

The Grand Duchy



Lands in Shadow for Shadow of the Demon Lord

An ancient land, prosperous but backwards, nestles against the Shield Mountains on its west and the shattered remains of the Empire to its east. A collection of small fiefdoms, intransigently set in their ways and suspicious of change, the Grand Duchy of the West has long been considered a rustic, backwater region, a place that is both the literal and figurative definition of “provincial.”

Serfs toil miserably in the Grand Duchy’s marshy rice fields and inside its deep and dangerous mines, spending their entire lives doing so without daring to look beyond their landlord’s borders, or to dream of anything better than the lot life has dealt them. Their lords are little different, paying little heed to the tumultuous events taking place outside of their tiny domains, focusing instead on their own petty squabbles and ceaseless infighting.

Led by a feeble Grand Duke with few ambitions and seemingly no interest in governing his own nation, the “Westers”—as the rest of the Empire derisively calls them—live in a state of deliberate ignorance of the

~Credits~

Writing and Design:
Eric Cagle

Development: Robert J. Schwalb

Editing: Tom Cadorette

Art Direction: Kara Hamilton and Robert J. Schwalb

Proofreading: Jay Spright

Graphic Design and Layout: Kara Hamilton

Illustrations: Kyllian Guillart

Cartography: Cecil Howe

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SCHWALB ENTERTAINMENT, LLC



PO Box #12548, Murfreesboro, TN 37129

info@schwalbentertainment.com

www.schwalbentertainment.com

growing dangers of the world just outside its borders, and of the insidious corruption slowly seeping into and infecting their own land. With the remains of the Empire in flames, the Grand Duchy keeps to itself, pretending that all is well, stubbornly clinging to a nostalgic ideal of "days of old" that never truly existed.

In short, the Grand Duchy of the West is a land ripe for massive upheaval and widespread chaos, a powder-keg primed and waiting to explode. It's just a question of time as to when some unexpected spark will set it off...

Ripe for the Taking

The Grand Duchy of the West is one of the oldest provinces of the Empire. When the High Warlord Eronymous made his push west from Caecras, his armies discovered a huge portion of land that was a mix of rugged hills and valleys to the north, vast marshlands to the south, and deep forests along the mountains. Hordes of unspeakable monsters and beastmen poured out from the hidden hollows and dark swamps to swarm and harass the soldiers with brutal and terrifying effectiveness, grinding their westward advance to a halt.

After several years of war with these hordes of horror, Eronymous learned that three ancient hags held sway over the monstrosities of the land, their military leadership of the hordes rivalling that of the Empire's best generals. Changing his tactics, Eronymous's forces located the hags and defeated them one by one, the long war culminating in a final decisive battle near a craggy ridge along Sapphire Lake, which would later become the seat of Castle Vanderbrun. Indeed, it was a young commander, George Vanderbrun, who dealt the killing blow to Grandmother Rattlebones, the last and most powerful of the three hags. With her last breath, however, the hag laid a terrible curse on the land, one that would take hundreds of years to unfold.

With a dozen years of bloody conflict behind them, the victors turned their eye towards settling the newly won lands. Despite the rugged and sometimes unforgiving terrain, they discovered that the region was pocketed with areas that were remarkably fertile and fecund, full of exotic fruits, rice, wheat, cotton, sugar cane, and much more. Surveyors and prospectors also found rich deposits of iron, silver, tin, and copper in the hills and mountains. Word quickly spread throughout the fledgling Empire of the riches to be had in the western lands, and just as quickly came those seeking to acquire them.

Wester, Ho!

After the demise of the hags, the Emperor declared the western lands cleared and open for settlement and expansion, naming it the Grand Duchy of the West. As a reward for their sacrifice and bravery, many of the commanders and soldiers of the army were granted full rights by the Emperor to become lords of the land by carving out and ruling over their own fiefs. In an effort to bolster the region's population, a decree was sent throughout the Empire that any citizen who wished to settle in this new province would be freed from all previous debts and automatically pardoned of any crimes.

Hordes of commoners, craftsmen, refugees, and more than a fair share of criminals hoping to escape their past made their way westward, seeking to take advantage of the promise of land and the chance at starting anew.

