HD 3d8+2d8+1d6+18, hp 44; Init +3 (+6 as hybrid or panther); Spd 30 ft. (40 ft., climb 20 ft as hybrid or panther); AC 17, touch 13, flat-footed 14 (19, touch 16, flat-footed 13 as hybrid or panther); Base Atk +4; Grp +7 (+9 as hybrid or panther); Atk +9 or +8 melee (1d8+4 or 1d8+3, *baron's arm*) or +8 ranged (1d8/x3, composite longbow [+3 Str bonus]), or +9 melee (1d6+5, bite) or +9 melee (1d3+5, claw) as hybrid or panther; Full Atk +9 or +8 melee (1d8+4 or 1d8+3, *baron's arm*) or +8 ranged (1d8/x3, composite longbow [+3 Str bonus]), or +9 melee (1d6+5, bite) and +4 melee (1d3+2, 2 claws) as hybrid or panther; SA favored enemy +2 (humanoid [elf]), sneak attack +1d6, pounce, improved grab, rake, hobble, curse of lycanthropy; SQ alternate form, panther empathy, damage reduction 5/silver (as hybrid or panther), Track, wild empathy, combat style (archery); AL LE; SV Fort +8, Ref +6, Will +4 (Ref +9, Will +5 as hybrid or panther); Str 16, Dex 17, Con 17, Int 10, Wis 12, Cha 8 (Str 20, Dex 23, Wis 14 as hybrid or panther).

*Skills and Feats:* Balance +3, Bluff +1, Climb +5, Gather Information +2, Hide +5, Intimidate +4, Knowledge (local) +2, Listen +6, Move Silently +5, Search +6, Sense Motive +3, Spot +6, Survival +4 (Balance +14, Climb +13, Hide +12, Listen +11, Move Silently +12, Search +10, Spot +11 as hybrid or panther); Back to the Wall, Rapid ShotB, TrackB, Weapon Focus (*baron's arm*), Weapon Focus (composite longbow).

*Possessions:* *Baron's arm*, composite longbow (+3 Str bonus), 20 arrows, 2 daggers, chain shirt.



cheese, wool and a small amount of milk is exported to Mordent, Verbrek and Sithicus. Salmon and trout are plentiful and traded eagerly between Valachani villages, but rarely exported. Rod fishing is common. Further south, Ungrad forms the center of Valachan's fur industry, where ermine and dire weasel pelts are particularly prized. Panthers accidentally captured by trappers are fearfully released and numerous gifts left beside the trap in apology.

Valachan's only exploited mineral resources are located around Rotwald, where minor amounts of gold and copper are mined. Rare seams of iron ore have been uncovered, but are quickly exhausted.

Valachani frequently barter among themselves even in large towns, but taxes are paid in coin. Coins are minted in Rotwald and bear a sequoia on one side. The other side varies with the type of coin: the gold *pantarlede* bears a panther's head, the silver *kattøye* a cat's eye, and the copper *klawe* a cat's paw with claws extended.

## Diplomacy

Valachan prefers to keep its neighbors at arm's length. Von Kharkov has little interest in establishing alliances, but allegedly maintains spies in many nearby realms. Valachani pride in self-sufficiency means each merchant must forge his own, individual bonds with foreign traders, a tactic that often works against them. Beyond this limited trade, Valachani avoid entanglement in the affairs of other lands.

**Mordent:** Valachani feel uncomfortable in the educated, settled lands of Mordent, claiming the pastoral realm's inhabitants are lazy and overly concerned with trivialities. The open sky and rolling plains make them quite uncomfortable, accustomed as they are to claustrophobic forests. Still, Mordent's tales of the Other Side align closely to Valachan's spirit world, giving the two cultures some common ground, and Mordent is Valachan's most reliable trading partner.

**Sithicus:** The Sithicans are contemptuous of all humans, and the Valachani are no exception. For their part, Valachani see the elves as a more civilized form of skogsra and treat them with the restraint that entails. Few actually enjoy their trips to the politically disturbed realm and tend to pass through as quickly as possible. Rumor has it that Lady Adeline frequently travels to Sithicus to rally support and attack Azrael's forces; von Kharkov

appears to be maneuvering into position to annex the realm, supplanting Azrael with the loyal Lady Adeline.

*Intriguing. I wonder if they realize that stunted animal is not Sithicus' true ruler? Would the true lord be troubled by a new pretender to her throne?*

**Verbrek:** As far as the Valachani are concerned, Verbrek is a realm of murderous beasts, and few folk are prepared to trade there, fearful of provoking the threatening wolves. Unnaturally fierce and cunning wolves frequently attack settlements on the Valachani side of the border, which the Black Leopards rigorously patrol in an effort to keep out such raiders. Any Verbrekers they discover in the area are killed without question. It is no small irony that the same cultural trait — their backwoods ignorance — that unites the Valachani and Verbrekers helps to keep these neighbors divided.

## Sites of Interest



awoke in Valachan just after the turn of the year, though the forest was remarkably temperate (if wet) until I reached the higher country in Bakkelande. Following my somewhat alarming

experience in Verbrek, I lingered in Helbenik for a week to recuperate before winding south to Ungrad and then backtracking to the Scarlet Maze. At no point could I travel for more than a mile without crossing or plunging into some ford or ravine.

## Helbenik

Helbenik (sometimes called Habelnik on foreign maps) is centrally located in northern Valachan, making it a trade nexus for the score of thorps found within a day's journey or so. This position has made the village wealthy, but those from more isolated thorps say the Helbeniki are not truly Valachani. Helbenik has become too reliant on making money from other people's labor, so go the complaints; most of them wouldn't know how to trap game or string a bow. The Helbeniki see themselves as having mastered survival in the civilized world (I managed to conceal my true thoughts on Helbenik's "sophistication") without dampening their ability to survive in the wilderness. Also, being chosen for work at Castle Pantara





and suffering frequent outbreaks of White Fever has made the Helbeniki a proud, stalwart and close-knit society. During my stay, the locals would frequently boast that "Helbenik would crush any but the Helbeniki." As a result of these conflicting opinions, market day brawls between the Helbeniki and the backwoods Valachani are frequent. For whatever reason, backwoods Valachani do not hold Rotwald and Ungrad in the same contempt as Helbenik.

Helbenik centers on its markets, which in turn center on the *Gastre*. This colossal tree of unknown species never bears leaves, but produces scarlet flowers every autumn. The Helbeniki strew the tree with colored ribbons and place exquisitely worked handicrafts and sumptuous feasts at its base every season to please the spirit that allegedly lives in the tree. If she is pleased, she brings peace, prosperity and fertility for that season; if not, she blights crops and drives game away and may even murder a young man by hanging before she is satisfied.

### Dread Possibility: The Cat of Felkovic

In reality, Felkovic created the *Cat* to avenge himself upon von Kharkov, who had turned Nadia into a nosferatu. The *Cat*, a unique, cursed *figurine of wondrous power*, is described in **Van Richten's Arsenal**. Because it was designed specifically to destroy von Kharkov, the *Cat* ignores von Kharkov's damage reduction. Urik must heal any damage it inflicts by sleeping in his coffin; damage from the *Cat* cannot be regenerated. If von Kharkov is reduced to 0 hp by the *Cat*, he is destroyed and the *Cat* becomes permanently nonmagical. The *Cat's* current location is unknown, but Black Leopards search the Core for it constantly.

Felkovic himself (male human geist Wiz12, CN) was once a powerful ghost bound to the statuette, but his botched attempt to kill von Kharkov severed his link to the *Cat*. The mad wizard's geist is now bound to his tower, cursing any who approach.

The only other site of interest in Helbenik is Felkovic's Tower, a flame-blackened, decayed heap of stone once home to the creator of the *Cat of Felkovic*. A little under a century ago, Felkovic's wife Nadia left him and the wizard went mad with grief. Baron Urik I took Felkovic back to Castle Pantara, but the wizard contracted White Fever and died. Nadia passed away from guilt at having driven her husband insane, and the *Cat of Felkovic*, a magical statuette he found in the tower, killed the Baron. The baron's son declared the tower cursed and began a nation-wide hunt for the *Cat*, which eludes him to this day. Tales claim that the *Cat* is the one thing the Baron fears and that their destinies are irrevocably entwined.

### Where to Stay in Helbenik

The Crispy Pickle (good quality rooms, poor quality meals) has the best rooms in Helbenik, but they serve almost nothing that has not been pickled; the menu can quickly prove wearing. Better and more varied meals are available at the Leaping Trout opposite (common quality rooms, common quality meals). Both are frequented by locals and are a worthwhile stop for folk looking to hire guides.

**Helbenik (large town):** Conventional; AL LN; 3,000 gp limit; Assets 525,000 gp; Population 3,500; Isolated (human 92%, gnome 6%, other 2%).

**Authority Figures:** Katarine von Allor (mayor), female human Ari10.

**Important Characters:** Moarnecone Brand Avil, male human Clr6; Sentire Anna Johnson, female human Clr4; Gregor Molik (werebeast hunter), male human Rgr4/Avn\*2; Linnaeus Beucephus (thief), male gnome Rog3.

\* See **Van Richten's Arsenal**.

### Castle Pantara

The seat of all authority in Valachan, Castle Pantara is a menacing fortress of charcoal-gray stone overlooking the Broken Road from a nearby hilltop. The castle is cunningly engineered to resemble a crouching tiger. A trick of perspective makes it look like the castle is built on the road itself, when it is actually almost half a mile away. Instead, a large wooden blockhouse straddles the road to monitor traffic. The twenty Black Leopards permanently stationed here search all travelers for weapons and carefully note their names, nationali-



ties and destinations in a huge tome. They also rigorously patrol the forest around the blockhouse for people trying to slip past; I only narrowly avoided them by judicious magic and a lucky thrust with a silver knife.

A winding path leads from the blockhouse to the castle, becoming the tail of the castle's panther. Defenders can attack from the moment an intruder emerges from the forest, and each stage of the castle's defenses is designed to provide cover from those closer to the outside but to be exposed to more central areas. The castle is big enough to hold a small army, and a similarly sized force would be required to take it.

The castle is home to Baron von Kharkov, who is rarely encountered even by those with whom he shares the castle: his few servants, a garrison of Black Leopards and the peasant levy, who spend their time maintaining the castle and preserving food. The lattermost almost invariably contract White Fever; why no one notices the connection between the baron and the wasting disease escapes comprehension. In any event, the baron's preserved food is traded all over the Core. These goods, however, are distributed from Rotwald and Helbenik; the baron has an almost pathological aversion to uninvited guests for any reason, and the castle is supposedly full of death traps and torture chambers to preserve his privacy.

### Dread Possibility: Something in the Water

Von Kharkov's food preserving industry would be drastically out of character for the nosferatu were it not part of a terrible plan to control the Valachani. Every month or so, von Kharkov adds a considerable amount of his own blood to the preserving vats. Anyone who eats the tainted food must make a successful DC 10 Fortitude save or become one of the Baron's *charmed* thralls (see *Ravenloft Gazetteer II* for details on vampiric thralls). These thralls can be found throughout Valachan and sometimes even in other domains, wherever the canned food is sold. The Crispy Pickle in Helbenik is especially likely to serve the corrupted food.

## Rotwald

Rotwald was founded early in the Pacification and quickly became a center of horrifying violence. Hundreds of natives were captured and put to work mining for gold and copper or felling trees for lumber. Many were put to the sword, their bodies used to fertilize the soil.

Since then, almost every attempted revolt has originated in Rotwald. This is not to say Rotwald is a cauldron of discontent; like any Valachani, the Rotwaldi bear their trials with quiet fortitude. The large population and distance from Castle Pantara, however, seem to give the Rotwaldi a false sense of security. By some accounts, gold in the drinking water taken from the Gold River and the angry ghosts of Rotwald's past drive the villagers to madness and revolution. For this reason, the baron maintains an oppressive number of Black Leopards here to keep the peace and protect the nation's mint.

Southwest of Rotwald, along the Broken Road, stands the Hospice of the Healing Hands, a large and impressive building home to a significant contingent of Hala's witches. A vast library occupies

### Dread Possibility: The Tales of Ages

Although Rotwald is home to numerous ghosts, the true cause of the revolts is the *Tales of Ages* and the witches who guard it. The *Tales of Ages* is a relic (see *Van Richten's Arsenal* for general details about relics). Mediating on certain sections of the book can *cure minor wounds* twice a day, *cure moderate wounds* twice a week, and *cure critical wounds* twice a month. The book continuously radiates a magic aura over the Hospice, with the effect of a *hallow* spell and preventing any lycanthropes from entering the building. Finally, if the leader of the Hospice reads aloud from the book, all within earshot are affected by *break enchantment*. This is a sonic, language-based effect. The witches have taken to doing just this in Rotwald on the spring equinox every year, freeing those listening from the baron's domination. Many are soon charmed once more, but those who are not retain a dangerous degree of free will. All of the *Tales of Ages*' properties take effect as if cast by a 15th-level cleric.







nearly nine-tenths of the building. The group's leader, Mother Marena, told me that the prize of this collection is an ancient copy of the *Tales of Ages*, a history of the church of Hala written by one of the original twenty-six witches. This book supposedly protects the Hospice from hostile forces and "reveals the truth to those willing to listen," though Marena did not explain her precise meaning. (I suspect the empty mysticism most religions rely on to intrigue potential converts).

*Sloppy and prejudiced. If the text was not magical, how could the Hospice survive von Kharkov's attentions?*

### Where to Stay in Rotwald

Rotwald is well known for its hospitality: villagers frequently open their homes as boarding houses for a season or two at a time, and seeing people attracted by the scent of cooking, haggling with homeowners for a share of the meal, is relatively common. The only permanent inn is the Singing Bone (good quality rooms, good quality meals), run from the back of the brewery owned by Oleg Halffen, the town mayor. This jolly ex-adventurer is always keen to share a story over an excellent stew and plentiful stout. The rooms are large, but the walls are thin and Oleg is somewhat inquisitive. The inn takes its name from the monstrous panther claw hanging above the bar, which has been carved into a flute.

**Rotwald (large town):** Conventional (monstrous): AL N; 3,000 gp limit; Assets 660,000 gp; Population 4,400; Isolated (human 93%, gnome 4%, half-elf 1%, elf 1%, other 1%).

**Authority Figures:** Oleg Halffen (mayor), male human nosferatu Rgr4/Ari3.

**Important Characters:** Mother Marena, female human Clr4/Sor3/Hwi5; Moarnecone Rurik Talgar, male half-elf Adp3/Clr2; Ylwa Morlig (guard captain), female human werepanther Ftr5.

### Ungrad

I have visited many unpleasant places in the course of this lengthy project, but few can compare to Ungrad for rural stupidity and vile surroundings. A cold snap blew through Valachan as I hiked to Ungrad, so I had to contend with snow and freezing winds to reach it. Once there, I discovered a backwater infested with moss, mold, toadstools,

rusts, smuts and slimes. The large compost heaps kept under the floorboards of each house exacerbate the problem, providing a staple diet of mushrooms as well as a convenient disposal for household wastes and deceased relatives. The air itself tasted rotten, and I felt unclean until I reached Sithicus.

The Ungradi are friendly, if even more deluded about the nature of their ruler than the rest of the Valachani. They consider von Kharkov to be a firm but benevolent ruler, sadly troubled by infidelity and illness among his wives, the chosen of Yutow and the kindest ruler since the Pacification — an attitude that requires them to ignore most of the events of his long reign. I suspect this is only possible due to the absence of the Black Leopards and Lady Adeline; the mayor, a Dementlieuse émigré and doctor named Antianetta Despini-Hoyer, collects taxes and determines the bridal lottery and levy herself.

I managed to befriend the doctor and encouraged her to show me her hospital. I think it was something of a relief for her to meet another educated woman in Ungrad. Despini-Hoyer has made it her life's work to cure White Fever, which claimed her own husband. Her purple powder,

### Dread Possibility: Curing White Fever

Dr. Despini-Hoyer provides her powder only to victims of the disease who commit themselves to her hospital. Daily doses taken in a glass of wine allow a character to heal temporary Constitution damage at twice the normal rate. The wine is used to dull the flavor of the powder; those using the powder without wine must make a DC 12 Constitution check to choke it down. If they fail, they do not gain the beneficial effects and actually suffer 1 point of temporary Constitution damage from vomiting and choking.

A nosferatu, Dr. Despini was dispatched to Ungrad by von Kharkov years ago to temper the bloodlust of the town's former mayor, Felix Hoyer. Hoyer's recklessness eventually drew the attention of adventurers, but Dr. Despini-Hoyer was not so rash and escaped their stakes. So long as Ungrad's status quo remains unruffled, the doctor is content to feed on the blood of her adoring patients.





predictably made from fungal spores, is mixed with wine and administered with a moderate amount of bloodletting (a standard remedy for most complaints) and greatly speeds recovery. I did notice that Despini-Hoyer carefully preserved the blood taken during bloodletting, and a few discreet inquiries later revealed she was rarely seen during the day. Needless to say, I beat a hasty retreat and was careful to ward my room that night.

### Where to Stay in Ungrad

Ungrad has only one eatery, Ambrick's Mushroom House (common quality meals), which sells fungus-based foods. While the mushroom and onion soup is delicious, avoid the hot sugar noodles, which look and taste like candle wax. The sole inn is the Inn of Quiet Repose (good quality rooms, common quality meals). The deluded Richemuloise poseur who runs the inn uses her small degree of magical skill to play at being a vampire, yet was terrified of the sight of real blood. I suspect it is only a matter of time until some muscle-bound thug stakes her and closes the only inn in the world where one is waited on by *unseen servants*.

**Ungrad (small town):** Conventional (monstrous); AL LG; 800 gp limit; Assets 60,000 gp; Population 1,500; Isolated (human 98%, other 2%).  
**Authority Figures:** Dr. Antianetta Despini-Hoyer (mayor), female human nosferatu Exp12.  
**Important Characters:** Beatrice Cargonne (innkeeper), female human Wiz11; Ambrick the Grey (tavernkeeper), male dwarf Rog6.

### The Scarlet Maze

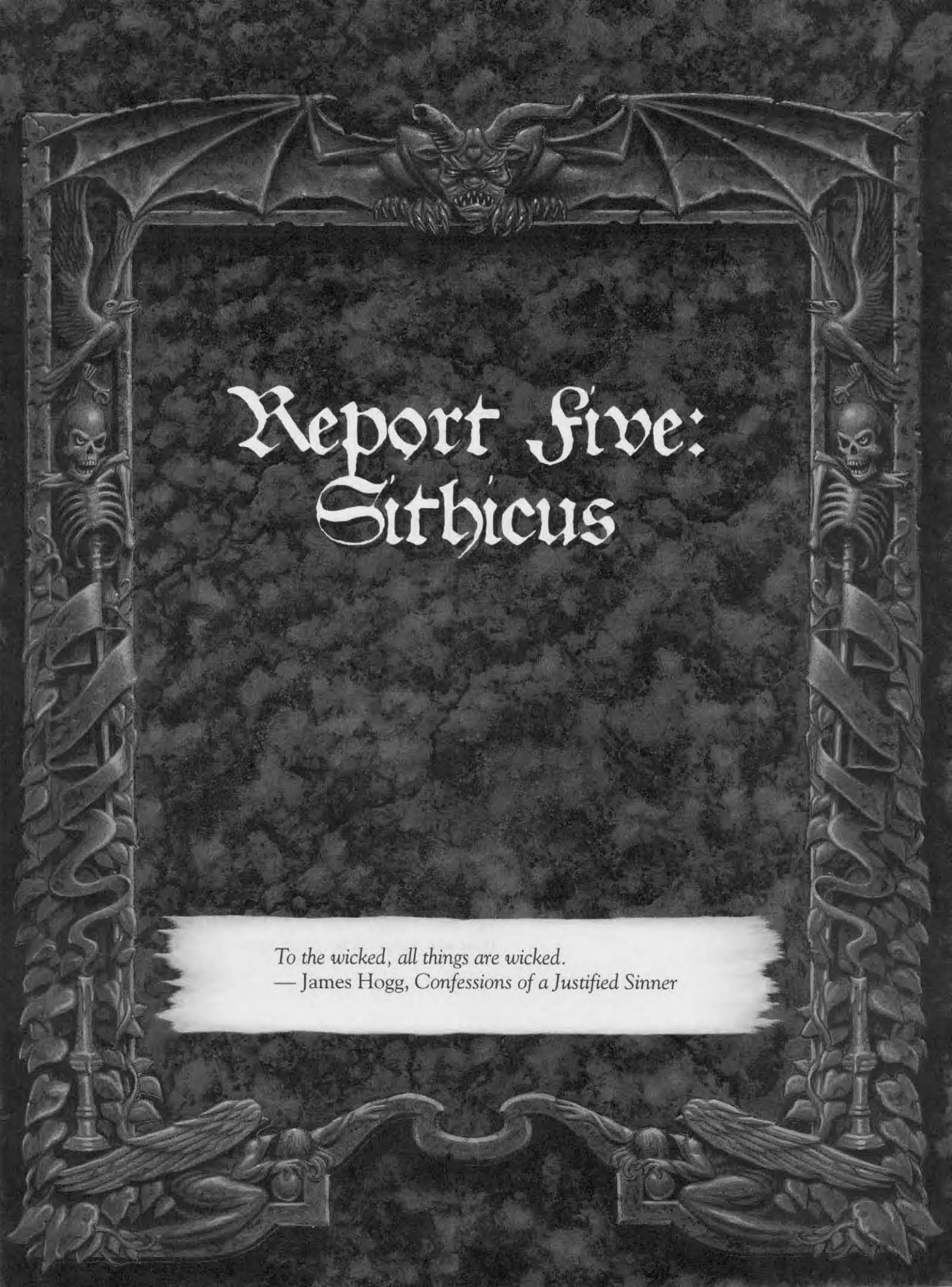
Lady Adeline's private estate nestles between the Elf Road and the Little Arden River on the Sithican border. In the twenty years since Adeline settled here, she has planted thousands of briars and thorns in a vast labyrinth. The spiked hedge surrounding the maze is strewn with the rotting corpses of those who died within and smeared with blood, the obvious origin of the estate's "scarlet" moniker. Those found guilty of treason and other serious crimes are delivered to the maze by Black Leopards and abandoned to Adeline's pleasure. If the accused can reach the center of the maze, they are supposedly pardoned, but no one has ever succeeded. Common lore holds that the maze is filled with sadistic traps, bloodthirsty animals, giant vermin and deadly plants.

### Final Thoughts



Valachan is clearly a willfully backward realm, whose isolated position and isolationist policies prevent it from ever becoming a key player in the broader world. Its only true resources are wood and its control of the trade route from Mordent to Sithicus along the Arden River. I cannot believe that the benefits of seizing this route would be worth the effort of ousting von Kharkov from his roost. The baron controls an army of werebeasts and a puppet church whose only purpose seems to be convincing peasants that their god wants them to follow the Baron obediently. As I ponder it, could it be that von Kharkov learned some of his tactics during his days in Darkon?

Were one truly interested in conquering this backwater, the best method would doubtlessly be to encourage Adeline's coup of Sithicus, then swoop in on both realms once they have butchered each others' armies. One would do well to note those who whisper in her pointed ears.



# Report Five: Sithicus

*To the wicked, all things are wicked.*  
— James Hogg, *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*



**T**pon crossing the border from Valachan on the lonely, ill-kept road between Rotwald and Mal-Erek, I understood why so few travelers journey to this strange land. The place was instantly oppressive. True, an oppressive atmosphere is hardly noteworthy in the lands of the Core; rare is the place that does *not* groan beneath the weight of a nameless, looming dread. Yet the feeling of unease that took hold of me as I entered this realm was somehow different from any that had yet plagued me during my long, dangerous mission.

I quickly came to understand the nature and source of that unease. In other lands, my disquiet upon arrival was an instinctual fear of some grim thing that had turned its attention to me. Here, the source of that oppression was neither hidden nor distant. It was my own sins that weighed so heavily upon me, and the bleak landscape inspired such brooding that each regrettable deed was amplified and augmented until I wept and could not look upon my reflection in a mirror for self-loathing.

An hour was too long for me to linger there, though my mission required a much longer stay. With each passing day, as I came more and more to think of how my daughter had begged for death, I

### Sithicus at a Glance

**Cultural Level:** Medieval (8); wild elves are Stone Age (1)

**Ecology:** Full

**Climate/Terrain:** Temperate forest, hills

**Year of Formation:** 720 BC

**Population:** 4,300

**Races:** Elves 96%, half-elves 2%, humans 1%, other 1%

**Elf Ethnic Groups:** High elves 91%, wild elves 9%

**Human Ethnic Groups:** Kartakan 35%, Gundarakite 30%, Invidian 25%, Sithican 5%, Barovian 4%, other 1%

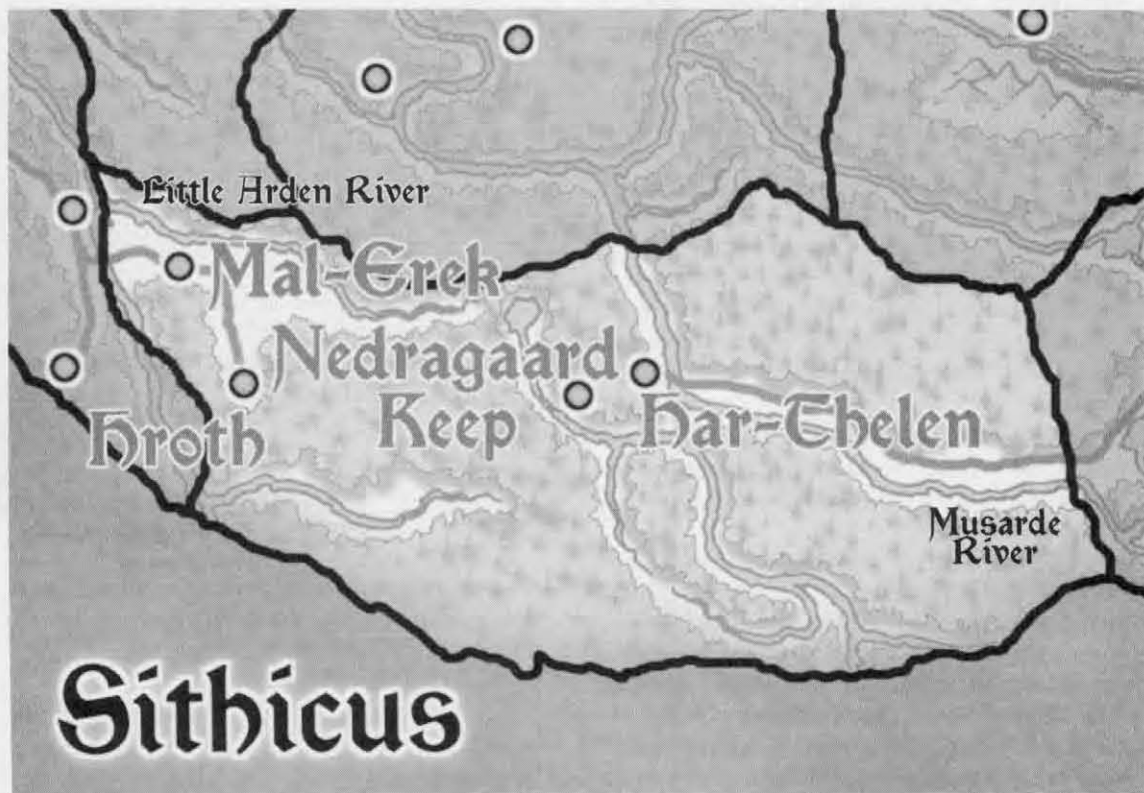
**Languages:** Sithican\*, Vaasi, Balok, Mordentish

**Religions:** Ezra, Hala

**Government:** Despotic monarchy and aristocracy

**Ruler:** Azrael Dak

**Darklord:** Inza Magdova Kulchevich





found myself wondering if those I met could see my sins written upon my face — just as those strangers' tortured features suggested their unspoken misdeeds to me. No wonder, then, that the native elves call their realm *Sithicus*: the "Land of Spectres."

## Landscape

**S**ithicus is located in the southwestern region of the Core, bordered by Valachan, Verbrek, Invidia, Kartakass and, since the Great Upheaval, the Mists to the south. This shattered elven kingdom is the only country populated mostly by nonhumans. Damp fog and ancient trees shroud the countryside in perpetual gloom. Sunlight almost never penetrates the thick boughs of the ancient forests, and the ground is slick with rotting leaves, moss and dew. The stench of decay and mold fills the heavy, wooded air. Except for a few cities and one major thoroughfare, most parts of the country have an untouched quality to them, for good reason.

