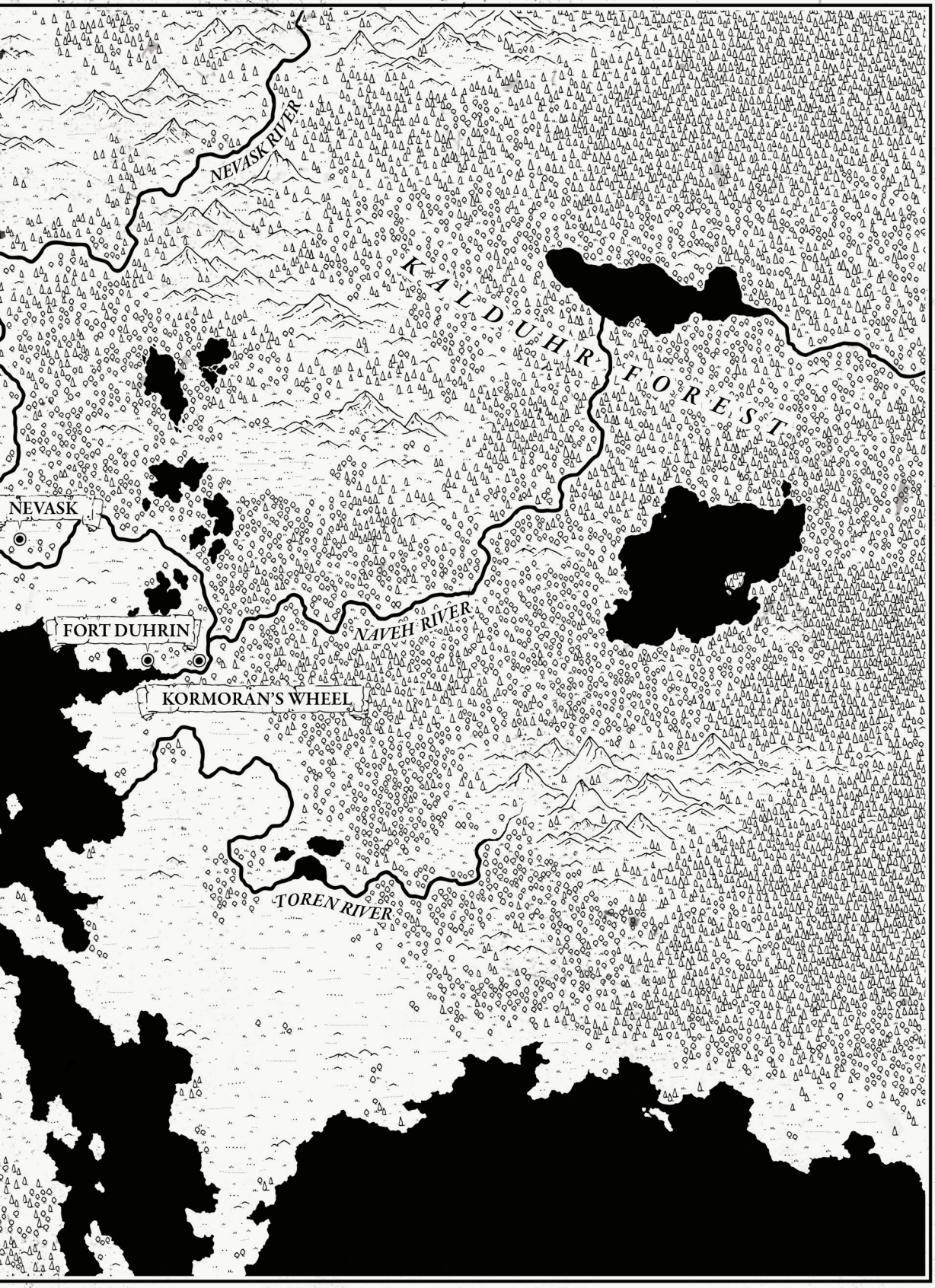
TROPHY LOOM

JESSE ROSS

FORT NORIL
TIROLLIS
LEVASTI
FORT SELEEN
DEVERAIN
BLOSSOMING SEA
AMBARET
NAGANEH
SAHIR
REKSHARI FOREST


NEVASK RIVER
KALDUHR FOREST
NEVASK
FORT DUHRIN
NAVEH RIVER
KORMORAN'S WHEEL
TOREN RIVER

gave birth to an ugly thing, its broad grin already full of teeth. She still wanted to nurse the wretched creature, by the Sisters! Best to leave those damnable goblins to the dark part of the woods and let them become

man they carried back with them

to be the famed sellsword Berit

ngsall himself, but a red-veined fung

cong

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creature which we encount

not a man, but neither a beast. Something in between with attributes of both. I have long heard rumors of men who miraculously survived a wolf's or lion's bite, but came back with strange passions, such as a taste

man or a longing

described as matching her height and figure, but closer inspection revealed it to be a swarm of stinging insects merely in the shape of the woman, which dispersed

approached by the widower. Later that evening he clai

a song that his wife would freq

of insect

ganeh plucked out his

by one after he saw

hter were able to

May it please Your Majesty,

I wish to inform you of an important occurrence that has come to my attention in the matter of the Forest of Kaldúhr. As Your Majesty is well aware, recent expeditions in the forest depths have resulted in the discovery of the tomb of Queen Sehtet ils Noh—The Devourer. Attempts to breach the tomb itself have been, thus far, unsuccessful, though at least two members of Your Royal Guard have made contact with a presence which whispers secrets that have been lost to history, secrets regarding the fall of Kaldúhr and the last days of the civilization which found its home in these dangerous woods. Should you wish us to learn more from this

Trophy Loom

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Visit the website for other game materials

TROPHYRPG.COM

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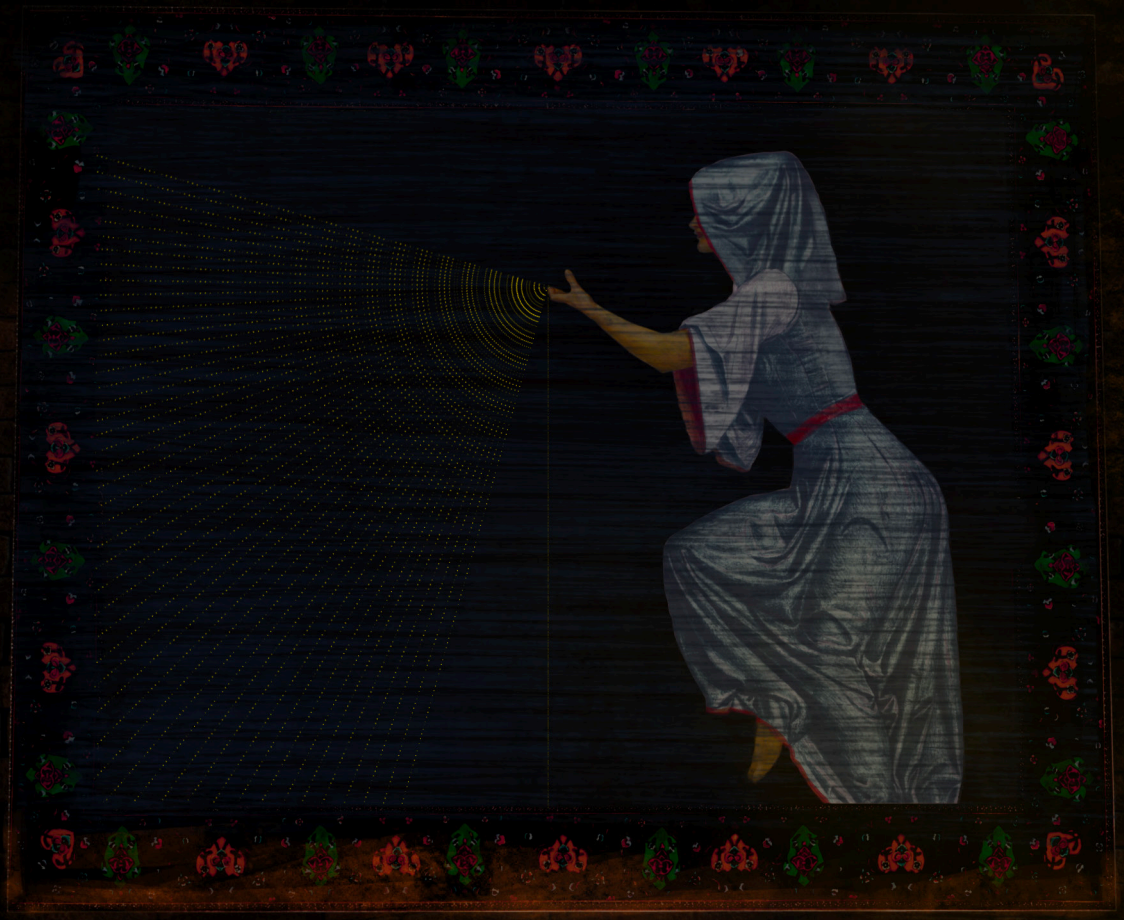
The Crown's Bold Expedition



Welcome, stranger, welcome! Come in from the rain and rest your feet. I will see if there is any pottage left over from dinner while you warm your bones and gather your purse. Yes, one coin for room and board for the week, thank you.

I see you admiring the tapestry above the hearth. My grandmother called it "Saint Suraya Weaves The World." She wove that for me as a wedding gift. I'm sure you've heard Suraya's tale a thousand times from the priests back in Ambaret, but here in Fort Duhrin I like to tell it like my grandmother taught me. You want to hear it? Oh no, no need for silver. It honors my grandmother and my Suraya just to tell it.

In the first days, all was chaos. The Old Ones—peaceful slumber be upon them—swam in the chaos as a fish in water. They birthed many children within the chaos, but tonight we will speak only of one.

Like her siblings, she was born without a name, but we now call her dear Saint Suraya for that is the name she gave herself. Suraya was born small but strong, and with a great tenacity. She looked at the chaos and saw it like loose fibers in a jumbled mass on the floor.

She gathered the threads of chaos, organizing them by color and by quality, and began weaving. She wove the ox and the wren, the mountains and the trees, the seas and the stars. She gave bodies to her Sisters. She wove even our humble bodies. She took those unformed wilds and tamed them into shape.

The Old Ones—peaceful slumber be upon them—hated this. They loved the chaos as a fish loves water. They retreated to hidden places where they could avoid being woven by Suraya's deft hands. Places where they could continue their wild ways, giving birth to monsters and demons. Some say this forest—this Kalduhr—is one such place. I suppose that is why you are here, why the Crown has opened up the gates. You want to be like my beloved Suraya and turn that chaos into something we will no longer fear? Something we can give name to and finally understand?

To that I wish you good luck. You will need it, for you, dear stranger, are no saint.

How to Use This Book

Trophy Loom is a system-agnostic setting book for dark medieval fantasy roleplaying games, especially the games under the *Trophy* banner.

Unlike other RPG setting books you may be familiar with, you will not find detailed historical timelines or accurate city populations in *Trophy Loom*. Rather, this book consists mostly of random tables you can use to inspire you before or during a game session. These tables contain threads of detail that can be woven into an entire adventure, or can be stitched in to fill a gap when you need a name, monster, or location on short notice. To make it easier to pull relevant information, the book is divided into three regions: the City, the Borderlands, and the Forest.

The City defines a single, large city—*Ambaret*, seat of the largest monarchy in the region—and the various districts and idiosyncratic characters that can be found within. The religion, myths, and legends that serve as the foundation of the kingdom are also shared in this section.

The Borderlands provides information on four different types of settlements outside the city. *Levasti* is the wealthy countryside just outside the safety of the city's walls, where the minor nobility lord over the serfs who work their land. *Deverain* is a semi-independent duchy with larger ambitions, but its own host of problems due to its proximity to the forest. *Fort Duhrin* is a royal outpost on the edge of the dreaded forest, and the ideal launching point for many adventures. *Kormoran's Wheel* is a recently-established but unsanctioned tent city within the borders of the forest itself. The further one gets from the city, the stranger the beliefs; the cults of the borderlands—and their gods and customs—are outlined in this section as well.

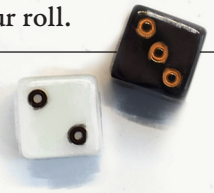
The Forest covers the magical and monstrous things found within the wilds of the great and terrible *Kalduhr Forest*. Within you will find random tables for strange encounters to be had here, potions crafted from the forest's flora, and treasures buried in the ruins hidden deep in the wood. This section also provides a variety of monsters unique to this setting, and rumors and tales associated with some of the broad categories of creatures.

Feel free to use what you find in this book however you see fit in your own games. Change names to better match your setting, and drop whole sections if they don't make sense. Nothing in this book is sacred or canonical, even if you're playing *Trophy*.

Your game's setting isn't what is in this book. Your game's setting emerges from what happens at the table as you play. So go play, and weave your own world from the threads of *Trophy Loom*.

USING THE TABLES

To randomly use entries from the tables in this book, simply roll two six-sided dice (preferably of two different colors) and consult the row that matches your roll.



The City

Ambaret

The Golden City. The Capital of the World. The Jeweled Crown. If it comes with a price, it can be found somewhere in one of the many colorful districts of Ambaret.

ROSE DISTRICT

The seat of wealth and luxury, where virtually every treasure-hunter seeks to retire—or at least indulge for a good long while. The streets of this district are lined with fragrant flowers and filled with beautiful people.

SALT DISTRICT

The home of the Ambaret Salt Mines, a source of great income for the Crown and one of the primary reasons the city was founded here. Populated mostly by the miners, their families, and the businesses that revolve around the salt trade, the district is known to be unwelcoming to outsiders who don't quickly absorb its idiosyncratic ways.

CHARCOAL DISTRICT

The poorest district, this—both literally and figuratively—dark part of the city is frequently neglected by the Crown. Absent a royal presence, the various guilds of the district have taken the reigns.

PAPER DISTRICT

The home of the capital's intellectuals and academics, some say the Paper District is filled with more stories, news, and gossip than even the Rose District. If you're looking for a rare book—or obscure knowledge worthy of a rare book—this is the neighborhood to visit.

SAIL DISTRICT

Ambaret's ports are extensive, given the city's strategic location in the Blossoming Sea. Outside of Fort Duhrin, you can find no more adventurous individuals than those of the Sail District. Sailors, fishers, smugglers, and pirates all make their beds here when they're away from the sea.

BARSUL PRISON

Virtually a district unto itself, the prison of Ambaret is a massive complex filled with only the most hardened criminals. The Crown doesn't take the breaking of its laws lightly, as few who find their way here are heard from again.

THE AZURE ARCHIVES

Some say the city has more districts than even the royal surveyors are aware of. Hidden somewhere in Ambaret is an entrance to the Azure Archives, a place of hidden knowledge and lost artifacts. If even the Paper District doesn't have what you need, best find yourself a sorcerer.

Rose District

THE GAUNTLET

Nestled in the great capital city of Ambaret is the jewel of civilization, the fabulous Rose District. Many a treasure-hunter desires nothing more than to be able to afford a lavish retirement there. But what makes the Rose District so special? What pleasures and delights await those who manage to survive their careers in the dark places of the world?

What Indulgences Are There to Be Had in the District?

THE HEDGE MAZE

The Rose District gets its name from the hedge maze rose garden at the heart of the neighborhood. On feast days, the maze is filled with performers and artisans—something new to see around every twist and turn.

MARKERS OF WEALTH

The wealthier denizens of the district hold the softness of one's feet to be among the greatest of status symbols. It is common to see nobility being carried through the streets on covered palanquins.

ROSE MEAD

Mead is enjoyed at many taverns, but while blackberry and honey mead are frequently imbibed, rose mead is costly and the aftertaste has been known to leave one with a desire to drink nothing else. The exact recipe for rose mead is a closely guarded secret.

THE DANMAQUE

You can't go far without running into a member of the *danmaque*, who study the passing fads of the nobility, and train others in their ways. Dancing, poetry, dueling... whatever the elite fancy, they are prepared to do, but they work for anyone who hires them. Some patrons have exclusive danmaque, of course. Often they retire when the noble fancies a new one, and then go on to set up schools to train new performers.

THE ROSE CRIERS

"You never heard such as the Rose Criers. Sure as at a town or some far place as Fort Duhrin you have readers and criers hawking the King's Word or such. But did you ever hear them call out the latest rumours 'bout the Queen's choice of undergarment? Or share word of a distant prince who would marry thee if only he were sent a golden pouch? 'Tis fantastic what they call news today!"

THE SNAIL VENDOR

Kali Ventrice is the foremost snail vendor in the district. Her purple-hued gastropods—which she sources from the Gloaming Mire—are famous for both their delectable flavor and aphrodisiac-like qualities.

THE HERALDS' GUILD

The Heralds' Guild is a body that regulates the use of arms, sigils, emblems, and crests. The learned who make up the guild have become fabulously wealthy, and only uncharitable observers would say it's because elite families are constantly bribing them to exaggerate their honors or downgrade those of their rivals.

THE BATHS

The steam never escapes the great baths of the Rose District, but the surrounding area always carries a particularly pleasing, floral aroma. The baths also employ the best masseurs in the region. They are a wonderful place to relax, detoxify the body, or catch up on the juiciest gossip—if you can afford them, of course.

THE SPINNERS OF AMBARET

The weavers of Ambaret are renowned for producing silks of peerless quality—softer, yet stronger, than any other fabric, in shimmering hues which shift under moonlight. Less known are their methods, involving the breeding of large and highly venomous spiders which must be attached to looms and fed constantly to keep them producing silk.