Many of them, however, had their dreams dashed either along the way or when they arrived. The paths to the western lands were still fraught with danger from both the lingering remnants of the hags' armies and the wildness of the land itself. Upon their arrival, those who survived the arduous and dangerous journey quickly discovered the best lands had already been claimed by the new lords. Flooded by the huge numbers of settlers, the newly minted dukes and barons were either very particular or inexplicably arbitrary as to what settlers they would allow into their fiefdoms. Those who were turned away had little choice but to settle in the swamplands, or in the unexplored dark hills and forests where none would venture for fear of the surviving minions of the hags who lurked there.

To this day, large swaths of seemingly uninhabited swamps and hills are still the home of the descendants of these settlers. Suspicious, xenophobic, and insular, the swampfolk and hillfolk have become the stuff of legends and nightmares throughout the Grand Duchy.

A Time of Growth

Granted the title of supreme leader of the western lands due to his great valor and military leadership, Grand Duke George Vanderbrun the First set about establishing his new realm's government and infrastructure. Across the region, keeps were raised, towns were built among the hills, new roads began to crisscross the lands, and miners dug deep shafts to extract riches from the earth. Regular commerce was established with the imperial capital of Caecras and other parts of the Empire, all of whom paid a premium for the rich bounty and variety of goods the Grand Duchy of the West produced.

This progress and growth was often threatened, however, whenever the Grand Duke had to contend with the painful transition of veteran soldiers into fief holders and farmers. Men used to having their will imposed at sword point found it difficult to resolve land disputes with each other peacefully. Vanderbrun found himself constantly intervening in the conflicts of his vassals in order to keep them from killing each other, along with the settlers on their lands.

By a quirk of ancient history, the Grand Duke's efforts to cease the constant squabbling and territorial disputes between rival lords were aided by old demarcation lines of previously developed farm plots from many centuries before, along with the presence of ancient but sturdy foundations of buildings long since gone. Using these primeval plots and ruins as borders and settlement sites made it easy for the Grand Duke to parcel out and allocate lands to his vassals for their farms, keeps, and towns. No one knew who originally settled these lands or built these structures, seemingly from a time beyond the earliest reckonings. Regardless, little thought was given to the mystery as the citizens of the Grand Duchy focused on building a new future.

For centuries, the Westers toiled and labored, slowly creating a realm wealthy and powerful enough to give the Emperor and his advisors in Caecras pause. The dukes and barons of the west, however, seemed content to rule over their own lands and serfs, showing little interest in the world outside of their borders except as commerce and trade required. Over time, any fears of the Grand Duchy representing a threat to the Empire were easily laughed away.

The Hag's Quake

Several centuries after its official establishment, the Grand Duchy was literally shaken to its core. A massive earthquake ripped through the land, from the Deepings Gorge in the far north to the edges of the March Lands in the distant south. Untold numbers of people were killed, keeps toppled, cities and towns leveled, and the very topography of the land itself was shifted and altered.

Adding insult to injury, the weather mysteriously turned extremely foul at the same time, as angry black clouds began to ceaselessly roll down from the peaks of the Shield Mountains, pelting the lands of the Grand Duchy with months and months of heavy rains. Those fields and roads not destroyed by the quake were soon washed away, and the swamps and marshes throughout the Duchy soon doubled in size.

During the quake, a portion of the foundation of Castle Vanderbrun cracked and split apart, collapsing part of the fortress. Westers were horrified when a ghostly figure flew out from the crack and begin terrorizing the lands of the Duchy for several weeks.

Eyewitnesses attested to spotting the same figure in all parts of the realm: a hideously ugly specter, resembling a hag, its cackle capable of driving people mad, spoiling milk, and killing livestock, seemingly by frightening them to death. The general belief was that this was the vengeful spirit of Grandmother Rattlebones, the hag defeated and killed by George Vanderbrun the First, finally come to fulfill her curse.

Thereafter, the events of this time came to be known as the Hag's Quake. Eventually the sightings of the hag-spirit diminished, but the damage was already done: the combination of the earthquake, the relentless rains, and the spirit's rampages took a hard physical and mental toll on the Westers, from which they never truly recovered.

A Time of Rot and Apathy

The Hag's Quake marked a turning point for the Grand Duchy. Although the horrible weather eventually abated, for many years thereafter the previously mild, sunny realm was instead covered in gloomy clouds and drizzle for most of the year. Farmers struggled to raise anything, engaging in all kinds of desperate measures and methods to deal with the climatic shift. There are dark tales of blood sacrifices made during these times, of both animals and people, in order to make the crops grow.