The country is sliced apart by the Musarde and its various tributaries and offshoots. The densely forested river valleys rise to rocky uplands where great russet eagles nest. The forest floor is covered with mottled ivy and gray ferns. Nasty snarls of thorns and nettles abound, almost eager to tear at any passer-by.

From the moment I left Valachan and entered Sithicus, I was haunted by a strange feeling, a distinct sense of *familiarity* to the woods. Try as I might, I could not determine why these woods would seem like home to me. Scenes from my past that I would just as soon forget crowded my head until I could no longer make out the moss-covered trunks that surrounded me. Throughout my travels within the Sithican borders, I constantly had to force myself not to get lost in less-than-pleasant reveries.

Most visitors through Sithicus stick to the main roads connecting the major cities. I decided if it was good enough for others, those routes would do for me as well.

The western end of Sithicus is bracketed by the headwaters of the Arden River to the south and its tributary, the Little Arden, to the north. Two elven settlements, Mal-Erek and Hroth, sit near the Valachani border, linked by the Elf Road, or *Esthithir*, as it is called here. Just north of Mal-Erek, the Little Arden skirts along the dense forests of Verbrek; fortunately for the elves, the river seems

## The Guilt of Sithicus

In 1d3 hours after entering Sithicus, newcomers experience a heightened sense of guilt (no saving throw). At first, this guilt manifests as a creeping unease, a certainty that something is wrong coupled with an inability to identify the root cause. Within the first 1d3 days, the newcomer vividly recalls some past incident in which she acted very badly. Guilt over this incident becomes the focus of the newcomer's unease, becoming a minor if persistent distraction. The newcomer suffers a -1 morale penalty to initiative, Listen, Search, and Spot checks for as long as she remains in the domain. Newcomers commonly mistake the distraction of their companions for discomfort, as if they can see the newcomer's guilty deeds in her face. In fact, they are caught up in their own guilty memories, though anyone who remains in Sithicus long enough will begin to wonder just what past sins are tormenting those around them.

True natives of Sithicus also suffer from this heightened, nagging conscience, though they do not suffer from the morale penalty it evokes in newcomers. In fact, their forced acceptance of their own weaknesses makes native Sithicans less susceptible to illusions: they receive a +1 insight bonus to saves against illusions cast within the domain. Furthermore, because the domain itself is unfriendly to deceptions of any sort, illusions last for only half their normal duration when cast within Sithicus' borders.

True Innocents are immune to the guilt. The effects of the guilt lift once a character leaves Sithicus. Limitations on the duration of illusions and bonuses for native characters do not extend beyond the domain's borders.

to act as a natural barrier against intrusive wolves. South of the Arden, the Disappearing Hills rise into the Misty Border, still clinging to their snowy caps as spring encroached.

Continuing east, the sparse woods give way to an awesome sight. Located between the respective headwaters of the Arden and Little Arden, the





Great Chasm lay before me like a scar across the heart of Sithicus. Running north to south, it stretched for dozens of miles, taking me days to circumvent. At its widest, I estimate that it was roughly five miles wide, but it narrowed to about a mile wide at each end. Denuded of any forest, the area should have been bathed in sunlight, but such was not the case. The Chasm absorbed all light and was surrounded by only a few skeleton-like trees. Directly in the center, a black peak speared the sea of shadows that filled the Great Chasm. Atop this peak, I could see the ruins of what must have been Nedragard Keep, home of the realm's fallen tyrant, with swarms of ravens circling overhead. All that remained of the castle were stone ruins resembling blackened, rotted teeth. Some of the elves in Mal-Erek swear to have seen keening spirits — *banshees* — swirling around the broken spires when the moon is full.

West of the Great Chasm, the Endless River flows north from the Mists, cutting a winding path through southern Sithicus. The Krellin River emerges from artesian wells near the Little Arden's own headwaters, then cuts a curving path south-

east, past the central elven settlement of Har-Thelen before merging with the Endless River just before their waters bolster the Musarde as it turns north toward Invidia.

Upriver from this confluence, the Musarde flows in a steady course from the Kartakan border, neatly bisecting eastern Sithicus. The valleys northeast of the Musarde — known collectively as the Fumewood, the densest forests in Sithicus — have an ill, haunted reputation. The sun has no chance of piercing the canopy of trees that cover the region like a dull, green shroud, and the woods are supposedly littered by a series of tunnels that crisscross and network the entire area. Pools of stagnant water harbor clouds of insects humming around them in the dank heat of summer. In addition, rumor has it that a pack of twisted, xenophobic halflings has built a large fort deep in the Fumewood, surrounded by horrible messages of warning to trespassers. No one has yet discovered their secret home, "Kendralind," and returned to tell the tale.

A well-maintained road runs in rough parallel to the Musarde's northern banks, joining Har-Thelen with the distant settlement of Skald in



Kartakass. Still known as the Merchants' Way among Kartakans for the number of traders who use this road, Sithicans have come to call it the Merchants' Slash. Starting around 726 BC, the halflings made so many raids on travelers that a group of merchants united to slash and burn a buffer zone along the entire length of the trail. This zone has helped somewhat with the attacks by denying the raiders their cover, but the shrouded Fumewood is eager to reclaim it. Hungry shoots of ivy and nettles require constant attention, and caravans of merchants take turns maintaining the route. It is never an easy task, and one or two merchants will periodically go missing during the routine cleanup.

Northeast of the Fumewood sits a less ominous track of woods bordering Invidia and Barovia. The area harkens to the name of *Sangiyeth*, or the "Iron Hills." Packs of wild elves roam free here, spending most of their time hunting and trapping high in the hills or foraging for berries and other wild, growing foods and roots. They too spend a fair bit of time raiding traveling merchants; unlike the halflings, they reputedly sneak across the border into Barovia to steal what they can. The region is treacherous even for these elves after the heavy, seasonal rains. Large tracts of the Iron Hills become muddy quagmires to which even the sure-footed wild elves are not impervious. Spring is thus when they suffer the highest mortality rates, but their raiding is heaviest as well, as it is commonplace for the wheels of caravans to bog down and become trapped, making them extremely vulnerable to the wild elves' attacks.

South of the Musarde and east of the Endless River, the Sithican forests rise into the boulder-strewn Misttop Hills. Nestled northwest of the Misttops lies a pathetic shambles of a village the people still call Veidrava. I was told that at one point, the area was busy with the excavation of salt, a commodity that is still rare within these borders, with a miners' village, storefront and engine house for the mine the humans worked. Almost all of the huts were situated near the foothills, ostensibly to make the dwellings easier to protect from invaders. The Engine House itself was a modern marvel, I hear, with a secret mechanism no one but Azrael was privy to. After the cataclysmic event of the Hour of Screaming Shadows, however, this bare village and the mine buildings were blasted into ruins. No one ever came back to open the mine, although I heard rumblings that some factions are considering it.

The borders of Sithicus are surrounded by low shrubs and bushes that bear sickly blooms. It is said that at times, these shrubs can quickly shoot up over twelve feet and choke out the sky with the smoky black roses they bear, the floral growths effectively barring travel.

Sithicus' climate follows a temperate pattern, characterized by muggy, humid summers and bitter winters. The thunderstorms that strike the realm are violent, descending sporadically each May to bring torrential rains and flash floods. The rains start to taper off by the second week of June. The uplands and some of the most outer-lying areas receive a light blanket of snow in the depths of winter.

In one of my interviews with the locals, I discovered an interesting history behind their unusual moon. Apparently, Sithicus did not always share the same moon with the rest of the Core. Previously, their moon, which the elves call *Nuitari*, was completely black. The only way one could discover its location in the night sky was to look for the points of light it blocked out. The black moon radiated an ebony glow, visible only to those with similarly black hearts, which sucked up all light. In addition, *Nuitari* had a lunar cycle of just over a week; I can only wonder about *Nuitari*'s possible effects upon *Verbrek*'s werewolves. Sometime shortly before the Hour of Screaming Shadows, a second, pure white moon appeared next to *Nuitari*, briefly followed by a red companion. On the night of the earth-shattering events of the Hour of Screaming Shadows, the portentous moons combined to form the orb that fills the night sky today. Some say that the darkness that fell on *Nedragaard* was none other than *Nuitari* itself, displaced by this new orb. The entire story strikes me as outrageous. I would dismiss the tale outright, had *Darkest Night* in our own land of *Darkon* not taught me that the night sky can be *untrustworthy*.

The elven cities feature a series of concentric stone walls separating the lofty towers of the various castes. Once glorious, the walls are slowly eroding, the structures of elven wood and crystal now choked with ivy and moss or falling apart to the touch. Statues and other works of art are crumbling, and potholes pepper the cobbled streets within the cities. Weeds, mildew and brush choke the ornamental gardens. The outermost walls of each settlement are covered by brambles so thick and overgrown that they both offer a haphazard





form of protection and often conceal the presence of the city itself from unobservant passers-by.

As for the human minority, its settlements are sorry affairs, mere clusters of hovels built of available materials and grouped together in proximity to a mine or logging stand.

## flora

Sithican forests are dense blocks of growth that few can maneuver through with any amount of ease or safety. These dark and haunted places never cease to evoke a sense of melancholy and dread. Some elven mages believe the trees and shrubs are the embodiment of souls that have died.

Stands of evergreens cling precariously to the rocky ridges and saddlebacks and swarm across the rolling geography of Sithicus. Other broadleaf trees fight for a foothold in the woods: alder, ash, maple, oak, rowan and willow, though one can also find rarer downy birch, juniper, and yew. Beneath the forest canopy lies an abundance of gorse, wild marigold, saxifrage, sedges and rampant ivy beds, as well as ferns in every possible shade of green and gray. Lichens and lugworts shroud the tree bark and stones in the darkest thickets.

Carnivorous plant life is also a danger to travelers in Sithicus, where the forests seem possessed of an unnatural vitality. Many trespassers have fallen victim to bloodroot, lashweed, quickwood and stranger things. More than one merchant told me of a type of mold that has the ability to infect and actually possess any traveler foolish enough to sleep on or too near it.

## Trekking Through Sithicus

The forests of Sithicus are notoriously difficult to navigate, even for natives. During the reign of the Black Rose, the landmarks never grew familiar to travelers, regardless of how often they were encountered. Under the reign of Inza Kulchevich, all of Sithicus seems strangely familiar, even to those who are completely lost. In either case, travelers suffer a -2 circumstance penalty to all Survival checks made to get their bearings.

## fauna

The primordial environment of Sithicus fosters a plethora of animals typical of the Core's

wilder regions. The expansive forests shelter badgers, bats, wild boars, deer, elk, rats, weasels, as well as mice, hares, moles, red squirrels and voles. Significant predators include badgers, brown bears and red foxes. Intriguingly, neither the wolves of Verbrek nor the panthers of Valachan are often seen here. Some travelers have told me of gigantic ants, spiders and wasps. I never encountered such oddities myself, but the elven rangers who patrol the wilds have developed ways to breed and train a

## Local Animals and Native Horrors

**Wildlife:** CR 1/10 — bat; toad; CR 1/8 — rat; CR 1/6 — lizard; raven; CR 1/4 — cat; owl; weasel; CR 1/3 — hawk; snake, Tiny viper; CR 1/2 — badger; eagle; snake, Small viper; CR 1 — snake, Medium viper; CR 2 — boar; CR 4 — bear, brown.

**Monsters:** CR 1/4 — goblin; monstrous spider, Tiny; zombie, Small; 1/3 — gremishka\*; skeleton, Medium; CR 1/2 — geist\*; monstrous spider, Small; silver fox\*\*; zombie, Medium; CR 1 — bakhna rakhna\*; fungus, shrieker; giant ant, worker; ghoul; monstrous spider, Medium; plant, bloodrose\*; CR 2 — assassin bug, giant\*; dire badger; giant ant, queen; giant ant, soldier; plant, crawling ivy\*; shadow asp\*; CR 3 — allip; dire wolf; ettercap; fungus, violet; ghastr; giant wasp; impersonator\*; ogre; plant, bloodroot\*; shadow; CR 4 — gargoyles; giant beetle, stag; plant, lashweed\*; vampire spawn; CR 5 — odem\*; reason stealer; wraith; CR 6 — corpse candle\*; vampire, halfling\*; will-o'-wisp; CR 7 — ghost; heucuva; salt shadow (see Attached Notes); spectre; vampire, elven\*; CR 8 — mohrg; plant, dread treat\*; CR 9 — plant, undead treat\*; CR 10 — plant, quickwood\*; radiant spirit\* CR 11 — crimson death, lycanthrope, werefox\*\*; CR 12 — roper; CR 17 — banshee†.

\*\* See Ravenloft Gazetteer I.

† Although the banshees of the Black Rose's retinue are fearsome creatures, most elven spirits within Sithicus are simply ghosts with the *frightful moan* or *wail* special attack:

**Wail (Su):** During the night, the ghost can loose a deadly wail. This attack can slay a number of living creatures equal to 1/2 the ghost's HD + the ghost's rank within a 30-foot spread centered on the ghost, or within a 60-foot cone extending from the ghost, at the spirit's option. A successful Fortitude save (DC 10 + 1/2 ghost's HD + ghost's Cha modifier) negates the effect. Once a ghost wails, it must wait 1d4 rounds before it can do so again, and it can wail a number of times per day equal to no more than half its rank (rounded down, 1/day minimum).





remarkable form of mount: huge stag beetles, easily the size of a horse. These chitinous monsters are hardly tame, however, and can pose a serious danger to anyone but their rider. For this reason, the beetles are seldom brought into populated areas.

Encounters with incorporeal undead, particularly the banshees that followed the Black Rose, are infamous in Sithicus. More than one traveler has met his end in the forests, far from home; to hear most foreigners speak of them, Sithicus' woods are overrun with the moaning ghosts. In actuality, however, encounters with such spirits are unusual and appear to have grown even scarcer in the last few years. The banshees supposedly still haunt the ruins of Nedragaard Keep, however, occasionally venturing along the edges of the Great Chasm — travelers beware.

## History



he chronicle of Sithicus does not reach as far back into the past as those of its neighbors. Despite its brevity, the realm's history is an active one, filled with as much treachery and strife as that of any land in the Core.

The details of that history are divided between the obvious and the utterly obscure; the two are intermixed with such regularity that my notes on the subject remain choppy, incomplete. The mark left upon the land and its people by the one-time ruler of Sithicus, now referred to only as the "Black Rose," remains vivid. Yet the despot's true name, even the exact nature of the curse that earned him his sobriquet — these have proved impossible to ascertain with any degree of certainty. The Sithicans demonstrate remarkable apathy toward their own distant past and a palpably active desire to forget recent events. It is a bitter irony, for given elves' extraordinary longevity, even living memory could stretch back centuries.

Written records are scarce in Sithicus, though this was not always so. The larger elven communities house extensive historical and arcane libraries, but the contents of those airy structures have fallen into decay. The elves rely upon oral tradition to pass along knowledge from generation to generation. They seldom share their tales with outsiders, and with those not of elven blood even more rarely. As for the human minority, the inhabitants of those wretched communities usually lack the ability to read or write. Like the more cultured elves,

these humans show great reluctance to recount folktales or reveal what they recall of local history. Yet their reluctance is not born of social snobbery or outright racism, as with their elven countrymen. Simple and profound *fear* prevents most human Sithicans from discussing the past.

From tales gathered throughout the Core, particularly in Barovia and Invidia, I came to Sithicus with some knowledge of its past. Oddly enough, the stories I had been told proved accurate, even if the facts underlying their narratives were sometimes deeply buried by local bias and "artistic" elaboration. Reciting a few of these facts had a uniform effect upon the average Sithican: where a moment before he had been grim and steadfast in denying any knowledge of events more ancient than yesterday's dawn, after hearing a few pointed comments about the "Black Rose" or the "Hour of Screaming Shadows," the local would slip into a mournful, trembling silence that confirmed the truth of what I had said.

*Bah. The silence of cowards is feeble proof of a tale's veracity. I know the truth of these tales already. The "destruction" of the cursed knight is merely bait on a hook — but my tormentors will not distract me now.*

Of Sithicus' distant past, the elves revealed only this: their kingdom began on a distant world in a land ruled by a human knight — the Black Rose — who waged a war against the gods, planning to topple them from power. The gods charged the elves with the task of stopping the Rose's hubris, but they failed. Then the gods themselves struck down the Black Rose, casting him into a misty abyss — our own world, as the elves describe it — and for their failures, the elves and their kingdom were dragged down to share his fate.

Note that even this brief account is a mere approximation of the false history of Sithicus. Every elf who deigned speak of history offered a differing version of the tale, the details often varying widely.

The Mists revealed the land of Sithicus in 720 BC, and from this point on facts are somewhat easier to come by. Earlier in that spring, the Black Rose first appeared in the annals of Barovia. Accompanied by a young, captive Vistana woman named Magda Ilyanova Kulchevich and a vicious dwarf and accused werebeast by the name of Azrael





Dak, the Rose reportedly challenged Count Strahd X in his own castle and survived to tell of that foolhardy confrontation. Similar stories are told of the Rose battling Duke Gundar, late ruler of Gundarak. Through Vistani campfire tales I have learned that the brave young woman Magda escaped the Rose and remained in Gundarak even as her former captor passed on to Sithicus, where he seized the throne and reigned from the ruined tower known as Nedragaard Keep.

For nearly two decades, Sithicus served as battleground for a long, bloody, and ultimately pointless conflict between the Black Rose and the wild elves of the Iron Hills. Whereas the elven aristocrats of the cities passively resisted the Rose's rulership, the denizens of the Iron Hills waged an open and active war. They attacked traders, burned human settlements, and killed anyone serving the Rose who fell into their hands. The enmity of the Iron Hills bands to non-elves forced the humans to side with the Rose, albeit reluctantly.

The Black Rose and Azrael Dak, now seneschal of Nedragaard, treated their human subjects with contempt and distrust. Even being suspected of sympathizing with the rebel elves was grounds for immediate execution, with the seneschal's newly formed secret police — the *Politskaræ* — fostering paranoia and fear among the humans and the supposedly neutral elven aristocrats. Travelers fared little better, with Azrael's press gangs grabbing captives by the score and whisking them off to the front lines.

As the civil war dragged on, the Black Rose appeared less and less frequently. By the time of the Great Upheaval in 740 BC, he had become a veritable prisoner inside the crumbling, blackened walls of Nedragaard Keep. Some began to wonder if he had been destroyed. As is so common in Sithicus, the truth was less extreme, but far more bizarre. The Black Rose had become enthralled by a group of *memory mirrors*, enchanted glass that allowed the Rose to submerge his mind in illusory variations of his disastrous life. For days, then weeks, and then months at a time, the Rose remained in his throne room, unmoving, lost in this reverie of what might have been.

Azrael Dak made the most of his master's inattention. He moved from securing troops loyal to — or at least fearful of — the Rose to mustering soldiers that served him above all others. He negotiated secret deals with the wild elves, promising the overthrow of the hated Rose and offering them

rewards for allowing him to appear victorious now and then. When one of the larger bands rejected Azrael's offers, the seneschal turned the others against them, so that soon the wild elves were as much a threat to each other as to the merchants, travelers and homesteaders who had started returning to Sithicus. Azrael capitalized upon their return, directing almost all the tax revenue collected to his private coffers. It is during this time that he most actively earned an unpleasant title he still proudly claims: "the Sorrow of Sithicus."

Given his reportedly limited intelligence and his explosive temper, Azrael almost certainly employed advisors who helped him accomplish these rather remarkable feats of cunning and diplomacy. Malocchio Aderre of Invidia is a likely candidate, though his alliance with the dwarf seems to have started some years after this period. More tantalizing are the stories of shadowy figures — little more than voices, really — that spoke to Azrael at the Lake of Sounds, a strange subterranean lake he discovered at about this time in a cavern off the deepest levels of the Veidrava salt mine.

By the spring of 743 BC, Azrael effectively ruled Sithicus. Several strange occurrences marked this transition. Early in the year, all the flowers in the kingdom turned black. With the exception of the white roses that continued to grow in the Iron Hills, and a brief time in early 744 when their normal hue returned, Sithican flowers would bloom black for the next nine years. At the same time, the land was ravaged by a sickness known as Ashen Fever — often mistranslated from Sithican as "White Fever," no doubt confusing it with the Valachani epidemic.

For much of the next decade, Azrael maintained his iron grip on the land. Yet he lacked the power to confront the Black Rose, who remained lost in his own mind, even after the *memory mirrors* were shattered in 744 BC. To gather the power to overthrow the Rose, the werbadger forged a twisted double alliance sometime after 750 BC — first with Malocchio Aderre of Invidia, then with a Vistana girl named Inza, daughter of his old nemesis, Magda Ilyanova Kulchevich.

Madame Magda and her *vardo*, a group of outcast and orphaned Vistani known as the Wanderers, entered Sithicus in 738 BC and remained under the protection of the Black Rose. They had made their way to the domain after the birth of Magda's daughter Inza two years earlier, in the now-conquered land of Gundarak, on the very



## Ashen fever

Sometime after 720 BC, a disease crept slowly across Sithicus. At first, many did not realize that an actual sickness was to blame, mistakenly thinking its victims had simply succumbed to the effects of age. Indeed, when the disease first appeared, it infected the elderly. Eventually, however, the Ashen Fever spread to younger victims by the tens, then hundreds, and finally, after two decades, the thousands.

The disease manifests as a simple fever at first, but progresses to a second stage marked by pustules and other sores that can last for years, even in a resilient person. Other signs as the disease progresses include bulging eyes and a general whitening of the flesh and hair with an overall stooping of the body. These symptoms initially fooled the populace into believing the victim had simply succumbed to early senescence.

Almost as mysteriously as the Ashen Fever started, it died out. No one knows why for sure, and the slightest hint of a flush on someone's face is enough to strike fear into those around her. No one knows if the Ashen Fever will strike again, and even those whose scarred, pock-marked faces forever identify them as survivors are not sure if they would be immune a second time.

**Ashen Fever (Ex):** Contact, Fortitude DC 15, incubation period 1 year, damage special. Victims infected by Ashen Fever make Fortitude saves to resist the disease only once per year. Each time a victim fails this saving throw, her physical ability scores are modified as if she has aged by one age category (youth, adult, middle age, old, venerable; see Table 6–5: Aging Effects in the *D&D Player's Handbook*). A victim "aged" past "venerable" dies. Each time the victim succeeds at the Fortitude save, her ability scores revert by one category to her "true" age. Ashen Fever never affects mental ability scores and has run its course when the victim makes enough successful Fortitude saves to restore her original age category.

night Duke Gundar met his end. How they secured the Rose's protection is unclear. I suspect Madame Magda held some secrets the Rose wished hidden, something perhaps only the Vistani could accomplish in this strange place.

Whatever service it was that Magda performed for the Rose, Azrael surely wanted it terminated. His pacts with Malocchio and Inza meant the murder, in 752 BC, of Magda and almost her entire tribe. At almost the same moment, Invidian troops, bolstered by soldiers loyal to Azrael and the always-rebellious Sithican elves, laid siege to Nedragard Keep. These appear to have been brilliantly orchestrated distractions, for even as the siege started, the treacherous seneschal himself completed a ritual deep within the Veidrava mine, in a cavern known as the Black Chapel. The result of this sorcery was the catastrophe that would come to be called the Hour of Screaming Shadows.

To hear Azrael's loyalists tell it, and none too convincingly, the Hour of Screaming Shadows was not the seneschal's doing, but dark and potent magic wrought by best-forgotten gods who wanted to destroy the Black Rose and clear the way for Azrael to take control of Sithicus. In fact, the

seneschal had made an almost insanely risky attempt to gain control of every shadow in the domain, hoping to use the power to annihilate the Rose himself. Yet the rite was foiled by a hero named Ganelon, known as "the Blessed" to the many people he's helped throughout Sithicus or as "the Doomed" to those who know that such good deeds seldom go unpunished.

The gathered shadows, freed from Azrael's control, smashed back upon the land, destroying Nedragard, the armies besieging it, and presumably its armored master before reuniting with their owners. The failure of his plan nearly drove Azrael mad, and he spent some months after the Hour of Screaming Shadows tearing through Sithicus in his war chariot, a ghastly contraption built of the teeth and bones of his slain enemies. He searched in vain for the missing Black Rose, who was seen no more in Sithicus. The remains of the once-imposing spire of Nedragard Keep huddled atop a spike of rock in the Great Chasm. All that remained of the Rose were whispered tales and a lingering dread that he might return, such that the people still refuse to speak his name for fear of summoning him.





## Former Darklord: The Black Rose

The Black Rose (male human death knight ex-Pal9/Blk6, CE) ruled Sithicus from 720 to 753 BC. Born on an outlander world wracked by wars between draconic armies and meddling gods of good and evil, he began life as a valiant member of a respected knightly order. Despite his noble origins, the Rose harbored a lustful and jealous heart. He murdered his wife to pursue an illicit affair with an elf maid, but his crime was uncovered. The Black Rose fell from grace.

Even as the Black Rose fell, a cleric rose to power. This high priest turned to evil in the name of good and threatened to usurp the throne of the gods. The Rose was granted one chance to redeem himself: a holy quest to stop the priest before the gods were forced to erase his madness with a terrible cataclysm. The Black Rose set forth, but the envious, spiteful sisters of his elf maid bride stopped him along the way. The elves lied, claiming that the Rose was not the father of his bride's newborn child. Given the choice of stopping the apocalypse and returning home to confront his wife, the Black Rose abandoned his quest. The world was scoured.

Even as flames rained upon the Rose's keep, he struck down his wife and refused to save their infant son. The fires consumed him, but the gods denied him death, cursing him to live one lifetime for each of the millions lost. The Rose became an undead horror — a death knight (see *Monster Manual II*) — and his insignia, the red rose enameled on his shining full plate, was scorched black.

The Black Rose brooded in his shattered keep for centuries as civilization slowly rebuilt itself, the painful memory of his failures the only reminder that he still existed. Eventually, draconic armies clashed again, and an evil warlord — the Blue Lady — dared to recruit the Rose as her henchman. Lust once again pulsed in the Rose's ashen heart, and he betrayed the Lady to her foes at the moment of her triumph. He carried her corpse back to his ruin, intent on adding her to his undead retinue, but the Mists added him to theirs instead.

After a brief trek across the Core, the Rose was granted Sithicus, a domain filled with maddeningly distorted echoes of his past. He heard that his Blue Lady's spirit also haunted his realm, but he could never claim her. Even the Rose's precious memories of pain deserted him, and he eventually sank into unfeeling despair.

No one knows what became of the Black Rose following the Night of Screaming Shadows. Perhaps he truly was destroyed. Perhaps the Dark Powers released him, disappointed by his utter surrender to their torment. Or perhaps he was reclaimed by a curse even more powerful than that which had held him here.

The apparent destruction of his former master in 752 BC has left Azrael far worse off than he was before his schemes all failed. The destruction of the Invidian forces at Nedragaard collapsed his alliance with Malocchio Aderre, putting a bitter enemy on his doorstep to the north, and his mistreatment of Madame Magda and her Wanderers earned him the enmity of the Vistani. The promises he made to the wild elves remain largely unfulfilled, and the threat of renewed rebellion grows greater with each passing day. Worse still, though Azrael claims the throne of Sithicus, he is by no means the real power in the land. Where once the dwarf had commanded all but the title of Lord of Sithicus, he now

commands the title alone. The secret ruler of the domain — the true dread lord at Sithicus' heart — remains unseen, allowing this desperate little madman the limelight while he, she, or it schemes from the shadows.

Like all secrets within Sithicus, this one is obvious, once one knows how to read the signs. Where the peasants' hidden sins manifest upon their faces in their mournful expressions and bleak eyes, the hidden reign of the true dread lord of Sithicus is revealed in a disturbing trail of strangely savaged corpses and blasted, lifeless groves that hiss with awful whispering beneath the weird, tripartite moon.

## Populace



he majority of the folk who live in Sithicus — and the only group to hold any positions of prominence — are elves, or *esthi* (“people”) as they call themselves. A few Vistani pass through the country, either to barter with the locals or fleece them as is their way, while others are here on a holy pilgrimage to the Last (see below). The only Vistani exceptions are the Wanderers, a small band that constantly patrols the country, as if prevented from leaving the Sithican borders.