THE SUMMERWINE WOMAN

In the park off Summerwine Street there is a pool, and in this pool it is said a woman is sometimes glimpsed. There are tales that she can grant wishes. But none dare to throw her their pocket change, for such may be seen as an insult. She demands more costly sacrifices.

THE ROSE

There grow roses, yes. But *the* rose outshines them all. Some believe it to be but a metaphor for a perfectly beautiful courtesan or chevalier. Others tell that it is an actual flower, and that its pollen is a most powerful aphrodisiac. However, all stories agree that it is the embodiment of beauty. And bliss.

PENELOPE DAWN

The ghost of Penelope Dawn is believed to haunt the hedge maze. An illusionist of her time, her shows were something of legend, and now so is her spirit.

THE HOLLOWED HALLS

The Hollowed Halls (not *Hallowed* Halls, as some fools think) are a series of winding caves beneath the streets. The rumble of footfall and wagon wheels from the surface above make this place reverberate with a constant, low noise that slowly focuses into a deep, resonant tone. You can hear your inner self speak to you here, with no distractions.

FASHION IN THE DISTRICT

It has become popular among the district's fashionistas to carry—as pets—dazzlingly-colored salamanders. Intrepid trappers comb the Kalduhr for the various vivid species that dwell within. Those who make it back out can earn quite the fortune. Amphibian aficionados, as a way to outdo one another, roam the Rose District toting elaborate contraptions designed to simulate the cool misty rains of their chromatic caudata's natural habitat—by happenstance, of course, keeping the affluent cool and comfortable in the heat of Ambaret.

ILYANA'S

If you're going to spend any real time in the Rose District you'll need to get the right clothing. Before your first night, or your first visit to a noble, make sure to stop by Ilyana's clothing shop. She'll get you outfitted just right, and for a reasonable price, too.

THE HOUSE OF THORNS

Much to the chagrin of the district guards, the House of Thorns is one of the capital's most exclusive pleasure houses. It is staffed by elegant gentlemen who ply the patrons with the finest food and drink, surrounded by exquisite art and sublime music. And of course, as the name suggests, you can expect a prick or two.

THE COBBLER'S ASSISTANT

Everet Steyn works for a cobbler in the Rose District, shoeing the wealthy and fashionable. His designs are works of art, and every piece is custom-made. They say he ventured into the forest as a young man, though, and every now and then, he creates a work that can never see the light of day.

THE POPPYWALKERS

A favoured pastime in the district is to smoke a little poppy—not too much, just enough to begin to float—and walk along the garlanded catwalks of the multi-tiered trellises along the boulevards. Here one can find small, impromptu gatherings of folk sitting among the flowers, watching the passersby below.

"DROPPED PETALS"

"Another dropped petal today. It's an awful tradition, but every year around this time young people take their own lives by leaping from towers while dressed in all red. Some years it's only a couple. Some years it's more."

CARNIVOROUS PLANTS

The lush gardens of the Rose District attract all manner of buzzing insects which pollinate the flowers—naturally, some plants consume these insects in turn. They say that if you write your secrets on tiny scrolls and feed them to a tooth fern, bladed tulip or witch's claw, no one will be able to speak them aloud. Take care that the plants do not taste even a drop of your blood, however, or soon the entire garden will know your secrets and whisper them to passersby.

PETAL KISS

There's a fine and sweet liquor called "petal kiss," made from rose nectar regurgitated by a hummingbird. It is very rare and fabulously expensive.

THE LAUGHING BOY

Tucked into one of the many gardens of Ambaret is the statue of the laughing boy, his marble face twisted with mirth. Some who refuge there are keen or lucky enough to catch his face illuminated by a waxing quarter moon. It is only under the light of this moon that the boy's facade falters and he weeps, a single tear of marble dropping into the fountain beneath him.

THE MASKED SCHOLARS

The coffee houses of the Rose District are home to the devotees of a scholarly intellectual society. After debate and coffee, they meet in the vaulted cellars below the coffee houses, whispering and plotting in patchwork masks made from the stretched vellum of heretical treatises. With time, immersion in their secret ways leads to tears of ink and saliva of crimson and cerulean oozing from cracked tongues. The secretions are much valued by the learned.

OLFACTORY ADVICE

"The scent of the Rose District can be overpowering for new visitors on account of the enormous quantities of roses and other flowers that grow there. I recommend picking up a fashionable mask to breathe through. It may mark you as a newcomer, but it's a lot better than fainting in the street!"

THE PALE PARADE

Hundreds of rare albino bulls are paraded through the streets of the Rose District during summer festivals. Spectators will shower them with crimson rose petals as the bulls stride triumphantly to their destination: the slaughterhouse.

THE GOLDEN MIMES

The Golden Mimes are renowned throughout Ambaret for their flawless performances and complete dedication to their craft. Such is their skill that only the trained eye can spot them among the other bronze statues in the gardens and gateways of the Rose District's elite. Look upon them but be warned that no one has ever insulted a mime twice. They will watch and wait as long as they need until the moment comes to silence your mockery for good. It comes as no surprise that the Golden are also rumored to be the most costly and highly sought-after assassins in the land...

A KIND OF IMMORTALITY

"You can't take it with you," lesser minds have said of great fortunes. But in the Rose District, adventurers lacking family to bequeath their fortune to have been known to hire a dualist, an actor who becomes their exact double, learning their tastes and tics, to carry on spending their fortune in their place, as them, once the grave renders them unable to do so themselves.

THE LILAC ROSE

There's a rare lilac rose of Ambaret that's hard to come by, but if you do, you're in for a treat. With just a single thorn clinging to its stem it can produce wonderful images only you can see: pinch your index finger and let yourself wander in illusions of your choosing. You can go wherever you want and become whoever you wish to be. This journey is brief but powerful. Just be sure you don't confuse it with the plum rose, which is lethal.

"PYX" THE BAKER

Amaranth, lilyseed, perilla, and sweet parsley, is what the old baker says he puts in his cakes. He stays up all night baking, and he's always sold out by noon. Strange how nobody remembers the old man's name, but a simple old sign above his shop's door reads "Pyx," and most call him that.

CLUB KURAMET

"The fancy residents of the Rose District would have you think that all the fighting pits are in the bottoms. Heh. What they don't want you to know is the rich folks love a good fight just as much as us commoners. Look for a black door with a carved lion's head above it just west of the maze garden. Give 'em the password and go down to see the best fights this city can offer."

THE OTHER SNAIL VENDOR

"We all know about Kali Ventrice and her excellent lavender snails. What most folks forget, however, is that it takes a master chef to properly extract the snail's flavor. From Kali's place, head six doors down to Spiral. If you can get a table, order the preserved snail terrine with brown bread and prepare to be astounded."

VERNICE THE ENCLOSED

A holy woman living on the eastern end of the district, Vernice is an anchoress who, it is said, was walled into her small, stone cell long before any living memory (though, from her appearance, she cannot be older than thirty). She will, for a small offering, share a prophecy drawn from one of the many old tomes that line her rough-hewn shelves—only, the words she reads are in no known language. It is commonly believed that to hear this supernal speech is to hear the voice of long forgotten gods, and there are those who have devoted themselves to the decipherment of Vernice's cryptic locutions, spending great fortunes in hopes of understanding.

A LURID HISTORY

In older times, before the district officially took its name, they made a fine and acrid paste from virgin rosehips. Folk would place the paste between the slips of sensitive skin and enjoy the subtle keen of its itch as much as the delicate daubing of the tongue that took it away.

THE COLLAR

The servants of the wealthiest residents of the district wear heavy iron collars that serve two purposes: to ensure they are always bent over their work, and to prevent them from ever looking directly in the eyes of their masters. To serve in such a capacity is a great honor, and the bent spine that results from years of wearing the collar is a sort of status symbol among the lower classes.

THE PRINCE OF ROSES

Every year, a new young noble is chosen to be the "prince" of the Rose District at a special cotillion held for the purpose. This beautiful lordling is feted all year, and all households must furnish him with whatever accommodations he might require. Thousands of white roses are picked and plucked each day so the petals may be thrown at his feet wherever he walks.

MORT'S

Have you spent so much time in the Rose District that you're exhausted by the roses? Mort's coffee shop and brewery is just what you need. There's dark wood paneling, plenty to drink, and not a rose in sight. None of the food will even remind you of a flower. Come in for the daily lunch special.

Salt District

MADELEINE EMBER

Ambaret, the thriving capital of kaleidoscopic faces, has lived and died a thousand deaths. No matter its current dressing, the city has always pivoted about a Salt District. The people who cultivated the earth above early discovered ways to reach their hands below, scoring deeply—deeper than any one person can remember or fathom. There, they found salt, an essential mineral prized by kings and paupers alike. The Ambaret mine is an exposed bone that the flesh of the city knits itself to, builds upon, and rots off of, only to be reborn from again. It is the city's oldest center of trade. The district remembers some of its past, but most of it—for better or worse—has been forgotten.

When you arrive, the district is...	because...
in an uproar...	the death of an important person is being marked.
bright, with a candle in every window...	a major trade day has brought unfamiliar vendors.
desolate...	a celebration has been interrupted by an outsider.
grim, each person silent in their task...	a new building is opening its doors today.
thronging with uneasy locals...	rumors abound—something has been freed.
awash in music and merriment...	a treasure has been recovered, but at terrible cost.

Still Your Tongue and Take in the Tales of the Salt District

WHAT THE MINERS LOSE

The miners who emerge from the central shaft each morning shepherd their salt-laden carts in silence. They are paid well, and their families are supported—but there is a cost for the honor of working down there. First, your tongue, by force. Then your back, by work. Then your shadow, by Still-Your-Tongue—a local saint who also goes by Saint Sepolta.

SLEEP SALT

Locals sleep with a pinch of coarse salt under their pillow to bring financial luck. It also brings dreams of suffocation and crushed bones. Nothing is free.

THE HOLLOWED HALLS

Some say that the Hollowed Halls of the Rose District are connected to the Ambaret mining system, but many would-be adventurers have died trying to map and navigate the thousands upon thousands of identical, empty spaces below. It's said they change their configuration for each person who enters.

RUPERT'S PIES

The Loaded Corf, a local greasy spoon, is a familiar touchstone for many miners and their families. Rupert, the owner, says there's something about the workers who are soon to be lost underground. His "guesses" have come to be measured as true prognostication. Now, if Rupert sends you a pie, you know to prepare your will.

HOUSE SHRINES

It's a common practice for locals to remove their shoes and tip them upside down just outside their front door upon arrival. The small piles of stone and salt grow over time, forming the foundation of shrines to house deities—who in turn protect their keepers, and see them safely home each day.

THE TRANSPORTED

Every few years, someone will come up from the mine who never went into it. They make wild claims about deserts, dreamless sleep, a door within a serpent's mouth, other—even stranger—sights, and have no recollection of their previous lives. These strangers are considered blessed by locals and are given unusual courtesy.

AN ANCIENT FURY

Less than 200 people actually labor in the mine, who are all bound by the miner's guild. No one else is allowed down there. It's said that something was disturbed, unearthed, and a great miracle was needed to quell an ancient fury. It's also claimed that there's incredible treasure, forgotten for millenia, hoarded in the mine's darkest depths.

THE COBBLESTONES

It's said that every stone of the cobbled Salt District streets came from a different corner of the world, carried there by various intrepid traders or merchants. It's true, the stones do come in a bewildering variety of colors and compositions. It's also true that tradition expects traders to bring a stone, find a broken one in the Salt District, and replace it. It's impossible to tell when this tradition began, or how long and thoroughly it has continued.

THE SALTMONGER

Efial Madragant and his several-hundred strong workers see to the sorting and sale of salt from the mine—from table quality to fish brining. His family, of which he is the last scion, has lived in Ambaret since the city's founding, and perhaps even before then. There is a rumor that there has only ever been Efial, and there will always only be him—that he isn't human, and hasn't been for a very long time.

THE FELTREE

The Feltree, with its wide, heavy leaves, has grown here since the early days, tangled about the support beam of a local administrative building. It's said to be the only tree of the Kalduhr living apart from that haunted forest—and not only does it live, but it cannot be killed. Most methods have been tried, but the stubborn thing cannot be cut by steel nor scorched by flame.

SAINT SEPOLTA

Saint Sepolta is merely a local saint, but is gaining traction for those desperate enough to seek her aid. She supposedly grants luck to the financially destitute through ritual sacrifice, usually including the salt burial of a thing, an animal, or (most powerfully) another person. It's said that Sepolta is not her true name, and she is also called "The Buried Mother" and "Still-Your-Tongue."

THE MINE PRIESTS

The Miner's Guild has secret meetings where they ritualistically cannibalize the removed tongues of miners. Doing so gives them the symbolic right to "speak for" their peers in the tunnels below, despite not venturing there themselves. They are revered, nearly as priests, with the mine as their temple.

STILLSEASON

Still-Your-Tongue, a name for Saint Sepolta, has a two-week celebration in the height of the wet season that usually overlaps with the solstice. During this time, children are scolded not to scream, or they will "lose their voice to Still-Your-Tongue." The festival is marked by the exchange of candles between loved-ones, and of gilt scissors to those most dearly trusted. No one is entirely sure why.

THE MINERS' SILENCE

The miners that work in the salt mine below the district didn't sacrifice their tongues for some eldrich purpose—they're just taciturn and don't like the look of outsiders.

DEAD MAN'S SALT

Common folk throw out all the salt belonging to someone who recently passed away. Ingesting a dead man's salt is as deep an affront as urinating on their grave. However, dead man's salt is a common ingredient in sleep tonics. I guess it doesn't hurt to insult people you never knew.

GHOST LIGHTS

If you see a light without a lantern moving through the Salt District streets, never follow it. Miners that die above ground always return below. The paths they walk are not for the living.

THE FELTREE'S FRUIT

The saline fruit of the Feltree rots on the lips, but can impart a strange second sense—the pull of the Kalduhr, no matter where one may journey.

THE SPINEWRIGHTS

The Spinewrights, a clandestine adventurers league, have the most complete maps of the mines and all other adjoining under-earth spaces. It's said they are only "allowed" to explore, and never take of the subterranean bounty. They meet in secret, and have special, whispered signs to identify each other above and below ground. Mining guild members work tirelessly to identify and kill anyone identified as a Spinewright, for fear they may share trade secrets.

RULEBEKT REMINDS US

Rulebekt is the name scored into the massive granite pillar in the center of the district, sometimes called Trader's Point. It is said to memorialize a trader of such considerable skill that most who share her profession end any cautionary tale with the phrase, "Rulebekt reminds us..." For example: "If you're determined to set up your stall before others, Rulebekt reminds us, built well is better than built fast."

THE SPICE MARKET

The spice market on Cappergilt Road is a celebrated annual event. It boasts a dazzling array of spices, of course, and varieties of salt, oils, and unguents. Merchants from far off lands across the Blossoming Sea sail here to trade. Nobody leaves the famed Spice Market of Salt District without something new in one hand, and less money in the other.

SALT-LOCKS

Those who wake with a sizable tangle in their hair that wasn't there before sleep are said to be "salt-locked." Such a person finds themselves better able to haggle for the price they want, and can find whatever they're looking for with ease. The harder the knot is to get out, the more likely they are to find joy in their efforts.

A PINCH, A POT, A POCKETFUL

A pinch, a pot, a pocketful,
the glimm'ined shiny spine.
The crooning mother, Still-Your-Tongue,
is climbing out the mine.
Her fingers sharp as chisel tips,
her eyes a'light with flame.
Never steal the mother's salt
and never say her name.
—a children's skipping rhyme

THE GUILD'S BRUISERS

The mining guild keeps their secrets well. They employ a burly, rotating watch of brutes to "defend" the guild's miners and the mine's two known, "safe" entrances. Some say the bruisers are also responsible for making sure the things in the tunnels stay down there.

THE BEGGAR

Pecho, a blind beggar, claims to have had a religious experience that opened his "true eyes" while making him unable to see by the light of the sun. His tears are said to be as sweet as strawberries. He claims not to know of Saint Sepolta, but quivers at her many names. Miners give him a wide berth.

WARDBIRDS

Wardbirds were once common finches, caught and selected for their sensitivity to toxic gasses and subterranean quakes. As time passed, these birds also came to sense hostile magics and dangerous beasts, as well. They speak in simple, short phrases, but possess vocabularies of surprising depth. There are no ornamental varieties, and most are hatched without eyes.

AUNT ORIWEN

The Oriwen Book of Little Conceits is a book that was written about a century back. It claims to detail all the secret signs and complicated tricks traders use to manipulate common folk out of their hard-earned money. The book claims these methods are primarily used in the Ambaret Salt District. When excusing themselves for rest or relief, traders will often claim they're "checking on Aunt Ori," as if consulting this absurd book to ensure swindling best practices. When said with a smile, it's a sarcastic way of saying: "You can trust me. I'm not a cheat as some outsiders think."

THE GREENWALK

Physikers of local nobility claim the air of the Salt District is good for the sinuses and helps relieve rheumatic joint pain. Several open air parks exist solely to provide a route through which the elite can promenade, shielded with topiary so that they need not rest their weary eyes upon the working-class rabble that sustain the district.

THE DOG ROSE

The hearty Dog Rose is the only variety of rose that can grow in the salt-poisoned soil of this district. It's not an especially attractive flower—something of a muddy, burnt sienna with wide, thick petals. Residents are extremely proud of their thriving roses, and one worn in the lapel of a blazer or in the hair is considered a mark of allegiance to the district's working-class.

LUVETTE

Luvette, an exotic dancer who owns a palisade on the edge of the Salt District, is rumored to also work as an assassin. It's claimed that her extraordinary balance allows her to run silently across the tops of the market stall awnings that line many of the district's streets.