Things became darker for the lords and their people as well. The history books tell of the terrible cruelties and abuses inflicted by the lords upon the people they ruled. Skirmishes between duchies increased, often erupting into small-scale wars. Corruption, always a concern, grew rampant and even became codified into law.

A permanent malaise and pervasive apathy fell upon the Westers, which has lasted to this day. Even otherwise civilized or urban areas grew more suspicious and paranoid towards outsiders. Ignorance and heresy grew as scholars, clergy, and merchants from outside lands were either killed or driven away, and few chose to return to the Grand Duchy.

The Present Day

Today, the Grand Duchy is a fragile shell, kept together by sheer inertia and the authoritarian control its lords hold over their serfs. Trade continues between the Grand Duchy and the other realms, although yields for the Westers continually decline. Corruption and graft dominate the political landscape and the current Grand Duke himself seems unable, or even unwilling, to do anything about it.

Held fast by its feudalistic government, the lords and barons look only to fend for themselves and pay their tribute to their masters above—problems outside the borders are intentionally ignored. Even the increased tensions with the Borderlands of Tear

and the orc uprising in Caecras have done little to motivate the nobility to prepare for conflict. In fact, the various dukes and barons have turned away refugees, forcing them to seek haven in Tear or the Holy Kingdom, which has only served to further sour the Duchy's already troubled relations with Tear.

The Grand Duchy

The Grand Duchy comprises several smaller provinces nominally loyal to the Grand Duke.

Duchy of the Sparrowlands

Located farthest east and adjacent to the fertile Low Country, the Duchy of the Sparrowlands has been a major producer of grain and fruit for centuries. The seat of the Grand Duke, it is dotted with numerous villages and thorps. It is the most stable, prosperous, and "civilized" of all the duchies, but still regarded as rustic at best by outsiders.

Vanderbrun

The largest settlement of the Grand Duchy, the town of Vanderbrun serves as its capital and main nexus for trade. It sprawls along the banks of Sapphire Lake in a twisting, confusing manner. In addition to trade, Vanderbrun has a surprisingly lucrative industry in the creation of clocks and toys, mainly due to the effort of an expatriate artisan from Kem who established several workshops throughout the city decades ago.

To outsiders, Vanderbrun is the only bright spot in an otherwise grim and brooding land.

Castle Vanderbrun

Rising high above the shores of Sapphire Lake, Castle Vanderbrun has belonged to the family of the same name for almost eight centuries. Its foundation was built on the remains of a rocky outcropping that was the lair of the dread hag, Grandmother Rattlebones.

The castle has a long history of unfortunate accidents and terrible murders. Some say that the hag's spirit returned to haunt the castle after her terrorizing spree centuries ago.

Duchy of Tildus

The most northerly of the realm's duchies, Tildus butts up against the Deepings Gorge, the Borderlands of Tear, and the Holy Kingdom. The bulk of the realm's army resides here, commanded by their lord, Victor Tildus, also known as The Red Duke. The duchy is a large, prosperous realm, comprised of rolling hills and abundant fields. Of all the duchies, Tildus is the most concerned about the potential conflicts to come, although the Red Duke's warnings

to the Grand Duke to undertake war preparations have been virtually ignored. The Red Duke has taken matters into his own hands, funneling funds to help beef up his own internal levies, in addition to seeking out mercenaries to bolster their ranks.

Duchy of Torth

Even compared to the rustic and simple folk of the rest of the Grand Duchy, the Duchy of Torth is a backwards, ignorant place. Located in the far south, it is a land of vast swamps and marshes, surrounded by forested hills, all black with age.

The Duke of Torth ekes out an existence by demanding tribute from barons, who themselves bully, cajole, and harass their own serfs into extracting whatever animal skins, ore, or other resources they can from the wetlands and hills.

Outside of Creeb, the main town, there are few villages, with most of its citizens living in small, inbred family groups. Dark terrors still remain in the brackish, fog-covered waters that cover most of Torth.

Duchy of Shieldbreak

The Duchy of Shieldbreak is a long, slender region that skirts the eastern slopes of the Shield Mountains. It primarily produces lumber and various ores from the rich veins beneath its rugged hills. Relations between the Westers of Shieldbreak and the dwarfs that live in the mountains are very strong and, of late, some thought has been given to breaking from the Grand Duchy and allying themselves with the stout folk. However, the seemingly endless and erratic ambushes from beastmen and fouler creatures from the mountains have kept its ambitions of independence in check.