A small population of displaced humans is present, mostly comprised of former workers from the Salt Mines of Veidrava. Either weakness or Azrael himself prevents them from returning to where the dwarf and his undead minions initially pressed them into his service. They are mostly a broken lot, forever damaged by their time in the darkness of the mines. A few have a twisted value to Azrael, though, as many will do anything for a few coins these days — things a saner person might avoid. The remaining humans tend to be merchants and craftsmen from Kartakass who have settled permanently within Sithicus due to marriage or some other type of entanglement with the Sithicans.

With this mix, one finds a growing population of half-elves. Some of these children and young adults are the offspring of merchants who passed through the Sithican villages or of those who remain there today. Others are the result of couplings between the most destitute of the villagers who have clung to each other out of mutual desperation.

I collected many tales of a final group in Sithicus, though I found it almost impossible to corroborate. Many villagers have reported a group of small, humanoid creatures living deep in the Fumewood and the Iron Hills. They appear to be halflings, but are reportedly ghastly, nocturnal, and nearly feral creatures. The villagers refer to these creatures as the most dangerous and xenophobic they have ever come across, and folk avoid the areas the creatures have claimed like the Ashen Fever. I even heard tales of these infamous recluses in Invidia, where Falkovnian mercenaries frequently referred to them as the *bitterkinder*: the “bitter children.”

## The Bitterkinder

Deep within the Fumewood, a pocket of vampiric halflings has taken root. Although no one knows for sure, many say that the Black Rose used foul rites in 725 BC to draw hundreds of once-kindly smallfolk — the entire village of Kendralind — into Sithicus from his home world, then experimented on them unspeakably.

Most of the captives died outright in the experiments. A very few escaped with their lives, if not unscarred. The remainder, more than 100, were transformed into wretched undead. These vampiric *bitterkinder* have long, wild, unkempt hair and a pale, sickly complexion, with mesmerizing red eyes devoid of any other color. The living and undead alike have a reputation for killing whoever crosses their path and have a deathly fear of strangers. The vampires despised the Black Rose, but they were forced to obey him. Inza holds no such power over them.

While quite vicious and ruthless, the halflings do not mindlessly attack the populace, and they do warn trespassers not to approach their territory by setting up perimeters of poles around their encampment, topping each one with the head of a former victim. Oftentimes, a stranger can smell a camp of bitterkinder before she sees them, the stench of rotting flesh overwhelming the potential trespasser.

No one knows why they fear others so much or why they go to such obvious lengths to dissuade strangers from crossing their path. What they fear and what they may be hiding deep within their gray, dank forests are questions that go unanswered, for anyone unwise enough to infiltrate their camp is never seen again. Except, perhaps, as a signpost.

## Sithican Vampires

The halfling vampires created by the Black Rose are inextricably bound to Sithicus. Unlike the standard halfling vampire (see **Denizens of Dread**), these undead can rest anywhere in the domain, not just within a mile of their grave. They are instantly destroyed if they ever leave Sithicus, however, as if exposed to sunlight. So powerful is their bond, they suffer intense pain whenever they wander within a mile of the domain’s borders.



## Appearance

Elven Sithicans share the traits of pointed ears, vulpine features and lithe frames with their Darkonian brethren. The civilized (or "high") elves of Sithicus, however, are distinguished by the amber eyes and silvery hair most of them share. As with the elves of Darkon, Sithicans' eyes reflect light like animals.

The wild elves, I believe, are the closest to a true, primordial elven demeanor that one might find in these desolate lands. Although generally similar to their civilized kin, they let their hair grow long and mane-like. Their skin is somewhat darker than those who live in the cities. Their nature has become feral and twisted. They engage in ritual scarification, carving elaborate spiral designs into their flesh, and I have even heard rumors that they partake of cannibalism to make themselves purer and more elf-like.

## fashion

Both the domestic elves and the wild elves of the Iron Hills are a sad, pathetic lot. Their clothes and demeanor are shabby and worn. They favor drab colors, their jackets, tunics and leggings predominantly white, beige, ash or dark green-gray. Their armor is dented and their cloaks are frayed and torn. Much like their buildings, their belongings are in desperate need of repair, even though they are fully capable of creating exotic, form-fitting fabrics.

Fashion among the civilized elves is determined by caste; a trained eye can often tell a Sithican's place in society at a glance. Those of the artisan and ranger castes, for example, prefer utilitarian garb, favoring loose tunics over tight leggings. Elves of the aristocratic caste prefer long, flowing robes, often spun from spider silk if tales are to be believed. Although seldom seen, elves of the arcane caste may be the most easily identified. Their black robes and tri-cornered headdresses are lined with silver and crimson trim, signifying the three



aspects of magic (see “Attitudes Toward Magic,” below).

The wild elves dress like the primitives they are, covering themselves with however little tanned hide they require.

Although they may differ in minor details of cut or hemline, the fashions of both cultures tend to be shared by both sexes.

### Language

Sithicans speak Sithican, a dialect of the Elven tongue noted for its sibilants, which earns the Sithicans the derogatory nickname of the “hissing elves.” Speakers of the Darkonian and Sithican dialects of Elven can generally understand each other so long as both pay close attention, but Darkonian speakers may note pidgin elements within the Sithican dialect. To the learned ear, numerous Sithican words and phrases sound oddly dissonant, hinting that they may have been borrowed from languages otherwise unknown in these lands. Many elves also know enough Vaasi, Balok or Mordentish to deal with their neighbors, or a smattering of Kartakan to interact with those expatriates making up the majority of their human population.

aristocracy, those few families born to rule. Several houses serve the ruling caste, forming the middle tiers of society. Elves of the artisan caste become Sithicus’ trained craftsmen, creating and (theoretically) maintaining all of the elves’ homes and goods. The greenshaper caste is tasked with overseeing agricultural concerns, including the great brambles protecting their communities. The ranger caste consists of the elves’ protectors, maintaining order within the towns and patrolling the wilds for external threats. The smallest of these castes, though likely not the least powerful, is the arcane caste, those elves who follow wizardly pursuits.

Beneath these houses kneels the servants’ caste, those multitudes fated to spend their centuries of life tending to the needs of their betters. Naturally, all those folk who are not born into a higher caste — including all foreigners and non-elves (*nesethi*) — are considered no better than servants.

Like everything else constructed by the Sithicans, the caste system is fraying at the edges. The elves remain dourly steadfast in their traditions, no longer sure why these customs were established. As Azrael’s power (and the Black Rose’s legacy) fades and the number of expatriates continues to grow, however, the younger generation of elves has begun to question the old ways. Even the oldest of these elves — those in their twenties or thirties — are still considered mere children within Sithican society, but perhaps this is the beginning of a new direction for the country. If so, I expect change to come at a truly glacial pace.

All marriages are arranged within castes. The true “love match” is almost unheard of among the pure-blooded elves and so couplings are generally pale, passionless affairs. Elven parents produce only a few children, who are then raised and educated by their families at a distinctly *leisurely* pace. Of course, the elves can afford to take their teachings in fits and spurts; their aging slows by the year. By the time an elf is fully accepted as an adult by his peers, a human born the same day would have long since turned gray and gone to his grave.

Like many of the folk who inhabit the Core, most Sithicans are simple subsistence farmers, hunters, or laborers. They eke out what they need to survive fairly handily on the land they have to work with. In fact, they are so competent in raising certain types of exotic vegetables that the produce has come into demand in some of the neighboring domains. The elves of Hroth have developed a growing vineyard whose wine, which they call the

### Sithican Primer

English	Sithican
the sun rises	
(common greeting)	<i>e’roess</i>
the sun sets	
(common farewell)	<i>e’naess</i>
yes	<i>s</i>
no	<i>ust</i>
help!	<i>aos!</i>
go away!	<i>kelos!</i>
darkness	<i>loth</i>
stranger	<i>nelin</i>
forest	<i>sereon</i>
tyrant	<i>rothihir</i>

### Lifestyle & Education

The high elves living in the three main towns and surrounding areas adhere to a rigid caste system according to the family of one’s birth, which determines one’s lot in life, with each family responsible for specific tasks and duties. The highest caste is the





*Tears of Lethe*, is growing in popularity throughout the Core. Truth is in wine say the elves, and that was never so accurate as with this label. After consuming only a glass, I found myself overcome by sadness and the burning desire to confess my most horrible secrets to a nearby stranger.

*It would be worthwhile to determine whether this vintage retains its properties beyond the borders of Sithicus.*

Because of the market for their wine, produce, and the somber statues some elves carve from Sithicus' ancient trees, trade has slowly increased within the domain. For the insular elves, it is a difficult transition. With gritted teeth, the Sithicans watch as small encampments of human merchants establish themselves along the Merchants' Slash and other areas close to the three elven cities. In addition, these human communities are slowly drawing halflings into Sithicus, many of whom eventually add to the growing population of problematic *bitterkinder*. The only citizen who bears no qualms at all over the increase in expatriates is Azrael. His income has decreased since the loss of the Veidrava Salt Mines, so he is pleased with the growing piles of gold his trade tax has once more placed in his coffers.

The overall air of the elves who inhabit the Sithican cities is apathetic, almost despondent. They take no joy from their lives and have few entertainments, often preferring simply to spend their free time in silent meditation. Even their music resembles funereal dirges, more fitting of the dour dwarves than the light and joyful elven artistry of my homeland.

Yet the Sithican elves hold to the belief that this is the way their life is supposed to be, the way their forefathers must have lived (if their memories are to be trusted). They firmly believe that no matter what misfortune befalls the kingdom, they will survive like this. Their aristocracy is largely apathetic, no one is assertive, and I sense little likelihood of a leader unifying the various groups of elves in the near future.

The only explanation for this behavior I can suggest is that the elves of Darkon claim to feel a close connection with the land they live on — as if they are literally a part of nature. Yet, as the Sithicans themselves claim (however impossible it may be to validate), these elves were brought here years ago with the distinct duty of torturing an-

other cursed soul. Sithicus is not their true land, and they subconsciously reject it as the land rejects them. Like so many of the floral specimens I have handled during my travels, the Sithicans are not unlike plants that cannot be transplanted to unfamiliar soil.

While in Har-Thelen, I heard a remarkable tale. For years, the elves tried desperately to escape this "land of spectres." When an opportunity finally arose for them to reclaim their freedom, however, most of the "natives" were struck with the horribly truthful realization that there was nowhere for them to return to. The Sithicans believe wholeheartedly that the world from which they were banished no longer exists. Like the Black Rose himself, it may have been destroyed or drawn into a deeper hell.

Yet while the elves appear beaten down by their lot in life, they manage to perk up, as it were, whenever non-elf foreigners are around. They assume a subtly haughty air and deride their visitors in other subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

Most foreigners are horribly overcharged for the most basic supplies, and only a lucky visitor secures a room, to which I can testify. Food and drink go to the non-elf last, and a Sithican will sometimes empty out his slop bucket just as a foreigner walks by. I barely missed a drenching more than once as I made my way around the kingdom. I suppose I cannot take these elves to task overly much, as I have seen firsthand how elves are treated in other countries during my travels. This is their way of turnabout.

Unlike their civilized brethren, Sithicus' wild elves live in small groups, much like wolf packs, with one dominant leader who must constantly defend his position from up-and-coming "youngsters." Always on the move, they fight among other packs, although a few packs will work together on rare occasions, oftentimes when a large caravan passes near the Iron Hills. One pack chases the caravan from the rear, herding the unsuspecting travelers into an ambush by two or three other packs ahead of them. Typically, no victims survive, and everything portable is scavenged.

### **Attitudes Toward Magic**

Sithicans believe that all arcane power flows from moonlight. Mind you, the elves also believe that the moon itself is the eye of one of their god-wyrms (see "Religion," below), with the magic it emits waxing and waning as the great dragon opens





and closes its eye. According to what little Sithican legend I could gather, three god-wyrms of magic once ruled the sky — one black, one silver and one crimson, each controlling one aspect of magic: destruction, creation, and transformation, respectively. Yet the legendary black wyrm Nuitari ate her sisters, and so only her black glow remained. The destructive aspects of magic — spells of death, doom, and necromancy — dominated those years, and thus magic fell under suspicion. Although the arcane caste continued to exist, its wizardly members seldom sought to draw attention to their training. With the recent dramatic change in Nuitari, however, the elves believe that Nuitari has merged with her sisters, bringing some balance back to the supernatural world. The arcane caste is once again emerging from the shadows to practice the occult arts openly.

While Sithicans no longer see any harm in magic itself, they place their trust entirely in the hands of those who are *trained* in its use. Natural arcane talents such as sorcerers are considered inherently unstable. Should the elves discover a sorcerer in their midst, the hapless mage may face perilous, potentially fatal tests to prove his mastery over the forces he commands... and not vice versa.

## Religion

No major religion is associated with those who dwell in the land of shadows and truth. While a few expatriates have brought their religious practices with them, such as the worship of Hala and Erza, they are the exception, not the rule. As far as I could discern, no active religious organizations operate within the borders of Sithicus. All that remains of the original elven religion are a few scattered ruins, whatever names they once bore stricken off, their statuary and icons seemingly blasted by lightning. Only through the closest scrutiny could I piece together even a partial account of the old Sithican faith. Apparently, these temples were once dedicated to dragons of godlike power, who continually fought among themselves for the right to devour the world. Of these god-wyrms, the two most powerful were the Adamantium Wyrm, god of cold, reason and sunlight, and his mate the Many-Headed Devourer, goddess of heat and darkness, who devoured him and scattered his bones throughout the sky.

The previous lord of Sithicus kept the elven population under his thumb. They had no time for leisurely activity or open, religious pursuits. After

## The Inconstant Moon: Nuitari

To the naked eye, Sithicus shares a single moon with the rest of the Core. To some viewers, however, Nuitari takes on the appearance of a stained glass window. Creatures with supernatural or spell-like abilities sense the power lingering in Nuitari. Some morally neutral creatures see a rosette in its triple-hued glow, while others of evil bent notice more horrendous things in its face. To all, the landscape casts strange and mysterious shadows under Nuitari's otherworldly glow.

While the Black Rose ruled, Nuitari had a cycle of just eight days. Today, its cycle matches the rest of the Core, stretching over a full lunar month. While the moon is half-full to full, evil-aligned arcane spellcasters suffer penalties to their occult defenses, while good or neutral arcane spellcasters receive bonuses. Only arcane spellcasters (not users of spell-like or supernatural abilities) are affected. These effects were reversed during the reign of the Black Rose.

**New Moon:** Evil arcane spellcasters gain a +1 profane bonus to their saving throws vs. all spells and spell-like abilities. Those of good or neutral moral alignment suffer a 1 profane penalty to these saving throws.

**Crescent Moon:** No effect.

**Half- or Gibbous Moon:** Evil arcane spellcasters suffer a 2 sacred penalty to their saving throws vs. all spells and spell-like abilities. Those of good or neutral moral alignment receive a +2 sacred bonus to these saving throws.

**Full Moon:** Evil arcane spellcasters suffer a 3 sacred penalty to their saving throws vs. all spells and spell-like abilities and effectively cast evil spells at one level lower than normal. Good or neutral arcane spell casters receive a +3 sacred bonus to these saving throws and effectively cast good spells at one level higher than normal.

the Black Rose's destruction, the nature of the land changed. That no religion has taken root in this new land of "truths" I find quite intriguing. Something for philosophers to ponder, perhaps?



## The Sithican Hero

**Races:** Most Sithicans are elves, with smatterings of humans, half-Vistani, halflings and a growing population of half-elves. Sithicans are met with derision and hatred by the humans outside their borders and thus return the favor within their realm. While “true” Sithicans are disdainful, if not outright rude, to any foreigners and non-elves within their borders, PCs may be exempt from such racist behavior. Yet even they are growing concerned and fearful of the *bitterkinder*, the fastest-growing population of “new” Sithicans.

**Classes:** Druids, fighters, paladins, rangers and wizards are the most common classes in Sithicus. In a desperate attempt to better understand the land Sithicans have finally chosen to inhabit, there is a growing trend among the elves to embrace the path of the druid. Acting as guardians of the forests, druids protect the woods from elf or human intervention. They serve as a medium between the land of spectres and elfkind, although some turn toward evil as they struggle with and misinterpret the nature they so desperately try to understand.

Rangers are also highly respected, though not numerous. They protect the travelers passing through the elven forests, while both druids and rangers act as intermediaries between folk and nature.

A select few from the growing numbers of halflings have turned to the life of the paladin, as younglings born to halflings who escaped with their lives have not grown up under the grim rule of the Black Rose. Wizards are also a growing number as more of them reveal themselves. Without the sorcerous presence of the Black Rose, many who studied for years in secret are slowly practicing their craft in public.

**Recommended Skills:** Climb, Craft (bowmaking, carpentry, leathermaking, sculpture, weaponsmithing), Heal, Hide, Jump, Knowledge (geography, local, nature), Listen, Move Silently, Profession (brewer, cook, farmer, fisher, herbalist, innkeeper, lumberjack, tanner, woodcutter), Search, Sense Motive, Spellcraft, Spot, Survival, Swim.

**Recommended Feats:** Alertness, Combat Expertise, Craft Wand, Deflect Arrows, Dodge, Great Fortitude, Improved Unarmed Strike, Point Blank Shot, Run, Skill Focus (Knowledge [any], Move Silently, Survival), Sworn Enemy (see *Van Richten's Arsenal*), Track, Weapon Focus (dagger, handaxe, longbow, longsword, quarterstaff, shortbow, shortspear).

**Sithican Male Names:** Aramil, Aust, Eberk, Enialis, Heian, Himo, Ivellios, Laucian, Quarion, Ruric, Thamior, Tharivol and Veit.

**Sithican Female Names:** Anastroianna, Antinua, Artin, Diesa, Drusilia, Felosial, Ielenia, Ilde, Lia, Qillathe, Silaqui, Valanthe and Xanaphia.

## Outcast Ratings in Sithicus

Humans and halflings each have a base Outcast Rating of 3 when dealing with the xenophobic elves of Sithicus. Wild elves ignore all scarring-based OR modifiers.

## The Realm



Azrael Dak has been the titular ruler of Sithicus since the Black Rose's disappearance in 752 BC in the Hour of Screaming Shadows. In the few scraps of official history put down in writing in

Sithicus and in diplomatic communiqués from Azrael shown to me in other realms, the mad dwarf alternately claims that the Rose never existed or that he had been a mere figurehead, servant or puppet used to focus the animosity of the land's

many enemies. According to recent, official court history, “King Azrael I” has been the one true ruler of Sithicus since he first set foot there in 720 BC.

No one I have met believes this, of course, and only the most fear-addled peasant even pretends it is true.

That is not to say Azrael lacks power in his realm. The dwarf is a despot with tremendous resources at his command, and his edicts have a profound impact upon the day-to-day lives of the Sithican people. His control is far from complete, however. During the reign of the Black Rose,



Azrael derived much of his fearful reputation by bringing all who opposed him to the attention of his master, who could supposedly burn or freeze foes with a gesture or kill with a word. With the Black Rose gone, Azrael can no longer dangle that threat over anyone's head. Azrael denies the existence of any rival to his authority, but that claim seems threadbare. Numerous resistance movements are brewing, though none of them yet holds any true might.

Even if no one gives it voice, I suspect that the truth — and the real power in Sithicus — lies within the Great Chasm. During my travels, I collected several accounts of a seductive yet deadly Vistana, including a few accounts from those who identify her as none other than Inza Magdova Kulchevich, thought killed in the Night of Screaming Shadows. If this woman is indeed Inza, then to have survived the shadows she must indeed possess the power her foes attribute to her. The stories I have heard about her dark deeds suggest that the dwarf holds the reins of Sithicus only at her whim.

Perhaps knowing his tenuous position makes Azrael's recent treatment of his more mundane enemies so brutal, even beyond the natural viciousness the dwarf possesses in abundance. Not even Drakov is so extraordinarily brutal to those who fall into his clutches. No, this is cruelty borne of flailing desperation. Azrael's power is fleeting, and he knows it.

## Government

King Azrael's mobile court moves from place to place as the whim strikes him. He cares little for the trappings of power, but revels in its exercise. A despot of the first order, he issues new edicts constantly, increasing taxes and declaring new ones or pressing his subjects into servitude as his needs demand. Old laws are rarely rescinded and the King's Code remains largely unwritten. The resulting tangle of contradictory laws leaves interpretation to the local government officials and the military, who must rely upon memory rather than a written record. Opportunities for abuse are obvious and many.

Sithicus' dreaded secret police, the Politskarae, are rife with corruption. The agents are poor at hiding their affiliation with the secret police (the identity of the local politskara is usually well known in any community), but that does not lessen their power. Because revealing or even admitting to *knowing* the identity of one of Azrael's secret agents

## Dread Possibility: The Blessed Knight

In 753, reports first surfaced of a heroic warrior who rescued people in need along the road that skirts the Great Rift near the ruins of Nedragard Keep. The armed and fully armored figure has been sighted many times since then, always in the same vicinity, always at moments of great peril for helpless travelers. Known only as the "Blessed Knight" by those he has rescued, the stranger refuses to speak or raise the visor of his helm, and makes his exit — vanishes, some say — as soon as danger has passed.

Because the Blessed Knight has battled state soldiers, preventing them from abusing peasants and merchants, Azrael has established a sizeable reward for the hero's capture or death. To date, no one has successfully cornered the man or even landed a blow against him in battle. His skills as a swordsman are remarkable, his strength prodigious.

Some claim that the Blessed Knight is none other than the wandering hero Ganelon, also sometimes called the Blessed for his kindness and compassion. Ganelon has denied any connection to the armored rescuer, and he has no reason to lie about the matter.

Yet the Vistani say that the key to the Blessed Knight's identity lies within the ruins of Nedragard Keep itself. They claim that the Black Rose spent so many years within the illusory worlds of his *memory mirrors*, dreaming of the hero he could have been, that he left some aspect of himself behind. When the *memory mirrors* were smashed, those illusions — images of the Black Rose as a mortal, had he never been damned — should have been destroyed as well. Instead, they were freed, given life by the very shadowstuff that blasted Nedragard. Even so, the "Blessed Knight" would remain a mere illusion. These images seem to be gaining strength, showing signs of increasing intelligence and independence. The Vistani claim that this means they may be drawing strength from some unknown source. Perhaps, they whisper, the Black Rose truly was destroyed, but his essence is slowly being drawn back into the shadows he left behind.



is a crime, the locals often find themselves in an awkward and dangerous position. They know who the agent is and even what he is planning, but cannot react for fear of summary execution.

The Politskaræ are charged with enforcing two very broad rules: every transaction in Sithicus should benefit King Azrael, and those who oppose the dwarf king's rule must be punished. How to accomplish these goals is up to the individual agent, and oversight of the Politskaræ is nonexistent. Azrael keeps his men loyal by keeping them well paid and allowing them to express their cruelty as they will. So long as tax money keeps flowing from an area and no open revolts break out, the secret police act as they please — much to the despair of the local population.

The main stabilizing force is the elven aristocracy. Each of the three Sithican cities has a council made up of elders of the aristocratic caste, who advise, appoint and obey one leader, known as the Lord Speaker. The three Lord Speakers answer to Sithicus' ruler, traditionally identified as the Lord of Nedragaard Keep. The noble houses live by complex but consistent codes passed down through oral tradition. While they will not openly challenge King Azrael, the elves follow his laws in appearance only. In matters of substance, when the dwarf king demands they change their rules to match his, the elven nobles fall back upon the maddening elven tactic of nigh-endless debate and delay. Given Azrael's short attention span, the debate lasts much longer than his interest in the subject, and the elves can, eventually, let the matter drop without effecting any change at all. The elves' own law enforcers, the honored families of the ranger caste, are few but elite, acting in whatever role required of them — soldier, detective or executioner.

This is not to say that the elves escape Azrael's machinations completely. The dwarf king shrewdly plays off rivalries and hatreds existing among the various elven houses. These feuds are intense, expressed more often by acts of political and social treachery than physical violence. In looking at the individuals who act as if they are politskara (obvious in most cases), it appears as if Azrael has placed agents where they will maximize inter-house tensions. Thus, he manipulates the aristocracy to accede to his demands more often than they realize.

Ah, so you realize that the despot may be mad, but hardly a fool. The stunted little tyrant is cunning and tenacious. Now that he has declared Sithicus his "den," this badger will not be removed as easily as some would boast.

This struggle for power between Azrael and the elves hides a third actor upon the stage of Sithicus, one who wields more power than king and aristocracy combined. Inza's court is never seen, and though she travels the land much like Azrael, she draws no attention to her presence. She puts her schemes in motion by manipulating and heightening the guilt of those within Sithicus' borders. Anyone, at any time, might be acting upon her command. The locals understand that they are pawns to some dark force, some hidden lord — a knowledge that heightens the realm's oppressive atmosphere.

Inza's long-term goal remains a mystery — one of the few real mysteries in Sithicus. Yet it is unlikely to remain hidden for long, given the domain's curious nature. For now, she seems content to allow Azrael and the elves to battle for control of Sithicus, a prize she has already won and carried with her into the lightless depths of the Great Chasm. The only clear losers in this struggle are the Sithican people, who fully understand the injustice of their situation and the hopelessness of revolt. The nature of the realm denies them harmless, hopeful delusions that things will get better someday soon. The harsh truth is, they will not.

## Economy

Trade among the humans in Sithicus is largely conducted through barter, with most eking out a living on subsistence-level farms. Trade among the elves is more robust, but they are reluctant to traffic with the local humans, whom they view as trespassers. The elves are more likely to deal with merchants from other domains, and much of the import-export business that occurs in Sithicus involves an elven merchant at some stage. The only significant exception is the salt trade, which Azrael conducts as a government monopoly. The elves frown upon the mines, but have thus far been ineffective in shutting them down.

## Law Enforcement

The *politskara* below can represent any member of Azrael's secret police. A number of humans have also been recruited to keep an eye on Sithicus' emigrants; adjust these scores as needed. The Sithican ranger represents one of the lone, elite protectors who roam the forests on their stag beetle steeds, using their wild empathy to control the creatures. Their ranks are restricted to Sithican elves alone.

**Politskara:** Sylvan elf War2: CR 1; Medium humanoid (elf); HD 2d8-2, hp 7; Init +1; Spd 30 ft.; AC 17, touch 11, flat-footed 16; Base Atk +2; Grp +2; Atk +3 melee (1d8/19-20, longsword) or +3 ranged (1d8/x3, composite longbow [+0 Str bonus]); Full Atk +3 melee (1d8/19-20, longsword) or +3 ranged (1d8/x3, composite longbow [+0 Str bonus]); SQ elf traits, low-light vision; AL NE; SV Fort +2, Ref +1, Will +0; Str 11, Dex 13, Con 9, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 10.

*Skills and Feats:* Intimidate +4, Listen +3, Search +3, Spot +3; Weapon Focus (longsword). OR 3 (racial).

*Possessions:* Longsword, composite longbow (+0 Str bonus), 20 arrows, chain shirt, large steel shield, *potion of cure light wounds*.

**Sithican Ranger:** Sylvan elf Rgr2: CR 2; Medium humanoid (elf); HD 2d8+2, hp 11; Init +3; Spd 30 ft.; AC 16, touch 13, flat-footed 13; Base Atk +2; Grp +3; Atk +4 melee (1d8+1/19-20, masterwork longsword) or +5 ranged (1d8/x3, composite longbow [+1 Str bonus]); Full Atk +4 melee (1d8+1/19-20, masterwork longsword) or +5 ranged (1d8/x3, composite longbow [+1 Str bonus]); SA favored enemy +2 (varies; usually undead); SQ elf traits, low-light vision, Track, wild empathy, combat style (archery); AL LN; SV Fort +4, Ref +6, Will +1; Str 13, Dex 17, Con 12, Int 10, Wis 13, Cha 8.

*Skills and Feats:* Handle Animal +4, Hide +7, Listen +5, Move Silently +7, Ride (horse) +8, Search +6, Spot +5, Survival +5; Mounted Combat, Rapid ShotB, TrackB. OR 3 (racial).

*Possessions:* Masterwork longsword, composite longbow (+1 Str bonus), 20 arrows, masterwork studded leather armor.

The main resources in Sithicus are oats, cabbage, turnips, peppers, squash, peaches, grapes, sheep, goats, wine, timber, furs, salt, gems, crystal and cloth. The elves produce rare and exotic vegetables, spirits and crafts of incredibly fine quality. They harvest hardwoods rare to the Core, though they have threatened in recent years to stop all logging in Sithicus if human lumberjacks do not cease their incursions into the forests.