DRY DISTRICT

To drink in the Salt District is a challenge. A well-meaning group of temperists, mostly spouses of miners and traders, passed a local ordinance forbidding public intoxication and the sale of spirits. Many alcohols are now sold as "remedies" to benign symptoms of general malaise. However, these tinctures must oftentimes be under the table or bundled with an "unrelated" high cost item. The "three silver pickle" is a nod and wink to this practice.

EYES OF THE SPINEWRIGHTS

Adventurers belonging to the Spinewrights are said to have strange eyes. Whether physiological or merely the result of fanaticism, they're said to be more reflective and wild than an ordinary person's.

SALTPETER

A few years ago, a series of grisly murders plagued the district. At first, they seemed to target young, affluent merchants and their paramours—but then an old seamstress, and even a miner's guildperson, were found slaughtered. They were each killed with a pickaxe. The killer was never caught, but was given the name of "Saltpeter."

CATIAN SALT

If someone tries to sell you "Catian Salt" they're trying to swindle you. This is a phrase used to help identify if someone is an easy mark or not. No such spice exists, but sellers will try to tempt a prospective customer with this "rare and uniquely sweet seasoning" that is mysteriously not present for tasting.

NOCKWALL

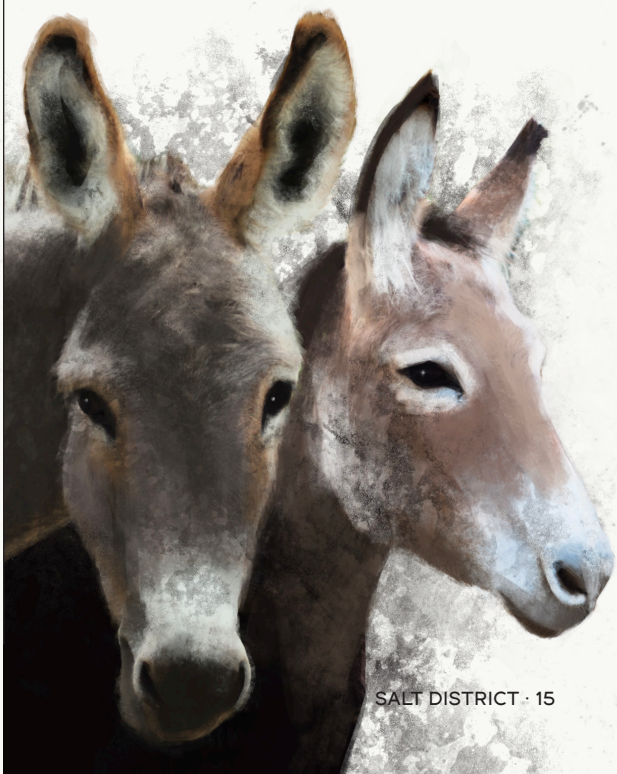
Nockwall is a local celebrity who has been gradually gaining broader popularity as a portraitist. His portraits (mostly of young, beautiful women) reveal a sensitivity and an eye for detail unexpected of someone born to "the lower class." He is not ashamed of his family or of the Salt District, and those who look down on him often find that their portraits arrive packed in coarse, heavy salt.

TOSS A COIN

If you toss a coin and it lands on top of the Trader's Point (a columnar landmark at the heart of the district) without falling, you will make what you need and little else from your time in the Salt District. If it knocks down another coin with it, you will make more than you expected. If it never lands on the point, you will lose money on a deal or suffer some other form of ill luck.

WHERE YOU NEED ONE MULE

Salt District horse traders always sell animals in pairs, and cannot be argued with otherwise —no matter how much you pay them. "Where you need one mule, you'll need another" is a common phrase, and means essentially the same as: "Many hands make light work."



Charcoal District

TOM McGRENERY

Soot-choked from the fires of forges, chimneys reach past teetering tenements. The streets are shadows. Wages are higher here than nearly anywhere in the city, but you get paid in guilders instead of gold. And only those with a guild seal may trade one for the other...

When you arrive, the district's streets are...	because...
ablaze with light...	it is the final day of the All Saints Festival.
up in arms...	the guild militias are rounding up dissidents.
deserted and silent...	fire has broken out in one of the cage tenements.
filled with smoke that stings your throat and eyes...	the workers are on strike.
filled with screams and the sound of weeping...	a dignitary is paying a visit to the Guild Houses.
packed with jostling crowds...	the Red Wind blows in from the sea today.

Whispered Rumors Outside the Halls of the Guild Houses

The Charcoal District is built on land that once was a forest of whispering pines.

The Burners' Guild still exists in name, but it has no members.

There are old hideouts and weapon stores, dug in the last days of the last war but never used, now buried in the hillsides.

The Glittering Arcade is the place to go for real luxuries at (relatively) bargain prices. For a price, the dealers there can seek out and supply any gem you care to specify.

The district employs a number of "spirit agents" who maintain a registry of likely haunting sites: places where murders, suicides, and tragedies took place.

Time-worn carvings of sinuous monsters adorn a dozen slabs of stone found across the district. It is said that they mark the course of subterranean rivers to ward off evil spirits.

The chamberlain of the Crow Guild wears a wig to hide the witch-marks on her scalp.

The district's hospital was founded originally to serve the dead, not the living. It still arranges for bodies to be sent across the Blossoming Sea for burial in ancestral lands.

The chamberlain of the Crow Guild wears a wig because her hair is falling out.

There's a man beneath the Glittering Arcade who cultivates ashen roses in the dark.

A fleck of ashen rose seed in your wine will make your hair fall out. More than that will kill you.

Each of the Guild Houses has a rooftop garden, freely open to the public. All the floors below are strictly off-limits.

I keep seeing that clown, the one who plays Pohki, around the district. He shows up in the most unexpected places.

The rats here move at times in swarms with uncanny purpose.

The Lord of the Farriers' Guild will pay handsomely to complete his collection of monster teeth.

The minstrels at the Salon ils Kore are five months into a year-long suite of music: its completion will win for its composer a mysterious masked noblewoman's hand in marriage.

The minstrels at the Salon ils Kore are five months into a year-long suite of music: its final bars are the culmination of an infernal sorcery.

Alderman Nikolau alone keeps the master schedule of the Glittering Arcade's shipments, locked away in the study of his townhouse.

The shadowed, overgrown grounds of the Royal Pavilion are a haven for thieves and spirits.

If you get an invitation to the Salon ils Kore on paper without gold edging, please don't go.

The guilds' monopoly on property and commerce in the district dates back to ancient times. It's in the city's power to rescind them—who benefits from the status quo?

⚅ ⚄ The gold from the Glittering Arcade goes out of the district once a week, by one of five different routes each time.

⚅ ⚅ They're doing something weird to those dogs in the Silver Guildhall kennels.

⚅ ⚃ Someone has been pouring blood into the wells around the district, and then people get sick.

⚅ ⚀ In fact, the Burners still meet in secret. There are no more than a handful of them.

⚅ ⚁ Bosses at the Victory Factory are hiring strikebreakers, anticipating a shutdown.

⚅ ⚂ The spirits at the clock tower could tell you everything about who walks the streets by night, if you could speak their language.

⚅ ⚄ That statue on top of the Tugu Areng pillar is real, solid gold. But even if you could climb up there, it's too big to carry away.

⚅ ⚅ The alchemist who lives in the ruins of the Royal Pavilion pays handsomely for the body parts of unusual creatures. Particularly still-warm eyes, if you can manage it.

⚅ ⚃ You should get one of those passes that says you live in a militia tenement. It's a free pass if you get arrested.

⚃ ⚀ The Cooperation Society still swears in new members with the ancient oaths of its founding years, when it was a rebellion against the Crown rather than a gang of thugs and racketeers.

⚃ ⚁ There are vengeful spirits here, but don't ask any more. If you talk about them, they'll find you.

⚃ ⚂ At the dark of the moon, the water in the Three Sisters Canal is low enough that you can wade across.

⚃ ⚄ Everyone knows about the two tunnels, but did you know there's a smaller third tunnel? It's in between the two public ones, used for maintenance.

⚃ ⚅ If you ever get your hands on a guild-ciphered letter, try to crack the code of marks in the margins first. Those are the scriveners' running commentary to one another on their masters' affairs.

⚃ ⚃ I heard Pohki the clown has been seen near the sites of a dozen grisly murders.

Paper District

NATALIE ASH

Booksellers, binders, writers, and prophets—the intellectual heart of Ambaret pumps its blood from the Paper District. Walking these streets of small, shaded shops and looming spires, the traveler walks on paths littered with disintegrating vellum and parchment. Many residents have a cough from the suspended ink dust they breathe.

Six Landmarks of the District and Six "facts" About Each

⚀ TEMPLE OF SAINT VERSEAF

This temple is small, frequented mostly by local worshippers who follow this patron of typesetters.

⚀ Verseaf was originally worshipped for righteous murder, rather than typesetting.

⚁ Alcanin oversees the temple and its day-to-day operations—which mostly means keeping it clean. He collects the offerings left, keeps the perishable and valuable items of charity for the temple, and then departs with the rest. Everyone who follows him with the intent to rob him ends up lost in the streets of Ambaret.

⚂ The third bench on the right has a wobbly leg.

⚃ It is known that the statue—a woman with a severe expression in simple robes reading an open codex—used to conceal an entrance into secret tunnels and the sewers. It is believed that this entrance has been completely sealed.

⚄ A ladder leads into the tower of the temple. From the tower, the spire can be climbed. At the top of the spire is something a little bit like a seat. When seated, one can see the entrance to the palace of Ambaret. The secret entrance.

⚅ Lendren Frond visits the temple everyday. He always brings a fresh, well-wrapped meat pie as an offering.

⚁ THE ROTHRICH MANOR

Sitting atop a small hill in the district, surrounded by fenced grounds, is the ancestral home of the Rothrich family. It has been left, mostly abandoned, since the last heir died a generation ago.

⚀ The third light from the left on the back side of the second floor is lit every other night.

⚁ The family engaged in ritual sacrifice and consorted with the darkest powers, but threw the best parties.

⚂ Neighborhood children dare each other to climb the fence and enter the house. Their parents wish they wouldn't, but know that none of them are brave or foolish enough.

⚃ Nels Vinden, who organizes an underground fighting ring in Kormoran's Wheel, is the last member of this family.

⚄ Treasure-hunters who have (unadvisedly) entered and escaped ,speak of pale, gaunt figures with wicked claws, glowing sealed doors, red runes, and dusty objet d'art that would bring a fortune at auction.

⚅ The Rothrich gained their wealth through their early adoption of the printing press in Ambaret. Though they later sold it, The Rose Petals is still in operation.

ARCADE D'ARTISANS

The arcade includes street dwellings, some workshops, and galleries of the finest artisans. One end houses a fine restaurant and stableyard for the carriages of the well-to-do who commission their specialty goods.

Farret's Sundries sells "Fate's Blood." People believe that any prophecy written in this ink will come true. Made from balindrakir blood and other even more exotic ingredients, its high price is paid not just in gold.

The Enladim family are silversmiths of renown, making many royal seals and signets. Their process involves casting proofs, which must be properly disposed of out of necessity. However, a certain segment of the populace knows someone who has a friend that got a royal seal from them to forge documents. But those stories can't be true, can they?

Drikse's Mixes dresses itself up as a serious alchemical shop, but most of its clients use it primarily as a spice shop.

Wila Marten sells a scented wax the nobility like to use in their official seals. No one can identify the odor, which she claims is "all natural." Her apiary is outside of Ambaret proper and is heavily guarded. Unusually so.

Fourteen different pen makers are trying to form a guild of pen makers. Contentiously, they share a shop called Fine Nibs, but cannot agree on a guild name or a guild master. More than one assassination attempt has already been made.

Bones & Pips makes fine gaming dice. Their 12-sided bronze set, for the game 3 Cauldrons, is very popular in the drawing rooms of professional Ambaretians. Their gold-trimmed ivory set aims for a more elevated audience. The game's origin in fortune-telling is honored in the "quicksilver and blood-of-a-murderer" set viewable by appointment only.

THE ETUDIERRE

One of Ambaret's colleges, the Etudierre is a common stopover for third or fourth children—those unlikely to inherit a family's assets, but often put into positions of influence and authority.

The five unofficial towers (so named for the school's five-towered construction) compete in monthly pub crawls and trivia. The winners have a special table reserved at The Inkwell, a student bar. Sophomore Melodie Pierce seems unbeatable—drunk or sober.

The masters of the college wear pendants with the sigil of an inkwell as a sign of their position. Some speculate that their reverse side, which is never shown, bears the mark of the dark pacts they swore in pursuit of forbidden knowledge.

Farndis Evesnin is the college's mediator and, as such, resolves disputes between students, between students and faculty, and occasionally between faculty. He is non-partisan in his resolution and is trusted to render fair judgements. He is not human, but refuses to speak of his origin.

Graduates receive a silver cloak clasp shaped like an inkwell within which is an eye made of blue sapphire. The college's masters have a secret room where they can see through any eye they have ever given.

Some students leave the college when it's made clear they're ill-suited to continuing their studies. However, the college has also dismissed two students that excelled. Grafton Righ murdered another student. Mill Flechersen—who was an excellent student and was universally liked—was dismissed without reason.

The Etudierre was originally built with six towers. A century ago, the sixth partially collapsed during a thunderstorm. It was an otherwise clear-weathered day. It has been sealed since then.

GOETHEN STREET

This street is a typical city street, with homes and apartments above street-front businesses. It is unique in that nearly every business is a specialty bookseller.

Vikras Dem of *The Cooker's Binding* does brisk trade in cookbooks, but also re-binds books of esoteric nature with cookbook covers. "The Crab Dishes of Southern Lairn Island" is an especially profane text.

Don't let that tiny, narrow shop with the sign that reads "Histories" fool you. The store occupies every square foot of its four floors with a cornucopia of texts. Even among scholars, the shop is regarded as one of the best reference libraries in Ambaret. Kohl, the wizened proprietor, allows browsing by appointment—for a fee, of course.

Piatro's Mysteries performs brisk trade in grimoires among the salon set of the Rose District. All these books are contrivances penned by failed fiction authors.

Rose Cantos is famous for publishing the works of the next big poet. More importantly, it is also a front for the fabled assassin known as *the Nocturne*.

Territory sells the most accurate maps in the world. However, a word in the right ear can result in maps of a different pedigree being put on display.

Periodically, *The Rogue* takes over another bookseller's space for a night. The trashiest pulp fiction and tabloid tales are sold to those eager for any truth within those pages.

THE TOWER OF PROPHETS

A tall, square building with an unimaginable number of windows. A prophet sits at each window, discarding their prophecies into the street below. These slips of parchment are largely ignored, ground into paste, and sometimes used as insulation for new construction.

Every prophecy that drifts down from this tower comes true, but most are incredibly banal.

The tower's central atrium is an impressive ascending staircase wrapped around circular bookshelves that run the entire height of the tower. Researchers are welcome to study the prophecies recorded here, provided they come with the proper references.

Lady Ancouer has gathered a band of urchins and pays them to collect prophecies from the street. If she identifies who the prophecy refers to, she might either sell it to them or use it as blackmail.

About six floors below ground, there is a team of astronomers and historians working to decipher the prophecies spoken by the immortal prophet chained one floor below them.

Barton Fret serves as something of a tour guide for the tower. He generates significant investment income from the foreknowledge it provides, and plans on using his earnings to start a new life underwriting the treasure expeditions leaving Fort Duhrin.

One room on the tenth floor was completely filled with cement ten years ago. No one will explain why or remark on it in any way.

Sail District

THE GAUNTLET

The Ambar peninsula is awash in the waves of the Blossoming Sea, and Ambaret's lively Sail District is the launching point into those wine-dark waters. If the forest of Kalduhr provokes the Crown's fear, then the Blossoming Sea captures its imagination. All manner of treasures, people, and even gods have disappeared after setting out on its shadowy waters over the years. A common saying among people wishing to account for something missing is "it must be lost to the Blossoming Sea." Many treasure-hunters seek the capital necessary to fund expeditions across the sea, in the hopes of discovering—or recovering—these lost wonders.

What Discoveries Might Be Made Upon the Blossiming Sea?

⚀ A TIDAL TOMB

An empty sarcophagus dating from the time of Old Kalduhr recently washed ashore. Now, treasure-hunters and explorers the world over are wondering how many more god-kings and high priests from the ancient times may have been buried at sea.

⚁ THE DEEP REAVER

Historians speak of a whaling ship, *The Deep Reaver*, whose captain was so heartbroken at having lost the love of her life to plague, she and her crew undertook one final, suicidal expedition to hunt the last leviathan born during the Beginning of All Things. The ship never returned.

⚂ THE WHISPERING ISLES

Everyone is taught about the Whispering Isles from a young age. These islands, likely a myth, are said to be where the First Sisters were canonized—where the gods whispered to them the essential truths they would need to guide mankind.

⚃ GREAT RAY

Once there was a great and benevolent manta ray, or so the story goes. The ray's vast fins supported a seafaring monastery of mystics that taught prayers and rituals at each port. When the beneficiaries of these teachings put them to selfish and destructive ends, the betrayed and grief-stricken ray swam far from land, never to return. But perhaps a crew of doughty sailors could find it and reap the secrets of the (doubtless uninhabited) monastery upon its back...