Westers

Throughout the rest of Rûl, Westers are considered simple, rustic, xenophobic, and ignorant. Education is nearly unheard of among them, and few, including nobles, have any desire to learn or better themselves. A typical Wester is highly superstitious, often blending a mishmash of lore from the Old Gods and the Cult of the New God into a confusing and primitive interpretation.

Those Westers who don't live in the few large towns and cities of the Grand Duchy generally consider themselves swampfolk or hillfolk. Regardless of their home terrain, both are extremely insular, viewing anyone outside their immediate community with suspicion or hostility. Over time, most of the rural villages, relatively distant and isolated from each other, have developed their own unique, and often depraved, customs and traditions.

The centuries-old curse of Grandmother Rattlebones seems to have rooted itself within the very heart of many Westers, making them a grim, apathetic, spiteful, and hidebound people. Not every Wester is touched in this way, however, and those who aren't often seek to leave their homeland as soon as possible. In fact, in recent years, large numbers of serfs in the Duchies of Tildus and the Sparrowlands attempted to migrate into Tear, lured by the promise of abundant farmland there, free of the tyranny of any feudal lords.

In characteristically harsh and brutal fashion, the dukes and barons of the Grand Duchy commanded their armies to stop these migrations, up to and including incursions into Tear to recapture and return any Westers they found there back to the Grand Duchy—yet another contributing factor to the increasing tensions between the two provinces.

Nobles

The Grand Duchy is a patchwork of smaller duchies, baronies, and smaller fiefs, some no bigger than a farm. Every square inch of the land belongs to someone, who in turn pays tribute to some superior above them. Nobles run the gamut of personalities, but most are arrogant, greedy, and self-important, believing themselves to be the rightful and “true” rulers of the Grand Duchy.

Serfs

Where other realms call their people the “Common Folk,” in the Grand Duchy there are only serfs. Serfs till the land, hew the trees, mine the ore, and so much more. In general, they break their backs to give up the majority of the fruits of their labors to their lords, ostensibly as recompense for their protection—but more often than not, it is given so that those selfsame lords don't put them to the sword for refusing to pay what is “owed.”

Soldiers and Knights

Each lord is responsible for maintaining a force for protection of their own lands, and to provide for the general defense of the realm if summoned by the Grand Duke. Wester soldiers are middling fighters at best, used to taking part only in minor conflicts between neighboring fiefs and duchies. Knights, a term applied to lesser nobility who serve the landed nobles, command these forces. Some of these knights, however, operate independently, selling their lances to the highest bidder.



Sheriffs

A sheriff is the top law enforcement official in any particular duchy or barony. Individual lords appoint sheriffs, though many domains consider it a hereditary title that passes down to the oldest son or, in some cases, daughter.

A truly thankless job, sheriffs serve as the first line of defense in attack, hunt down bandits, investigate crimes, and are responsible for extracting payment from recalcitrant serfs. Since graft and corruption are rampant throughout the Grand Duchy, most sheriffs become quite wealthy and powerful through the exercise of their office, sometimes superseding their own lord in terms of control and wealth. Despite their own corruption, most sheriffs are smart enough to ensure that any serf uprisings are quickly quashed, and that enough taxes are collected to keep their lords satisfied.

Sheriffs are armed with the full power of their lord when it comes to investigating and meting out justice. The line is drawn, however, when crimes involve the nobility—a common occurrence, which typically results in most charges getting swept under the rug, with no recourse available to the victimized, who are almost always serfs.

Artisans

The Grand Duchy boasts a decent population of artisans: blacksmiths, carpenters, wheelwrights, and the like to keep the economy moving. Compared to those of other nations, the products of the Grand Duchy are basic, no-frills, and serviceable, lacking anything in the way of flair, beauty, or innovation.