The coinage of Sithicus is a holdover from the reign of the Black Rose, yet one more reminder of his existence despite all attempts to forget him. The gold piece is known as a "rose," the silver piece a "crown," and the copper piece a "sword," for the symbols minted onto the face of each coin. The reverse side of each coin is morbidly marked with an elven skull. These coins have grown increasingly rare within Sithicus itself, though the elves may take years to agree on new designs. They are far more likely to be encountered in neighboring realms, before they are melted down for the value of their base metals.

## Diplomacy

Sithicus remains relatively isolated from its neighbors, thanks to the elven population's dis-

dain of humans, to various failed alliances, to the occasional border skirmish, and to the perceived instability of Azrael's claim to the throne. Sithican ambassadors are not welcome in most lands and are barely tolerated in those few courts that allow them access.

**Barovia:** While most Barovians consider Sithicus an unnatural place, some in the realm's western reaches — the lands gained during the collapse of Gundarak — maintain ties with former countrymen who fled south rather than remain subjects of Count Strahd. Much of Sithicus' interaction with Barovia is founded upon informal networks of trading partners. In recent years, some former Gundarakites, tired of elven snobbery and the unsteady nature of Azrael's rule, have returned to their ancestral lands. With each departure, the feeble lines of trade and communication with Barovia wither further. The dwarf king's troops along the Barovian border now turn back Sithicans seeking to exit the realm, rather than preventing any theoretical incursions by Strahd's troops.

**Invidia:** Though Azrael shares Malocchio Aderre's hatred of the Vistani, the Invidians have distrusted the Sithican ruler since the Hour of Screaming Shadows. The dwarf king returns that



suspicion in kind. Tensions between the two lands are very high, and trade and diplomacy all but nonexistent.

**Kartakass:** Kartakass is the closest thing Sithicus has to an ally, but the relationship can be chalked up to the aggressive expansionism of the Kartakan merchants more than any shared political vision. In recent years, the dwarf king has come to appreciate the Kartakans, as the rest of his neighbors are unwilling to trade with him directly, even for such rare and highly valued items as elven spirits and salt. The elves of Sithicus do not share his enthusiasm, particularly due to the presence of Kartakan lumberjacks.

**Valachan:** Baron von Kharkov is publicly contemptuous of Azrael, and Valachani patrols are especially strong along the border between the two realms. The soldiers' stated mission is to prevent the spread of unrest from Sithicus, but the Black Leopards are actually trained subversives who creep into the dwarf king's domain to foster unrest. While Azrael does not suspect von Kharkov's secret desire to annex Sithicus — he has returned von Kharkov's public contempt by stationing few troops along the border, as if the Valachanis could never be a threat — some other force within the kingdom recognizes the danger. In recent months, many Valachan spies have met with a prompt and grisly death, particularly those who travel close to the Great Chasm.

**Verbrek:** The most adventurous of the Sithican elves have traveled to Verbrek to pit their woodlore and tracking skills against the packs of unnatural wolves said to roam the forest there. For the majority of Sithicans, the terrifying stories of Verbrek's werewolves kill any interest in visiting that land. Where Verbrek's river merchants can gain access to Sithicus, they do some light trading, particularly in timber and the strange vegetables grown by the elves, which are unknown in other parts of the Core.

## Sites of Interest

**R**ecalling many points of interest along the rambling route I took through Sithicus is hard. Do not misunderstand me. The country was completely devoid of mysterious corners — far from it. I simply find calling forth unique memories difficult. Almost everything is clouded with a sense of familiarity. No matter where my feet led me, I always had

the vague feeling that I had been there, or someplace very similar, before. Though my recollection of my travels may be muddled, my journals are thankfully clearer. Several areas still haunt me.

## Mal-Erek

The elven village of Mal-Erek sits just south of Verbrek on the Little Arden, west of the Breadth Forest. This insular community, despite the road passing through its walls and the small, ramshackle docks amid its northern brambles, sees relatively few visitors. I felt the hard looks from the dour elves who populated the city and knew they wanted my gold and then wanted me on my way.

I barely had the chance to glance into the library I discovered before the rude stares drove me out. The Library of Mal-Erek is a true pity: once its towering shelves held arcane secrets to rival the collection of any Darkonian mage, but most books have rotted into mulch. The elven librarian seemed to bear no interest in me or the state of ruin around her. Before I left, however, I went looking for her in the stacks, hoping to give her a piece of my mind. Naively, I was not yet aware of how endemic Sithican apathy truly is. I caught sight of the librarian as I rounded a corner, and in that instant, witnessed something *unnerving*. The elf maid had taken one of the books into a secluded corner and there was *eating* it, one strip of sodden vellum at a time. To what end, I cannot even guess, and I did not stay to ask.

## Where to Stay in Mal-Erek

Considering the reception I received upon entering the deteriorating city, I was surprised to discover that there were actually two inns within the crumbling walls of Mal-Erek. Neither is worth their cost. Between the Dirge of Sellisa (common quality rooms, no meals) and Aeir's Tears (common quality rooms, poor quality meals), I would recommend the latter. Neither inn has many rooms,

**Mal-Erek (village):** Conventional; AL NE; 200 gp limit; Assets 5,000 gp; Population 500; Isolated (elves 94%, half-elves 3%, humans 2%, other 1%).

**Authority Figures:** Claos the Elder, male elf Wiz6 (Lord Speaker).

**Important Characters:** Nuenel (librarian and lorekeeper), female elf Wiz3.

but Aeir's Tears does boast a small kitchen and meager meals. I found it more comfortable to stay there than to search out a tavern separate from my accommodations.

## Hroth

With ferns curling up between every cracked stone in the Elf Road, I found the short trek south from Mal-Erek unexpectedly arduous. Hroth, the largest settlement in Sithicus, appeared little different from Mal-Erek at first glance: hard to find from the outside, decaying on the inside. Although it follows the same concentric layout common to elven communities, it lacks Mal-Erek's docks and has only one entranceway. Extensive marshland stretches to the southeast all the way to the distant banks of the Arden. The elves of Hroth often dispose of their dead in the bogs dotting this swamp. Many strange things are preserved within their peat-choked waters, most famously the hulking, horned ancient dead that emerged to do battle with van Richten and the local rangers in 724 BC.

Hroth sees few visitors, but paradoxically it has a somewhat larger relative population of humans and halflings than Mal-Erek. These





folk are as reclusive as their elven hosts and are moderately tolerated as long as they respect the locals' desire for quiet.

## Where to Stay in Hroth

I had more luck finding a few choices where to stay and where to eat in this forlorn city. There were still only two inns, the Climber's End (poor quality rooms, common quality meals) and the Sighing Maid (common quality rooms, poor quality meals). Both had small dining halls; I chose the former because a few humans were already staying there. Less than two weeks in Sithicus, and I was tired of being the only outsider.

Those humans at the Climber's End appeared to be a band of adventurers, gathering supplies. When I asked where they were headed, one of them simply nodded to the south, toward the Disappearing Hills, and said, "We're going to find out what's on the other side." I stared out the window a long time after them as they left, mesmerized by their naïveté. I knew in my heart that they would never return, yet a part of me hoped it. No amount of gold, however, would have persuaded me to follow in their footsteps. As my survey of the Core is now nearing completion, I will be most satisfied to return home to Darkon.

*You speak too soon, my little scholar.  
Your labors are not nearly done.*

**Hroth (small town):** Conventional; AL N; 800 gp limit; Assets 37,600 gp; Population 940; Isolated (elves 91%, humans 4%, half elves 3%, other 2%).  
**Authority Figures:** Ieree Mylindan, female elf Drd6/Wiz4 (Lady Speaker).

**Important Characters:** Klannyn Sirr (local guide), male human Ftr 4/Exp 8; Tileara (herbalist), female elf Drd5/Wiz4.

## Har-Thelen

Nestled in the center of the country, Har-Thelen sits on the banks of the Musarde. Nedragaard Keep and the Great Chasm lie just a day's hard hike down a rocky road to the east, separated from the town by the Krellin River. Due to its location, Har-Thelen sees the most foreign traffic and has squirmed under the firmest grip of the Lord of Nedragaard Keep. For these reasons, Har-Thelen is widely

accepted as the "capital" of Sithicus, despite being little more than half the size of Hroth.

Har-Thelen is organized behind its weed-choked walls in a series of concentric circles. Its most active areas extend from its outermost ring. A fairly verdant plain stretches north of the town, following the banks of the Musarde, and the local noble and greenshaper castes are currently cooperating to develop a vineyard that could probably turn quite a profit.

Har-Thelen's docks are unusually well-kept for a Sithican community. This town has the largest mixed population, strongly bolstered by its river traffic. The races tolerate each other no better here than in the other elven settlements, however; the non-elves are simply more prevalent. To avoid trouble, most non-elves congregate near the extensive docks.

Those docks exist thanks to the town's former Lord Speaker, Mason of Har-Thelen. Unusually ambitious for a Sithican noble, Mason doggedly bullied the artisan caste into repairing and maintaining the city docks and pressed for increased trade with Kartakass and Invidia. Mason, though, was also known to resent Azrael's brutal intrusions and steep taxes, while Azrael supposedly preferred his elves compliant. After the Black Rose fell from power, the two came to loggerheads, and Mason was forced to vacate his post hastily — the only time the title of Lord Speaker has changed hands within memory. Current Lady Speaker Ciyriia is new to her post, and much more of the docile mold Azrael prefers.

Mason's current fate is unclear. Some believe he is dead or has fled into exile. Others whisper that he still haunts the region, trying to organize an underground resistance to bring down the mad dwarf's regime.

## Where to Stay in Har-Thelen

There was little choice in the central city of Sithicus for a non-elf. The only inn that would even consider letting me in the front door was the Wailing Banshee (poor quality rooms, no meals). The rooms were meager in terms of supplies, and there was no dining hall or any other place where the guests could gather. Therefore, I had to seek out another spot to refresh myself. After a bit of a search, dodging refuse and chamber pots that always seemed to empty in front of me regardless of which winding, pot-hole infested path I chose, I discovered a hidden treasure.







Whether it was because of the warm fire, or the excellent wine, or the fact that folk actually spoke to me, I was quite taken with the Banshee's Tears Tavern (common quality meals). The food was unremarkable but warm, and the wine from the local vineyards was wonderful and powerful. This was the only spot in any of Sithicus' three cities where I did not feel like a pariah. And that says much.

**Har-Thelen (village):** Conventional; ALLE; 200 gp limit; Assets 5,000 gp; Population 500; Isolated (elves 88%, half elves 10%, humans 1%, other 1%).  
*Authority Figures:* Ciyriia Mathrund, female elf Drd5/Wiz3 (Lady Speaker).

*Important Characters:* Giogi Tharper (tanner), male human Ftr5; Tyrlyra Tharper (herbalist/healer), female elf Drd3; Mason (resistance leader), male elf Rog5/Wiz3.

## The Last Stand of the Vistani

Northeast of the ruins of Veidrava, past the Musarde and the Merchants' Slash and east of the central Fumewood, I heard mention of a clearing with a pathetic history. Some of the residents of Har-Thelen mentioned the spot to me. In a hushed tone, one of the elves told me over warm wine one evening in the local tavern in Har-Thelen that a band of Vistani known as the Wanderers broke their oath to a kinsman many generations in his grave and lingered more than one night in the same spot — that clearing.

A horrible fate befell the eighteen or so Wanderers. A band of Malocchio Aderre's ogres ambushed them, decimating their ranks and leaving almost no survivors. At this point, the speaker lowered his voice even more as he continued the tale. "If it weren't for the Black Rose," he slurred, "they would have all died." He stopped suddenly, casting a fearful eye on the tavern occupants, as though he had broken some terrible oath by mentioning the Rose aloud. When he realized the others, including his companion, were not going to strike him dead for it, he finally continued. He told me that the ogres were all massacred; as they died, their swollen purses burst open and covered the ground with a blanket of coins, some of whose country of origin could never be determined.

The woman, who I assume was his wife, added that someone or something came along immedi-

ately afterward and desecrated the mass grave that held the Vistani; their bodies were never found. "That doesn't mean," she explained to me, "that no one has ever seen them since, though." When I asked her to elaborate, she told me that many folk traveled to "The Last," as the spot is called. "Some to seek the otherworldly gold that supposedly litters the forest floor," she said, "while the occasional Vistani traveler treks to the spot as though on a holy pilgrimage."

I believe I located the spot not far from the Merchants' Slash. No marker identifies the area, but I found a clearing some forty feet wide with what looked like the remains of a few rotted *vardos* along one edge. Off to one side was what might have been a mass grave: a pit that could easily have held perhaps twenty human-sized bodies, though nothing but worms wriggled there now. The place was eerily still, and I found myself holding my breath. I moved about quietly and thought that I heard whispers around me, but it was probably just the wind and the ceaseless creak of the pine boughs.

Before I left the spot, I thought I spied something winking in the twilight on the forest floor. It may have indeed been a piece of gold, but I decided against investigating and left the clearing before the last of the evening light failed. I did not want to chance desecrating the place and have some vengeful Vistani spirit hounding me for the return of its treasure.

## The Black Chapel

I am afraid I must base all of my information on this infamous locale on word-of-mouth. I went so far as to locate Veidrava and approach what must have been the salt mine's entrance, but I went no further. Some putrid, saline stench wafted from the abyssal crack, and I struggled to keep down my meager meal. I am sure that something or someone had died down that hole some time ago. I did not care to find out what it was. As I vacillated between keeping my breakfast and gathering more information for you, dear patron, a strange foursome approached and made to stop me from venturing any further.

Three of the four appeared human, and judging by their somewhat colorful garb, I deduced they were Vistani. That in and of itself was odd, as few of their kind wander through Sithicus these days. The final companion, however, was truly a rare sight, some kind of gray-skinned giant, perhaps twelve feet tall. As a lone traveler, I should have



felt threatened by such a strange collection of men, yet I felt oddly sure that I was quite safe.

The oldest of the group came over to where I was poised, inspecting the fissure, and held out a hand in warning. "You don't want to go down there," he cautioned.

"I have to agree with you," I replied. "But, since you know I shouldn't venture in, you must know what's down there. Tell me."

The older man consulted his other companions with a glance before turning back to me. "I have heard of an unholy chapel in the depths, a Black Chapel carved from the very salt itself. Carved with harts and hounds and other things that belong in the daylight."

"It is below the mine," the giant added. "It is older than the mine."

One of the younger men, dressed decidedly better than his companions, chimed in, "And there are melted benches and a melted altar. Nothing a fine lady such as you needs to trouble herself with."

"Unless, you are looking for trouble," added the youngest, with a touch of something less friendly than a warning in his tone.

"Piotr, mind yourself a bit better," the oldest admonished him.

"The only thing I have in mind is satisfying my curiosity," I told them.

"Curiosity can be a dangerous trait in these parts," the giant warned me, "and there are things down there far worse than the Chapel."

"Such as what?" I asked them.

"If it will keep you from meddling where you shouldn't," the oldest finally said, "then I shall tell you."

Yet before he could continue, the giant started his tale.

## The Lake of Sounds

"Beyond the Black Chapel, a series of tunnels wind their way deeper into the bowels of this cursed spot. The tunnels themselves were dug out by someone... or something," he corrected himself somberly, "with very large claws." I was hard-pressed not to laugh at his earnest expression when he held up his own, stone-colored hands impersonating the claws — that is, until I realized how serious he was.

"Whatever created those tunnels probably still haunts them. Beyond the defiled altar, a tunnel leads down several hundred feet, the stench of brine more overwhelming with every step, choking out almost all breath."

I could tell by his description that this giant, so out of place here in the land of shadows and truth, had been there himself.

"Finally, a purple glow starts to fill the tunnel and you know you are near," he lowered his voice, overcome by some unnamed emotion.

"Near to what?" I asked.

"The Lake of Sounds," the older man finished for the giant. "A huge underground lake that spans an enormous cavern. Along the stalactites and the cavern ceiling, a luminous purple moss grows and fills the chamber with its sickly light. The black

## Secret Society: The Wanderers

Sometime after escaping from the Black Rose in 720 BC, Magda Kulchevich gathered a odd mix of other Vistani to her side — those whose families had been murdered or destroyed, just as the Black Rose had wiped out her tribe. Eventually, her band numbered nearly two dozen. Yet the *raunie* and her people were betrayed by she who should have been closest to the revered Magda: her own daughter Inza.

Nearly all of Magda's caravan members were destroyed, save for three men: the older Alexi, the creature-comfort loving Nikolas, and the angry Piotr. After Inza's plot to destroy the Black Rose was foiled, the three Vistani were joined by a fourth member: a stone giant named Nabon. Because of the magically endowed boots the giant sports, he has an unusual connection to the Vistani survivors as well as a different connection of blood debt to Inza, who kept him hobbled and imprisoned in the Veidrava mine for years. Together, the four make up a group known today in Sithicus as the Wanderers.

They patrol the countryside over and over, spoiling as many of Azrael's plans as they can, preparing for the day they will meet with the true darklord of Sithicus and finally have their revenge against her. Only then will their wandering finally come to an end. Further details on the Wanderers can be found in **Heroes of Light**.



waters cast no reflection back and are even supposed to be poisonous. The black waters move of their own accord, and the cavern echoes with whispers that never cease.

"After the horrendous Hour of Screaming Shadows, I don't know that anyone other than that werebadger, Azrael, has ever come back from a visit to those fetid waters. And even he has a fearful look about him when he returns."

"If what you say is true," I said, "why would anyone else try the journey?"

"Gold," the older man replied. "What other reason ever motivates beings to attempt the foolish things they do?"

I would have liked to speak to the odd coalition of men longer, but the oldest politely mentioned that they needed to continue their journey, and I could see the younger men were already anxious to move on as I was obviously not a damsel in despair.

"Where to?" I asked.

"To the end," the giant responded and the four continued on. Our paths never crossed again.

## Final Thoughts

Once one has suffered through even a few hours in the blighted land of Sithicus, I cannot imagine any sane person returning by choice to this doom-bowed place. The strange threat of truth the domain presents is unsettling in ways I never could have imagined before coming here. I no longer wonder why the rulers of the Core have shunned this kingdom or its people.

These cold months have been sorely trying, my dear patron, and at times harrowing. This endless forest weighs heavily upon me, and I yearn for the grassy plains and broad skies of Nova Vaasa.

Intellectually, I understand that the sense of guilt which plagues me here is nothing more than a phantasmal manifestation of Sithicus' planar fabric, no stranger than our memory-leeching homeland. Yet, at an emotional level, these accusations will not let me deny their essential truth. I feel like a madwoman straining to be sane, but forced to judge sanity through the filter of a deranged mind.

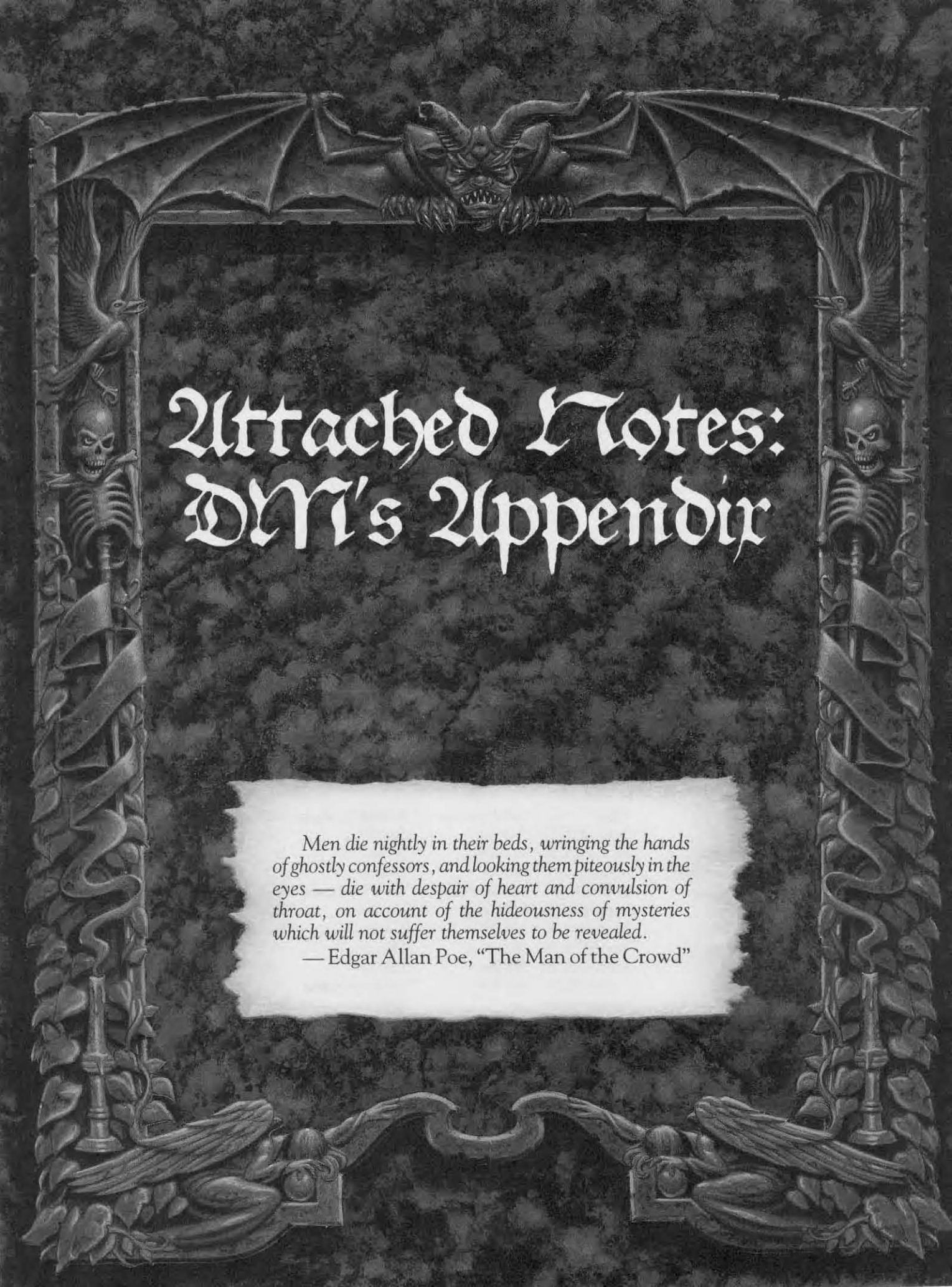
I am due to meet with one of your lackeys at dusk, when I shall deliver this, my latest folio. That done, I shall spare no time in leaving these wretched woods behind. Fortunately, I have already made arrangements with a Vistana I happened upon earlier today. He had an underfed, haggard look about him, and seemed most eager as I dropped my coins in his scarred palm. An escapee from the Dukkar, perhaps? I will have to ask.

Regards,

S

So at last the hounds have found my fox. I warned the impudent little fool against relying on the gypsies. Now it begins.





# Attached Notes: DVI's Appendix

*Men die nightly in their beds, wringing the hands of ghostly confessors, and looking them piteously in the eyes — die with despair of heart and convulsion of throat, on account of the hideousness of mysteries which will not suffer themselves to be revealed.*

— Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd"



This section offers new material for the Dungeon Master to include in her campaign. If you are a player, you should stop reading now.

## Poison Politics



orcans contracts are written in ink but underlined with venom. The following section expands on the rules for crafting poisons found in *Song and Silence*. Although the use of deadly toxins is an art form in Borca, it is hardly unique to that land.

### Creating Poisons

Characters can use any of three overlapping skills to create poisons: Craft (alchemy), Craft (poisonmaking) and Profession (herbalist). Profession (herbalist) is used to prepare any plant-based poison, while Craft (alchemy) is used for poisons extracted from animals or more esoteric ingredients. Craft (poisonmaking) can create any poison, but does not provide the extra abilities included in the other two skills.

Regardless of the actual skill used, creating poisons follows the rules for making items with the Craft skill (see the *Player's Handbook*), with the following exceptions. The DCs to create poisons in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* are listed in *Song and Silence*.

**Raw Materials:** The cost of a poison's raw materials is determined by their rarity.

**Very Common:** The ingredients are readily available and cost 1/6th of the market price. Very common poisons are mild and often grown in herbal gardens for medicinal use.

**Common:** The poison's ingredients appear naturally in the region and can be gathered without unusual difficulty. The poison's raw materials cost 1/3 of the market price. Many plant- and animal-based poisons are common in Borca's forests, though rare in foreign lands.

**Rare:** The ingredients can be found regionally, but only with considerable effort. The poison's raw materials cost 3/4 the market price. Most poisons have rare ingredients.

**Very Rare:** The raw materials cannot be bought at any price. At the DM's discretion, a character planning to prepare a poison with very rare ingredients may need to undergo a special quest to gather the raw materials. Poisons extracted from powerful monsters — such as dragon bile or lich dust — are very rare.

**Crafting Mishaps:** If a character fails a Craft check while creating a dose of poison, then in addition to the standard repercussions she must succeed at a DC 15 Reflex save or expose herself to her own toxic brew. Characters with the poison use ability (such as assassins, blackguards, and court poisoners) are exempt from this condition.

Table 6-1: New Poisons

Poison	Type	Initial Damage	Secondary Damage	Craft DC	Market Price
Banewort	Ingested DC 17	Special	Special	25	150 gp
Belladonna	Ingested DC 13	1d3 Con	Special	15	60 gp
Borrowed Time	Ingested —	Special	Special	25	360 gp
Coma spores	Inhaled DC 16	2d4 Wis and special	2d4 Wis and special	18	240 gp
Cyanide	Ingested DC 16	1d4 Con	1d6 Con	15	120 gp
Dewplum	Ingested DC 18	1d4 Str	1d4 Str	15	90 gp
Foxglove	Ingested DC 16	1d8 Int	1d6 Con	20	500 gp
Hemlock	Ingested DC 18	1d6 Dex	1d8 Con	20	650 gp
Henbane	Contact DC 15	1d6 Wis	1d4 Wis and special	20	600 gp
Gust oil	Ingested DC 13	—	Special	15	90 gp
Passionflesh fruit	Ingested DC 13	1d2+1 Con	1d2+1 Wis	—	50 gp
Royal morel	Contact DC 20	2d6 Con	2d4 Str	25	3,000 gp
Sightrot	Contact DC 17	Special	Special	20	240 gp
Silphium resin	Ingested DC 15	—	Special	15	15 gp
Staggersap	Injury DC 15	Staggered	Staggered	20	60 gp
Strychnine	Ingested DC 16	1d6 Dex	1d6 Con	15	240 gp
Twin shudders	Ingested DC 14	1d2 Con	1d2 Con	25	180 gp
Wolfsbane	Injury DC 18	1d4 Con	1d8 Con	15	1,500 gp





## New Poisons

Borcans cultivate many natural poisons, often putting them to beneficial use in minute doses. These minute doses cost 1% of the listed market price, but their game effects are cosmetic.

**Banewort:** Banewort must be blended with another herbal substance (such as garlic or wolfsbane) before it can take effect. A character ingesting prepared banewort temporarily develops an allergic reaction to the selected herb, lasting 2d4 hours after ingestion. During this time, the victim's skin breaks out in a painful rash (dealing 1d6 points of nonlethal damage) whenever she comes in direct contact with the selected bane.

**Belladonna (Deadly Nightshade):** This plant bears bell-shaped flowers of dark purple tinged with green. Borcan noblewomen use diluted drops of its juice to dilate their pupils, increasing the brilliancy of their eyes. It has medicinal uses in relieving pain. Ezrite folklore (incorrectly) holds that eating larger doses of belladonna can prevent the onset of lycanthropy. In doses of this size, belladonna causes convulsions, then hallucinations (as the madness effect) and loss of voice for 1d6 hours.

**Borrowed Time:** Ivan Dilisnya commands fanatic loyalty among his inner circle of servants, guards and spies through this insidious poison. This toxin courses permanently through the veins of Ivan's key minions, laying a death sentence only Ivan can stay. A creature poisoned with Borrowed Time suffers 3d6 points of temporary Constitution damage each day at sunset unless she ingests an elixir dubbed "Mercy" less than 10 minutes prior to sunset. Ivan doles out Mercy each day, though even the appearance of disloyalty can provoke him to withhold it at the last moment.