⚄ THE AUREATE BOUNTY

Fragments of a set of opulent crockery—ornate, multi-hued, and gilded—washes up on the shores of Ambaret. The rumor is that it comes from the treasure galley *The Aureate Bounty*, dashed on the rocks many years past. As it went down, hold groaning with the blood-soaked treasures of the Kalduhr, the hungry ocean took back a trophy of its own. It is said that those who find fragments of the set will be compelled to seek out its fellows and reunite them, throwing their spoils and themselves into the waves.

⚅ THE SAGAH LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER

There is a lighthouse attendant on Isla Sagah. She is believed to be hundreds of years old, but no one has seen her face. Knocks at her door are ignored and, when confronted, she is hunched, covered in a shawl, and her face is wrapped with a thin cloth. Some blame her for the disappearances on the Blossoming Sea or believe her to bring the visitors of the sea into a cosmic balance.

⚀ THE NORTHERN MONOLITH

There is a place in the icy north where the Blossoming Sea grows shallow. The ocean floor rises until the water is scarcely higher than folks' knees, and bold sailors continue on foot. Those that have sailed to the edge of this Sodden Plateau whisper of a monolith on the horizon, glittering like a diamond in the last rays of the setting sun. Those that have traversed the plateau to seek the edifice say nothing, for none of them have yet returned.

THE DRIFTLESS QUEEN

A god-queen of Old Kalduhr became increasingly paranoid that her throne was coveted by her brother. She attempted everything to hide her fortune: paying great expense to make decoy caravans during travel, charging an entire city with creating a deep mine to house the riches, and even killing one of her husbands when she believed him to favor her brother. As her final act, she set sail with all of her goods to cross the Blossoming Sea and find an island that no one could possibly reach. No one has seen her—or her immense wealth—since.

OLD MALACHI

The fisherfolk down by the docks are saying that ships are going missing recently because Old Malachi has returned. Old Malachi is a massive sea turtle, larger than a frigate, with a shell made of quartz and granite.

MISSING ROYALS

During the last war, a minor royal family was forced to flee by ship out across the sea. There's no record of arrival at their intended destination, nor was a shipwreck ever located despite an exhaustive search.

MEFAISO

Though it looks inviting, never dock at the lush island of Mefaiso. Its inhabitants might look like normal folk, but they lay with the beasts of the sea and feed drunken sailors to their watery gods. There must be a full fleet's worth of gold scattered throughout Mefaiso given all the ships they've lured in.

THE BALINDRAKIR

There's nothing better for reinforcing a ship's mast or hull than balindrakir bones. Too bad they wash up less than once a year. Anyone brave enough to scour the seafloor for a balindrakir's corpse would come back to a life of wealth and leisure. Surely no one is foolish enough to attempt to hunt a live balindrakir...

THE GRAND LEGION'S SHIPS

During the last imperial invasion, the Grand Legion's ships were scuttled by saboteurs, leaving all their cargo at the bottom of the sea. The wrecks should still be intact because no sailor will go near the area due to rumors that the legionnaires' spirits haunt the waves.

THE THIRD PROPHET OF LOVE

The corsair princess Brass Maw slaughtered a pilgrim armada on these seas when the troubles last raged. The pilgrims' leader—the Third Prophet of Love—was beheaded on the deck of his burning jade-sailed trireme and his head, still prophesying, cast into the hungry sea. As a divine being, the prophet endures, sea-changed, with pearl eyes and locks of green weed on a barnacled skull, and still proclaims the holy secrets of love, charity, and peace. Most recently pulled up in the nets of a poor fisherman, the headless old man claims that he heard only a word of love before the head was wrestled from him by a pod of black dolphins who dived with it to their living coral temples. The singing fish revere the prophet as a god, praising him with holy mockery. Should the prophet's head return to the world of mortals he will speak the twelve secrets of peace and the twenty-four words of love, assuring a cataclysm of fiery joy and twelve years of absolute peace.

SPIRIT SANDS

While browsing a junk shop you find an old parchment requesting something called "spirit sands" from a small island community far out across the Blossoming Sea. It appears these sands are sought after by arcanists. Perhaps there's profit to be made.

DRANIN'S REEF

They say that no captain can safely navigate Dranin's Reef. The passages are too narrow for a large ship and the currents too strong for smaller craft. While they're likely just tall tales, folk tell stories about wealth beyond measure in the islands beyond the reef.

THE PAPER ARMADA

"I told this story to my son, who told it to his daughter; and for them, I tell it to you. There once was a little paper boat, painted with wax, set to sea by a child who lived in a village not far from here. It came back every year until the child was an old man, whose grandchild built a boat of their own to travel with it. For two centuries the Paper Armada has returned to that shore to take new boats among its number, built by people young and old, to take their hopes to sea. But a vicious hurricane called up by the Shrieking Mother of Sirens destroyed the village five years ago. Now the Paper Armada has no home, no place to renew its hope. Please, friends, make a new home for the Armada. For my son and his daughter, if no one else."

THE LURE OF DERUN

It is widely rumored in the small villages that litter the islands of the Blossoming Sea, that deep below, the last creation of a mad sea god lies. Rumored to be a lure, for any and all creatures, it rests at the bottom, whispering of all your heart's desires—the soothing images and empty promises dragging more and more adventurers down to the depths, ever casting for a prey no one knows.

THE COMFORTER

Somewhere in the vast Blossoming Sea exists a small islet, on which stands one thing: a statue of a woman with her arms outspread, ready to embrace the viewer. At her feet are bits of bone and shipwreck. The direction she faces changes over time, perhaps due to some instability in the earth below her. For the most part it's an innocuous mystery, as the land is so small and no culture has claimed it, or her. But seafaring towns have a story about her. You see, if you ever feel desolate and alone, and look out at the sea, you might see a path emerge over the waves leading you into her arms. It's inviting, to be sure, but any who take this path are gone forever, lost to the hungry waves.

OLD BONE WHITE

Down past the cliffs in whimsical waves,
past shifting shoals and sailors graves,
lies old Bone White.
In his socket a crab's claw ticks,
in his maw a reef I saw,
through his ribs a home he gives,
near his toes some grass it grows.
In the sand he sits and sits,
the sea around him swirling fits.
He's waiting there for you, you see,
to join him 'neath the deep blue sea.
—a children's rhyme in Pearl's Perch

THE TRAWLER'S SPYGLASS

For decades, the Trawler's Spyglass has been little more than a natural curiosity of the southern seas. A column of crystal clear fresh water in the middle of the ocean, sailors sought the Spyglass to refill their stores and to gaze upon the ocean floor far below. Now, the mariners say the Trawler's Spyglass has begun to move, roaming far from its place on the charts, and that in the depths below the column, something has begun to writhe.

UNDERSTATION ARCANE 7

The sorcerer-alchemists of Old Kalduhr had high hopes for Understation Arcane 7. It was not the first underwater laboratory, but it was certainly the first dedicated to the study of underwater cultures. Part research station, part diplomatic outpost, UA7 was devoured by the sea when a heat vent opened beneath it, swallowing it and all of its gathered lore.

THE LEGION OF THE DEEP

When the Sojourner came to slay the archwizard Aragal, she commanded her legions to march into the Blossoming Sea. She was found by a fisherman three days later, face down in the surf, but her legions had long since disappeared beneath the waves. It is said that one must first be drowned before the Legion of the Deep can be summoned, but none has ever succeeded.

THE WITHERING HULK

Every sailor of the Blossoming Sea knows the tales of *The Withering Hulk*, a titanic, cathedral-like structure floating on the ocean currents. Said to be a construction of wrecked hulls, intertwined ropes, and splintered masts, no one knows where it comes from or what dark magic caused it to take shape, but tales tell of unfathomable riches hiding within its halls.

THE LOST JEWEL

An ancient astrological manuscript depicts the Queen's Crown—a constellation used by sailors to navigate the waters for thousands of years—as having five jewels set across the top instead of four. Treasure-hunters now think the myth about the fifth jewel falling into the Blossoming Sea may be true, and listen more carefully to the drunken sailors who swear they have sailed over it—a vast, cyclopean gem twinkling silently in the depths.

THE ABYSSAL CHEST

An ancient tale claims that on the darkest bottom of the Blossoming Sea lies a coffer containing the sea itself. If opened, it would blast off an endless amount of saltwater with tremendous pressure, as if the chest contains a portal to the bottom of the ocean. Anyone unfortunate enough to find this chest, and foolish enough to bring it aboard, would be followed by an unspeakable sea monster to the ends of the earth. The tale says the creature attacks and sinks the ship only if it comes close to any port, ensuring that the coffer containing the sea won't ever leave its own waters.

THE STATUES OF SAINT OFELIA

Statues of Ofelia, the Drowned Sister, are somewhere in the depths of the sea. Sailor-nuns in her holy order drop them in places where the bottom cannot be touched by anchor or rope, a process by which one can turn grief and loss into a lens with which to explore the world.

MALAK'S WAKE

There is a place in the Blossoming Sea where the waters do not merge, but leave a deep swath of crimson against their luminous turquoise peaks. It is said that this marks the passage of the Dread Queen Malak during her final conquest. On land, she left a trail of blood in her wake, but on this voyage it was the blood of a mutinous crew that stained the waters as they were towed behind her fleet, kept alive by cruel sorcery until she set foot upon the shore.

ULFAAD'S BARGE

When King Ulfaad died, the people mourned greatly, for he was a wise and benevolent ruler. As were the ways back then, they built for him a funeral barge, and laid his bier atop a pyre. With thousands standing on the beach, two longships towed the barge away from shore, and archers lit the pyre with flaming arrows. The flames leapt high, yet did not consume: the barge drifted out across the Blossoming Sea, still burning, until its light disappeared over the horizon. Today, if you see a strange light on the distant water, know that you gaze upon King Ulfaad's funeral barge. Take comfort, for it is an omen of wisdom and peace.

THE GLASS HORSE

The old sorcerers of the plains, sipping milk in their horsehair nests, tell of a prince who was gifted a glass horse by his secret father, a powerful demon. Fleet and tireless, the prince rode his magic horse to the ends of the earth. When he came to the shores of the Blossoming Sea, he could not comprehend an ocean's vastness or depth, believing the sea a shallow flooded plain or expanse of strange grass. Impetuous, the prince commanded his magic steed forward and quickly drowned. The glass horse wanders beneath the waves, unmarked and in need of a better master than the bones of the foolish prince still tied to its saddle.

RED PEARLS

Out past Jerund's Point the waters turn red. Sailors are terrified of the unnatural waters, but that's where you get the red pearls. Just watch out for the carnivorous oysters...

THE DUKE OF THE DEEP

They say that if you drop your anchor in the Blossoming Sea on the warmest evening of the year and wait, the Duke of the Deep might come to call. This ancient fae brings a retinue of revelers from the bottom of the sea to lead sailors through a night of dance and jubilation. Some captains fear this night, knowing that crews so ensorcelled rarely return to work. Others seek it out, wishing to lose their earthly troubles and join the dance of the waves.

WATERWARD BOY

There once was a jolly navigator,
Who served on a royal gold-bound freighter,
That life of his couldn't get much greater.
Woe to the waterward boy.
Woe to the waterward boy,
He never will feel one ounce of joy.
His never will hear that land ahoy,
Woe to the waterward boy.
He sailed to the isle of Never-Later,
And met with a wise prognosticator,
Who said "on the crew is a filthy traitor."
Woe to the waterward boy.
Woe to the waterward boy,
He never will feel one ounce of joy.
His never will hear that land ahoy,
Woe to the waterward boy.
He searched and searched for that infiltrator,
Murdered each man as a depredator,
Cried "Now I see I'm the perpetrator."
Woe to the waterward boy.
Woe to the waterward boy,
He never will feel one ounce of joy.
His never will hear that land ahoy,
Woe to the waterward boy.

—a sea shanty

SIRENS

"We let him on the boat, we did. Looked to be about nine years old. A wee thing, that boy. He couldn't talk, but he could sing—no lie—just like a mockingbird. Eventually the captain stopped giving orders. He'd just sit in front of that boy, day after day, bewitched by his songs. One morning, the quartermaster found the captain, throat tore out. We sailed back home right then and there, but I swear we could hear the captain's voice calling to us from the waves. I tell you what: I'm buying a farm. My shipping days are done."

DOWYN

Long ago, there existed a color that can no longer be seen by any eyes. Extracted from the shells of a now extinct mollusk pulled from the depths of the Blossoming Sea, the color *dowyn* has been lost to its waters. It is rumored that the artist Ajino's "unfinished" masterpiece is painted in dowyn.

THE INVERTED LIGHTHOUSE

Out in the far middle of the Blossoming Sea, where the blues of the depths turn a dark black, there lays a spire. Its brine-stained and coral-encrusted tip pierces the water, visible between the peaks and troughs of the waves. Most would mistake it for the top of a large seamount were it not for the dark gleam that reflects off the too-smooth stone. Some call it the Inverted Lighthouse, for it does not warn of danger, but is said to instead draw in ships to their doom. No one knows what happens to the ships that disappear near the spire. There is no tangle of wrecks or debris caught in the stone and coral; no survivors to speak of strange darkness, whispers, and promises of long-abandoned treasure; no glimpses of what waits in the deep for those who go looking; no hint at what waits within the Lighthouse, waiting to be found.

Barsul Prison

THE GAUNTLET

There are few places in the world so terrible as Barsul Prison. Prince and pauper alike have been condemned to its cold, hard cells over the centuries. Those who have survived their sentences tell tales of strange, inhuman jailers; bizarre, even baroque, methods of torture; and little-traversed passageways that lead to naught but madness and death. And yet... for the right price, you can buy anyone's freedom from Dread Barsul. Many treasure-hunters over the years have taken up the incursion for that very purpose.

Old Prisoners' Tales from Time Served in Dread Barsul

SILENT JAILERS

The jailers never speak. They simply shuffle along in the darkness, their faces occluded by rust-red cowls, signaling to each other with the little bells they keep in their pockets.

BEETLE MARKS

A peculiar type of folk art has emerged among the prisoners: many of the rot beetles that infest the dank depths of Barsul are found with their thick chitinous shells etched with everything from simple messages to intricate byzantine engravings. Jokes, news, graffiti, pleas, poems, prose, confessions, caricatures, even fine art is carved into the carapace of the insect before being set loose in a vain, desperate act of hope to once again be seen.

TRUE ESCAPE

Barsul is not just a prison for the living, but also for the dead: no spirit may leave here unless by divine intercession. The trick for the prisoners who really want to escape is to stay alive long enough to jump from the walls.

THE GOLDEN MAGGOT

A likely-apocryphal story claims a prisoner once found a golden maggot in his bread, and that when he presented it to the jailers, they set him free. It is now a tradition amongst the prisoners to pick through their food, in search of a golden maggot, in the hopes they might find one and buy their freedom with it. The jailers encourage this story by occasionally slipping a golden maggot into a prisoner's meal. When the prisoner presents it to the jailers, the prisoner is taken to a darkened room and devoured on the spot.

THE PIT

The Pit was dug deep to accommodate an influx of petty criminals, a gaping hole in the earth filled with tier upon tier of iron cages. The wardens of the Pit make a lucrative trade in elevating sufficiently wealthy prisoners to the higher levels so that they may escape the detritus from the cages above and have access to food and water at its "freshest." The floor of the Pit is a soft clay, and apparently dozens of feet higher than when the pit was first dug.

THE CAPTIVE VOLUMES

The prison library is attended by guards who are utterly deaf and illiterate, so as not to even accidentally hear or read any of the words contained in the books and tomes held prisoner there. Only the most trusted of the Crown's scholars (or those who have paid an especially massive bribe to the wardens) are allowed into the Captive Volumes.

THE JURY

"Wrongfully accused" prisoners have a right to appeal their sentence to the jailers. The appeals process involves a jury of "peers" consisting of capital offenders and cannibals being given dice to compete for who gets to decide the final fate of the appellant. Jurors always arrive early for service.

GRAVE TWINS

Those sentenced to death at Barsul Prison are always taken to the northern gravelands in pairs. Each digs the grave that will entomb the other. The accepted wisdom is that the graves are more lovingly dug that way, meaning fewer visits from uncomfortable spirits.

TELLER

Teller is a mute inmate everyone knows to avoid. But he'll get to you at some point, handing over a card with a short note foretelling your immediate future. Funny thing, this future is always short, ending with guts on the floor. Nobody cared where these cards came from until a warden was found with one in his cold hand. Teller went missing, a tough thing to pull off in Barsul Prison. But he's out there... and he'll get to you when the time is right.

BILLY GREENTEETH

Billy Greenteeth is a feral goat recovered from the edge of the forest, where he somehow managed to survive before being shipped back to Ambaret in the care of a gibbering ex-gladiator who died at the gates vomiting a shower of rotting tadpoles. He has become the prison's official mascot due to his uncanny ability to methodically chew down and digest any refuse, no matter how fowl, with a contented bleat. His nighttime habit of moaning in his sleep in the voices of those lost to the forest amuses the jailers as much as it unsettles the prisoners.

SORROW-HORSES

An infrequently used path to reducing one's sentence is to agree to serve as a sorrow-horse for one of Ambaret's perfumed and puffed-up thespians. A few actors a year offer the wardens "donations" in exchange for time with a prisoner, hoping to learn to ape the prisoner's slumped and dejected carriage, begging them to dwell on their deepest sorrows so they may mirror the prisoner's genuine despair when next they appear on stage.

TOOTH SERUM

The wardens have devised many elaborate methods of torture, such as "tooth serum," which causes one to regularly sprout new teeth which painfully uproot the old ones, and sometimes even force their way into places on the body teeth should not be.