The odd exception to this is the production of certain forms of folk art and the manufacturing of toys. Secluded from outside influences, artists of the Grand Duchy produce fantastical, odd, and in some cases, disturbing artwork and toys that other kingdoms find fascinating. Other than in the town of Vanderbrun, there are no schools or trade guilds to teach these crafts, so the output is unique and purely organic. Strange, haunting dolls and puzzle boxes carved from a single piece of wood are typical fare, though each hamlet and thorp has their own unique specialty. Although the demand for these items is high, the Grand Duchy rarely exports these items, since the makers have a superstitious dread about giving this artwork to outsiders—they see each item as possessing a tiny portion of the maker's soul. Selling or giving such an item away would court damnation, they believe.

Government and Politics

Since its creation centuries ago, the Grand Duchy of the West has followed a feudalistic system with little incentive to change. The Grand Duke George Vanderbrun IV sits at the top of the hierarchy. Indeed no other family has ever held the title, though more than a few upstart dukes have tried (and failed) to wrest it for themselves.

Beneath the Grand Duke are four duchies, ruled by dukes. Each duchy is further broken down into baronies, followed by counties, and then individual plots of land ruled by knights, baronets, merchant lords, and other minor lords and ladies. This incredibly ponderous and top-heavy pyramid sits heavily upon the backs of the Grand Duchy's masses of soldiers and serfs.

Law is divided into two portions. Upper Law contends with the power and politicking of the noble class. Justice in Upper Law is slow, baroque, and rife with



corruption and backroom deals. Lower Law deals with the remaining rabble and tends toward the draconian for fines and punishment.

The word of a lord is law. Most lords have survived long enough to determine how much is too much when exercising their power. More than a few, however, are infamous for their cruelty and the harsh extremity of their edicts. In turn, lesser lords must follow the edicts of their superiors. The law of the Grand Duke allows for rival (and often related) lords or ladies to challenge each other in combat to settle disputes, which sometimes turns into full-fledged warfare between competing nobles. Regardless of the outcome, usually inconclusive, hundreds of serfs and soldiers die during these petty disputes—rarely, if ever, does any noble suffer real harm or backlash from the conflict.

While the other realms have evolved in their governance, the feudal system in the Grand Duchy has remained stubbornly intractable. Serf revolts have occurred in the past, typically under weak or ineffectual lords, but none have been able to last for more than a few months at a time. Once the revolt was put down, its leaders were usually subjected to extremely cruel torture and execution, to serve as an example to any future rebels.

Agitators, particularly those from Tear and the Holy Kingdom, have become more common in recent years. They publicly rail against the ineptitude and lackluster rule of the Grand Duke, particularly in light of the looming threat of the orc uprising in Caecras. Most are quickly rounded up and sent to work in the mines for the rest of their lives, or chased out of the country—but sometimes their ideas, infectious and insidious, take root in the minds of the long-suffering, simpleminded serfs.

Grand Duke George Vanderbrun IV

The fourth of his name, the Grand Duke has ruled for as long as most people can remember. A small, slight man, easily startled, with a receding hairline and a clubfoot, Vanderbrun does not inspire much confidence. Raised in wealth and comfort, he has never had any great ambition or aspirations, nor is he even particularly bright. From an early age, he shunted off most of his responsibilities to his court advisors, spending most of his days fishing in Sapphire Lake, playing with the toys created in the workshops of the town, or cavorting with his various mistresses.

As part of a tradition for the past two hundred years, the Grand Duke married a family member, in this case his own aunt Matilda Vanderbrun. Matilda is a cruel woman who delights in pitting the various nobles at court against one another, just for sheer sport. She also loathes her nephew-husband, haranguing him at every opportunity.

Despite this, the couple has managed to produce



nine children. With only a few exceptions among them, their offspring are simpleminded, deformed, or outright insane. While indifferent at best to his children, in truth, the Grand Duke is absolutely terrified of his wife and their twin sons, one of which he must soon name his heir apparent.

Vanderbrun has rarely left the confines of his castle and only ventured to view the rest of his land once—vowing, out of fear, never to do so again. In other lands, the ineptitude of such a sovereign would be cause for revolution, although the iron grip that the lesser lords have on their people have kept that in check for years—so far.

The Lords Albrecht and Aldon Vanderbrun

The Grand Duke's twin sons, Albrecht and Aldon, are marked as the next heirs for the throne. They are both hulking, brutish specimens in their thirties, with little in the way of social skills. They spend their days torturing small animals, terrorizing the servants, or making knights fight (and intentionally lose) to them.

One day, the Grand Duke must decide which one

will become the true heir. The fear of how his wife and the son not appointed will react, however, has kept him from making any decision.