Borrowed Time does not function like most poisons, but remains active in the victim's system for the rest of her life. A dose of Borrowed Time must be ingested each day for seven consecutive days for it to take effect. The time and cost involved makes it impractical for Ivan to inflict this poison on anyone but a select cadre of his own servants. Only Ivan holds the secret to creating Borrowed Time and Mercy (Craft DC 12; Market Price per Dose: 5 gp).

**Caldura Roses:** Living creatures (with a sense of smell) that rest quietly for 24 hours within 10 feet of a living caldura rosebush gain a +2 enhancement bonus to Fortitude saves to recover from negative levels, disease and similar long-term ailments for as long as they remain near the rosebush.

Cut caldura roses, however, impose a -2 enhancement penalty to all such saves. If living and cut roses are mixed together, their effects cancel each other out.

**Coma Spores:** Creatures inhaling this fungal powder sink into a deep torpor. Victims who cling to consciousness gradually recover as normal, but those reduced to 0 Wisdom or below are plunged into a deep, dream-wracked slumber from which they cannot wake. Such victims recover Wisdom damage only through magic or the application of the only antidote, Rapture (Craft DC 15; Market Price per Dose: 120 gp). Borcan poisoners use coma spores as a method of taking hostages, making demands of the victim's kin in return for the antidote.

**Cyanide:** Extracted from the pits of cherries, peaches, or apricots and from bitter almonds, cyanide prevents the victim's blood from replenishing the body's tissues, quickly leading to suffocation.

**Dewplum:** Dewplums' flesh and juice are highly poisonous. Dewplums can be distinguished from wild plums only by the glistening sheen of pearl-like moisture droplets that condense on their skins.

**Foxglove:** These thimble-like wildflowers range from yellow to crimson to lavender. The blossoms and leaves are ground into a sweet-tasting extract used to treat heart ailments. In larger doses, foxglove causes visual hallucinations and mental confusion, ending in heart failure.

**Hemlock:** These herbs resemble wild parsnips; clusters of small white flowers sprout from purple-splashed stalks. The thick yellow sap is a deadly poison identifiable by a strong, unpleasant odor resembling vermin. Hemlock attacks the nervous system, creating a brief sensation of excitement quickly followed by paralysis and death.

**Henbane:** Henbane is a grayish-green, sticky plant that emits a foul aroma. In extremely limited doses, it is used to treat headaches and insomnia, but in greater amounts it causes dementia. Treat a failed Fortitude save as a failed Madness save, with the degree of failure determining the severity of the madness effect as normal. The madness effect persists only until all Wisdom damage lost to the henbane is recovered.

**Gust Oil:** Victims loses all sense of taste for the next 1d6 hours. Although the effects of this colorless, odorless liquid are mild, poisoners use it to conceal the distinctive taste of more lethal concoctions.



**Passionflesh Fruit:** Passionflesh is cut into eight slices. After ingesting each slice, a character must succeed at a DC 13 Will save or desire to eat another section. If more passionflesh is not immediately available, the craving lasts for 4d8 minutes, during which time the character will hungrily seek it out.

**Royal Morel:** These large mushrooms bear lavender stems and spongy, vein-covered caps of deep purple. Rivulets of poison ooze from the cap, rendering it poisonous to the touch. Among the deadliest toxins in the poisoner's arsenal, royal morel is rare even in Borca.

**Sightrot:** If a victim fails one saving throw against sightrot, her vision grows dark and bleary, halving her range of vision and imposing a -8 competence penalty to all Search and Spot checks. If a victim fails both saving throws, she is blinded. Blindness improves to impaired vision after one hour, and impaired vision fades after another hour.

**Silphium Resin:** Silphium is a leafy herb with thick roots, so medicinally popular that it has been harvested into extinction in the wild and is now grown only in Borcan herbal gardens. Its resin alleviates all manner of minor ailments, but it is most effective as a form of birth control. Dissolving a pea-sized ball of silphium resin in wine and swallowing it prevents (or quickly ends) pregnancies for 1d3 days.

**Staggersap:** These slender mauve toadstools glisten with an intoxicating poison. Victims become disoriented and are staggered for 1d4 minutes per failed save. If a victim fails both saving throws, the duration stacks.

**Strychnine:** In minute doses, this plant extract is used as a restorative to increase appetite. In greater amounts, it causes paralysis and muscular convulsions, leading to a sudden and painful death.

**The Twin Shudders:** This complex poison is comprised of two separate liquids, both pale violet. Each liquid is inert by itself, but when a creature ingests both liquids within an hour of each other, they combine to induce shortness of breath or even suffocation with high enough doses. Poisoners value its ability to subvert *detect poison* spells and similar protective magic.

**Wolfsbane (Aconite):** In minute doses, aconite root is used in ointments to soothe fevers. Wolfsbane is lethal in larger doses, causing nausea, giddiness and the sensation of crawling skin rapidly followed by death, and is often used in poisoned bait to kill wolves and such predators.

## New feats



The following feats are particularly appropriate for characters from the southwestern Core, though the DM may allow them elsewhere at her discretion.

### Cat's Eyes

Valachani are occasionally born with disturbing, bile-yellow eyes. These people are said to have cat spirits in their ancestry and are feared and respected for their power over panthers.

**Prerequisites:** Wis 11.

**Benefit:** The character can *speak with cats* (as *speak with animals*, but only affecting feline creatures) at will. The cat is in no way obliged to listen to or obey the character, but usually reacts favorably. The character suffers a -2 racial penalty to Charisma-based skills when dealing with canine and lupine creatures.

**Special:** This feat can only be taken at 1st level by characters of Valachani heritage.

### Sympathetic Spell [Metamagic]

You can channel spells through a held token to affect a distant target.

**Benefit:** To use this feat, you must possess a small sample taken from your chosen target. If targeting a creature, you must have a tissue sample such as blood, hair, or a finger. To target an object, you must have a piece of the object, such as a scrap from a cloak, a chainmail link, or a stone pried from a cottage's foundation. Through a 10 minute ritual, you permanently prepare the sample as a *sympathetic token*.

To use sympathetic magic, you must hold the token and target it with a sympathetic spell. The magic is channeled through the token to affect the true target, regardless of distance, so long as you and the target are on the same plane. Only spells that affect single targets (such as "one creature" or "one object") can be channeled through the focus. If you attempt to channel any other kind of spell (such as any area affect spell), the spell targets the token itself. Casting a sympathetic spell increases its casting time:

Standard Casting Time	Sympathetic Casting Time
Free action	1 standard action
1 standard action	1 full-round action
1 full-round action	1 minute
1+ minutes	standard casting time x2

The token becomes a material component in the sympathetic spell and is consumed in casting.





## New Prestige Classes



he unique properties and cultures of each domain call for specific forms of expertise devoted to its most common traits.

Below are two prestige classes designed for use within the realms of the southwestern Core, though they may also be found in other lands.

### Court Poisoner

Borca's courts bustle with courtiers serving their patrons in specific roles. The court poisoner is a vital component of Borcan politics. Officially, these scholars act as herbalists and apothecaries; however, they are also trained to dole out herbal remedies to rid their masters of complaining commoners.

In Borca, court poisoners begin as aristocrats or experts, trained in the arts of poison by long tradition. Although the court poisoner is an unskilled combatant, assassins and blackguards sometimes take this class to expand their murderous repertoire. Court poisoners need not be murderous villains, but at best they serve a necessary evil. Heroes who pride themselves on their honor would never consider such underhanded treachery.

**Hit Die:** d4.

### Requirements

To qualify to become a court poisoner (Cpo), a character must fulfill all the following criteria.

**Alignment:** Any non-good.

**Skills:** Craft (alchemy) 2 ranks, Craft (poisonmaking) 8 ranks, Profession (herbalist) 2 ranks, Sleight of Hand 4 ranks.

**Feats:** Skill Focus (Craft [poisonmaking]).

**Special:** To prove herself worthy of training, the character must kill a living creature (not necessarily a person) with a poison she has crafted herself.

### Class Skills

The court poisoner's class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are Bluff (Cha), Concentration (Con), Craft (Int), Diplomacy (Cha), Forgery (Int), Knowledge (nature) (Int), Profession (herbalist) (Wis), Sleight of Hand (Dex), and Spot (Wis).

**Skill Points at Each Level:** 6 + Int modifier.

### Class features

All of the following are features of the court poisoner prestige class.

**Weapon and Armor Proficiency:** A court poisoner gains no proficiency in any weapon or armor.

**Poison Use (Ex):** Court poisoners are skilled in the use of poison and never risk accidentally poisoning themselves when applying poison to a blade or when crafting poisons.

**Poison Mastery (Ex):** Court poisoners are experts in the creation of beneficial medicines and lethal toxins. As they gain experience, they master complex methods of altering the properties of the poisons they create. For each level a court poisoner gains in the prestige class, she gets a special ability of her choice from the following list. Each modification added to a dose of poison increases the DC of the







skill check to craft that dose by +2 and increases its market price by the modifier noted below. When crafting a poison with multiple modifications, apply the modifiers to the poison's base market cost, then total them for a final price.

**Altered Delivery:** The poison's original method of delivery (ingested, inhaled, contact, or injury) can be altered to any other method of delivery. *Cost Modifier:* x3.

**Delayed Onset:** The court poisoner can delay the onset of the poison's initial damage by a period of up to 10 minutes per court poisoner level. Thus, a character with 4 levels of this prestige class could create a dose of poison that inflicts its initial damage up to 40 minutes after delivery. Secondary damage still takes effect 1 minute after initial damage. *Cost Modifier:* x1.5.

**Enduring:** The poison remains active in the victim's body for an extra minute, inflicting tertiary damage equal to the poison's secondary damage. The saving throw to resist tertiary damage is reduced by -4, however, as the toxins peter out. *Cost Modifier:* x2.

**Putrid Distillation:** The court poisoner uses the poison to kill a miniscule animal, then leaves the creature to rot for a day. She then collects and distills the creature's putrefying fluids, combining the original poison with the toxins of decomposition. This increases the DC of saving throws to resist this dose of poison by +2. *Cost Modifier:* x2.

**Undetectable:** The court poisoner increases the DC of any checks to notice this dose of poison by +4. Magic still detects these poisons normally, however. *Cost Modifier:* x2.

**Saving Throw Bonus vs. Poison (Ex):** A court poisoner works with countless toxins and builds up resistance to their effects, gaining a bonus to all saving throws vs. poison equal to her class level.

**Insidious Application (Ex):** At 3rd level, the court poisoner can apply contact poison to any object, such as a goblet or the lining of a vest, rather than simply applying it to weapons.

**Inventive Ingredients (Ex):** At 5th level, the court poisoner is so practiced in creating drugs and toxins that she can replace difficult-to-obtain ingredients with skillfully blended substitutes. When the court poisoner crafts poisons, this reduces the rarity of her raw materials by one category (see above).

**Table 6-2: The Court Poisoner (Cpo)**

Class Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special
1st	+0	+0	+2	+0	Poison use, poison mastery, +1 save vs. poison
2nd	+1	+0	+3	+0	save vs. poison +2
3rd	+2	+1	+3	+1	save vs. poison +3, insidious application
4th	+3	+1	+4	+1	save vs. poison +4
5th	+3	+1	+4	+1	save vs. poison +5, inventive ingredients



## Moonchild

Lycanthropy threatens to warp both flesh and spirit. Most afflicted victims end their lives or strive to cure themselves of the curse. Others seek a different form of escape, battling their own latent savagery for self-control. Some moonchildren seek to integrate their human minds and bestial urges to muzzle the beast within, while others hope to unleash the beast and thus become its master. Although much rarer, a few natural lycanthropes have also become moonchildren, honing their self-control to blend into humanoid societies better.

**Hit Die:** d8.

## Requirements

To qualify to become a moonchild (Mnc), a character must fulfill all the following criteria.

**Skills:** Concentration 2 ranks, Control Shape 2 ranks.

**Feats:** Iron Will.

**Special:** Must be a lycanthrope. If afflicted, the character must be aware of her condition. A moonchild cured of lycanthropy loses all special abilities and can no longer gain levels in this class. Should she later be afflicted again, however, she regains all special abilities and can once again progress in levels as a moonchild.

## Class Skills

The moonchild's class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are Bluff (Cha), Concentration (Con), Control Shape (Wis), Intimidate (Cha), Listen (Wis), Search (Int), Spot (Wis), and Survival (Wis).

**Skill Points at Each Level:** 2 + Int modifier.

## Class Features

All of the following are features of the moonchild prestige class.

**Weapon and Armor Proficiency:** Moonchildren gain no proficiency in any weapon or armor. Note that armor check penalties apply to the skills Balance, Climb, Escape Artist, Hide, Jump, Move Silently, Sleight of Hand, Swim and Tumble. Many moonchildren eschew armor, since it risks destruction when they transform.

**Shackle the Beast (Ex):** Starting at 1st level, a moonchild receives a competence bonus to Control Shape checks equal to twice her moonchild class level (+2 at 1st level, +4 at 2nd level, and so forth).

**Human Heart (Ex):** Starting at 1st level, whenever a moonchild voluntarily assumes bestial form, she retains her original alignment, memories and self-control by making a successful Will save at the DC listed in Table 6-3, below.

**Savage Blood (Ex):** Starting at 1st level, whenever a character takes a level in moonchild, she must succeed at a DC 20 Will save or have her alignment





permanently shift one step toward the alignment of her bestial form. This alignment change is insidious and considered voluntary, and thus does not provoke a Madness save.

*Example:* A lawful good character afflicted by a chaotic evil werewolf takes a level of moonchild and fails her Will save. Her alignment shifts to either neutral good or lawful neutral (player's choice).

**Tempered Hunger (Ex):** Starting at 2nd level, on any day a moonchild does not assume bestial form, she need eat only half as many pounds of raw meat as a normal lycanthrope of her size to satisfy her dietary requirements. At 4th level, her dietary requirements drop to just 1/4 of the listed amount (see "The Hunger" in Chapter Five of the *Ravenloft Player's Handbook*). The character's appetite never drops below the norm for her base race, however.

*Example:* A Medium werewolf normally needs to eat 25 pounds of raw flesh each day or begin to starve. (Remember that afflicted lycanthropes who have not taken ranks in Control Shape are subject to the Hunger only in bestial form.) A 2nd-level moonchild needs to eat only 12 pounds of flesh on any day she stays human. At 4th level, this amount drops to just 6 pounds per day.

**Scent of the Bloodline (Ex):** Starting at 3rd level, the moonchild's senses become so acute that she can detect other members of her own bloodline

by scent. To detect the scent of another werebeast, the moonchild must succeed at a Wisdom check (DC 10 + 1 per 5 ft.). Creatures with the scent ability (including many lycanthropes in their bestial forms) receive a +4 racial bonus to this check.

**Improved Control Shape (Su):** At 5th level, a moonchild receives Improved Control Shape as a bonus feat. The moonchild is now considered a natural lycanthrope; she can assume both animal and hybrid forms, can control her changes at will, and is no longer affected by her trigger. This change also severs the original bloodline; the moonchild can never be cured of lycanthropy, and any afflicted lycanthropes she creates consider her the progenitor of their bloodline. Despite the fact that she is now a natural lycanthrope, the moonchild does not have an adjustment to her effective character level (ECL). Such are the boons of forgoing all other paths in favor of mastery of the beast within.

In addition, whenever any lycanthrope gains the Improved Control Shape feat, she must endure a brief period when the two halves of her nature engage in a final battle for dominance. This phase lasts for 1d4+1 days, during which the lycanthrope must make a DC 30 Control Shape check every 1d6 hours or assume one of her other two forms. Natural lycanthropes pass through this phase in early adolescence, when their heritage first manifests.

**Table 6-3: The Moonchild (Mnc)**

Class Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special
1	+0	+2	+0	+2	Shackle the beast, human heart (DC 20), savage blood
2	+1	+3	+0	+3	Tempered hunger 1/2, human heart (DC 18)
3	+2	+3	+1	+3	Scent of the bloodline, human heart (DC 16)
4	+3	+4	+1	+4	Tempered hunger 1/4, human heart (DC 14)
5	+3	+4	+1	+4	Improved Control Shape, human heart (DC 12)





## New Magic



This section presents new forms of magic particular to the southwestern Core. Under certain circumstances, DMs may allow characters from outside this region special access to these magics.

### Cleric Domain

#### Slaughter Domain

**Deity:** The Wolf God (Verbrek)

**Granted Power:** Once per day, you can activate the frightful presence extraordinary ability automatically as you attack an opponent (see Chapter 7: Glossary in the *Monster Manual*). This ability has a range of 30 feet and affects any opponent with less Hit Dice than you who can see you. The Will save has a DC of 10 + 1/2 your character level + your Charisma modifier. Affected creatures remain frightened or shaken for 5d6 rounds. This is a fear effect.

#### Slaughter Domain Spells

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | <b>Expeditious Retreat:</b> Doubles your speed.   |
| 2 | <b>Hold Animal:</b> Holds one animal helpless; 1 round/level.   |
| 3 | <b>Greater Magic Fang:</b> One natural weapon of subject creatures gets +1 bonus to attack and damage per three caster levels (max +5). |
| 4 | <b>Fear:</b> Subjects within cone flee for 1 round/level.   |
| 5 | <b>Slay Living:</b> Touch attack kills subject.   |
| 6 | <b>Tenser's Transformation:</b> You gain combat bonuses.  |
| 7 | <b>Power Word Stun:</b> Stuns creature with up to 150 hp.   |
| 8 | <b>Discern Location:</b> Exact location of creature or object.  |
| 9 | <b>Wail of the Banshee:</b> Kills one creature/level.   |

### Magic Items

The magic items detailed below are most common in the southwestern Core. Though they might be found elsewhere, their flavor is best suited to that area when first encountering them.

**Baron's Arm:** *Baron's arms* are exotic double weapons wielded by the Black Leopards. One end of the weapon is a black +1 *heavy mace*, fashioned in the shape of an armored gauntlet or panther's claw. The other end is a short whip of black leather

strips tipped with sharp pieces of metal. This end acts as a nonmagical light flail. A critical hit with either end of the weapon results in terrible scarring, increasing the victim's OR by +1 for each 10 points of damage inflicted.

Faint necromancy; CL 5th; Craft Magic Arms and Armor, *inflict moderate wounds*; Price 2,360 gp; Cost 1,180 gp.

**Periapt of Intimidation:** This stone is a jade skull on a platinum necklace. While wearing it, the user gains a +5 profane bonus to Intimidate checks. The user must make a 1% powers check each week she wears the *periapt*.

Strong necromancy; CL 3rd; Craft Wondrous Item, *cause fear*; Price 1,000 gp.

**Tasting Cup:** These coveted crystalline goblets are typically embossed with swirling, serpentine designs. Whenever a poisonous liquid is poured into the goblet, the clear crystal assumes a lurid violet shade. The tint fades once the goblet is emptied and wiped clean.

Strong divination; CL 5th; Craft Wondrous Item, *detect poison*; Price 4,000 gp; Weight 1 lb.

**Vital Venom:** Nostalia Romaine created this elixir with assistance from Ivana Boritsi. It is a lethal poison mixed with Nostalia's own toxic ichor and the life's blood of three people harvested for this very purpose. The draught must be consumed on a night of the new moon for its magical properties to take effect. A character who drinks the concoction must make two DC 20 Fortitude saves or suffer initial and secondary damage of 2d4 points of temporary Constitution. If the imbiber survives, the toxins halt her physical aging for four months, effectively embalming her living flesh. A character can extend her youth indefinitely by drinking additional draughts of *vital venom*, but if she ever stops drinking the elixir or otherwise allows its effects to wear off, she ages at fifty times the normal rate until her physical age matches her true age once more.

Only Nostalia and Ivana know the formula to the elixir, though they have chosen to share its benefits with several of their compatriots. *Vital venom* has no effect on creatures immune to *ermordenung* poison.

Crafting *vital venom* does not require a powers check, but the necessary murders do.

Strong necromancy [evil]; CL 6th; Brew Potion, pint of drinker's blood, pint of *ermordenung* blood, heart's blood from 3 victims of same race as drinker; Price 2,000 gp.





## New Monsters



This section presents monsters known to roam the lands of the southwestern Core.

### Lycanthrope, Werepanther

*This sinewy creature's ebony fur glistens in the moonlight as it approaches like a silent piece of animated night.*

Werepanthers in humanoid form are sleek and graceful and exude a feral sense of danger. The Black Leopards are Valachan's elite enforcers, serving Baron von Kharkov as guards, assassins, tax collectors, and spies. Though feared for their mercurial cruelty and fierce loyalty, they would be even more frightening if the truth of their lycanthropy were known by Valachan's populace.

### Creating a Werepanther

Denizens of Dread and the Ravenloft Player's Handbook contain full rules for Ravenloft's lycanthropes; the rules below detail the werepanther only as it differs from other sample lycanthropes.

"Werepanther" is a template that can be added to any humanoid (referred to hereafter as the base creature). The werepanther template can be inherited (for natural lycanthropes) or acquired (for afflicted lycanthropes). Becoming a werepanther is very much like multiclassing as an animal and gaining the appropriate Hit Dice.

**Size and Type:** The base creature's type does not change, but the creature gains the shapechanger subtype. The werepanther takes on the characteristics of a large cat such as a leopard or panther (referred to hereafter as the base animal). This animal can be within one size category of the base creature's size (Small, Medium, or Large for a Medium base creature). Werepanthers can also adopt a hybrid shape that combines features of the base creature and the base animal. A

werepanther's hybrid form is the same size as the base animal or the base creature, whichever is larger.

A werepanther uses either the base creature's or the base animal's statistics and special abilities in addition to those described here.

**Hit Dice and Hit Points:** Same as the base creature plus those of the base animal. To calculate total hit points, apply Constitution modifiers according to the score the werepanther has in each form. For example, a human commoner with a Constitution score of 11 as a human and a Constitution score of 15 as a panther has 1d4 plus 3d8+6 hit points. See "Ly-





canthrope" in the *Monster Manual* and in *Denizens of Dread*.

**Speed:** Same as the base creature or base animal, depending on which form the werepanther is using. Hybrids use the base creature's speed.

**Armor Class:** In humanoid form, the character gains a natural AC bonus +2. In animal or hybrid form, it has a natural AC bonus of +3.

**Attacks:** Same as the character or the animal, depending on which form the werepanther is using. A werepanther in hybrid form gains two claw attacks and a bite attack as natural weapons. These weapons deal damage based on the hybrid form's size. A hybrid may attack with a weapon and a bite or may attack with its natural weapons. The bite attack of a hybrid is a secondary attack.

**Damage:** Same as the character or the animal, depending on which form the werepanther is using.

**Special Attacks:** A werepanther retains the special attacks of the base creature or the base animal, depending on which form she is using, and gains the special attacks described below.

A werepanther's hybrid form does not gain any special attacks of the base animal. A werepanther spellcaster cannot cast spells with verbal, somatic, or material components while in animal form or spells with verbal components while in hybrid form.

**Curse of Lycanthropy (Su):** Any humanoid hit by a werepanther's bite attack in hybrid or animal form must succeed at a DC 15 Fortitude save (or DC 18 in *Ravenloft*) or contract lycanthropy. In *Ravenloft*, afflicted lycanthropes *can* pass on the Dread Disease. Afflicted characters are unaffected by the curse until the night of the next new moon, when they undergo an agonizing transformation. Their skin darkens to the coffee color of a native Valachani and their face reshapes itself until they are unrecognizable. If in Valachan, they must make a DC 18 Will save or come under Von Kharkov's control: their alignment changes to lawful evil, they are permanently *charmed* by the baron, and they can spend 100 XP to take the Improved Control Shape feat. A werepanther who takes this feat during her first transformation is thereafter considered a true lycanthrope. They are no longer subject to involuntary shape changes but cannot be cured. If the new werepanther makes the Will save or is outside Valachan, they retain their freedom but remain an afflicted lycanthrope.

**Improved Grab (Ex):** To use this ability, the werepanther must hit with its bite attack in panther form. If it gets a hold, it can rake.

**Rake (Ex):** A werepanther that gets a hold in panther form can make two rake attacks (at full attack bonus) with its hind legs for  $1d3 + 1/2$  its Strength modifier points of damage each. If the werepanther pounces on an opponent in panther form, it can also rake.

**Special Qualities:** A werepanther retains the special qualities of the base creature and the base animal, and also gains those listed below.

**Alternate Form (Su):** See "Lycanthrope" in the *Monster Manual* (and *Denizens of Dread*). Natural werepanthers can assume a hybrid form as well as panther form, while afflicted werepanthers can normally only assume panther form.

**Damage Reduction (Ex):** An afflicted werepanther in animal or hybrid form has damage reduction 5/silver. A natural werepanther in animal or hybrid form has damage reduction 10/silver.

**Lycanthropic Empathy (Ex):** In any form, a werepanther can communicate and empathize with any normal or dire animals of its animal form. This ability gives werepanthers a +4 racial bonus on checks when influencing the animal's attitude and allows the communication of simple concepts and (if the animal is friendly) commands, such as "friend," "foe," "flee," and "attack."

**Low-Light Vision (Ex):** A werepanther has low-light vision in any form.

**Scent (Ex):** A werepanther has the scent ability in any form.

**Base Save Bonuses:** Add the base save bonus of the base animal to the base save bonus of the base creature. Werepanthers also receive a +2 racial bonus to Fortitude and Will saves.

**Abilities:** Natural werepanthers gain Str +2, Dex +2, Con +4, Wis +2 while in humanoid form. In panther or hybrid form, these modifiers improve to a total of Str +6, Dex +8, Con +4, Wis +2. As well, a werepanther may also gain an additional ability score increase by virtue of extra Hit Dice.

**Skills:** A werepanther gains skill points equal to  $(2 + \text{Int modifier, minimum } 1)$  per Hit Die of its animal form, as if it had multiclassed into the animal type. (Animal is never its first Hit Die, though, and it does not gain quadruple skill points for any animal Hit Die.) Any skill given in the animal's description is a class skill for the werepanther's animal levels. Werepanthers in hu-





manoid form gain a +4 racial bonus to Listen, Search, and Spot checks. When in animal or hybrid form, these bonuses increase to +8, and werepanther's receive a further +4 racial bonus to Hide and Move Silently checks and a +8 racial bonus to Balance checks. See **Denizens of Dread**.

**Feats:** Add the base animal's feats to the base creature's. If this results in a werepanther having the same feat twice, they werepanther gains no additional benefits unless the feat normally can be taken more than once, in which case the duplicated feat works as noted in the feat description. This process may give the werepanther more feats than a character of its total Hit Dice would normally be entitled to; if this occurs, any "extra" feats are denoted as bonus feats.

A werepanther may possibly not meet the prerequisites for all its feats when in humanoid form. If this occurs, the werepanther still has the feats, but cannot use them when in humanoid form. A werepanther receives Iron Will as a bonus feat.

When in hybrid or animal form, werepanthers also gain Weapon Finesse (bite, claw) as a bonus feat. If they retain their freedom past the first new moon, werepanthers can gain the Improved Control Shape feat without binding themselves to Von Kharkov by spending 100 XP.

**Environment:** Temperate and cold forest and hills.

**Organization:** Solitary or squad (2–12).

**Challenge Rating:** Character level +4.

**Treasure:** Standard, plus *baron's arm*.

## Shadow, Salt

	<b>Medium Undead</b>
<b>Hit Dice:</b>	5d12 (32 hp)
<b>Initiative:</b>	+7
<b>Speed:</b>	30 ft. (6 squares), climb 30 ft.
<b>Armor Class:</b>	14 (+3 Dex, +1 deflection)
<b>Base Attack/Grapple:</b>	+2/+5
<b>Attack:</b>	Corrosive touch +5 melee (1d6+3 plus 1d6 acid or 1d6 Strength)
<b>Full Attack:</b>	Corrosive touch +5 melee (1d6+3 plus 1d6 acid or 1d6 Strength)
<b>Space/Reach:</b>	5 ft./5 ft.
<b>Special Attacks:</b>	Malevolence, strength damage, splash damage, create spawn
<b>Special Qualities:</b>	Vulnerability to sunlight, vulnerability to fire, +2 turn resistance, damage reduction 5/magic, undead traits
<b>Saves:</b>	Fort +1, Ref +4, Will +5
<b>Abilities:</b>	Str 17, Dex 16, Con —, Int 10, Wis 12, Cha 13
<b>Skills:</b>	Hide +10, Listen +7, Spot +7
<b>Feats:</b>	Dodge, Skill Focus (Hide)
<b>Environment:</b>	Any land and underground
<b>Organization:</b>	Solitary, gang (2–5), swarm (6–20)
<b>Challenge Rating:</b>	7
<b>Treasure:</b>	None
<b>Alignment:</b>	Always chaotic evil
<b>Advancement:</b>	6–11 HD (Medium)
<b>Level Adjustment:</b>	—

*Reeking of saline ooze, the pool of semi-liquid darkness slithers across the cavern floor, coalescing as it flows into a dripping, half-formed humanoid figure.*

## Description

Salt shadows are the spawn of the misery and evil found within the depths of the Veidrava salt mines and other black places beneath the earth. These entities of living darkness continually shift form, appearing as swift-moving puddles of liquid shadow one moment and vague humanoid figures the next. The touch of a salt shadow causes terrible burns from salt corrosion or drains the strength from one's bones. Furthermore, salt shadows can force themselves into a person's body, possessing the victim; those possessed can be identified by their faint saline odor and by the fact that when they commit an evil act, their eyes become the glossy black of the salt shadow's true form.