THE 13TH CORRIDOR

Prisoners whisper to one another stories of the 13th corridor—a rumored method of escape said only to appear to the worthy and only at certain times of the lunar cycle. The jailers do not deny the prisoners this small hope. The jailers find hope makes the prisoners run faster when they open the corridor for night hunts.

WATCHER LARVA

The final stage of the intake process involves the forceful insertion of a watcher larva into the prisoner's ear canal. The prisoner loses hearing in that ear after the watcher burrows through the drum and inner ear, to finally lodge itself near the brainstem, where it lies dormant until "signaled."

SKELETON KEYS

Barsul trades in skeleton keys made from the carefully turned tibia of its inmates. So long as the giver of the bone does not die, any door locked by these keys cannot be undone by might or magic or mechanism.

THE UNBOUND

The lower levels of Barsul have no doors at all. Prisoners are free to wander as they please. There are no jailers, either. Prisoners are left to fend for themselves, in roving gangs that quite literally tear each other apart over the occasional scraps of food thrown down from above. Those who have survived the longest wear the bones of those they have consumed.

THE BIRDS

Reese Ironhands is said to have attacked a jailer on his way through intake. When he reached the inside, he was missing the pinky and ring finger from his left hand as well as the index and middle finger from his right hand. He also had several unidentifiable puncture wounds around his neck and shoulders. When released from isolation, he jabbered constantly, repeating things like "horrid beaks" and "please, not my eyes".

THE WAILING TOWERS

The wailing towers of Barsul Prison are not named for their inhabitants, but rather for the continuous, dissonant melodies formed by the wind as it passes over an intricate network of tiny windows carved in the stone—these were made small, of course, to prevent prisoners from flinging themselves through, as most attempt to do after a few weeks of maddening wind-song.

THE "VAMPIRE"

A disgraced monk occupies the most solitary of cells within the prison. Every cellmate of his has died with no trace of injury or harm; the other prisoners believe him to be syphoning their life. Rumors suggest the monk has been in Barsul for over 300 years.

THE SHORTENING

The current warden is fond of "shortening." This is the practice of strapping prisoners into a large, alchemically-driven apparatus resembling a chair. The prisoner's limbs are immobilized using thick metal straps and bolts. Slowly, the prisoner's arms and legs are bent at an angle perpendicular to their natural position, resulting in breakages of bones, muscle, and tissue. After this procedure, the prison's resident physicker carefully positions the broken bones such that they overlap, thus causing a shortening of the prisoner's limbs.

THE ESCAPE ARTIST

Many years ago, the world's most famous escape artist, The Great Effugium Praevado, declared it would be an easy task for him to escape the prison, and he made a bet with the prison governor. He vanished from his prison cell just minutes after he had been put there. Oddly, he never returned to claim his prize and no one has seen him since. Some say he lost his way in the labyrinthine corridors of the prison and went mad. Every year, on the night of his escape, prisoners whisper his name, hoping that he will appear and open the doors to their cells.

THE ARCHPRIEST

The length of internment of murderers sentenced to Barsul are determined by the Archpriest of the Rose. The stay is equal to the number of years the Archpriest feels were stolen from the victims.

THE SHIVERING CELL

The shivering cell has neither bars nor door. A small wooden stool with uneven legs and a splintered seat is its only furnishing. Every inch of stone in the cell is covered in markings, the signs and symbols and prayers of a thousand former prisoners etched with nails and teeth and bone. None can say whether it is the stool or the carvings that drive prisoners mad, but all leave the shivering cell glassy eyed and muttering mysteries.

THE GRUEL

Teeth, bits of fingernail, and tattooed skin can often be found in the daily gruel; Barsul has never been affected by periods of drought and famine.

FAIR NANCY'S SONG

Prisoners who are stubbornly hopeful and think to annoy the wardens by bravely singing shanties and mocking songs at them sometimes will be taken to Fair Nancy's cell. There, they will hear Nancy's love song: "Far away, in the forest so deep; I will give you five rings for to keep; far away, in the forest's deep lair; you will be my trophy so fair..." They will hear it running in their mind for the rest of their lives: whenever there is a bit of quiet, whenever they try to rest, "Far away in the forest so deep..."

THE NIGHTWATCH

Petty and malicious inmates are given "nightwatch" tasks by the jailers. The nightwatch consists of patrolling the sleeping wings and ensuring prisoners are awakened regularly and reminded of the time remaining on their sentences, calculated to the nearest hour.

THE SEED

"The day I entered Barsul they gave me a seed. The Chief Arborist said, 'Son, if you want to leave this place, nurture this seed. Love it more than you love yourself. It will sprout and grow and one day you will leave.' And I did. I loved the seed. Now that it's a seedling, I'm taking him home, to the center of the forest where he will grow tall and proud."

THE BELLS

The Black Rose is struck three times on the night of a full moon. This large, black bell rings out a sonorous, melancholy tone the entire prison can hear and feel. On the third strike, all inhabitants alike stop and turn toward the source of the tones. The red-cowled guards, in unison, ring their bells three times in answer. Blood-curdling screams are then heard coming from the depths of the prison.

THE CRIES OF THE DEAD

Every prisoner at Barsul knows the condemned never escape, even after death. Their howls and wails float through the halls when night falls, seeking out those who do not yet fear enough.

PARALYSIS POWDER

Members of the nightwatch are authorized to spread paralysis powder over inmates with night terrors that become disruptive to others. The powder keeps the inmates from moving or making noise for approximately twelve hours but does not wake them or end the dream cycles. Some complain the powder causes the current dream to loop, but jailers disregard such rumors as old-prisoners' tales.

PENANCE HALL

The followers of Saint Anamartia built a "penance hall" in Barsul—a soundproof room that allows prisoners to sit in total silence, with nothing but thoughts of their wrongdoing to keep them company. In recent years, the jailers have begun using the chamber for more... *direct* methods of redemption.

UNENDING DARKNESS

There is no surviving Barsul, only enduring it. Those few who manage to escape have lived in darkness for so long, they lose their sight within moments of emerging.

A PRISONER'S HANDS

The most visible sign someone spent time in Barsul Prison is their hands: twisted things, like the roots of a sickly tree desperately searching for water.

THE HELL-DIVE

A dive in the steam-baths is a necessary part of intake into the prison. The scalding hot springs near deep underground magma fissures ensure that incoming prisoners have no unauthorized parasites or pests on their persons. Jailers are nothing if not meticulous in checking for organisms that may interfere with the prison's naturally-tormenting flora and fauna.

THE FORGIVEN

Some crimes are said to be unforgivable, yet the ingenuitive surgeon-priests of Barsul find a way. An object representing the crime is ritually implanted and fused with the body of the prisoner, in a manner most befitting the crime—every cut and stitch forming the litany of confession and forgiveness. Those who survive are set free to wander as the Forgiven, wretched beggars that serve as a warning to would-be sinners.

THE GIBBETS

Originally designed as a form of torment, the iron gibbets that adorn the outside of the walls are now generally thought of as the best way to reward good behavior. The fresh air, bright sun, and limited views of wildlife are certainly a relief and worth the discomfort of the gibbet itself.

The Azure Archives

GABRIEL ROBINSON

A fabled vault of arcane lore and cultural artifacts from ancient Kalduhr, the Archives are said to contain all answers to seekers who look deeply enough. Those with a mind for tomes and histories know that such items are more valuable than any gold or gems. The right artifact or piece of lore, opened to the right mind, may forever alter the shape of the world. Such things were not created merely to be displayed and gloated over, but used with great purpose—and all are dangerous if wielded carelessly. So they were locked away, accessible only to those inducted into the Azure Order of Lorekeepers, or to those able to afford entrance with a rare or valuable donation to the Archives.

To cross the Archives' threshold, you must...	in order to...
reveal a terrible secret...	pay for the services of a manikin guide.
donate a valuable tome to the archive...	pass unseen among the Archives' inhabitants.
give away a precious memory...	shield your mind from dangerous writings within.
present findings from a forgotten place...	attune your map to constantly shifting corridors.
open your mind willingly to store a piece of lore...	pick up the thread of one who searched here before.
win the smile or tear of an expressionless guardian...	secretly deface a tome, and thus change the past.

What Are the Archives and What Do They Hold?

THE MANY ARCHIVES

There are, in fact, multiple Archives, all based in obscured, hard to reach, or dangerous locations. Scholars debate the number of Archives and their exact locus, and the specific details of each are guarded fiercely among those pursuing an entrance.

LOREKEEPERS

The Lorekeepers of the Archives are all manikins—or at least are no longer bound by the limitations of creatures with living flesh. Some were formed from inanimate materials with the purpose of serving the Archives, others were people who altered their bodies over time through extensive ritual and discipline until they no longer required food, drink, or sleep. Most have experimented extensively with such processes, incorporating rituals to the Gossamer Queen to grant them extra limbs, eyes, and root-like appendages that can spin silk. These gifts allow them to better climb the towering shelves unaided, work in total darkness, and read and sort entire sections with relentless efficiency.

THE SINGLE ARCHIVE

There is only one Archive: a living, ancient entity that feeds on secrets and the desires of those who seek them. It exists on the edges of reality, inhabiting a physical location—with constantly expanding shelves and tunnels formed of parchment, feather quills, and leather tomes—and the fathomless void where it hoards collective memories.

THE ARCHIVE'S INSECTS

The Archives are home to all manner of insects—paper moths, book wyrms, and scroll weavers—that constantly repair the fragile paper and leather tomes, adding to the fibers of the central record parchment. Where do they find the raw materials to digest and weave new silk and fibrous nests?

BOOK SENTIENCE

Some books have been stored here for so long in the company of unstable and powerful relics that they have developed a degree of self-awareness, seeking out answers to the questions left on their own pages. Some of them in turn awaken others with profound quandaries about the nature of their existence. Others, if opened and read, trap the reader with an onslaught of desperate queries that only lead to other books...

BOOK GOLEMS

Many books on the Archive's shelves have shifted radically from their original form and purpose. Some have bound themselves together, rewritten themselves, or shed pages that have lost their meaning over time. These shambling monstrosities desire only knowledge and attention, pressing their pages against you to whisper their best passages, while hungry spines seek to open your cover and read the truths of your heart...

HIVE OF THE ARCHIVES

A splinter of the Sun-Stripe Clade has infiltrated one of the Archives below the forest of Kalduhr, smuggling specially prepared bee larvae into the paper tunnels of bookwyrms. In time, a hive will be born and a new Queen will be installed—one vibrating with knowledge absorbed from her surroundings, ready to share with her brethren in the forest above.

WINDOWS

The few Archive windows look out upon strange and distant places—such as a smoldering bridge high upon basalt pillars, floating sky temples woven from vines and hollow bones, and an undersea cave lined with glowing coral. Others are portals to royal libraries, ritual chambers belonging to powerful sorcerers, or hellish interdimensional prisons. Open them with great care...

ARCHIVAL INK

The Azure Archives are so named for their central records, inscribed in a rare cobalt ink upon a vast, singular scroll at the very heart of its libraries—tall as a person, ever unfurling. It is said that any name or phrase recorded there will never be forgotten.

GHOST-LANTERNS

To locate items that disguise themselves or exist as echoes of their former shape, researchers must use ghost-lanterns to illuminate the liminal spaces where such things are found. To avoid undue attention, they do not emit visible light. An open flame in the Archive would be unforgivable. In such a rare event, the inky, winged sun-eaters hanging from the rafters swoop down to extinguish the source of such a threat.

DERAWAN TATTOOS

Prophecies regarding the time and place in which entrances to the Archive appear were recorded by a dreamwalker of the Cult of Derawan and tattooed upon the members of its innermost circle. Each members' inked skin bore a single line of text, requiring the presence of all for entry. The group vanished after completing their final ritual to summon a portal. However, another theory holds that the group splintered after disagreements regarding the one true prophecy, with some members pursuing the others to this day. If a certain piece of skin is genuine—a piece that is carefully preserved in a jar upon the shelf of Unverified Items—this would appear to be the case. Of course, anyone can tattoo and preserve skin...

MEPHIRA'S PRAYERS

Smelling faintly of burnt honey, a tanned leather book sits alone on a plinth. It is made from the skin of human hands, with prayers to Sister Mephira seared into its pages. These were originally inscribed in smoldering metal braziers, held aloft by her devout followers during acts of religious mortification.

SILVER CHOIR PRAYER BOOKS

The prayer books of the Silver Choir began as chanted hymns, recited over a germinating seed that would eventually become the tree from which their paper was made. By the time their pages are ready for ink, the hymns practically write themselves.

THE NATURE OF THE ARCHIVES

Shelves and scrolls, and desks full of quills and ink... these are the Archives' crudest forms. Those who have achieved a deeper level of understanding perceive them as stored memories—beyond that, they hold secrets of time itself, which only the ancient sages understood.

STORAGE I

The Archives store their records in many forms beyond mere books or scrolls: messages carved on small stones and carried in the bellies of fish, knotted cords and woven assemblages, cross sections of fossilized trees, oracular bird nests, scrimshaw runes, and memory chimes.

THE JEWELLED VAULT

Keepers of the Jewelled Vault within the Archives are said to trade in information on the whereabouts of lost treasures. They deny this in person, of course, but will accept certain treasures for "safekeeping." Depositors are given a well-rehearsed speech about the preservation of historical and culturally significant artifacts, while the standard parchment is inscribed, stamped, and duplicated. The copy that is handed back coincidentally includes a contact, a map orientation, and any other leads, along with mention of other "artifacts of interest." A blank slip for "essential gear and provisions" is included, with directions to the "Returns and Exchanges" section, where any items required for the presumed future expedition may be acquired. Shrewd treasure-hunters may notice that the items described are always more valuable than those received.

ITEMS ON A 'RETURNS' SHELF

A quill that draws on the blood of the writer, a book containing lies about the one who reads it, a map that always leads to danger, a small lantern that only reveals unwelcome truths, a small book of accurate, mundane prophecies, a scripture of precious insight that is impossible to recall, and the true name of a Sister that cannot be forgotten once read—nor will she forget yours.

ITEMS ON AN 'EXCHANGES' SHELF

First, an animated, severed hand, grasping a quill that laboriously copies page after page of a crumbling songbook. Second, an oval jewelry box, painted with scenes of a garden humming with bees, labeled "Never to Be Opened." Third, a preserved ear, mounted on a stand, twitching and inclined towards a nearby book. Fourth, a pale, clouded eye, floating in a bottle of emerald liquid, apparently scanning an empty page over and over.

MERCIFUL PRESERVATION

The Vault of Merciful Preservation is stacked high with sentient books that were awakened illegally or mistakenly through improper rituals. They are unsafe to read, but destroying them would be seen as a cruel act by the Archivists. They slumber here instead, soothed by the sounds of running water as underground streams flow around their chamber, maintaining a tentative barrier for any magic that enters or leaves the vault.

LEDGER OF SOULS

The most heavily bound and sealed items of the Archives are a series of unassuming ledgers. Their cost in gold and blood is incalculable, for they contain the secrets of those in the most elevated positions of power. The ritual for extracting or eliminating all living memory of such secrets is unspeakable, and only a few sorcerers who share ancestry with practitioners from ancient Kalduhr know the method of distilling souls into the purple ink in which they are written.

WITNESSES OF DECLINE

A parasitic cult known as the Witnesses of Decline have occupied the ruins of a once-famed library, claiming it to be one of the Azure Archives. Believing that the highest form of knowledge is the realization of impermanence, they practice a radical form of death contemplation, forbidding any efforts to preserve objects of the past or to cure diseases of the body. The cult is said to take up residence in places of historical significance, actively encouraging their ruin through rituals of mold and rot. Some members are so devoted to their attainments that they seek out new afflictions of their own flesh, reveling in its slow decay as the world crumbles around them. Eventually, these "exalted" elders are interred in seats of honor to witness the final stages of dissolution, while the surviving members of the cult move on to a new host to repeat the cycle.

SISTERS OF SILK

The Sisters of Silk have woven their tapestry for years while they hang, inverted in a space that is above the shelves and out of time. Gifted with prophetic abilities as children, they became followers of the Gossamer Queen, earning Her blessings—blessings that allow them to manifest their visions in this way: the many-eyed Seer rests motionless, holding hands with the Vessel, who then whispers directions to the Weaver. Their tapestry unfurls without end: fates revealed, destinies recorded, loose threads woven back into the Loom of which all things are a part.

BLUE LOTUSES

Brilliant blue lotuses grow in a still lake surrounding the Archives. Practiced oracles can trace the delicate veins upon their petals to reveal a moment of lost time. The pigment of these flowers is a key ingredient in the azure inks of the archival records. Consuming the lotus itself is a path to forgetfulness and peaceful dreams.

THE INSCRIBED

Human libraries are rarely spoken of, being barbaric relics of a past age, yet evidence of their continued practice can be found within the Archives. Students of common birth who demonstrated an aptitude for words (and a robust constitution) were apprenticed to the royal scribes of Naganeh. Those who survived their training and its attendant alchemical transformation brought great honor to their families as permanent fixtures of the royal household. These "Inscribed" achieved a complete memorization of important texts, and can recite passages word-for-word on command. This "living embodiment" of key information went deeper, however. At their royally appointed time of death, the flesh of those Inscribed contained the writings they had memorized over a lifetime, revealed as they were shed like serpents outgrowing their skin. The remains of one such long-retired servant hang displayed in the Ancient History wing of the Archives, spread along the walls in an array of unfurled scrolls. While the methods of inscription and preservation have long been forgotten, their exquisite detail is undeniable.

THE LISTENER

The Listener is carved of pure green marble, with deep wells for eyes. They will hear your story, your confessions, and all the words you could not speak to anyone else. They alone hear you without judgement. Sit with them for as long as you need, before passing over the threshold to the Silent Room. Speak no more in that place, however, for the things kept there will not be so understanding when roused from slumber.