The Red Duke

Called so for his flaming red hair and armor, Victor Tildus is known throughout the Grand Duchy as “The Red Duke.” As lord of the Duchy of Tildus, he commands power, money, and influence second only to the Grand Duke himself. The Red Duke is quite unlike most Westers—confident, educated, and ambitious. He sees himself as the Grand Duchy’s only protector against the threat of Tear and the orc uprising in Caecras.

Outwardly a devotee to the New God, he is actively seeking an alliance with the Holy Kingdom against Tear. Despite the good relations between those two nations, the Red Duke is playing upon the Matriarch’s not-so-secret desire to annex Tear should its current ruler Horus die. Tildus wants to eliminate the threat that Tear represents to his lands, as well as prepare for the war he believes will be waged by the orcs spreading outward from Caecras.

Unbeknownst to anyone else, however, the Red Duke suffers from hallucinations, hearing the cackling voice of an elderly, grandmotherly spirit who gives him bits of information that would otherwise not be possible for him to know. So far, Tildus has kept this a secret, though the voices are growing louder and more persistent as the clouds of war begin to gather on the horizon.

Health and Servitude

Old, hierarchal, and autocratic, the Grand Duchy of the West has survived for hundreds of years with little change or progress. The feudal system established centuries before remains obdurate as lords and barons greedily cling to their domains, expanding and contracting through marriage, or through the occasional territorial grab from a neighboring fief.

Every Wester knows their place—lords rule over their people and serfs toil on their land. Even seemingly “independent” individuals, such as merchants and clergy, owe their servitude to someone above them, be they guilds or bishops. Upward mobility is an almost unthinkable concept anywhere in the Grand Duchy, and most Westers unquestioningly accept their status, with entire generations living and dying without ever leaving the confines of their farms and hamlets.

Economy

Although the Grand Duchy sits on rough and rugged terrain, it is a fertile land that produces a tremendous variety of foodstuffs that help feed the rest of the continent. Farming dominates the economy, followed

closely by animal husbandry and mining.

Due to the feudal government, however, this wealth of produce rarely translates into prosperity for the serfs and farmers of the land. Depending on the barony or duchy, anywhere from 50 to 90 percent of food, livestock, and ore produced goes directly to the lord of that land. In turn, serfs can keep the remainder and sell it.

This proves a delicate balancing act for the serfs, since they are selling off the very food and goods they usually need to survive. Some few are smart or lucky enough to make something resembling a profit, while most barely eke out enough to keep their family moderately fed. Outsiders who visit the Grand Duchy are constantly amazed to see so-called “prosperous” serfs that would be considered terribly poor in other kingdoms.

Vanderbrun Agricultural Consortium

Established generations before, the Vanderbrun Agricultural Consortium serves as brokers to sell produce from The Grand Duchy to outside realms. As food flows upward from serf, to local lord, to the duchy’s duke, and finally to the Grand Duke himself, the Consortium monitors transactions for “quality assessment,” and to ensure that taxes are paid on each deal. In the end, the portion left over after feeding the realm’s troops and royalty is carted away for sale in distant lands, and the money returned (minus substantial and numerous fees, of course) to the Grand Duchy’s coffers.

The Consortium is universally hated outside the halls of Castle Vanderbrun, and it escapes no one’s notice that the Grand Duke profits at every step of the way. Fat and self-important, members of the Consortium use long-established rules of graft, bribes, and corruption to line their own pockets, always skimming a bit off the top here and there.

Law and Order

As a feudal government, each duchy is responsible for maintaining its own peace and laws. Lords establish their own unique rules, often stacked on top of older, obsolete decrees that can make navigating laws a tricky task. Ultimately, a lord’s word is law, regardless of precedent.

For most matters, each lord relies on a sheriff to enforce the law. Sheriffs run the gamut from capable and dedicated to sycophantic and corrupt, heavily skewed toward the latter. In addition to their own cadre of deputies, sheriffs rely on their lord’s coterie of knights to help enforce the law, collect taxes, and hunt down serfs who attempt to flee instead of pay.

Most law enforcement officials, especially the sheriffs, are notoriously arrogant and swaggering, using their rank and power to cow, intimidate, and

steal (which they call “impounding”) at will. Lax lords turn a blind eye to the misdeeds of their enforcers, as long as tribute flows upward.