Salt shadows hate life and light, taking maniacal glee in acts of corruption. Often, salt shadows work with other evil beings to further great works of evil. Salt shadows often blend into a possessed



victim's community in order to pursue long-term goals.

## Combat

**Malevolence (Su):** Once per round, a salt shadow can attempt to possess the body of a living victim. This ability is similar to *magic jar* as cast by a 10th-level sorcerer, except that it does not require a receptacle. If the attack succeeds, the salt shadow crawls completely into the opponent's body. While in possession of a living victim, the shadow uses the victim's skills, feats, and abilities rather than its own; a salt shadow cannot use any of a victim's divinely-granted class abilities, however. The target can resist the attack with a successful DC 16 Will save. Those possessed by a salt shadow's malevolence ability receive a +2 profane bonus to Fortitude and Reflex saves. A creature that successfully saves is immune to that salt shadow's malevolence for one day. Should a salt shadow abandon or be driven from its possessed victim, the victim suffers 2d6 points of temporary Strength damage (no saving throw) as the shadow pours out.

Note that in Sithicus, salt shadows cannot possess Innocent victims while Inza is darklord.

**Strength Damage (Su):** Instead of dealing normal damage with their touch attack, salt shadows may choose instead to deal 1d6 points of temporary Strength damage to a living foe. A creature reduced to 0 Strength by a salt shadow dies.

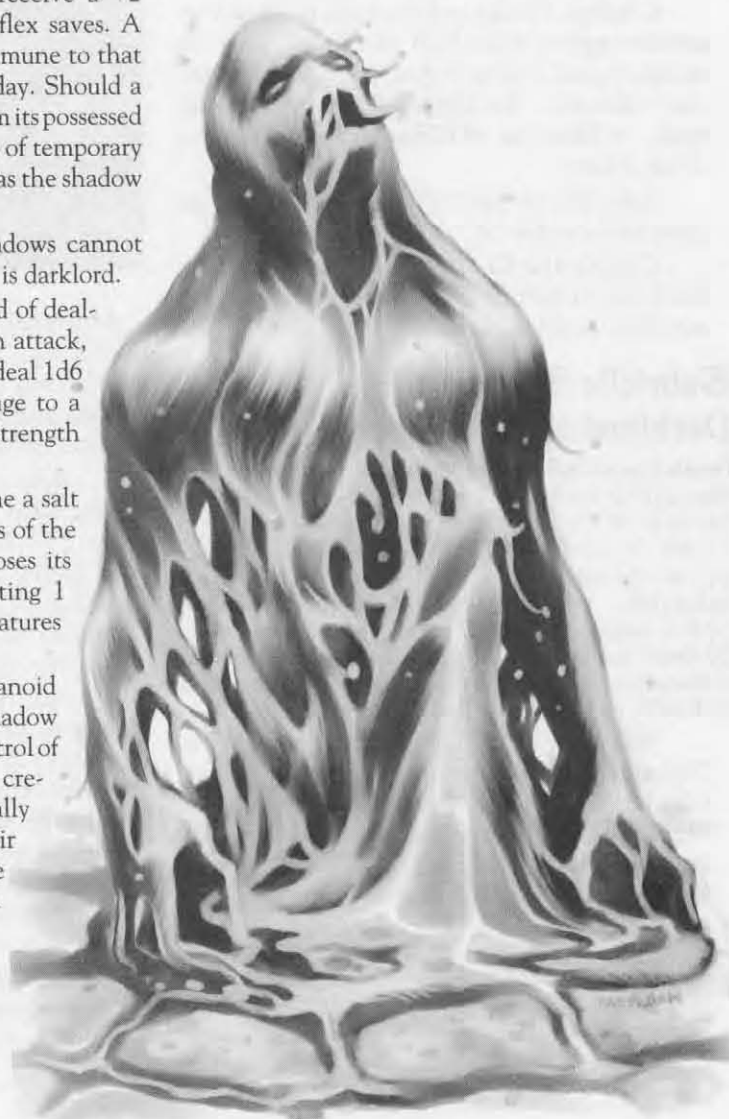
**Splash Damage (Su):** Each time a salt shadow is damaged in combat, blobs of the semi-liquid shadowstuff that composes its body spray in all directions, inflicting 1 point of acid damage to all living creatures within 5 feet of the salt shadow.

**Create Spawn (Su):** Any humanoid reduced to 0 Strength by a salt shadow becomes a salt shadow under the control of its killer within 1d4 rounds. Newly created salt shadows may automatically possess their own corpse using their malevolence special attack the same round in which they rise as undead.

Salt shadows that possess their original bodies can pass unnoticed among the living since the possessed corpse does not decay, but is instead preserved as it appeared at the moment of death.

**Vulnerability to Sunlight (Ex):** Salt shadows exposed to direct sunlight are staggered and are destroyed on the following round if they can not escape. Salt shadows are unharmed by sunlight while within possessed hosts, but suffer a -1 circumstance penalty to all attack rolls, saves, and checks while exposed.

**Vulnerability to Fire (Ex):** Salt shadows take double damage from fire, regardless of whether a saving throw is allowed or if the save is a success or failure.





## Who's Doomed

This section presents the darklords of the five domains in this gazetteer as well as other notables. Information here takes precedence over previous versions already detailed in *Secrets of the Dread Realms* or elsewhere. The NPC descriptions adhere to the following format:

**Statistics:** The character's complete game statistics. Some characters use special rules found in the *Ravenloft Player's Handbook* or *Denizens of Dread*. The character's native language is always listed first and marked with an asterisk.

**Background:** The character's history.

**Current Sketch:** The character's personality and current activities.

**Combat:** Tactics and strategies the character usually employs in battle. If the character has any unique special attacks or qualities not found in the core rulebooks, the *Ravenloft Player's Handbook*, or *Denizens of Dread*, they will also be detailed here.

**Lair:** The character's home or where she can often be encountered.

**Closing the Borders:** If the character is a darklord, this section details how a border closure manifests in her domain.

### Gabrielle Aderre, Darklord of Invidia

**Female Zarovan half-Vistana Sor11:** CR 12; Medium humanoid (human) (5 ft. 1 in. tall); HD 11d4, hp 39; Init +2 + 1d10-1d4; Spd 30 ft.; AC 17, touch 14, flat-footed 15; Base Atk +5; Grp +4; Atk +5 melee (1d4/19-20, +1 *shapechanger bane dagger*) or +8 ranged (1d4-1, masterwork dart); Full Atk +5 melee (1d4, +1 *shapechanger bane dagger*) or +8 ranged (1d4-1, masterwork dart); SA gaze of the temptress, spells; SQ dread familiar (cat), fire-building, free of the *lunatio*, protected kin; AL NE; SV Fort +6, Ref +8, Will +13; Str 8, Dex 14, Con 10, Int 14, Wis 16, Cha 17.

**Skills and Feats:** Bluff +7, Concentration +6, Diplomacy +6, Gather Information +6, Knowledge (arcana) +8, Knowledge (local: Invidia) +5, Move Silently +4, Sense Motive +6, Spellcraft +8, Survival +5; Extend Spell, Quick Draw, Spell Focus (enchantment), Voice of Wrath.

**Languages:** Balok\*, Luktar, Patterna.

**Typical Sorcerer Spells Known** (6/14/7/7/6/4; save DC 13 + spell level, 14 + spell level for enchantment spells): 0 — *dancing lights*, *daze*, *detect magic*, *flare*, *ghost sound*, *mage hand*, *light*, *read magic*, *resistance*; 1st — *cause fear*, *charm person*,



*disguise self*, *hypnotism*, *sleep*; 2nd — *blindness/deafness*, *detect thoughts*, *scare*, Tasha's hideous laughter, *whispering wind*; 3rd — *dispel magic*, *hold person*, *major image*, *suggestion*; 4th — *charm monster*, *confusion*, *emotion*; 5th — *dominate person*, *hold monster*.

**Signature Possessions:** +1 silver *shapechanger bane dagger*, 6 masterwork darts, *amulet of natural armor* +1, *bracelets of armor* +2 (as bracers), *kerchief of disguise* (as hat), *ring of protection* +2, *ring of wizardry 1*, *shawl of resistance* +3 (as cloak), *Eva's deck*, *wand of charm person*.

The darklord of Invidia appears as a beautiful woman in her mid-20s with black eyes and hair like lustrous ravens-wings, marred only by a single streak of gray. Her skin is unblemished and pale, inherited from her *giorgio* father. Gabrielle is actually in her late 40s. Her reflection in mirrors shows her true age, with graying hair and the beginnings of wrinkles. Though this reflection is by no means unattractive, Gabrielle finds it hideous and does all she can to avoid mirrors.

Gabrielle favors her gypsy mother's mode of dress, preferring brightly colored skirts and blouses and a great deal of silver jewelry.



## Background

Gabrielle is part Vistani, the daughter of the half-Vistana fortuneteller Isabella Aderre and an unknown giorgio. Born in Richemulot, she never knew her father. Though her mother's people spurned both mother and child, Gabrielle learned much of the ways of the Vistani from her mother, including how to tell fortunes and cast simple spells, but Gabrielle was consumed with curiosity about her father's identity. Isabella said only that he had been a cruel and evil man and that Gabrielle carried a piece of that evil within her.

"You must never have children," her mother once warned her. "Tragedy would be the only result." From a seer of Isabella's skill, such a prophecy was tantamount to a curse. Though the words had been spoken out of love and concern, Gabrielle grew bitter and resentful of her mother, creating a fanciful image of her father as a great noble and imagining finding him and rediscovering the love so lacking in her present life.

When Gabrielle was 19, a werewolf attacked her and her mother, severely injuring Isabella. Holding the creature at bay with a silver *bane* dagger that she had stolen from a wealthy merchant, Gabrielle threatened to leave Isabella to the werebeast unless she revealed her father's identity. At last Isabella told her the truth: she had once been slave to a wealthy, sadistic Falkovnian nobleman, became pregnant with his child, and escaped so her child could know freedom.

Gabrielle refused to accept her mother's words and left her to the werewolf's tender mercies.

The Mists surrounded Gabrielle, who found herself in the heart of Invidia. Invidian soldiers seized her and brought her to the werewolf Bakholis, the realm's darklord. Mad with bloodlust, Bakholis ordered his guards away and moved to attack the peasant girl. To his horror, he found himself transfixed by her evil eye, and he perished as her silver *bane* dagger slit his throat. The lordship of Invidia passed to Gabrielle. The oppressed peasants rose up, overthrew the werewolf's minions, and proclaimed Gabrielle ruler, a role that held no interest for her.

Gabrielle took various lovers, luring them away from committed relationships, dominating them, and casting them aside when she tired of them. Still haunted by her mother's curse, she dared not seek out a true relationship.

Twelve years ago, a mysterious, dark-eyed Gentleman Caller captivated her the moment

their eyes met. They shared a single night of passion, after which she never saw him again. To this day, she has difficulty remembering their time together.

Nine months later, Gabrielle gave birth to Malocchio, a child seemingly normal save for a small sixth finger on each hand. Gabrielle's divinatory gifts revealed that her son was actually a Dukkar — a fearsome monster from Vistani legend fated to destroy the Vistani should he be permitted to live.

At first, Gabrielle was delighted by this discovery and determined to use Malocchio as a tool for her vengeance on the Vistani. Unfortunately, though he held a deep contempt for the gypsies, Malocchio had bigger plans. By the winter of 747, his manipulations had left Gabrielle broken and nearly mad. Only the timely intervention of Matton Blanchard, a werewere and one of her spurned lovers saved her. Malocchio set off to claim Invidia as his own.

Matton slowly nursed Gabrielle back to health and she found herself returning Matton's affections. The two planned to defeat Malocchio and restore Gabrielle to her prominence in the domain.

To this end, Gabrielle used her seductive arts and subtle enchantments to take control of the bitterly divided Gundarakite rebels in northern Invidia, helping them recapture Castle Hunadora. Matton ventured into Kartakass to recruit wolfweres.

The rebels chafed at Gabrielle's leadership, however, as they realized she was more devoted to vengeance against her son than to the cause of Gundarakite independence. Sensing control slipping from her, Gabrielle seduced Ardonk Szerieza, leader of the Barovian Gundarakite movement, and once more became undisputed rebel leader. She has walked a precarious route, keeping both lovers in ignorance of each other.

Late in 752 BC, Gabrielle discovered that she was pregnant, despite magical and herbal precautions. Her daughter, Lucita Aderre, is now a girl of four-and-a-half, and Gabrielle still does not know who the father is. Matton and Ardonk each believes himself the girl's father, and Gabrielle finds it difficult to maintain her ruse. If Matton is the father, then Lucita is a werewere as well and could start transforming at any time. If Ardonk is the father, the girl will never change, and Matton will know the truth. Either alternative may result in the downfall of all her plans.





Gabrielle has come to realize that, in her own way, Lucita proves Isabella's curse true once more.

## Current Sketch

As Lucita grows older, Gabrielle becomes more estranged from those around her, distancing herself from both Matton and Ardonk. Above all, Gabrielle loves her daughter and hopes that Ardonk is the father, preferring Lucita to avoid facing life as a bestial shapechanger.

Lucita is a lovely, dark-haired girl who dotes on Gabrielle, often dressing like her. Gabrielle never allows her daughter out of her sight, thus keeping Lucita sheltered and naïve.

## Combat

Gabrielle does not relish combat, but she has killed to defend herself in the past and will not hesitate to do so again if necessary. She normally leaves her *charmed* minions to defend her, but aids by using the powers of her evil eye to assist her allies.

**Special Attacks:** *Gaze of the Temptress (Su)*: Gabrielle can use any enchantment spell that she knows in a manner similar to a gaze attack. To use a spell as a gaze attack, she must have at least one spell of the appropriate level readied for the day. Thus, if Gabrielle wants to use *hold person* as a gaze attack, she must have at least one 3rd-level spell readied. Using this gaze attack does not actually cast the spell. As long as Gabrielle still has one 3rd-level spell readied, she can use her *hold person gaze* over and over again. When used as gaze attacks, Gabrielle's spells do not require spell components. Gabrielle must take a standard action to use her gaze attack, and those merely looking at her are not affected. Anyone she targets must succeed at a DC 18 Will save or be affected as though by the spell. The abilities are all as spells cast by an 11th-level sorcerer. Gabrielle's gaze has a range of 30 feet.

**Special Qualities:** *Eva's Deck (Su)*: Gabrielle can read the future as well as a full-blooded Vistani, but only when using her personal deck, an heirloom originally crafted and passed down by her ancient ancestor, Madame Eva. Using the cards gives her blinding headaches, inflicting an effective decrease of 2d4 Strength per reading. She recovers 1 point of Strength per hour and is considered sickened until fully recovered. Due to this pain, she uses this talent only when necessary.

**Free of the Lunatio (Ex)**: Gabrielle does not suffer from the moon madness that afflicts most half-Vistani.

**Protected Kin (Ex)**: Gabrielle cannot directly harm the Vistani. Pure-blooded Vistani are completely immune to her supernatural powers and spells, unless the spell is harmless, and she cannot attack such an individual. Any individual of Vistani heritage — whether half-Vistani or simply having a distant Vistani ancestor — receives a +2 bonus to her saving throws vs. all of Gabrielle's supernatural powers and spells, and Gabrielle suffers a -2 penalty to her attack rolls should she attack such an individual physically. She can, however, manipulate others to harm those of Vistani blood.

## Cair

Gabrielle resides in Castle Hunadora with the Gundarakite rebels. Once home to the vampire Duke Gundar, darklord of Gundarak, the castle is an ancient and dangerous place, full of traps and unexplored areas that might harbor hostile creatures from Gundar's time. Gabrielle's private quarters contain colorful drapes and tapestries. Aromatic incense spices the air. The rebels are laying their own traps and ambushes should the Invidians ever attack again. The castle was a rank 4 sinkhole of evil under Gundar, but in recent years it has been reduced to rank 2.

## Closing the Borders

When Gabrielle wishes to close her borders, an invisible and undetectable wall of terror surrounds Invidia. Creatures who cross the border automatically panic and must flee back into Invidia (no saving throw). This panic affects even creatures normally immune to fear or mind-affecting magic, though creatures without Intelligence scores remain unaffected.

## Malocchio Aderre, the Dukkar

**Male Dukkar Ftr3/Rog3**: CR 8; Medium outsider (chaotic, evil) (6 ft. tall); HD 3d10+3d6, hp 36; Init +7; Spd 30 ft.; AC 20, touch 14, flat-footed 17; Base Atk +5; Grp +7; Atk +9 melee (1d8+2, crit 19–20, masterwork cold iron longsword), or +9 ranged (1d8+2/x3, masterwork composite longbow [+2 Str bonus]), or +9 ranged (1d12/x3, masterwork musket); Full Atk +9 melee (1d8+2/19–20, masterwork cold iron longsword), or +9 ranged (1d8+2/x3, masterwork composite longbow [+2 Str bonus]), or +9 ranged (1d12/x3, masterwork musket); SA evil eye, feral allies, sneak attack +2d6, spell-like abilities; SQ damage reduction 10/holy silver, resistance to acid 20, cold 20, electricity 20, and fire 20, darkvision 60 ft., evasion, Dukkar qualities, poison immunity, protected kin, reality wrinkle, teleport without error, trapfinding, trap sense +1; SR 15; AL CE; SV Fort +5, Ref +8, Will +4; Str 14, Dex 16, Con 10, Int 16, Wis 12, Cha 17.





*Skills and Feats:* Bluff +8, Diplomacy +4, Handle Animal +8, Hide +8, Intimidate +11, Knowledge (arcana) +8, Knowledge (local: Invidia) +5, Knowledge (Ravenloft) +7, Knowledge (Vistani lore) +5, Listen +6, Move Silently +8, Ride (horse) +8, Search +8, Sense Motive +6, Spot +6; Combat Reflexes, Dodge, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (firearms), Improved Initiative, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (longsword). OR 2 if fingers visible; 7 if true nature known.

*Languages:* Balok\*, Luktar, Patterna, Vaasi.

*Signature Possessions:* Masterwork cold iron longsword, masterwork composite longbow (+2 Str bonus), masterwork musket, +1 studded leather, masterwork buckler, cloak of resistance +1, ring of protection +1.

Invidia's tyrant is a darkly handsome man who appears to be in his early twenties, with a square jaw and steady eye. His skin is pale, but everything else about him is black as midnight. He has inherited his mother's dark eyes and wavy black hair, wearing it below his shoulders. He prefers to dress entirely in black. Those who hold his gaze for long are invariably forced to look away, overcome by feelings of unease and a sense of great evil. Malocchio is quite normal-looking save for a tiny, claw-like sixth finger on each hand, concealed under black gloves.

Malocchio often wears military attire, including an engraved breastplate. He bears the sword *Vistani's Bane*. Polite and well-spoken when calm, if provoked he transforms into a mad thing, bellowing and shrieking, striking all nearby. His rage is greatest in the presence of Vistani, who consider him a Dukkar — a demon in the flesh. Though he cannot harm the Vistani directly, he revels in their suffering at the hands of his minions.

## Background

Born in the spring of 747 BC to the luckless Gabrielle Aderre and a mysterious stranger, Malocchio seemed to be a gift from on high, a specially blessed child who would bring his mother happiness (and, in her mind, vengeance upon the Vistani who had banished her mother). Unfortunately, Gabrielle's curse was that she never find happiness — the mysterious stranger was actually a fiendish creature of purest evil.

Before Gabrielle had recovered from the childbirth, Malocchio was walking and holding intelligent conversations. Within half a year he

had gained nearly full adult stature and intelligence.

When he thought no one was looking, he demonstrated burgeoning occult powers, using them to monstrous ends, such as directing flocks of birds to crash into the walls of Castle Loupet. Even more incredibly, he could teleport from place to place at whim — around the castle at first, then throughout Invidia. At first, Gabrielle indoctrinated her son with all of her anti-Vistani sentiment. Yet Malocchio's hatred seemed far greater than anything Gabrielle could have anticipated. Her suspicions aroused, Gabrielle consulted her tarokka and in a dark vision she saw that her son was a Dukkar: a dark messiah destined to bring pain, suffering and death to the Vistani and possibly bring down the Realm of Dread entirely.

As his wickedness expanded to match his physical growth, Malocchio came to see a wondrous and terrible destiny beckoning to him. Tiring of his mother, he enthralled her servants, turning them against her and turning Gabrielle's own mind against itself. During the Harvest Carnival, Malocchio imprisoned his mother, then stripped away the illusions surrounding her night with the Gentleman Caller. The unshackled memories of that night ravaged Gabrielle's mind, leaving her broken, beaten, and alone.

Malocchio intended to destroy his mother and continue on to pursue his own fiendish interests. The Vistani, who had slowly pieced together his existence, opposed him. Within Malocchio writhed an unholy combination of powers drawn from his demonic, Vistani and darklord heritage, and when he assumed his full powers, no force — not even the Dark Powers — would be able to chain him. Malocchio could use the Mists to travel anywhere in the multiverse, even through closed domain borders and even carrying darklords in tow.

He imprisoned his mother and had her tortured until she agreed to cede all authority to him. Malocchio left her to die in the Dreadwood, where the first werewolf Gabrielle encountered was her old lover Matton. When all was nearly lost, the Vistani — including Madame Eva herself — created the *sphere of binding* and shackled the Dukkar to the domain of Invidia, containing his evil power.

Outraged, Malocchio returned to Castle Loupet, destroying much of its contents in a childish tantrum. He resolved to seize control of Invidia by force. Using his charisma and the enthralling powers of his evil eye, Malocchio united the dispar-





ate village militias, mustering an impressive mercenary force. When Malocchio claimed control of most of the domain, few folk dared stand against him. With the villages of Invidia united under his rule, he organized a campaign of murder against the Vistani. If he could not torture the Vistani into revealing how his chains could be broken, then he would sate his anger with the blood of their entire race.

With their new ruler calling for a pogrom against the “thieving gypsies,” the Invidians rose up to drive the Vistani from their midst. Malocchio’s expanded army and his newly-recruited mercenaries honed their skills on helpless gypsies — the lucky ones were merely beaten and driven into exile. To be a Vistani, a Vistani half-breed, or even a Vistani sympathizer was tantamount to a death sentence.

Only the eastern lands of Invidia remained outside Malocchio’s control. The Gundarakites there retained a strong independent streak, and Malocchio was surprised to discover his mother leading the resistance movement.

Dozens of dead Vistani men, women and children barely slaked Malocchio’s bloodlust. He ordered his soldiers to cross into neighboring realms in pursuit of the gypsies, and only recently did he curtail the practice in the face of complaints and threats from Borca and Barovia. Most believe that this is only a temporary respite.

### Current Sketch

Lord Malocchio is a man driven by hatred: for his mother, for the Vistani, and (some claim) for himself. Some believe that his campaign against the Vistani is influenced by his loathing for his own Vistani heritage and that of his mother, whom he has sworn to flay alive on the walls of Castle Hunadora when he captures her. Malocchio now regrets allowing his mother to escape his clutches. Although he controls most of the domain, she remains the darklord, and Malocchio is satisfied with that state of affairs.

Malocchio understands much of the nature of Ravenloft and does not want to become darklord himself; darklords are irrevocably tied to their domains, while Malocchio is entrapped only by a magic spell that might yet be broken. As long as Gabrielle lives, she remains the darklord; should she die, lordship of the domain will likely pass to him, denying him his destiny. He seeks to capture her, keeping her safe while he tortures her psycho-



logically for his own amusement. He has recently learned of his young half-sister Lucita and sees her as the perfect leverage to trap Gabrielle.

Malocchio acts like a child in many ways. He is selfish and temperamental. The slightest frustration sends him into a tantrum that usually ends in murder. His iron fist closes tighter around the realm each day. Malocchio does not care whether Invidia is crushed beneath the heels of foreign invaders, so long as he exterminates the Vistani.

When not overseeing his troops or leading patrols in the countryside, Malocchio researches his ancestry or amuses himself by tormenting commoners or torturing his imprisoned Vistani, leaving day-to-day functions of the nation to subordinates. When Malocchio issues a decree, however, he expects it to be obeyed instantly.

### Combat

Malocchio revels in death and misery and leads patrols into the countryside whenever he can, ordering his mercenaries to swoop down on bandits, rebels, marauding creatures, and fleeing Vistani with heartless enthusiasm. His favorite steed, Redhoof, is a warhorse as intent on shedding blood as its master. Malocchio particularly enjoys





riding foes down and trampling them beneath his steed's iron-shod hooves.

Malocchio has many powers at his command and uses his evil eye to render his foes helpless before summoning wild beasts or directing mercenaries to tear them apart. Though boastful in combat, Malocchio is a coward at heart, quickly teleporting away should a fight turn against him.

**Special Attacks:** *Evil Eye (Su)*: Malocchio possesses the Evil Eye ability of the Vistani, detailed in Chapter Five of the **Ravenloft Player's Handbook**. In addition to the effects listed there, Malocchio can use his evil eye to cast *cause fear*, *charm monster*, *charm person*, *hypnotism*, and *suggestion* in a manner similar to a gaze attack. To use a spell as a gaze attack, Malocchio must take a standard action, and those merely looking at him are not affected. These effects manifest as if cast by a 6th-level sorcerer. Saving throws against the Dukkar's evil eye have a DC of 16. Malocchio's gaze has a range of 30 feet.

*Feral Allies (Su)*: Once per day, Malocchio can call forth 3d6 wolves, 2d6 dire wolves, 2d6 Tiny vipers, 1d6 Small vipers, 4d10 ravens, or 2d4 dire ravens from Invidia's wilds as a standard action. These animals arrive in 2d6 rounds and serve Malocchio for up to 1 day. Malocchio has no love for these creatures and often bids them to destroy themselves for his own entertainment.

*Spell-Like Abilities*: 3/day — *darkness*; 1/day — *desecrate*, *unholy blight*. These spells are cast as by a 6th-level sorcerer and have a saving throw DC of 13 + spell level.

**Special Qualities:** *Dukkar Qualities (Su)*: As a Dukkar, Malocchio is immune to Vistani curses and the Evil Eye. Part fiend, part Vistani, Malocchio forms a "blind spot" for the Vistani, undetectable to their prophecies and scrying. Although Malocchio does have a reality wrinkle with a radius of 12,000 feet, Gabrielle cannot sense its presence or location. It may even be true that the Dark Powers themselves have difficulty perceiving him. Malocchio has not performed power rituals; he has no interest in further binding himself to this claustrophobic world.

*Protected Kin (Ex)*: Malocchio has inherited his mother's inability to harm her kin. Pure-blooded Vistani are completely immune to his supernatural powers and spells, unless the spell is harmless, and he cannot attack such an individual. Any individual of Vistani heritage — whether a half-Vistani or simply a *giorgio* with a distant Vistani ancestor —

receives a +2 bonus to saving throws vs. all of his supernatural powers and spells, and he suffers a -2 penalty to his attack rolls should he attack such an individual. Malocchio can, however, cause others to harm those of Vistani blood.

*Teleport Without Error (Sp)*: At will, Malocchio can *teleport without error* as a standard action. Were he not shackled by Vistani magic, he would be able to teleport through closed domain borders to any location on any plane (not unlike a *plane shift* spell) and could take "passengers" with him, even darklords. This action would free those damned souls from their domains, causing those lands to vanish or be reformed. In his current circumstances, however, Malocchio is limited to teleporting to any location within Invidia's borders. Malocchio now primarily uses this ability to transport himself around the domain and to escape danger.