READING EYES

A sealed jar contains the eyes of a follower of Saint Antonia, preserved in a luminous holy liquid. They gaze upon a massive, open tome, reading constantly in remembrance of the martyrs listed on the page, weeping endlessly for their noble sacrifices.

SERVING THE ARCHIVES

To willingly serve the Archives is a rare step taken by only the most dedicated truth-seekers. Offering your mind as an empty vessel is the first step. Shedding the layers of your body is another, as its materials can be used to form new volumes. Expanding your consciousness to inhabit and enliven the words contained therein is the true calling—unfettered and without end.

THE DEVOURER'S WYRM

A spiralling mural of inlaid glass and iridescent scales tells a certain story: how the first bookwyrm was brought to life by Queen Sehtet ils Noh herself, transforming the last surviving text of a secret doctrine into a living creature that fed on the pages of lesser books. As her mastery over the beast grew, she sought to destroy all writings that spoke ill of her line or exposed unwelcome truths. The pages it shed told a better story, but these too began to grow and hunger for more. Her closest followers raised these wyrms to guard the archives from their nests of dusty parchment—ensuring the offspring of The Devourer would long be sustained.

ARBITERS OF MINOR DIVINITIES

The Arbiters of Minor Divinities sit behind simple writing desks in cramped alcoves. Ornaments, symbols, and idols pertaining to their patrons fill every inch of available space. Statues, manikins, or spirits are bound in service—the distinction between them means little here. Visitors uncertain of their standing with a particular god may have their oaths recorded, receive prescribed blessings, and make offerings in the appropriate donation box. Notably, some Arbiters will gladly retrieve books from tiny shelves to read passages aloud, while others shun written words entirely. One alcove appears empty, inhabited only by cobwebs and dusty bones—who can say for certain if a god is represented here, or if this is the inevitable destiny of such minor powers?

THE HERALD

The prayer wheels of the Herald spin constantly, intoning minor blessings for those unable to read them any longer. Hour by hour, it recites hymns and scriptures in dead tongues, its own voice resonating from a hollow mask. The craft of assembling and animating such automatons is a lost art, but the Herald has never stopped running. An inscription lists the faiths and deities represented. If coins are dropped through the slot of a massive onyx box at its feet, a prayer will be added to the cycle on the donor's behalf.

STORAGE II

Certain texts require highly specialized means of storage to maintain the stability of their form (and the permanence of their surroundings). The Archive contains: scrolls submerged in vials of salt water, oil, or blood, texts kept in braziers of smoldering embers, and inscribed chunks of marble, bone, or gemstone that remain locked in darkness—or surrounded by light—to avoid too many shadows.

THE KALDUHR ENTRANCE

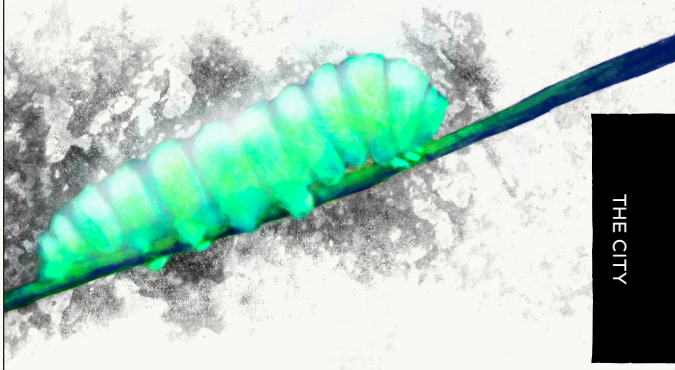
There is an Archive entrance hidden deep in the forest of Kalduhr, through a narrow gap in a densely grown cluster of yew trees. Inside, the walls are formed of living trunks and roots. The outermost layers of bark are carefully harvested each year by archival attendants, polished to reveal the messages grown inside.

ARCHIVE GUARDIANS

Most Archive guardians have outgrown their original purpose, as time passes immeasurably and visitors have become rare. Some still wander the stacks and study chambers instinctively, though many have settled into long periods of hibernation. Beware those prone to rearranging their surroundings, inevitably creating rifts in the fabric of reality, awakening other objects, and stirring things best left asleep.

SHELF IMPS

Shelf imps come in many forms: blooming anemones, drifting jellyfish, phosphorescent centipedes, translucent frogs. All blink in and out of this tangible plane, sometimes taking objects with them when their usual meals of dust and mildew are scarce.



RETIRED EXPOSITORS

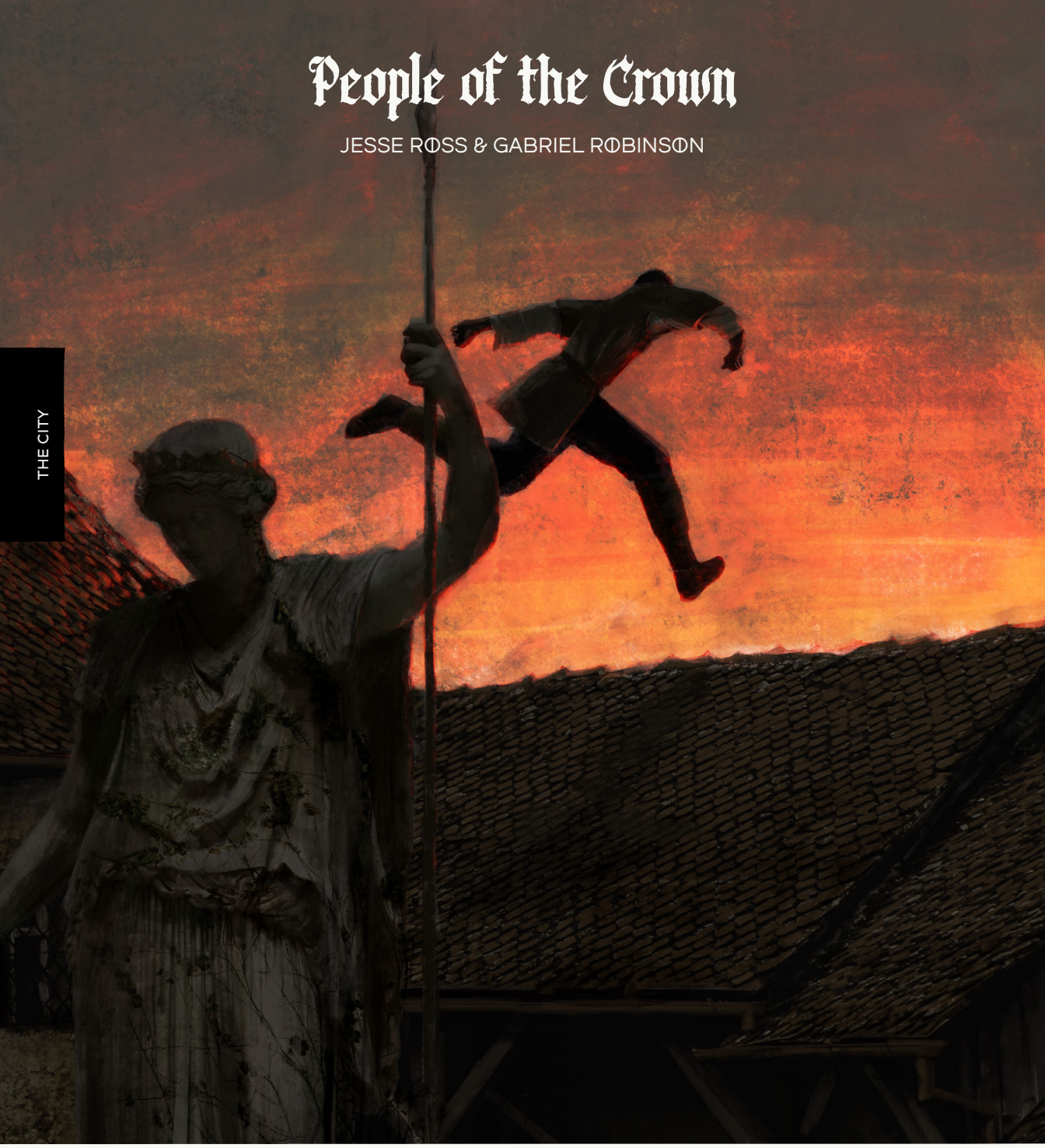
When no single volume holds the answers you seek, consult the resident experts on the subject. While the room of Honorably Retired Expositors is surprisingly small, you may speak with the living embodiment of nearly any field of study—or rather, you may speak with their polished skull that holds a lifetime of finely honed knowledge preserved without the muddling influence of aging flesh. Take care to address the one you seek directly, as their peers are prone to interject and challenge any facts presented.

WONDROUS EMERGENCE

Every culture has its monsters. Tales of half-seen, misshapen terrors that lurk in the darkness and take their own form as they outgrow the imaginations of the small minds that drew them to the light. The Stewards of Wondrous Emergence cherish them, seeking to preserve all forms of life no matter how fearsome or dangerous. Their sanctuary is a branch of one of the earliest Kalduhri archives, sculpted from deep roots beneath the gaze of the Old One. Here, they actively nurture these blooming horrors, setting most free to roam as new guardians of the forest. Others are nurtured longer, giving birth to ever more glorious forms of life to behold.

People of the Crown

JESSE ROSS & GABRIEL ROBINSON



Humans of all ranks and walks of life exist under the protection of the Crown. Other, stranger beings are also counted among the citizenry, provided they stay out of trouble and promptly pay the royal tax collector.

Folk

Regular humans like you and I. Some have trained in the sorcerous arts or been changed by their time in the forest, but otherwise they're just like us.

PERSONS OF INTEREST — *Roll once and use a single row, or roll three times (once for each column)*

NAME	APPEARANCE	MANNER
Adia	Stooped, tremulous gestures, fine robes	Flowery and effusive praise
Alis	Lithe, balanced stance, leather-clad	Monosyllabic with a curt nod
Anu	Moustached, stocky frame, dusty apron	Disarming smile and a firm handshake
Baldrik	Grizzled, sunburned, loose chainmail	Honorable and gravelly
Brom	Haggard, shuffling, rain-soaked cloak	Resigned and philosophical
Eduin	Haunted expression, hollow-eyed, wild hair	Rambling prophecies
Elin	Fearless eyes, feral grin, muscular frame	Undirected aggression
Endolin	Imposing, broad-shouldered, fine silk shirt	Feigned ignorance and leading questions
Florian	Vibrant features, clear voice, spotless clothing	Obsessively repetitive
Gabor	Staggering, greasy hair, wine stains	Conspiratorial with knowing glances
Helena	Delicate frame, careful steps, veiled face	Silently withdrawn
Hild	Smile creases, grey braids, homespun wool	Jolly and rhyming
Iman	Balding, kind eyes, patched clothing	Stuttering observational humor
Isabel	Poised, graceful movements, flowing dress	Reserved and formal
Kadija	Strong arms, voluptuous, confident walk	Brooding whispers
Karin	Sickly, dull-eyed, unkempt hair	Impatient and twitchy
Katlin	Shifty posture, restless, hooded face	Fearful and defensive
Lief	Ferocious grin, dancing feet, stolen uniform	Fast-talking and self-assured
Lorin	Wiry frame, scuttling, mud spattered	Energetic and eager
Luanda	Weathered features, rusty armor, missing hand	Courteous and stiff
Mansur	Deep smile, dreadlocks, feathered cap	Booming laugh and a stream of curses
Marek	Leaning on a cane, heavy pack, whistling a tune	Mischievous and distractible
Matild	Stout build, glaring up, well-made leather armor	Surly pouting
Mikel	Barrel-chested, shaved head, gurgling voice	Stubborn and contrarian
Nakula	Luxurious beard, flower tattoos, festive dress	Amorous and sing-songy
Niara	Plain dress, fluid movements, mask-like face	Innocent curiosity
Ningal	Bright eyed, melodious speech, simple jewelry	High-strung suspicion
Oona	Springing step, striped hosiery, dramatic gestures	Eccentric and forgetful
Raji	Billowing robes, gleaming boots, flashing smile	Quick to agree and keep the peace
Ria	Bloodied, heavily armed, defiant expression	Brutally honest
Rowan	Lanky build, toothy grin, muddy clothing	Crude jokes and belching
Sedrik	Polished armor, swaggering step, callous face	Self-righteous and brittle
Seti	Stunning beauty, costly attire, haughty posture	Unnerving gaze and cryptic speech
Sindu	Hobbling, bearing an empty bowl, pleading eyes	Shifty with an obviously fake accent
Varda	Bent back, careful hands, colorful scarf	Bitter and sharp-tongued
Wilem	Slouching, spindly arms, dusty overalls	Gleefully evasive

Beastbitten

Woe to the human who returns from forest or field marked by the bite of a ravenous beast. If not urgently treated, such wounds can fester and provoke transformation into something called a *beastbitten*. On moonlit nights, their bodies stretch and break, growing features resembling their attacker: claws, hooves, fangs, fur, antlers. Feral beastbitten are considered criminals under Our Majesty's Laws, and subject to imprisonment or worse.

Very rarely, a beastbitten who is subjected to unconventional treatments can be "cured" and reintegrated into society. Though they still transform, they remain in possession of their faculties, and can even trigger a partial change at will. Notable scholars suggest that such a treatment doesn't actually cure the disease, but merely delays the poor victim's inevitable descent into a bestial form.

AWFUL TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE BEASTBITTEN

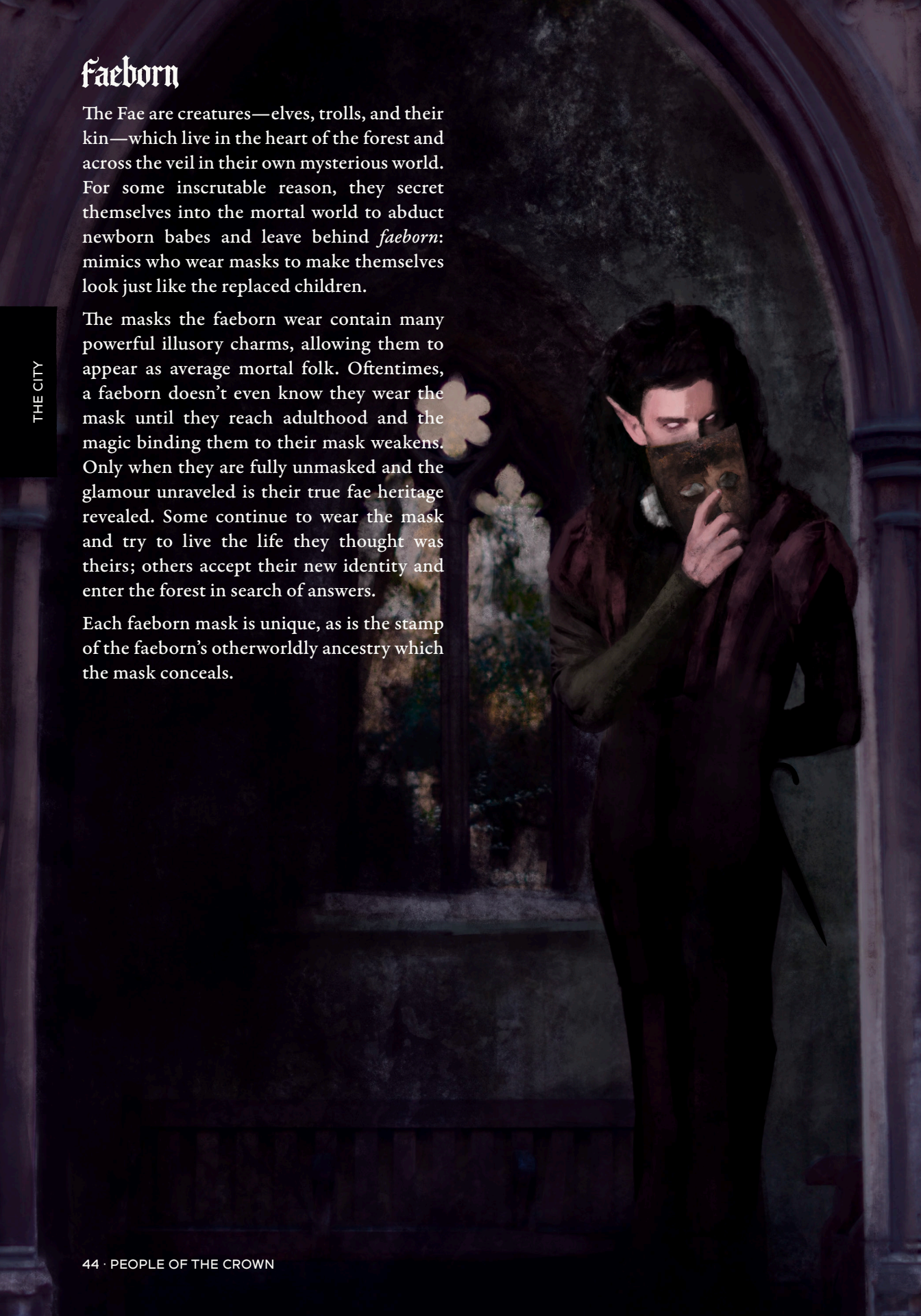
	EFFECT
1–1	Puckering suction cups sprout in stripes along their limbs.
1–2	Their fingernails and toenails harden and curve into large talons.
1–3	They begin sweating a slippery and viscous grease-like substance.
1–4	Their feet elongate and they begin walking on their toes.
1–5	Hollow pockets balloon in their chest, a breeding ground for vermin.
1–6	A thrashing tail erupts from the base of their spine.
2–1	A rugged, plated shell forms as the skin on their back calcifies.
2–2	Their skull distends into a wolf-like muzzle.
2–3	They secrete a strong and sticky spider silk.
2–4	They are cloaked in large black feathers.
2–5	Tiny hairs cover their fingers and toes, allowing them to climb with ease.
2–6	Their muscle mass doubles, as does their strength.
3–1	A bloody set of fresh antlers tears out of their skull.
3–2	Their skin bloats and cracks into drab, reptilian scales.
3–3	All of their teeth stretch and sharpen to a fine point.
3–4	Their pupils dilate until their eyes look like pools of ink.
3–5	The color and texture of their skin fluctuates to mimic their surroundings.
3–6	Their toes merge into sturdy cloven hooves.
4–1	Spear-like tusks extend from their widened mouth.
4–2	Webbing grows between their fingers and arm, stretching into bat wings.
4–3	Their bite injects a paralytic venom.
4–4	Their ears rise to a conical point.
4–5	Their body grows multiple layers of a coarse, dark fur.
4–6	Two additional rows of teeth break out of their gums.
5–1	Dagger-length barbed quills pierce through their back and shoulders.
5–2	Six eyes of various sizes burst from their head in perfectly round orbs.
5–3	Bands of dark camouflaging stripes paint their body.
5–4	They grow two additional sets of spindly, fully functional arms.
5–5	Their fingers merge and harden into serrated, grasping pincers.
5–6	They begin releasing a sickly sweet musk that draws protective flies.
6–1	The lower half of their body fuses into a single, serpentine coil.
6–2	A quartet of translucent insect wings wrap around their body like a cloak.
6–3	A bulbous sac capable of producing a booming roar hangs from their jaw.
6–4	Their body can disassemble into hundreds of carnivorous moths.
6–5	Their tongue multiplies in length and can lash out like a whip.
6–6	New glands grow which can release clouds of hallucinogenic spores.