To further complicate matters, each local sheriff in turn “belongs” to the realm itself and is accountable to the Grand Duchy’s highest law enforcement official, the High Sheriff. Idealistic sheriffs that attempt to buck the system often find themselves “encouraged” by their lords to step down and find another line of work, or end up floating face down in the village’s mill-pond.

Justice in the Grand Duchy is imbalanced and haphazard at best. An offender might find himself at the mercy of an angry mob while the authorities look the other way. Nobles, however, have the luxury of the Ducal Court to air their grievances, and the power of coin to get themselves out of most legal troubles.

Defense and Warcraft

The Grand Duchy has survived war for centuries due to its large army. Every lord has a duty to maintain its own force of knights, soldiers, and peasant levies, both for its own defense and in defense of the realm. The Duchy hasn’t expanded much since its creation and has a notoriously narrow-minded point of view in regard to how war is waged. Most lords build their forces knowing they will more likely fight their neighbors in small skirmishes or raids rather than against some large, outside force.

That attitude has changed some in recent years with the stability achieved in the Borderlands of Tear, and the threat many believe Tear poses to the Duchy. The Duchy of Tildus, which would bear the brunt of the attacks from that province, has the most robust and trained army of the realm. The Grand Duke, ignorant in the ways of war, is content to let the Red Duke deal with Tear, ignoring Tildus’s warnings and repeated requests for more men and resources. The Red Duke grimly prepares for war while the Grand Duke plays with his clockwork toys in the safety of his castle on Sapphire Lake.

The armies of the Grand Duchy are disorganized and unsophisticated, but boast large numbers that often win the day.

Religion

Religion is deep and pervasive in the Grand Duchy of the West. When the original settlers arrived centuries ago, they worshipped their old gods in a simple but fervent manner. However, before their arrival, the land had been occupied by an older human culture, leaving behind some vestiges of temples and sacred sites devoted to even older and darker gods from long before. Over time, the faith of the Old Gods in the Grand Duchy morphed (some would say devolved) into a more base and crude form of worship, introducing some of these “newfound” older gods and

beliefs. Priests turned more into witchdoctors and soothsayers than guides and spiritual leaders for their flocks. Superstition, hexes, and curses became the form of worship for the masses.

For hundreds of years, this crude form of worship dominated the realm. This began to change with the arrival of the Cult of the New God from the east. Seemingly overnight, the faith of the New God spread like wildfire throughout the Grand Duchy, as the Cult’s evangelists changed hearts and minds. Newly converted priests probed deep into the secluded hills and marshes, hoping to bring enlightenment to the backward villages and hamlets. Some were successful, while others were burned at the stake or worse.

In time, the Cult of the New God prevailed as the dominant religion. However, the old gods and their ways were not forgotten, but were either driven underground or twisted to blend with the newer beliefs. To this day, a commoner might attend a service of the New God during the day and sacrifice to the old gods at night. Knowing this, members of the Inquisition constantly travel to isolated communities to root out heresy, often finding blasphemous ceremonies and black rites intertwined with the teachings of the New God.

Adventures in the Grand Duchy

Although ancient and relatively stable, the Grand Duchy of the West is still a brooding and dangerous place. The rough land is full of hidden groves, thick swamps, secluded mountain valleys, and rolling hills that keep many travellers away, and thus is ripe for hiding secrets and sheltering monsters. It is a land where religion and belief hold sway in a fervent, zealous manner—a dichotomy of the superstition of the old ways blended with, yet fighting against, the evangelical zealotry of the New Religion.

Adventures in the Grand Duchy should be characterized by creeping and corrosive horror, paranoia and terror, and dark secrets and horrible truths best left unrevealed. Isolated hamlets, often comprised of families inbred over several generations, are scattered throughout the countryside. The Grand Duchy’s base and coarse people find little joy outside of crude humor and bawdy songs, favoring cruel and sadistic entertainment such as dogfighting, bearbaiting, or stoning criminals. Most families, whether highborn or low, seem to have a dark past, a history of corruption, or the stain of something unspeakable. Westers are xenophobic, suspicious, and willfully ignorant of the world outside their fiefdom.