## Lair

Invidia's ruler divides his time between the Citadel in Karina and his personal retreat at Castle Loupet, his mother's old demesnes and the lair of the werewolf lord Bakholis before her. His mercenaries' barracks are located within the castle walls. The extensive dungeons and torture chambers are also kept occupied by as many Vistani as the Dukkar's men can capture, their eyes and tongues cut out to prevent them from laying curses. Loupet's bloody history and the constant agony of the Dukkar's prisoners keeps the castle a consistent rank 3 or 4 sinkhole of evil.

## Ivana Boritsi, Darklord of Borca

**Female human Ari3/Exp4/CPo5**: CR 13; Medium humanoid (human) (5 ft. 6 in. tall); HD 3d8+4d6+5d4+72, hp 112; Int +4; Spd 30 ft.; AC 16, touch 11, flat-footed 16; Base Atk +8; Grp +7; Atk +8 melee (1d4/19-20, +1 dagger) or +9 ranged (1d4-1, masterwork dart); Full Atk +8/+3 melee (1d4/19-20, +1 dagger) or +9/+4 ranged (1d4-1, masterwork dart); SA insidious application, kiss of death, poison mastery; SQ detect poison, inventive ingredients, poison immunity; AL CE; SV Fort +9, Ref +6, Will +8; Str 8, Dex 11, Con 22, Int 16, Wis 10, Cha 20.

*Skills and Feats*: Appraise +9, Bluff +19, Craft (alchemy) +6, Craft (poisonmaking) +20, Diplomacy +20, Gather Information +10, Handle Animal +7, Hide +9, Knowledge (local) +9, Knowledge (nature) +9, Knowledge (nobility and royalty) +9, Knowledge (religion) +5, Listen +8, Move Silently +8, Profession (herbalist) +6, Search +8, Sense Motive +6, Sleight of Hand +10, Spot +8; Alertness, Improved Initiative, Muse (see **Van Richten's**



Arsenal), Skill Focus (Bluff, Diplomacy, Craft [poisonmaking]).

*Languages:* Balok\*, Mordentish\*, Falkovnian.

*Signature Possessions:* +1 dagger, 6 masterwork darts, *amulet of natural armor* +2, *bracelets of armor* +3 (as *bracers*), *dress of charisma* +2 (as *cloak*), *ring of protection* +1.

Ivana has not aged a day since becoming darklord of Borca. Though she is currently 68 years old, she looks no older than 18. Appearing as a beautiful young woman with long black hair and deep blue eyes, she has an air of innocence about her that is completely contrary to her cruel character. Her appearance is marred only by her lips and fingernails, which are a sickly shade of blue. She disguises these flaws with the careful application of makeup.

When Ivana sleeps, her face swells, her tongue protrudes and blackens, and her skin becomes gray, marked by a maze of black veins. She looks like a victim of poisoning and would appear dead if not for the strained rise and fall of her chest. This disfigurement fades within a minute of her waking, but Ivana must rise to it every morning.



## Background

Ivana is the daughter of Camille Dilisnya, the former darklord of Borca, and Klaus Boritsi, a minor stapan. Her father disappeared, just one more in a long string of Camille's murders.

Camille tried to instill in Ivana the same disdain for men that she had, but was unable to poison Ivana's heart completely against them. Ivana longed to experience true love. When 17, she met a young man named Pieter, a poet and musician. Pieter was more interested in his art than love, and even Ivana's considerable beauty was insufficient to garner his attention. Roused by his aloofness, Ivana pursued Pieter, trying to capture his interest. Once she began to feel as deeply for his work as he did, Pieter began to share her affections.

Camille was unwilling to let her daughter experience happiness in love. Using her resemblance to Ivana and the cover of night, Camille deceived Pieter and made her way into his bed, where Ivana found the two of them together. Camille claimed Pieter seduced her, demanding that Ivana punish him in the manner of Dilisnya women. Ivana employed a powerful magic poison that saturated her body while doing her no harm. A single kiss killed Pieter.

In 711 BC, Ivana recruited her childhood friend and closest confidante Nostalia Romaine as a test subject for a new concoction that would give its user a lethal touch at will — a refinement of the same magic toxins that now flowed through Ivana's blood. Thus, Nostalia became the first *ermordenung*, and the two women conspired to assassinate Camille. Although Nostalia's kiss took Camille's life, Ivana had directed the event and so became Borca's new darklord.

Ivana remain unchallenged until the Grand Conjunction, when her distant cousin Ivan Dilisnya became trapped in Borca. As children, Ivana counted Ivan as a dear friend, but this sentiment now came to an end. The impish child Ivana once knew has been replaced by a bitter old man who craves her eternal youth — a gift not in her power to give. Ivana remains the dominant personality of the two but must constantly be on guard against Ivan's envious schemes.

## Current Sketch

Ivana's experience with Pieter has left her bitter and hateful toward men. She delights in destroying the relationships of others and humors the men who court her just so she may poison them later. She claims that her slain lovers had at-



tempted to do her harm, but such claims leave the people of Borca deeply torn. On the one hand, they remain suspicious of Ivana, secretly calling her the Black. On the other hand, few Borcan men can say that they do not wish to sample her embrace.

Ivana still longs for love. Unfortunately, the poison coursing through her body makes this impossible, so she drowns her loneliness in hedonistic pursuits and encourages her *ermordenung* retainers to do the same.

Ivana rarely concerns herself with passing laws and leaves the nation's defense to her cousin Ivan. She is interested in maintaining her decadent lifestyle and taxes Borca's elite mercilessly, with her "rent collectors" making sure no one withholds. The elite extort from the commoners, and thus Ivana's excesses drain the very livelihood from her domain.

## Combat

Ivana is not a strong combatant, but she possesses enormous skill with poisons and has many hired thugs to defend her. She also has her innocent bearing, which often allows her to get close enough to an opponent to make use of her deadly kiss.

**Special Attacks:** *Kiss of Death (Ex)*: The intimate embrace of Ivana Boritsi is far deadlier than any poison known to humanity. Ivana can kiss a helpless creature as a standard action or kiss a resisting creature with a successful grapple check. Any living creature she kisses must make a successful DC 22 Fortitude save or immediately suffer 3d6 points of temporary Constitution damage. The victim must continue to make a Fortitude save each minute following the kiss, suffering 3d6 points of temporary Constitution damage with each failure, until the victim dies or receives a *neutralize poison* spell. Creatures immune to poison due to their creature type (i.e. constructs, elementals, oozes, and undead) are immune to the kiss.

**Special Qualities:** *Detect Poison (Su)*: Ivana continuously *detects poison*, as the spell, on all creatures and objects within 50 feet. This ability requires no concentration or action on Ivana's part.

*Immunity to Poison (Ex)*: Ivana is immune to poison.

## Cair

Ivana's private estate, Misericordia, is filled with hidden passageways and secret doors that only

Ivana can freely navigate. The beautiful, walled gardens contain all the raw materials she needs to create her poisons. Ivana frequently entertains guests here, but just as frequently bars everyone from entering, even her servants, when she desires solitude. The estate is a rank 3 sinkhole of evil.

## Closing the Borders

When Ivana wishes to seal her domain, an undetectable catalyst permeates the air surrounding Borca. This substance reacts with the waters of the domain to create a lethal poison — even when that water is already coursing through a creature's veins. Creatures that have consumed any liquid in Borca in the last 48 hours become nauseated when they cross the border and will die in 1d4 x 10 minutes unless they return to Borca. The nauseated condition ends 1d6 rounds after the creature crosses back into Borca. Borca's closed borders do not affect creatures immune to Ivana's poison kiss.

## Azrael Dak, the Sorrow of Sithicus

**Male hill dwarf werebadger Ftr10**: CR 13; Medium humanoid (dwarf, shapechanger) (4 ft. 1 in. in dwarf or hybrid form, 7 feet long as direbadger); HD 10d10+3d8+52 (10d10+3d8+65 as badger or hybrid), hp 120 (133 as badger or hybrid); Init +7 (+10 as badger or hybrid); Spd 20 ft. (20 ft. as hybrid, 30 ft. as badger, burrow 10 ft. as badger or hybrid); AC 19, touch 13, flat-footed 16 (21, touch 16, flat-footed 15 as badger or hybrid); Base Atk +11; Grp +15 (+17 as badger or hybrid); Atk +19 melee (1d10+11/x3, +3 *dwarven waraxe of speed*) or +15 ranged (1d8/19–20, masterwork light crossbow), or +21 melee (1d10+14/x3, +3 *dwarven waraxe of speed*) or +18 ranged (1d8/19–20, masterwork light crossbow) as hybrid, or +17 melee (1d4+6, claw) or +17 melee (1d6+3, bite) as badger or hybrid; Full Atk +19/+14/+9 and +19 melee (1d10+11/x3, +3 *dwarven waraxe of speed*) or +15 ranged (1d8/19–20, masterwork light crossbow), or +21/+16/+11 and +21 melee (1d10+14/x3, +3 *dwarven waraxe of speed*) or +18 ranged (1d8/19–20, masterwork light crossbow) as hybrid, or +17 melee (1d4+6, 2 claws) or +17 melee (1d6+3, bite) as badger or hybrid; SA animate dead, spread the rage, curse of lycanthropy, rage (as badger or hybrid); SQ alternate form, badger empathy, chemical bane (poppy seed), darkvision 60 ft., dwarf traits, the Hunger, low-light vision, scent, damage reduction 15/silver (as badger or hybrid); AL CE; SV Fort +14, Ref +9, Will +9 (Fort +14, Ref +11, Will +8 as badger or hybrid without *cloak*); Str 19, Dex 16, Con 19, Int 10, Wis 12, Cha 12 (Str 23, Dex 22, Con 20 as badger or hybrid).

*Skills and Feats*: Bluff +2, Climb +4 (+8 as badger or hybrid), Craft (trapmaking) +6, Hide +3 (+8 as badger or hybrid), Intimidate +7, Jump +4 (+8 as badger or hybrid), Knowledge (local: Sithicus) +2, Move Silently +3 (+8 as badger or





hybrid), Sense Motive +3; Back to the Wall, Blind-Fight, Cleave, Combat Reflexes, Courage, Dodge, HollowB (see **Van Richten's Arsenal**), Improved Control ShapeB, Improved Initiative, Iron WillB, Power Attack, Weapon FinesseB, Weapon Focus (dwarven waraxe), Weapon Specialization (dwarven waraxe). OR 3 (7 if true nature known).

*Languages:* Dwarven\*, Balok, Sithican.

*Signature Possessions:* +3 dwarven waraxe of speed, masterwork light crossbow, chain shirt.

Azrael's body is heavily muscled, yet nimble. Balding on top, he has foregone the traditional dwarven beard for bone-white muttonchop sideburns that meet as a mustache. The skin on the left side of his face and running down his left arm and chest is puckered with scars. His voice is a rumbling growl, and his eyes bulge with madness. Azrael's mannerisms make him appear to be on the verge of a violent rampage — and he often is. Azrael usually wears dark and repeatedly patched clothes, and he always wears his chain of office, bearing a rose of black iron.

As a werebadger, Azrael can also take the form of a dire badger or a monstrous dwarf-badger hybrid, with stooped posture and claws so long and thick they clack together as he moves. His burns are visible in all forms.

## Background

Azrael was born on a distant world, in the dwarven city of Brigalure. He demonstrated no talent for dwarven crafts and proved too lazy to overcome his incompetence. Unable to master his parents' crafts, Azrael could not be considered an adult. His parents' continued attempts to teach him their trade merely resulted in expensive accidents.

At last, unable to bear his parents' tirades, Azrael snapped and in a rampage slaughtered his entire family. His mother's screams drew constables, and Azrael was forced to flee. A mob of dwarven locals cut off Azrael's escape. Wounded and cornered, Azrael sank into unconsciousness.

Azrael awoke alone, somewhere in the endless maze of lightless tunnels surrounding the city. On the verge of panic, he heard the smothering darkness speak to him, promising to grant Azrael life and power if he destroyed Brigalure. Azrael accepted, and his body wrenched itself into a new shape: he had become a werebadger.



Azrael found his way back to the dwarven city, preying on its inhabitants for 50 years and realizing his true calling as a murderer.

One day, while Azrael tracked yet another victim through the tunnels, a strange mist billowed from the stone. When it parted, Azrael found himself in Forlorn. He wandered the southwestern Core, learning the lay of the land. In 720 BC, Azrael was captured by a band of Barovian peasants who tried to burn him for his crimes. He killed the last of them, then discovered he had an audience: a glowering, undead blackguard and his captive Vistana, Magda Kulchevich. The death knight, an outlander like himself, had only just arrived in the Land of Mists. Sensing the Black Rose's power, Azrael joined him, serving him for the security he provided. When the Black Rose entered the Mists and became the darklord of Sithicus, he made Azrael the seneschal of his castle, Nedragard.

Azrael served as the death knight's emissary for more than 30 years, earning the nickname "the Sorrow of Sithicus." Following the Grand Conjunction, Azrael discovered a subterranean pool of liquid darkness far beneath the Veidrava salt mines. Once again, the darkness whispered to Azrael, revealing the secrets of any creature in the domain and promising him future glory. Azrael saw that the



Black Rose had retreated into numb despair and that the darkness was preparing him to become the new master of Sithicus. The darkness taught Azrael a rite that would give him control of every shadow in Sithicus and advised him on how best to wield its power.

Six years ago, Azrael started conspiring with Inza Kulchevich, the treacherous daughter of Magda Kulchevich. Azrael believed that Magda was the only person capable of thwarting his treason and that Inza sought to assume her mother's role as *raunie* of their small tribe. Azrael secretly approached Malocchio Aderre to sow the seeds of the Black Rose's destruction. Once his master was gone, Azrael would assume control of the domain and deliver all of his master's captive Vistani to the Dukkar's tender mercies.

Azrael's plans came to fruition in 752 BC on the heels of Magda's murder. An army of Invidian mercenaries distracted the Black Rose at his castle as Azrael performed the rite. The shadow of every living creature in the domain tore away from its moorings and poured into the Great Chasm beneath Nedragaard. Then, as a single roiling mass, they rose up to shatter the castle and all who stood within it, an event now called the Night of Screaming Shadows. The darkness sank back into the rift, and the shadows returned to their owners. The Black Rose was erased from his own domain.

## Current Sketch

The shadow rite has driven Azrael to the brink of madness. The darkness no longer cajoles him with promises of power. Now, it speaks the truth, mocking him as the puppet he has always been. Azrael knows that Inza has assumed the position of darklord. He wishes to find and destroy her, to assume her power, and to repay her for her betrayal. Azrael knows Inza has merged with the darkness — or that she has *always* been the darkness.

Azrael has declared himself the new ruler of Sithicus, but his control is crumbling. The Sithicans are slowly realizing that for all his sadism, Azrael is just one dwarf with a dwindling force of hired killers. Increasingly desperate, Azrael now continually races through Sithicus on a chariot decorated with elven bones, quashing one uprising after another with acts of astounding cruelty.

## Combat

Azrael hurls himself fearlessly into close combat to rattle his enemies. Many opponents have

been fooled into thinking him little more than an unsubtle berserker. If he intends to kill a foe, Azrael usually shifts to hybrid form. If opponents demonstrate that they can actually cause Azrael serious harm, he immediately becomes much more cautious and reveals a cunning, tactical mind. Azrael shifts to his badger form and burrows to retreat if necessary. If opponents best Azrael once, they can rest assured that he will return with reinforcements to even the score.

**Special Attacks:** *Animate Dead (Sp)*: Once per day, Azrael can cast *animate dead*, as the spell cast by a 9th-level cleric. The Black Rose granted Azrael this power as a boon for his service.

*Rage (Ex)*: Azrael can use the dire badger's rage ability whenever in badger or hybrid form.

*Spread the Rage (Su)*: When an intelligent, non-evil creature touches Azrael's battleaxe, it must succeed at a DC 17 Will save or pick the weapon up and go berserk, as a *berserking sword*. The axe does not function as a *berserking* weapon in Azrael's hands.

*Curse of Lycanthropy (Su)*: Afflicted lycanthropes of Azrael's bloodline are triggered by rage.

## Cair

Azrael seldom visits his home in the cracked ruins of Nedragaard. The castle is still haunted by phantoms, some of which remind Azrael of his former master. The domain's simmering political unrest offers Azrael little respite, and he travels frequently.

## Ivan Dilisnya, Darklord of Borca

**Male human Ari4/Exp3/CPo5**: CR 13; Medium humanoid (human) (5 ft. 7 in. tall); HD 4d8+3d6+5d4+72, hp 113; Init +0; Spd 30 ft.; AC 16, touch 12, flat-footed 16; Base Atk +8; Grp +7; Atk +11 melee (1d6+1/18–20 plus venom, envenomed +2 rapier) or +9 ranged (1d4–1 plus venom, masterwork dart); Full Atk +11/+6 melee (1d6+1/18–20 plus venom, envenomed +2 rapier) or +9/+4 ranged (1d4–1 plus venom, masterwork dart); SA envenom, insidious application, poison mastery; SQ deadly alchemy, immunities, inventive ingredients; AL CE; SV Fort +9, Ref +6, Will +10; Str 8, Dex 11, Con 22, Int 18, Wis 15, Cha 12.

*Skills and Feats*: Appraise +11, Bluff +14, Craft (alchemy) +10, Craft (poisonmaking) +21, Diplomacy +1, Disguise +10, Forgery +7, Gather Information +8, Intimidate +9, Knowledge (history) +11, Knowledge (local) +10, Knowledge (nature) +12, Knowledge (nobility and royalty) +12, Listen +4, Perform (act) +11, Profession



(herbalist) +8, Sense Motive +10, Sleight of Hand +8, Spot +12; Alertness, Quick Draw, Skill Focus (Bluff, Craft [poisonmaking]), Weapon Finesse, Weapon Focus (rapier).

*Languages:* Balok\*, Mordentish\*, Falkovnian, Luktar, Vaasi.

*Signature Possessions:* Envenomed +1 rapier (“Wasptongue”), 3 masterwork darts, *amulet of natural armor* +2, *bracelets of armor* +2 (as *bracers*), *cloak of charisma* +2, *ring of protection* +2.

Ivan is a thin man with curly gray hair, streaked with the blond of his youth. He is an extremely animated person, to the point of histrionics. Many Borcans call him a fop — but never to his face. He paces and poses as though on a stage, lowering his voice to a barely audible whisper only to send it booming to emphasize a point. He gesticulates with every word and often laughs suddenly for no apparent reason. Ivan considers himself a great actor, and his wardrobe includes costumes representing all walks of life. Although Ivan usually prefers to wear the stylish fashions of the Borcan court, on any given day he may choose to pose as anything from an armored knight to an anchorite to a lowly court jester. He makes for most unusual company, and no one would likely tolerate his presence if not for his power, wealth and willingness to eliminate those who displease him.

## Background

The Dilisnyas have been in Ravenloft since its earliest days, being among the guests at Castle Ravenloft on the fateful night of Strahd’s death and rebirth. Some were able to survive the horrors of that evening, and the Dilisnyas have persevered ever since.

Ivan was born under a new moon in Levkarest in 689, on the same night as Ivana Boritsi. He was a troublesome child from the start, prone to fits and tantrums. By the age of six, he was torturing small animals and was only ten when he committed his first murder, poisoning a servant girl for stealing a pastry. At the age of twelve, he poisoned his mother for no particular reason.

Ivan seemed filled with hatred for the whole world, save for his playmate Ivana Boritsi and his older sister Kristina. The two siblings loved each other dearly, but Kristina had no inkling of just how evil her younger brother was. Instead, she doted on him, spoiling him to the best of her ability. Ivan began to feel perversely possessive of



his older sister, and these feelings would have tragic consequences.

When Ivan was twenty, Kristina took a husband, and Ivan’s jealousy was extreme. Ivan felt betrayed when Kristina had a child, as though she had replaced him in her affections. Enraged, Ivan poisoned Kristina and her husband. Fortunately, a midwife escaped with the child before Ivan could finish exacting “revenge.”

Ivan’s own family drove him into the Mists. A new land emerged to welcome him, which he dubbed Dorvinia. His rulership of that domain lasted until the Grand Conjunction. Terrified by the tremors, Ivan sought out his cousin Ivana Boritsi for comfort. The two were in close proximity when the Grand Conjunction ended, and their domains merged, with Borca subsuming Dorvinia. Ivan now shares lordship with Ivana, and the awkwardness of this situation has driven the cousins to mutual hatred.

## Current Sketch

As a young man, the only thing Ivan loved as much as watching poison course through a person was tempting his palate with the sensual pleasures of fine foods and drink. Since becoming a darklord, he has been robbed of his sense of taste. The finest





foods are like ash in his mouth, the best wines like vinegar. The loss of his palate has left Ivan feeling empty and dissatisfied, unable to enjoy the luxury in which he lives. He hosts extravagant dinners to garner vicarious enjoyment through his guests, but erupts in jealous rages when his guests enjoy the food too much and offended rages if they like it too little.

Ivan's other obsession is his age. He is nearing 70, and while he remains as vigorous as a man half his age, he need only look at his ageless cousin Ivana to feel the weight of time bearing down heavily upon him. Ivan has tried to extract the secret of eternal youth from Ivana, but has failed. She offered him the formula for *vital venom* soon after their domains merged, but he proved as immune to the poisonous elixir as Ivana herself. Ivan believes that she is hiding the true secrets of immortality from him out of spite, but the truth is that Ivana does not know why she has remained youthful for so long. Ivan's jealousy has deepened the wedge between the two.

## Combat

Ivan is not well suited to direct combat, preferring to poison his enemies from a distance. He has a large number of thugs at his command, though, and sends them into combat while he stands back to watch.

**Special Attacks:** *Envenom (Ex):* As a standard action, Ivan can touch an object weighing up to 50 pounds to render it permanently poisonous. This is a contact poison that can never be removed from the object; the poison infuses the object's very essence. Creatures that touch the envenomed object must succeed at a DC 26 Fortitude save or suffer 1d6 points of initial temporary ability damage and 2d6 points of secondary temporary ability damage. Ivan can decide at the time he poisons the object whether the venom will inflict Strength, Dexterity, or Constitution damage.

Ivan has enchanted his rapier *Wasptongue* with Constitution venom, including its hilt.

**Special Qualities:** *Deadly Alchemy (Ex):* Ivan can create any poison as though its raw materials were two categories less rare than they actually are, to a minimum of "very common" (see "Poison Politics," above).

**Immunities (Ex):** Ivan is immune to disease, paralysis, and poison.

## Lair

Degravo, the Dilisnya estate, is as chaotic as its master. Ivan is constantly in motion within its walls, changing quarters to suit his whim and leaving the rest of the estate to gather dust. He loves to host gatherings or invite acting troupes to perform in his private theater, and once an invitation is extended, attendance is mandatory. For all his guests to survive the visit is a rare occurrence. The estate is a rank 2 sinkhole of evil, though this often rises to rank 3 during gatherings.

## Closing the Borders

Though Ivan is in most respects on equal footing with his fellow darklord Ivana Boritsi, the power to close Borca's borders resides with her alone.

## Inza Magdova Kulchevich, Darklord of Sithicus

**Female Vatraska Vistana Rog4/Wiz6:** CR 12; Medium humanoid (5 ft. 6 in. tall); HD 4d6+6d4+10, hp 46; Init +4; Spd 30 ft. (10 ft., climb 10 ft. as shadow); AC 16, touch 14, flat-footed 12; Base Atk +6; Grp +7; Atk +11 melee (1d4+5/19–20, +4 *dagger of wounding*) or +10 ranged (1d6/x3, shortbow); Full Atk +11/+6 melee (1d4+5/19–20, +4 *dagger of wounding*) or +10/+5 ranged (1d6/x3, shortbow); SA evil eye, guilt lash, sneak attack +2d6, spells; SQ heightened static burn, darkvision 60 ft., daylight vulnerability, dread familiar ("Sabak," shadow asp), low-light vision, Mist navigation, shadow form, shadow immunity, she seeps below, the sight, tracking magic, trapfinding, evasion, trap sense +1, uncanny dodge; AL NE; SV Fort +4, Ref +10, Will +9; Str 13, Dex 18, Con 13, Int 17, Wis 16, Cha 18.

**Skills and Feats:** Appraise +6, Bluff +10, Concentration +5, Craft (alchemy) +8, Escape Artist +10, Forgery +7, Gather Information +10, Heal +5, (Hide +14 as shadow), Intimidate +13, Knowledge (arcana) +7, Knowledge (Vistani lore) +7, Listen +5, Move Silently +7, Search +12, Sense Motive +8, Spellcraft +6 (+8 to decipher scrolls), Spot +15, Survival +6, Use Magic Device +11; Alertness, Back to the Wall, Brew Potion, Combat Casting, Jaded, Spell Penetration, Voice of Wrath. OR 2 (8 in shadow form).

**Languages:** Patterna\*, Balok, Draconic, Luktar, Sithican.

**Wizard Spells Known (5/5/5/4; save DC 13 + spell level):** 0 — all; 1st — *cause fear, charm person, chill touch, disguise self, mage armor, magic missile, protection from good, ray of enfeeblement, sleep*; 2nd — *misdirection, summon swarm, web*; 3rd — *dispel magic, lightning bolt, nondetection, phantom steed*.



*Signature Possessions:* +4 dagger of wounding (“Novgor”), leather armor, crystal ball with detect thoughts, charm of life protection.

Inza Magdova Kulchevich appears to be a beautiful young Vistana woman in her late teens. Those who knew her mother — the famous Magda Ilyanova Kulchevich — swear that Inza is almost her mirror image: slender figure, raven-black hair, gorgeous green eyes. The likeness, though, ends there. Whereas Magda was always blunt, even brazen, Inza is manipulative and secretive. She has convinced strangers that she was a sweet young thing, more prone to singing than scheming. Even now, she sometimes appears to strangers dressed in pretty skirts and embroidered blouses, but her black leather fighting gear — sewn, some say, from the flayed skin of her defeated enemies — always lurks beneath this frilly façade.

Inza’s beauty hides a heart of darkness, however. Although she prefers to maintain her human form whenever possible, her true form is a seething, formless wave of semi-liquid shadow. All that remains of Inza are her bright green eyes, glinting out from the darkness. Inza must focus to retain her humanity. She visibly darkens when angered, and her blood is inky black.

## Background

Born in Gundarak in the year 736 BC, at the very hour when Duke Gundar was assassinated, Inza entered the world as a terrifying storm swept through the domain, as if the land mourned its lord’s passing. The Vistani of her caravan said that her cry of outrage at being slapped by the midwife was louder than the worst shrieking of the un-earthly tempest.

Inza’s constant screaming as an infant brought more than one deadly night creature down upon the Wanderers’ camp. Throughout her youth, she caused the troupe’s hasty departure from village after village with her flagrant thievery and combative attitude. Magda’s love for Inza blinded her to the girl’s darker traits. Perhaps the *raunie* had hoped to make her daughter’s life better than the one she had endured or to compensate for Inza’s missing father, murdered by Duke Gundar’s men before her birth.

By the time Inza was sixteen, the rest of the Wanderers had decided that she was either a monster or a jinx. Though Magda saw the girl as sweet and caring, they recognized her as a vicious, power-hungry misanthrope who cared little for the



unwritten codes of the Vistani. She hated animals, particularly dogs, because she feared that they could recognize her true nature. This fear manifested in her animosity toward her mother’s faithful hound, Sabak.

Inza learned thieving skills from some of the older men in the caravan, whom she seduced with promises of power and never-delivered sexual favors. Where she gained her initial training in magic remains a mystery. Some claim that she traded her soul to a dark entity for tutelage. However she gained her magical skills, she kept them — and the powerful dagger Novgor, which had also come into her possession — hidden from her mother and the other Wanderers.

Novgor was the storied blade of the equally storied Vistani warrior Kulchek the Wanderer. Inza’s mother had called her patchwork caravan “the Wanderers” in honor of the legendary hero, whose bloodline she claimed as her own. As Magda’s renown grew, the Vistani elders wondered aloud if the *raunie* might indeed be the heir to Kulchek’s fabled greatness.

Kulchek had been the original wielder of the weapon Magda then carried: the cudgel Gard. The club had been carved, from a tree at the top of the world, out of wood only Kulchek’s ever-sharp dag-



ger Novgor could cut. In her travels, Magda had kept watch for that long-lost blade, a powerful artifact in its own right. And her dreams had revealed that a Vistana of Kulchek's bloodline could carve a remarkable legacy for herself with Novgor.