Faeborn

The Fae are creatures—elves, trolls, and their kin—which live in the heart of the forest and across the veil in their own mysterious world. For some inscrutable reason, they secret themselves into the mortal world to abduct newborn babes and leave behind *faeborn*: mimics who wear masks to make themselves look just like the replaced children.

The masks the faeborn wear contain many powerful illusory charms, allowing them to appear as average mortal folk. Oftentimes, a faeborn doesn't even know they wear the mask until they reach adulthood and the magic binding them to their mask weakens. Only when they are fully unmasked and the glamour unraveled is their true fae heritage revealed. Some continue to wear the mask and try to live the life they thought was theirs; others accept their new identity and enter the forest in search of answers.

Each faeborn mask is unique, as is the stamp of the faeborn's otherworldly ancestry which the mask conceals.



HIDDEN BEHIND THE MASK OF THE FAEBORN

	APPEARANCE
1–1	The featureless bark of a dry old oak
1–2	A writhing mass of plump silkworms
1–3	Orb-like owl's eyes
1–4	A delicate and angular sky-hued face
1–5	Hard stone, which grinds when it moves
1–6	Wispy orange fox fur and whiskers
2–1	Iridescent fish scales, slick with moisture
2–2	Weeping sap from a wounded maple
2–3	Snow-white goose feathers
2–4	Jagged arcs of crackling lightning
2–5	Soot black hair of billowing smoke
2–6	Wooly green moss, crawling with beetles
3–1	The nubby antlers of a growing fawn
3–2	Thorny brambles with odd dark berries
3–3	The rough and puckered flesh of a sea star
3–4	A glistening red toadstool's cap
3–5	Hundreds of tiny rodent teeth
3–6	Wave-worn mother of pearl
4–1	The snout and bristles of a wild boar
4–2	Hundreds of fluttering butterfly wings
4–3	Loamy soil rich with meandering roots
4–4	Hair of jade-green serpents
4–5	A haphazard bird's nest of twigs and grasses
4–6	Sucker-lined squid tentacles
5–1	Two sharp and sweeping spiraled horns
5–2	The bloated face and bulbous eyes of a frog
5–3	A wide jawline with protruding ivory tusks
5–4	An inky void pierced by specks of starlight
5–5	A thick and jagged layer of rough rock salt
5–6	Fine gold lines filling in cracks and wrinkles
6–1	A shocking contradiction of colorful feathers
6–2	Tough and fibrous scale-like leaves
6–3	Pointed ears and teeth
6–4	Shifting spots, like sunlight through leaves
6–5	A gossamer film that blurs features
6–6	A hooked falcon's beak

Manikins

Far away from the prying eyes of the public, unusally powerful and untrusting sorcerers craft themselves companions from planks of wood, scraps of cloth, and handfuls of straw. These constructed beings, called *manikins*, are imbued with life to perform simple tasks on behalf of their creators.

Occasionally, the crafter of a manikin desires for their creation to be made real, with soft flesh, warm breath, and a beating heart. Such manikins are said to be enlivened.

Especially talented sorcerers can even craft an enlivened manikin in the likeness of a specific person. These hidden manikins are the cause for much royal paranoia—many court physickers and cunning hermits have offered up means of detecting such beings.

RUMORED METHODS FOR DETECTING HIDDEN MANIKINS

	TECHNIQUE
1-1	The pinprick of a golden sewing needle draws no blood.
1-2	Being originally made of wood and burlap, they refuse to sit near open flame.
1-3	They have a birthmark over their heart in the shape of an arcane sigil.
1-4	Their reflection's reflection reveals the original materials of their construction.
1-5	Hearing a particular phrase—like "summer's setting sun" or "flowers full and fair"—puts them to sleep.
1-6	No amount of food will sate their hunger.
2-1	If they ever tell a lie, a portion of their body reverts to its inanimate material, though it still functions.
2-2	An animal milked in their presence will produce black bile instead of milk.
2-3	Though they have real skin, it is always cold to the touch.
2-4	They briefly get confused when confronted with a child's doll or other human-shaped toy.
2-5	They sometimes whisper calming words to chairs, brooms, and other inanimate objects.
2-6	They pray not to the Sisters, or even to idols like in superstitious villages, but to their own sorcerous maker.
3-1	If wounded with a blade blessed in the purifying fires of St. Fatimah, the injury will never heal.
3-2	The scent of pine lingers behind them wherever they pass.
3-3	They have no freckles or blemishes on their body, and their facial features are perfectly symmetrical.
3-4	They are deathly afraid of being near running water, and will always avoid crossing it.
3-5	They can tie any knot requested of them, or extract themselves from any rope in which they're bound.
3-6	Because of the artisan glass used in their construction, their eyesight is particularly keen.
4-1	Pollen—whether drifting through the air, or hidden in their meal—is a powerful aphrodisiac to them.
4-2	They occasionally forget names, or stutter when they find themselves saying the name of their creator.
4-3	Being touched with a hot branding iron leaves not a red welt, but a black wood burn.
4-4	Any baby they hold will begin crying and will not stop until out of their presence.
4-5	They are obsessed with a certain color, often blue, like the arcane light which enlivened them.
4-6	Their homes are prone to infestations of insects, rodents, or birds.
5-1	While they sleep, they mumble the name of their creator once every hour.
5-2	They feign eating, sleeping, and other base necessities.
5-3	Any children they sire are forever drawn to the heart of the nearest forest.
5-4	Any hair cut from their head will transform into leaves by the next sunrise.
5-5	They still crackle with animating magic, which can hop to mundane objects such as teacups or candelabras.
5-6	To sustain their artificial life they must conduct a small sacrifice under the light of every full moon.
6-1	If they ever consume a seed it will embed itself in their wooden stomach, take root, and begin growing.
6-2	If they ever harm a creature of the forest, the creature's spirit will haunt their home and all its residents.
6-3	They are obsessed with crafting manikins of their own, and keep a private workshop hidden away nearby.
6-4	If a goat is fed raw materials used in making the manikin, a sympathetic bond is created between the two.
6-5	A manikin draws magical sustenance from those they live with, leaving them prone to illness and injury.
6-6	Because they are not truly human, manikins do not feel pain and their tears are sticky like tree sap.

Bright-Teeth Assyrio

MICHAEL VAN VLEET

One can spend a lifetime saving money to lease space in the crowded, flower-scented Rose District of Ambaret, but getting there is not like crossing a finish line. In fact, it doesn't take long for the costs of lifestyle maintenance to soon seem overwhelming. And that's where Bright-Teeth Assyrio enters. She's a friendly face matched with a generous nature, eager to float you "whatever you need" until you find your financial footing. You're good for it, right? Of course you are. You think you are.

The marker that Bright-Teeth Assyrio demands you carry as a symbol of your debt:

- A human skull, dipped in bronze, on a necklace. The skull has a leather tongue stitched into its mouth that dangles down your chest like a tie as a reminder that "talking is not doing."
- A small child that answers to "Lucky." Assyrio says that she's related to the child, and that she expects the child back unharmed and well fed. Lucky only eats meat.
- An earring, locked in place, composed of a toothed ring and a dangling obsidian rock that gives a tug every twenty minutes back towards Bright-Teeth. "You remember, that's me tugging your ear. Reminding you to come back. If you're not back in a week, I'm adding another ring when I find you. Somewhere else."
- An oilskin bag containing a tentacled inkpuppy and enough saltwater to keep it alive for two weeks—if you keep the bag sealed.
- A clever chain-and-clockwork mechanism called the chronophage. A chain is wrapped around your middle with the chronophage device attached to your back. Every day, the chronophage "eats" a link in the chain, tightening it around your middle. You'll want to stop back with payment before the squeezing chain constricts your breathing—and certainly before you're halved, slowly.
- Two new shining, reflective teeth to replace two of your original set (with which you had been on good terms). The new pair ache.

What Do We Really Know About Bright-Teeth Assyrio?

BRIGHT-TEETH'S DEMON

Bright-Teeth is easy to identify in a crowd, despite her stout stature. She wears expensive silk robes designed by the same tailors who serve nobility, but her habit of gnawing on a dogwood datun with a gnarly sneer undercuts her aristocratic image. The back of her head is carefully shaved to reveal the horrifying visage of a four-eyed demon with silver shining teeth, where her own hair supplies a drooping mustache and pointed beard.

PLEASE & DON'T

The kingsguard are aware of Assyrio's activities, but claim she's too cautious to implicate herself directly in any illegal enforcement of debt. For example, while she's kept many hulking brutes in her employ over the years, she tends to pamper and rename the two most loyal as a sign of her favor. She requires them to answer to the names "Please" and "Don't," as this allows some deniability about intent—should she say, as a hypothetical example, "Please... Don't... break his legs."

BRIGHT-TEETH THE DEMON

"The lady with the mouth-stick and the thugs? That's not Bright-Teeth Assyrio. Look at the back of her head. *That's* Bright-Teeth Assyrio. She just *works* for Bright-Teeth. Bright-Teeth is actually a demon, and if she doesn't keep bringing in souls, it's going to open its shining mouth and eat her whole. I heard from an incensemonger who said they knew a demonologist who swears they saw Bright-Tooth listed in a lore book in the Azure Archives."

BRIGHT-TEETH THE MANIKIN

Bright-Teeth is a malformed manikin, and whoever made them didn't get the teeth right. Their teeth just keep growing and growing. They have to constantly gnaw to halt the growth, or their teeth will pierce their brain, and they'll die.

THE CHAIN BREAKERS

Debtors seeking relief may hear rumors of an informal organization called the "Chain Breakers," composed of those previously victimized by Assyrio's usury. They'll deliver you out of your debt in exchange for joining the Chain Breakers, tithing from all future earnings to help rescue those who suffer after you. Some say Bright-Teeth invented this fiction as a way to let debtors think they got away while still earning the benefit of their freely-given donations to the cause.

THE PAIN OF HER TEETH

Assyrio's teeth are a source of great pain, and if one could acquire a permanent replacement set, one would be handsomely rewarded. Perhaps the long-lost Mother's Grin, or a shining new Pearly Wonder from the Pennant Street artisans who fashion sets using dental scrap from Barsul prisoners.

TEETH FROM THE SEA OF BONE

The pink, sharp, crystalline teeth that Bright-Teeth Assyrio wears were imported from the Sea of Bone where they were discovered in the Tomb of Reversed Ladders. Out of a party of four treasure-hunters, only one survived to bring this treasure back. Assyrio claims that their survival can be attributed to the knowledge that even death would not let them escape their (now discharged) debt.

CO'ASSYRIO

The coastal town of Co'Assyrio did not adopt that name as a way of paying on an overdue loan to Bright-Teeth. Documents kept in trust by a former mayor demonstrate that the name can be traced back centuries, but that doesn't stop wags from drawing the connection. For the record, Bright-Teeth has never visited the coast, and Mayor Eightchurch's fall from the Oxtail Cathedral's bell tower was declared a suicide before their body was even cold.

NEGOTIATING WITH ASSYRIO

Negotiations with Bright-Teeth Assyrio can prove difficult, as she'll often claim that certain decisions are "not up to me." But when she's badgered and haggled to a breaking point, she'll offer to "pass your request along" before turning her back, lowering her voice, and speaking as the demon on the back of her head. The demon is a tough negotiator, and has few compunctions about exploring violent outcomes to intractable problems.

HER SPOON

In a pocket on her right arm within a custom armband, Bright-Teeth wears a spoon. It's for gouging eyes. No, it's for threatening to gouge eyes. It's what she used to dig her way out of Barsul Prison. It's what she used to dig her way into Barsul Prison to collect a debt from a condemned man. It was a gift from a fae she nursed back to health, and it makes any meal delicious. It detects poison in food. It's made of a special metal that can kill fae. It's a distraction from the knife she wields with her left hand.

COLLATERAL

Surgical colleges are prohibited from using bodies recovered from the forests of Kalduhr as specimens for anatomical study. Though the wise agree that doctors require detailed knowledge of anatomy to be effective, too many of the bodies thus obtained were, in hindsight, warped and non-representative. Were they used as models, living citizens may be harmed by the misinformed doctors who were trained on them. As such, loans from Assyrio must be backed with a more sufficient collateral than one's own flesh.

HER MOTHER

Bright-Teeth Assyrio's mother lives in luxury on the ground floor of a six-story tenement. The floors above are populated with artists, exotic animals, and the visiting Marquess of Richter—who swears they'll never go home. Assyrio's father is presumed dead.

THE FINAL DEBT

Bright-Teeth Assyrio must always maintain at least one outstanding loan. If she does reclaim payment from her final debtor, a demon prince will spirit her away to a frost-rimed castle beyond thorned barriers of ice-tipped daggerweed. Assyrio guards this secret closely, but should anyone discover it, it would be quite the loophole and defensive maneuver.

THE SKELETAL LANDMARK

Bright-Teeth Assyrio is actually the name of a skeleton that rests along a well-traveled route through the Sea of Bone. The gem-carved teeth that sparkle in the corpse's mouth helped transform this memorable sight into both a navigational landmark and an object lesson in straying from well-traveled routes. Anyone adopting this name for their own use likely is—or was—a traveler themselves, or means to communicate that if you've become entwined with them, you've strayed from the safe path.

THE CULT OF SPIRITUAL RICHES

The ruins of Old Kalduhr wore ancient murals featuring a heretical sect dedicated to mortification of the flesh. Flaking and faded scenes depicted the voluntary removal of fingers (replaced with unfeeling stone) and teeth (replaced with glittering treasure, coins, gems, and necklaces that hung freely from the mouth). The murals were destroyed to prevent any resurgence of these well-forgotten practices.

THE COCKTAIL

At the Gilded Donkey, there's a signature cocktail made from fermented mushroom (for effervescence), a clear alcohol derived from a local tuber (Midwife's Ankle), and honey from the Humming Woods (within which is suspended a human ear). The cocktail is called either a "Listen Here, Now" or a "Bright-Teeth." No one will say why.

BRIGHT-TEETH IN LITERATURE

Works of fiction that include thinly veiled fictional versions of Bright-Teeth Assyrio include the long-running penny-fiction *Every Star, A Coin Owed*, the musical stage performance *Blood on the Cobbles Tonight*, the poesy cycle *My Father Is Gone Away, Away-O*, and the marching song *We Can't Go Home (Unless Our Packs Are Laden)*.

THIEVES CANT

From among the quick-fingered coin-snatchers, a piece of thieves cant: To be "Bright-Toothed" is to have a hunger that can not be sated, such that one's mouth is never closed, with teeth visible, in standing readiness for the opportunity at any morsel.

ASSYRIO THE LACK

Fox Ears, the master thief, claims that in their youth, Bright-Teeth was a traveling companion of theirs. But at the time, "Bright-Teeth" was known as "Assyrio the Lack" for their habit of hiding their lack of a critical supply or item until the circumstances most required it. You'd find yourself without flint as a snowstorm blew in, or without rations when everyone else was already traveling light.

A DRINKING SONG

What is the weight of a noble's soul?
Heavy, oh so heavy
What is the weight of an urchin's soul?
Light as a song, Oh Way Oh
How are the keys to the doors of death?
Heavy, oh so heavy
How is the journ' with my love 'long side?
Light as a song, Oh Way Oh
Pay your debts 'cause they slow you down
Heavy, oh so heavy
Bright are the teeth that'll strip your crown of light and of song, oh!

—a drinking song of unknown title or provenance, transcribed by Blackish Hem and published in SONGS FOR SCOUNDRELS, POEMS FOR FOOLS *vol.* II.