The lands adjacent to the Shield Mountains are commonly attacked by hordes of beastmen, trolls, and other sinister creatures. The swamps of the south are full of similar dangers, in addition to those primitive Westers who have retreated deep into the vast lakes

of dead trees and rotting muck. By comparison, the duchies of the north are more civilized, but travels through those lands can be fraught with their own dangers, due to the suspicion and xenophobia of the people who live there, and the ever-present threat of invasion from the Borderlands of Tear.

You can use the following ideas to spark your own adventures:

- Two rival lords began a campaign of war over a newly discovered iron deposit. Both sides seek out mercenaries and adventurers to bolster their inexperienced forces.
- Strange lights and eerie, booming noises are seen and heard over the deep swamplands of the south. Hordes of poisonous creatures, both natural and monstrous, emerge and terrorize the countryside.
- Seemingly healthy livestock in and around the town of Vanderbrun begin giving birth to horribly disfigured young, coinciding with rumors of a huge, black figure spotted swimming along the shores of Sapphire Lake.
- Numerous non-humans entering into the Duchy of the Sparrowlands disappear. Their mutilated and flayed remains are found inside crude wicker baskets hanging from trees along main roads.
- A large vanguard of troops and scouts from Tear manage to penetrate deep into the Duchy of Tildus. Rumors persist that the leader of this expedition was killed not once, but three times, and seemingly returns each time after three days.
- Ignorant serfs lynch a visiting scholar and magician from the east. Upon burning his books, a terrible demon is unleashed that is ravaging the land.
- There are rumors of orc war-bands from Caecras probing into the Duchies of Tildus and the Sparrowlands, possibly scouting parties to determine what resistance a larger orc army following them might face.

Wester Characters

Players who create characters hailing from the Grand Duchy of the West can choose from any of the ancestries described in the main rulebook as well as halflings from *Demon Lord's Companion*. Other ancestries are extremely rare, virtually unheard of in the backwards and xenophobic hills and marshes of the West.

Wester characters can swap out one profession for any of the following: Artisan (any one), Farmer, Laborer, Miner, or Woodcutter. All people in the Grand Duchy speak a heavily accented, commonly ridiculed dialect of the Common Tongue. In fact, there is a version of this accent so thick, with enough age-old, impenetrable idioms to qualify as its own language: Westerspeak. A character from the Grand

Duchy can choose to use Westerspeak in place of the Common Tongue, or as an option if they know more than one language (this qualifies as a secret language).

Lastly, Wester characters can use the following table in place of the background table from their ancestry.

Wester Background

d20	Background
1	You spent your youth in the swamps and marshes, far from civilization. Add fisher or hermit to your list of professions.
2	You are the legitimate heir to a small, prosperous barony. You start the game with the wealthy lifestyle.
3	You and your family received a slightly larger plot of land on decent ground. You start the game with the comfortable lifestyle.
4	You received an education. You can read and write the Common Tongue.
5	You were caught up in a skirmish with raiders from Tear and have been marked for death by them.
6	Your family was killed and hamlet destroyed by a capricious lord. You vow revenge on the arrogant lord and the knights involved.
7	You come from a terribly inbred family line, known for debauched practices. Start the game with 1 Corruption.
8	You are the bastard son or daughter of a local lord.
9	You were captured by debased swamp or hillfolk, but managed to escape after 1d3 years (add the years to your starting age). Gain Westerspeak as an additional language and start the game with 1d3 Insanity.
10	You earned a living working in your profession. Nothing significant happened to you.
11	You were mauled by a horrible creature (your choice) and bear terrible scars on your face and body.
12	You come from a family of fanatics of the New Faith. Add evangelist to your list of professions.
13	You witnessed a debauched rite between swampfolk and beastmen, and have been haunted by nightmares ever since. Gain 1d3 insanity.
14	You saw a traveling magician in your youth, giving you motivation to travel and explore.
15	You were falsely accused of insulting your local lord and had to flee in order to save your tongue from being cut out.
16	You belong to a family notorious as poachers and livestock thieves.
17	You are a spy or saboteur sent by the Borderlands of Tear. You funnel information about the Grand Duchy to your masters in the north and work to sabotage efforts to expand its reach. Add spy or saboteur to your list of professions.
18	Your father or mother served as a knight to a powerful lord. You start the game with a suit of medium armor or a military melee weapon.
19	You found a curious and ancient bit of treasure deep in the swamp. Start with a random enchanted object.
20	You belong to a family that performed carnal rites with dark fiends long ago. Start the game with 2 Corruption.