A member of the Wanderers, one of Kulchek's descendants, *would* fulfill this dream-prophecy, but in ways Madame Magda never could have imagined.

By 752, the Wanderers unknowingly journeyed to Sithicus, the domain-prison of Magda's old adversary the Black Rose and were trapped there. The Black Rose allowed the tribe the run of Sithicus, but he would close the borders whenever they attempted to leave. In Sithicus, Inza forged a secret alliance with the werebadger Azrael Dak, who had served as the Black Rose's seneschal but now schemed to control the domain himself. The werebadger underestimated Inza, who lusted for power even Azrael could scarcely imagine.

Inza used Novgor to sabotage Gard, then arranged for the salt shadows, discovered by Azrael, to attack the caravan. The cudgel shattered in Magda's hands during the fight, a disaster that led to the *raunie's* death. The surviving Wanderers were later sacrificed in a scheme by which Inza would gain the Black Rose's personal protection. To trick the Knight into saving her, Inza arranged for a mob of the Dukkar's ogres to attack the remaining Wanderers. The Black Rose did indeed rescue her and granted her the safety of his castle. Three of the Wanderers survived the attack, however, a fact Inza would later regret. (See **Heroes of Light** for more information on the Wanderers.)

The Black Rose eventually vanished from Sithicus, but neither Inza nor Azrael could claim total victory. The hero Ganelon disrupted Azrael's plot to control the shadows of every living creature in the domain, leaving the werebadger on the brink of madness. The three surviving Wanderers joined with the giant Nabon and swore revenge against Inza. On the Night of Screaming Shadows, to escape these avengers, Inza threw herself into the Great Chasm just as the seething darkness struck Nedragaard and poured into the rift behind her. She survived the fall, but was cursed with the mantle of Sithicus' secret darklord.

### Current Sketch

Witnesses to Inza's plunge into the Chasm say that shadowy hands enfolded her, slowing her

descent. Her terror-filled shriek is the last thing anyone can report with certainty. Some who ventured too close to the Chasm claim they heard a young woman's voice whispering to them in Patterna, though they are reluctant to reveal what was said. Others speak of meeting a green-eyed Vistana woman who tempted them to unspeakable deeds.

Inza revels in the evil deeds of others. She works from within the Great Chasm to eradicate all goodness within her domain.

She often acts through minions and oblivious agents, tempting the weak to evil and punishing those who do good and selfless things. She especially enjoys causing those who think of themselves as noble to lose faith and has tormented harmless individuals with her Guilt Lash for days on end for some small act of self-effacing kindness that Inza witnessed through her crystal ball.

Inza mostly remains hidden, increasing her potency through mystery and minimizing the drain of maintaining her preferred form. She recognizes that she has made some powerful enemies. The Wanderers stalk her ceaselessly, carrying with them a stake made from the shattered wood of Gard and swearing to drive it through Inza's black heart for her treachery against the Vistani. Ganelon the Doomed, who even now labors under Inza's curse that everything he holds dear should perish by his hand, also pursues her. Even Azrael accuses her of having stolen "his" rightful power. Then there is the White Rose, a helpful, phantasmal figure encountered near the ruins of Nedragaard Keep.

These adversaries trouble Inza more than she admits. They remind her that selfless people, capable of good, exist. These noble souls haunt her thoughts and trouble her sleep. She cannot bury their truth any more than her subjects can escape their sins.

Inza studies magic and has increased her wizardly skill significantly since becoming darklord. She still loathes animals, especially dogs. Even the shadow asp the Dark Powers granted her as a dread companion repulses her, though she tolerates its presence. Inza named this familiar Sabak in mocking tribute to her mother's faithful hound.

### Combat

Inza rarely enters combat. She has no scruples and stoops to any underhanded method to win. She enjoys goading an enemy into a fight after sabotaging his weapons or buying off his reserve forces. If



cornered, she is fierce and resourceful, reverting to liquid shadow to escape. She uses spells or her Guilt Lash to incapacitate the most dangerous foes, allowing her allies or servants to deal with lesser threats. She feels no guilt about fleeing from a serious adversary, though she always resumes the fight under more favorable conditions.

Inza carries Novgor, dagger of the Vistani hero Kulchek. The plain looking blade is an impressive +4 *dagger of wounding*. Novgor's edge never dulls, and its needle-sharp point can be used by any pure-blooded Vistani rogue as a masterwork lockpick. Novgor seems immune to scratches or scuffs. In the hands of one of Kulchek's descendants, including Inza, the flat of the blade can be used to cast *color spray* at will; a light source is necessary for this effect, but anything brighter than a candle within 5 yards will suffice. Once per week, the dagger's mirror-bright sides can be used to cast *major image*, with a duration of 1 hour/level rather than concentration + 3 rounds. (All spells are cast as by a 12th-level sorcerer and have a save DC of 16, where applicable.) This illusion exhausts the caster, effectively reducing her Strength and Constitution by half for 24 hours. Novgor's powers are subject to Sithicus' limitations on illusions.

For distance fighting or ambushes, Inza relies upon a shortbow and specially prepared poisoned arrows (Injury, Fort DC 11, initial and secondary damage 1d6 Con).

She wears a *charm of life protection*. This small silver pendant protects the wearer from *magic jar* and spells that would usurp control of the wearer's body. The pendant shields the wearer's shadow from capture or manipulation. If the wearer is slain, her soul enters the pendant and is protected for seven full days. Thereafter, it is supposed to depart to the plane of the wearer's alignment — though in Ravenloft, this power remains untested and unlikely. If the pendant is destroyed during the seven days, the spirit is annihilated. Inza's charm appears as a silver teardrop patterned with a twining vine and casts a small shadow on the wearer's flesh at all times.

**Special Attacks:** *Guilt Lash (Su)*: As a standard action, Inza can cause any individual within the domain to recall a random memory. Especially detailed will be the recollection of any guilty deeds or motivations associated with that memory. Targets must succeed at a DC 22 Will save (good-aligned targets gain a +1 bonus; evil-aligned

targets suffer a -3 penalty) or be stunned with remorse for 2d4 rounds.

If the target of Inza's Guilt Lash succeeds at a Will save, it means that the darklord has inadvertently tapped a memory without a specific or noteworthy sin attached to it. Unless she has cast *protection from good* on herself, the backlash from this revelation causes Inza 1d6 points of damage. This damage manifests as a pain in her chest, as if the Wanderers had succeeded in piercing her heart with the Gard fragment they carry. Inza will not use the Guilt Lash for a day on someone who succeeds in a Will save and flees from direct confrontation with him until she reassures herself of his corruptibility.

**Special Qualities:** *Daylight Vulnerability (Ex)*: Inza suffers 1d4 points of nonlethal damage each round she remains exposed to direct sunlight.

*Heightened Static Burn (Su)*: Like all Vistani, Inza is compelled to stay mobile. As the direct descendant of Kulchek the Wanderer, she must sleep in a different location every night and never in the same place twice, or she faces dire consequences. After her mother's death, Inza ordered the surviving members of her caravan to stay in the same location two nights in a row, in a spot where she had arranged for ogres to attack them. The transgression was fatal for most of the Wanderers. The consequences of defying the curse have yet to manifest for Inza, though she fears that the Blessed Knight might be an agent sent to deliver supernatural retribution. Since that incident, she has not defied the curse.

*Innocence Vulnerability (Ex)*: The mere presence of true innocence pains Inza. She suffers a -1 morale penalty to all attack rolls, checks, and saves made either to attack an Innocent character or to resist the attacks of an Innocent character.

*Mist Navigation (Ex)*: Inza cannot use the Mists to leave her domain.

*Shadow Form (Su)*: Inza can transform at will into seething shadow as a move action and can remain in shadow form indefinitely. When she transforms, all worn and carried gear transforms with her. Whenever wounded, she must succeed at a Concentration check (DC 10 + damage suffered) or involuntarily assume shadow form; she can take human form again on her next action as normal. While in shadow form, Inza is chillingly cold to the touch, but she cannot make physical attacks, speak, or cast any spells requiring verbal or somatic components. Her liquid body can seep up walls and



through narrow gaps and is not subject to flanking or critical hits. She also gains a +10 racial bonus to Move Silently checks and a +10 racial bonus to Hide checks while in shadowy areas.

*Shadow Immunity (Ex)*: Inza is immune to the natural attacks of all shadow creatures and all shadow magic.

*She Seeps Below (Su)*: Whenever in shadow form and in contact with the ground, Inza can seep into the earth (or boil up from it) through the soil or crevices in stone as a full-round action, unless she is somehow blocked (as by a *forcecage* spell). When Inza sleeps, is rendered unconscious, or drops below 0 hp, she automatically assumes shadow form. One round later (if possible), she automatically seeps into the inky bowels of the earth. While deep below Sithicus, Inza recovers 1 hp per hour until she is fully healed. If the Wanderers are correct, driving the shard of Gard through Inza's heart (or into the rippling pool of shadow) before she can seep away would destroy her forever.

## Cair

Inza has no true home, lairing within the seething depths of the Great Chasm when she must rest. Because of Kulchek's curse, she sleeps in a different location every night, in the chasm itself and in the loneliest wilds and most desolate ruins of her domain.

## Closing the Borders

Inza rarely closes the borders, but to do so she merely begins a recitation of her sins. As she catalogues her crimes, all the inhabitants of Sithicus stop whatever they are doing to add their voices and their own catalogue of transgressions to hers. The resulting sound flows to the border and coalesces as a wall of tangled flowerless rose stems, their thorns dripping with corruption. When the recitation is finished, the inhabitants of Sithicus recall every crime and misdeed they confessed. They do not remember the sins confessed by their neighbors, but are aware that everyone had joined them in giving voice to myriad dark deeds.

## Alfred Timothy, Darklord of Verbrek

**Male human werewolf Clr7 of the Wolf God**: CR 11; Medium humanoid (human, shapechanger) (5 ft. 4 in. tall as human or hybrid, 5 ft. long as wolf); HD 7d8+4d10+22 (7d8+4d10+44 as wolf or hybrid), hp 75 (97 as wolf or hybrid); Int +1 (+3 as wolf or hybrid); Spd 30 ft. (50 ft. as wolf or hybrid); AC 13, touch 11, flat-footed 12 (AC 17, touch 13, flat-footed 14 as

wolf or hybrid); Base Atk +9; Grp +9 (+12 as wolf or hybrid); Atk +9 melee (1d6, quarterstaff), or +12 melee (1d4+3, claw) or +12 melee (1d6+1, bite) as hybrid, or +12 melee (1d6+4, bite) as wolf; Full Atk +9/+4 melee (1d6, quarterstaff), or +12 melee (1d4+3, 2 claws) and +7 melee (1d6+1, bite) as hybrid, or +12 melee (1d6+4, bite) as wolf; SA rebuke undead, spells, spontaneous casting, curse of lycanthropy, trip (as wolf or hybrid); SQ alternate form, chemical bane (wolfsbane), darkvision 60 ft., the Hunger, low-light vision, scent, shadow walk, wolf empathy, damage reduction 5/silver as wolf or hybrid, spell resistance 16; AL NE; SV Fort +12, Ref +8, Will +13 (Fort +14, Ref +10 as wolf or hybrid); Str 10, Dex 13, Con 14, Int 12, Wis 19, Cha 14 (Str 16, Dex 17, Con 19 as wolf or hybrid).

*Skills and Feats*: Concentration +7 (+9 as wolf or hybrid), Diplomacy +8, Heal +9, Hide +3 (+5 as wolf or hybrid), Knowledge (arcana) +9, Knowledge (nature) +3, Knowledge (religion) +7, Listen +8, Move Silently +3 (+5 as wolf or hybrid), Search +5, Spellcraft +6, Spot +8, Survival +8; AlertnessB, Brew Potion, Combat Casting, Dodge, Enlarge Spell, Improved Control ShapeB, Iron WillB.

*Languages*: Mordentish\*, Balok.

*Typical Cleric Spells Prepared* (6/6/5/4/3; save DC 14 + spell level): 0 — *detect magic* (x2), *guidance*, *inflict minor wounds*, *mending*, *resistance*; 1st — *cause fear*, *command*, *doom* (x2), *inflict light wounds*, *protection from good*; 2nd — *cure moderate wounds* (x2), *darkness*, *enthrall*, *resist energy*; 3rd — *animate dead*, *bestow curse*, *dispel magic*, *inflict serious wound*; 4th — *cure critical wounds*, *divine power*, *restoration*.

*Typical Domain Spells Prepared* (Slaughter, Strength): 1st — *expeditious retreat*; 2nd — *bull's strength*; 3rd — *greater magic fang*; 4th — *spell immunity*.

*Signature Possessions*: *Amulet of resistance +1* (as cloak), *potion of endurance*, *wand of doom*.

Despite his 50 years, Alfred Timothy resembles a slim Verbreker youth with pale skin and scruffy, dark chestnut hair in human form. His features possess a fresh handsomeness; nonetheless, those nearby may notice details hinting at his black heart, such as the predatory glitter in his blue eyes and his wolfish, toothy smile. Whenever he speaks to non-werewolves, Alfred sneers, the left edge of his mouth twitching. His body quivers with tension, as if ready to attack at any moment. In human form, Alfred dons the simple garb of a Verbreker commoner.

In animal form, Alfred is a silvery wolf of unusual beauty and strength, about the size of a wolf. He is nimble and assured in this form, often





running with packs of wolves and dire wolves. He prefers his hybrid form, believing it his race's natural form. During rituals, he dons the high priest's ceremonial dress, a gruesome mantle of beads, feathers, bones, and human hide.

Alfred carries few possessions. Even in wolf form, however, he wears a gold amulet in the shape of a crescent moon. Alfred never casts a shadow, an unsettling trait prompting some opponents to mistake him for a vampire.

## Background

Alfred is the son of Nathan Timothy, a Mordentish werewolf who was himself darklord of Arkandale until the Grand Conjunction. In his human form, Alfred was sickly and frail. Realizing that he would never be his father's equal, Alfred despised his "human" weakness. Eventually, this hatred encompassed all humanity. Disgusted by his father's tolerance for the company of humans and passion for life on the River Musarde, Alfred left to seek his own way.

While traveling Arkandale, Alfred learned that the human natives made sacrifices to an ancient deity known only as the Wolf God. Packs of vicious wolves plagued Arkandale, and the humans sought respite from the constant attacks. Alfred felt a kinship with the Wolf God.

The thought of wielding divine magic at the behest of the god-beast tantalized Alfred, who dedicated a portion of his kills to the Wolf God and offered prayers to the deity, hoping to become its first priest. Unfortunately, Alfred received no reward from the Wolf God in return for his devotion. Frustrated, Alfred hunted down Arkandalers who revered the Wolf God, terrorizing them to uncover their secrets. He devoured each human that failed to provide another answer.

One night, maddened by frustration, Alfred went on a rampage, slaughtering livestock and desecrating shrines to the Wolf God. Satiated, he fell asleep amid the carnage, whereupon furious villagers captured him. Just as Alfred was about to be burnt at the stake, a Vistani mother and daughter approached and purchased the young werewolf's life for a hefty sum. By virtue of her Sight, the elder Vistana was aware of what Alfred's future held. She offered Alfred his freedom in exchange for safe passage for any Vistani he should meet from thence on. Alfred agreed, but then attacked the moment he was released, devouring the old woman as her daughter fled into the night. The Mists descended



upon Alfred, revealing Verbrek as his new home and prison.

Alfred discovered that Verbrek was home to powerful werewolf clans and that he was revered as the high priest of the Wolf God. He commanded the reverence of his fellow lycanthropes and was able to cast divine spells in the name of his god. Yet a terrible curse struck him as well, forcing his transformation to human form whenever strong passions stirred within him.

## Current Sketch

Alfred rules the werewolves of Verbrek by virtue of his supreme cunning and his unrivaled divine powers. Though Alfred has the mandate of the Wolf God, strong alphas constantly challenge his supremacy. Thus far, Alfred has toppled all challengers. He nurtures alliances with strong clans and fosters religious fanaticism to widen his loyalty base. Still, Alfred fears that his fellow werewolves will discover his curse, heralding his fall from power. Due to his curse, he often refrains from hunts and has not yet found a mate, failings that diminish his status among other werewolves. So far he has always viciously murdered any werewolf or other creature that witnessed his weakness.





Alfred believes that his curse is a test of faith. He is convinced that the Wolf God will free him from his burden if he transcends his weak humanity and obliges others to do the same. He encourages greater and greater depravities in the Wolf God's name, hoping that freedom from his curse lies at the bottom of the blackest pit of savagery.

Following the Grand Conjunction, Alfred found his realm encompassed his father's realm of Arkandale as well as Verbrek. He regarded it as a blessing from the Wolf God for his promotion of attacks on humans. In the years since, the commands he has handed down in his god's name have grown more appalling. Alfred is aware that his father is still alive and traveling the Musarde River. He would relish the opportunity to show his father how powerful he has become, but secretly fears such a confrontation.

## Combat

Bloodlust bubbles in Alfred's soul, and he longs to rend flesh with fang and claw. Unfortunately, his curse prevents this, as he transforms into his weak human form whenever strong anger, lust, or fear overcome him. Thus, Alfred contains his emotions amidst the thrill of the hunt or the rapture of a blood rite. He is calculating and methodical in combat, evading his opponents' blows expertly and seeking tactical advantages in his surroundings. Alfred relies on his allies' battle prowess, supporting his fellow werewolves with spellcasting.

**Special Attacks:** *Curse of Lycanthropy (Su)*: The trigger for afflicted werewolves of Alfred's bloodline is the three nights of the full moon.

**Special Qualities:** *Shadow Walk (Su)*: Whenever the moon is visible (i.e., not covered by clouds or in its new phase), Alfred can use *shadow walk*. This ability functions as the spell except that it only affects Alfred and allows instantaneous movement through the Plane of Shadow to any other shadowed area in Verbrek.

**Alternate Form (Su)**: Though he is a natural lycanthrope and therefore possesses the Improved Control Shape feat, Alfred suffers under a trigger. He is cursed to transform into human form whenever anger, lust, or fear overcome him (no check allowed).

## Lair

Alfred considers all of Verbrek his lair, wandering wherever he pleases in the company of other

werewolves. He spends much of his time at the Circle where he oversees the spiritual life of Verbrek's werewolves. Beneath each dolmen are said to rest the bones of a powerful human hunter or knight, slain by werewolves when the creatures claimed Verbrek. The Circle is more than a holy site, however. There, the werewolves gather to socialize, engaging in contests for dominance, brutal blood sports and unspeakable breeding customs. Due to the bestial hatred that permeates it and the countless ritual murders that have occurred there, the Circle is a rank 3 sinkhole of evil.

## Closing the Borders

Alfred cannot close his borders through any supernatural means. When he wishes to seal his domain, he sends dire wolves and werewolves to patrol the borders. It is possible to escape Verbrek, provided one can outwit or outrun these vicious predators.

## Baron Urik von Kharkov, Darklord of Valachan

**Male human mature nosferatu Ftr11**: CR 15; Medium undead (vampire) (6 ft. tall); HD 11d12, hp 87; Init +8; Spd 40 ft. (50 ft., climb 30 ft. as panther); AC 23, touch 15, flat-footed 19; Base Atk +11; Grp +17; Atk +17 melee (1d4+6, claw) or +19 melee (1d8+9/19-20, +1 longsword) or +18 melee (1d6+7/19-20, +1 short sword) or +16 ranged (1d8+5, +1 composite longbow [+3 Str bonus]), or +17 melee (1d6+6, bite) or +17 (1d3+6, claw) as panther; Full Atk +17 melee (1d4+6, 2 claws), or +17/+12/+7 melee (1d8+9/19-20, +1 longsword) and +16 melee (1d6+4/19-20, +1 short sword), or +16/+11/+6 ranged (1d8+4, +1 composite longbow [+3 Str bonus]), or +17 melee (1d6+6, bite) and +12 melee (1d3+3, 2 claws) as panther; SA Blackout, blood drain, children of the night, create spawn, curse of lycanthropy, domination, plus pounce, improved grab, rake as panther; SQ Alternate Form, cold and electricity resistance 20, damage reduction 20/+1, darkvision 60 ft., daylight powerlessness, feline spies, gaseous form, lunar regeneration, restful sleep, spider climb, turn resistance +6, undead traits, vampire weaknesses; SR 13; ALLE; SV Fort +7, Ref +9, Will +5; Str 22, Dex 19, Con —, Int 17, Wis 14, Cha 19.

**Skills and Feats**: Balance +8 (+16 as panther), Bluff +12, Climb +12, Diplomacy +8, Handle Animal +11, Hide +12 (+16 as panther), Intimidate +8, Jump +12, Knowledge (arcana) +6, Knowledge (nature) +6, Listen +10, Move Silently +12 (+16 as panther), Ride (horse) +11, Search +10, Sense Motive +10, Spellcraft +9, Spot +10, Survival +8; Alertness, Cleave, Combat Reflexes, Dodge, Improved Initiative, Lightning Reflexes, Mobility, Point Blank Shot, Power Attack, Precise Shot, Track, Two-Weapon Fighting, Weapon Fo-





cus (composite longbow), Weapon Focus (longsword), Weapon Specialization (longsword). OR 7 if true nature is known.

*Languages:* Vaasi\*, Darkonese, Mordentish, Sithican.

*Signature Possessions:* +1 longsword, +1 short sword, +1 composite longbow (+3 Str bonus), 20 +1 arrows, bracers of armor +2, cloak of resistance +2, ring of protection +1.

Urik von Kharkov is a tall, exotically handsome, black-skinned man with broad shoulders. He speaks in a deep, resonant baritone. He has high cheekbones and an angular jaw. His meticulously groomed black hair is short and straight, and his compelling eyes have an unusual golden hue. When angered, his pupils change to the slits of a cat. His hands are covered in sleek black fur and feature retractable talons, but he hides this deformity with gloves. Despite his build, von Kharkov moves smoothly and gracefully.

## Background

The baron started life as a panther in an outlander world, but his tale begins with the powerful wizard Morphayas, who conceived of an elaborate plot for revenge against Selena, a woman who spurned his advances. Morphayas used a rare polymorphing magic to transform a panther into a full-grown man, naming his creation Baron Urik von Kharkov. Urik received years of education and courtly training at the finest schools, where he exhibited a tendency toward violence and treachery.

Morphayas arranged for Urik and Selena to have frequent chance encounters. The pair became lovers, and when the two were locked in a lover's embrace, Morphayas dispelled the magic that maintained Urik's humanity. The savage panther tore Selena to shreds.

Morphayas bestowed human form upon Urik, not expecting the panther to remember his prior human incarnation. Urik was horrified by the uncontrollable beast within him, escaped from the wizard, and fled the country, burning with hatred and humiliation. He stumbled into a bank of fog, emerging in Darkon, where a bard told him legends of Azalin's vampiric secret police. Urik sought out a vampire to induct him into the ranks. In undeath, Urik desired not just power and immortality, but control over the panther. What he received was 20 years of slavery to a Kargat master.



When his master was killed, Urik fled into the Misty Border. This time, the Dark Powers embraced him, granting him his own domain. Urik von Kharkov adapted well to his new prison. He named it Valachan and declared himself its baron.

## Current Sketch

Some vampires pine for the humanity they have lost. Urik von Kharkov mourns for the humanity he never had. He loved Selena, and his role in her murder still haunts him. Von Kharkov has been a panther, a man, and a vampire, possessing traits from all three: the quick temper and taunting cruelty of a cat, the intelligence and creativity of a human, and the charm and bloodthirst of a nosferatu.

Baron von Kharkov marries frequently, selecting a bride for himself or through a lottery. Valachan's three major settlements take turns sacrificing one of their daughters to the baron's desires. Few of the baron's brides survive their first year of marriage. Baron von Kharkov tries to be the perfect gentleman, but he cannot deny his true nature, inevitably questioning his every word and deed, wondering when his civilized veneer will crack. Within months he grows suspicious of his bride, becoming convinced that she must already know



he is a beast and is keeping other secrets from him. He turns cold, then cruel. Finally, he snaps and tears the woman apart. After a period of shame and self-recrimination, he calls for another lottery.

## Combat

Von Kharkov is a dangerous opponent in close combat, even during daylight hours, using his physical prowess to its utmost advantage. Nearly half the population of Valachan lives under his domination, and he can telepathically call upon all of these victims if need be. Von Kharkov mistrusts spellcasters, particularly wizards, targeting arcane spellcasters first among his foes, then divine spellcasters.

**Special Attacks:** The save DC against Von Kharkov's vampire abilities is 18.

**Blackout (Su):** If Von Kharkov successfully uses his drain blood ability on a creature, that creature immediately suffers a blackout when it escapes the baron's grapple. The creature forgets all that occurred in the 5 minutes leading up to and including Von Kharkov draining it, as if the spell *modify memory* had been used on it. This is a mind-affecting compulsion enchantment.

**Claws (Ex):** Unlike most vampires, Von Kharkov has claw attacks instead of a slam attack.

**Children of the Night (Su):** Unlike most vampires, Von Kharkov can use this ability only to summon 2d4 black panthers (use the MM leopard).

**Curse of Lycanthropy (Su):** Any humanoid hit by Von Kharkov's bite attack in panther form must succeed at a DC 18 Fortitude save or contract werepanther lycanthropy.

**Domination (Su):** When used like a gaze attack, this ability works just like that of the *Monster Manual* vampire. Victims of Von Kharkov's blood drain attack, however, must also make a Will save or fall instantly under his influence. In this case, the victim remains under Von Kharkov's domination until the victim receives a *break enchantment* spell or Urik is slain.

**Special Qualities:** *Alternate Form (Su):* Unlike most vampires, Von Kharkov can only take the form of a black panther (as the *Monster Manual* leopard). This ability is otherwise unchanged.

**Feline Spies (Su):** Von Kharkov can place his mind inside that of any feline creature anywhere in Valachan. "Feline creature" in this case applies to anything from a house cat, to a werepanther in hybrid or panther form, to a dire tiger. He cannot

control the animal in any way, but he experiences everything that the cat experiences. His human body lies comatose and unaware of its surroundings during this period, which lasts until the Baron is wounded, decides to return to his body or that of another cat, or *magic jar* is cast on the affected cat.

Feline familiars, animal companions, and bonded mounts receive a Will save to resist the Baron's spirit. If they succeed, they are aware of the attempted possession.

**Lunar Regeneration (Su):** Von Kharkov gains the regeneration special quality whenever he is exposed to direct moonlight. When he is exposed to moonlight, any damage he has previously suffered is immediately converted to nonlethal damage (bypassing the standard undead immunity to nonlethal damage); this is true even if Von Kharkov had already been slain. He then automatically heals nonlethal damage at a rate determined by the phase of the moon: crescent moon 3 hp/round; half moon 4 hp/round; gibbous moon 6 hp/round; full moon 8 hp/round. Fire, acid, and *blessed* or holy weapons still deal normal damage. Von Kharkov can reattach severed limbs while regenerating, but he cannot regrow them. If decapitated, Von Kharkov cannot heal nonlethal damage until his head is reattached.

**Vampire Weaknesses:** Garlic and mirrors do not affect Von Kharkov. He may freely enter any building in Valachan without being invited. He can cross running water at will, but he still suffers damage if immersed. Wooden stakes are useless against him — his heart must be impaled on a stake made of sharpened bone.

## Cair

Baron von Kharkov resides in Castle Pantara, home to the baron, his handful of spawn, and at least a score of living peasants. These peasants frequently succumb to White Fever and are replaced by healthy individuals. Castle Pantara usually carries a rank 2 or 3 sinkhole of evil. This often rises by a rank in the weeks following the death of von Kharkov's latest bride.

## Closing the Borders

When von Kharkov wishes to seal his domain, the land itself subtly shifts to redirect travelers back into Valachan. Regardless of their bearing, travelers become confused in the forest and journey back into the domain.







**Markovia**

**Lamordia**

**Dominia**

**Blaustein**

**The Sea of Sorrows**

**Ghastria**

**Dementlieu**

**Mordent**

**Richemulor**

**Verbrek**

**Valaeban**

**Falkovnia**

**Borca**

**Invidia**

**Kartakass**

**Sithicus**

**Keening**

**Cepest**

**The Shadow Rift**

**Barovia**

**Forlorn**

**Hazlan**

**Nova Vaasa**

**Isle of the Cempete**

**Isle of the Ravens**

**The Nocturnal Sea**

Isle of Demire

Castle of Egnony

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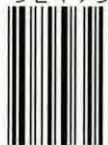
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