ABSOLVING DEMONIC DEBTS

There are two nights each year when demons may absolve you of your debts, so long as you speak the correct words to them—the sixth day of the new harvest, and the last day of the masked festival (celebrated in parts of Levasti, but increasingly seen further afield in cities where a love of mummery and a supply of silver-tongued mask crafters are found). However, it can be difficult to verify whether or not the being you're indebted to is a demon, as they are under no obligation to identify themselves.

BRIGHT-TEETH'S MONOPOLY

Loan sharks have found it impossible to compete for the same client base already claimed by Assyrio for multiple reasons, including: Assyrio has social connections they do not, allowing for a better class of clientele; Bright-Teeth spends a considerable portion of her usurious earnings as well-placed gifts, bribes, programs for orphans, widows, and public art works; and finally, so many loan sharks have been extracted from the public well in Pillow Square that the neighborhood, citing concerns over the need to guarantee purity, now imports all the water it needs, having surrendered the well to its new purpose of "rival storage."

STARS-SO-BRIGHT

In the Rose District, one can find Stars-So-Bright—a singer and performer known for writing songs with counter-cultural themes and a fluid approach to gender expression. Some say that Stars-So-Bright is a sibling of Bright-Teeth Assyrio, while others claim they're a former romantic partner. Bright-Teeth has been seen at many Stars-So-Bright performances, enraptured as she watches from the wings. Could Assyrio's patronage be the reason why songs such as *Fields of Widow's Tears* and *Yesteryear Storms* have not been suppressed, when artists such as Elkkin and Sen Bondish have seen their instruments shattered and studio spaces put to the torch?

BUCKETS & COUGHERS

New loan sharks are sometimes referred to as "buckets," as they tend to end their careers at the bottom of wells if they compete with Assyrio for clientele or, at a minimum, refuse to share a cut of their profit with her. Those who survive long enough to carve out their own markets graduate (in the argot of criminals) to "coughers"—both a pun on "coffers" and because they are "un-well."

SEIZED GOODS

- A boar statue, carved from heartswood, one and one-half times life size.
- Reliquary containing a lump of flesh swaddled in a golden nest.
- Transcription of the last words of the poet Ikov Aginos, bound in leather, warded with curses, untranslated.
- Three spoons and a serving fork bearing decorative details of forked tongues and eggs, possibly Naganeh origin.

—list of goods seized for tax avoidance, bound for Bright-Teeth Assyrio (disputed).

BRIGHT-TEETH'S RUNNERS

Underneath Assyrio's robes are shoes with thick soles. She's shorter than you might think and unable to run while wearing them. Unfortunately, she has employed people who can run on her behalf and by the time they catch you, you'll be out of earshot of Assyrio, who'll then be in no position to respond to any pleas for mercy.

A CHILDREN'S SONG

Fruit from trees and leafy greens,
Bright-Teeth, Bright-Teeth.
First she bites, and then she leaves,
Bright-Teeth Assyrio.
Stew on boil and honey hives,
Bright-Teeth, Bright-Teeth.
Give me yours, and now it's mine,
Bright-Teeth Assyrio!

—published as *A Children's Song* in the satirical broadside DUNNY'S GUFF (defunct).

PELLECK THE COIN BEARER

The only person known to carry a debt to Bright-Teeth and still roam the market undisturbed is Pelleck the Coin Bearer. Nobody will accept Pelleck's coin, or even risk having it come into their possession, lest the curse be transferred.

A FAERIE OFFERING

Want to secure the love of another? An easy fortune? A cough's cure or smoother blood? An offering to the Bright-Teeth fae when the night winds are most "slippery" can ensure a visit and a blessing by these creatures of shadow, their teeth their most visible feature.

PRISON GRAFFITI

Among the graffito known to circulate among prisoners in Barsul are familiar japes scratched into the walls: "Fine Dining: Tomorrow" (as tomorrow never comes) and "Bright-Teeth stayed here," usually accompanied by a series of sharp triangles that symbolize Assyrio's teeth, implying that she had taken a bite from the unyielding walls.

BRIGHT-TEETH'S HOBBY

"Did you know that Bright-Teeth Assyrio collects figurines? Little painted clay-fired figurines of the Sisters, no two alike. If you want to get on her good side, consider bringing one as a gift. I heard this from Melek, the toy maker. You know, the one whose shop burned down last month?"

AN INFAMOUS NAMESAKE

Scourge of the Glass Sea is the *Bright-Teeth Assyrio*, a pirate ship with a run of successful raids to its credit. Sailors say that the ship can summon a protective fog when needed, or command the winds to reverse. Of course, a ship can't do anything of the sort... such powers are more likely seated within the ship's captain, Fairfeather Mithrudk. "There's no name like it, to strike fear: Assyrio," says Mithrudk.

THE ASSYRIO LEGION

The singular form is "Assyr," and it refers to a member of the nomadic Assyrio legion, identified by their ornate dental jewelry and the heraldic rampant lizards that decorate their banners and shields when they go to war.

THE COLORS OF BRIGHT-TEETH

Those in the market who make a study of such things say that you can map Assyrio's mood to the color she's wearing on any given day. Reds and oranges? Her mood is sour, and she'll be unyielding and cruel when it comes to debt recovery. Blues or greens? A more pacific mood can be expected, as well as an unyielding and cruel attitude regarding debts and such.

AVOID DEBT

The land we walk on is deep—the soil is built up over generations of our fallen ancestors, as they fall, dream, and become the loam in which we grow our crops, fields, and cities. Our ancestors had treasures, and not all of them were passed along. Some were lost. For those who seek, there are fortunes enough. You don't have to borrow. Don't trust anyone who says you do.

THE LUCKY DAGGER

If Bright-Teeth likes you, she'll loan you her lucky dagger. "Saved my life a few times. Killed a four-eyed hound that roared through my tent like a bridegroom through a tavern afore the wedding. But I trust you. You'll bring it back to me when you're in finer fortune." She has dozens of these daggers. They're of decent quality, but it's unlikely that every one of them is lucky.

WHY DID YOU TAKE OUT A LOAN WITH BRIGHT-TEETH ASSYRIO?
Realized far too late you are bad at counting cards
Purchased counterfeited antiquity
Many costly visits to the physicker
Addicted to love potions—and mirrors
Borrowed shares on a ship lost at sea
Entrance fee to the Etudierre
Successful exorcism
Started an unwise business venture
Inherited your parents' debt after they died
Failed Kalduhri treasure-hunt
Poor bookkeeping at your family's manor house
Too many dalliances with your "muse"
Expensive tithes to your patron saint's temple
Restitution for release from Barsul Prison
Two back-to-back seasons of failed crops
Acquired a "painting" from Guille of Ordoe
Funeral costs for your beloved father
Arsonists set your shop ablaze
New mule refused to work and you were hungry
Bought a false lead-to-gold alchemical formula
To buy back your voice after that witch took it
Injured after serving in the kingsguard
Hired a historian to translate a meaningless map
Entire flock of sheep taken by wolves
Tossed out by your family with no useful skills
Paid a sorcerer to teach you a bit of magic
Death payments to your torchbearer's mother
Unnatural hunger for ever more exotic foods
Needed fine clothes to attend the Duke's ball
Silvered all your weapons to ward off beastbitten
Bought a lot of—very necessary—spirit charms
Paid an "assassin" up front
Threw an extravagant party to show off
Ran out of money building yourself a house
Sacrificed your wealth as part of a revenge ritual
To placate Assyrio's demon after you insulted it

Ajino the Debauched Painter

THE GAUNTLET

Ajino has been dead for centuries, but his paintings live on. Priceless and profane, majestic and mysterious, divine and detestable—the works of Ajino are the focus of intense academic inquiry, the subject of countless theological debates, the locus of occult activity, and the life's quarry of the perversely wealthy. In the halls of The Temple of All Saints, most of Ajino's works are considered heresies, and the artist has earned the sobriquet "The Debauched Painter." A treasure-hunter can earn a fine retirement indeed by locating an original Ajino and putting it in the clawing hands of the obsessed.

This is clearly an original Ajino because of...	and, of course, because...
the almost supernatural use of chiaroscuro...	who else would dare paint with human excrement?
the gentle draftsmanship used on the figure's hands...	I've seen this scene in my unspoken nightmares.
its bold use of blues indicative of his Azure Period...	this pigment is clearly mixed with pulverized bone.
how agitated the brushwork is around the mouth...	this "canvas" is the hide of no beast I've ever seen.
the richness and depth of the cast shadows...	that figure's eyes are undeniably following me.
the unsettled transition from subject to background...	it is whispering. Can't you hear it?

The Masterpieces of Ajino and the Theories Behind Them

THE WHITE CANVAS

There is an apocalyptic cult in Ambaret called the White Canvas that wishes to bring Ajino's *Memory Cycle* collection together in one place. They believe doing so will trigger the events that lead to the end of the world.

PORTRAIT OF LOVE

Ajino's first well-paying commission was said to be the portrait of his lord's son. The child died while the piece was being finished and it is said that Ajino painted the child's soul into it. Anyone who looks upon the painting weeps uncontrollably.

ON SEEING AN AJINO ORIGINAL

"I've only seen one Ajino painting myself and no thank you. I didn't understand it all, a single impossibly thin black line in a field of grays. I'm not sure what was on t'other side of that line, but I'm sure glad Ajino painted it shut."

ON AJINO AND NATURE

"Late Ajino left behind the realm of representational art. His art did not imitate nature, it dictated to nature what it had to be—and nature obeyed the stroke of his brush. Do I, an old art historian with failing eyesight, really need to tell you what that means? The immense riches that he painted are only the tip of the iceberg..."

CYCLE OF ETERNITY

The so-called *Cycle of Eternity* paintings have no obvious connection, some even being simple patterns, but Ajino is said to have insisted that not only were they linked, but that they were all the same painting, seeing no distinction between the works on each canvas. Some are covered in arcane symbols, some are depictions of queens and kings of the past, and some bear uncanny resemblance to heretics and scholars of the present day.

THE GRAY LADY

While several paintings by Ajino have been declared cursed at one time or another, *The Gray Lady* is among the most notorious. Said to have been painted after the loss of his own mother, Ajino poured his grief and rage onto the canvas in ragged streaks of gray mixed with his mother's ashes. According to legend, each owner of *The Gray Lady* came to a tragic end following their acquisition of the piece, often after a series of bizarre and inexplicable misfortunes. This has not dissuaded some from seeking the painting out, perhaps with more sinister motives. There has been at least one recorded assassination attempt when *The Gray Lady* was "gifted" to a Levasti noble. Fortunately for him, his butler opened the package and gazed upon the painting first.

GODLY PIGMENT

Some say the paint Ajino used to create his works is literally divine—that the minerals mixed with the pigments come from the bones of a god that fell to earth.

THE DIVINE HAND

The Temple of All Saints is rumored to have half of *The Divine Hand*, using it in secret as a sacred piece of cloth in their ceremonies. It is unknown to them that the other half shows a golden-domed palace being crushed by the hand. A rebellious group of a foreign religion is trying to steal the fragment, as it was spoken in their dreams that the union of the two halves would bring an end to their foes.

DEPICTIONS OF TREES

A little known fact is that Ajino lived for a time in the Kalduhr Forest. Some would find it odd, then, that his paintings rarely feature trees, but those which do are said to have a mesmerizing effect on the viewer, invoking an insatiable desire to travel and see the forest for themselves.

AN UNKNOWN SITTER

There are competing theories as to the meaning behind the painting usually referred to as *Portrait of an Unknown Sitter*. Perhaps it reflects the absence of self suffered by the wealthy, who have replaced their own humanity with a collection of fine objects. Some critics, in looking carefully at the depiction of an unoccupied room, believe it is the artist's only known self portrait. They point to the writhing pattern on the carpet, the semi-human forms in the collection of meteoric rocks displayed on the inlaid wood table, the lush curtain of ivy that covers the window and casts shadows which show the sun to be in eclipse. Ajino's grandchildren sold the painting with the stipulation that it would be turned to face the wall every full moon, but that was years ago and many collectors have come and gone since.

THE SACRED MASK

Scholars who have studied Ajino still speculate on whether his most legendary and infamous work actually existed or if it was just a horrifying rumor. Some believe he abducted treasure-hunters bound for the Kalduhr, slipping a sedative into their drinks, because who would miss them? That set of scholars still debates whether the adventurers were alive or dead when Ajino sliced open their abdomens and used their entrails to paint *The Sacred Mask*, a painting that, so far, has only ever been documented in stray notes found after Ajino's death.

DEPICTIONS OF ANGELS

Ajino's pieces depicting angels and other spiritual guardians invoke such a powerful presence that they have inspired a handful of minor cults, each making a more grandiose claim of the miracles their painting grants. Those who attend the cults' rituals say the effect is amplified as more viewers pray to the beings depicted, exquisitely detailed in strokes of golden light.

OUROBOROS

Ajino journeyed to the tropics, and became enraptured with the many tales of serpents from local lore. Staying there for six weeks, Ajino painted a series of images that show people and serpents—fighting, conversing, and merging. Displayed in the correct order they tell a greater story of rebirth, constant reinvention, and its all-consuming cost.

CIRCUS OF ECSTASY

There are rumors of a twin set of paintings generated during twisted interactions of multiple participants using fingers and other body parts to paint the very scene they were undertaking. Since the paintings' creation, other painters trying to spread their own legend have attempted to match or best the quality and utter bizarreness of the scenes. So far, all have failed.

THE AUSTERE LADY

The Archduke of Naganeh is rumored to be so obsessed with Ajino's *The Austere Lady*, which he managed to get his hands on after decades of searching, he has secretly married it and intends to leave his entire estate to the painting when he dies.

CHRYSALIS

Ajino's *Chrysalis* depicts either the rise of demons, the descent of angels, or the birth of the first saint to walk the earth—depending on which angle you view the painting from.

AJINO'S IMITATORS

With verified Ajinos either hard to procure, or already in the hands of those wealthy enough to maintain the security of their property, a secondary market of post-Ajino artwork has sprung up to fill the need. Art students, likely under the influence of the mother's palm fungus, "channel" Ajino and create works such as *Digestion*—all black canvas meant to be experienced tactilely: it is somehow warm, always moist, and burns.

"REVEALING" AJINOS

The art merchant Guille of Ordoe has made a cottage industry of selling unheard-of Ajinos to lower-born nobles across the region, and yet he remains largely unknown to the upper crust. The secret to both his success and his obscurity lies in his apparently blank canvases that "reveal themselves" to the viewer discerning enough to appreciate their scope and refined elegance. The purchase of one of these pieces is almost certainly accompanied by a radical change in social standing, ensuring that Guille's departure comes quickly thereafter.

EMPTY BASKETS

Empty Baskets, a lesser known Ajino work, is said to be hidden not in the tomb of a wealthy merchant but in the grave of an anonymous pauper, as no monied interest would dare be caught dead with it. Deemed egregious, even by the stark standards of the Age of Partition, not for the artist's typically blasphemous themes but rather for its almost violent depiction of an upended societal order. Its last public showing led to a three day riot reaching across social classes and threatening the very existence of Ambaret.

THE SINISTER PERIOD

It is said that after the rather strange incident with his right hand, Ajino's paintings took on a certain prophetic quality. Everyone who looks at a piece from his Sinister Period sees themself somewhere in the painting, and never in a good way. And then sooner or later, most find themselves in situations morbidly similar in real life. That all ended after his hand was reattached.

AJINO'S ABSTRACTS

Ajino's abstract work was underrated and far ahead of its time. Unfortunately, much of it was destroyed or lost to the ages. The few pieces that remain are so evocative they incite furious debates among critics, artists, historians, and even the occasional priest.

ON AJINO AND ALCHEMY

"Much has been written on Ajino, even more on his works, slightly less regarding the mysterious happenings and obsessions surrounding his paintings. It has been forgotten by most that before his career as a painter, Ajino was a failed alchemist. It is these skills he drew on in creating the vivid, otherworldly colors of his paints. It is the view of this author that the paints themselves are the source of the narcotic fervor surrounding his paintings. Be it pharmacological, theological, parapsychological, or something else entirely, is not clear. What is clear, however, is that Ajino was not the failed alchemist he is believed to be."

AJINO'S SCULPTURES

While best known for his paintings, Ajino also made a collection of animal and beast sculptures. His animals are particularly terrifying because he exaggerated and stretched their proportions to lengthen limbs, ears, fangs, and claws.

ON AJINO AND BARSUL PRISON

Ajino spent a number of years in Barsul. He painted a vast and intricate fresco above the mess hall during his time there. Ever since, inmates are advised to never look up while dining, and if they do, they should not speak about what they see. Over the years, a few prisoners disregarded this advice and spent hours gazing upon the fresco; all requested to be buried face down upon their deaths.

AJINO'S APPRENTICES

Ajino's own journals document all six of his apprentices, covering a span of nearly forty years. Two of the names are drawn from well-known jokes and are assumed not to exist, (despite the extensive daily records Ajino must have fabricated to further the joke), one is an alias for a noble priestess from Naganeh, and the other three—Marha Fen, Nim ils Oleh, and Rorek Hulda—are all famously blind.

⚄ BLACK SUN

Ajino's *Black Sun* was painted during a solar eclipse, and is a markedly restrained example of the debauched painter's late period. A black circle on cream-coloured canvas, it is said that if one looks at the middle of the circle and allows their eyes to lose focus, the unmarked surround of the ecliptic centre will begin to teem and writhe with a myriad strange wonders.

ON AJINO AND AUTHORSHIP

"Contrary to what you've heard, Ajino did not paint any of the works for which he is credited. According to his own purposefully obscured notes which I have meticulously translated, he would find them in a circle of rune stones during every new moon."

THE ECHOES OF THE FOREST

The Echoes of the Forest is a mysterious and extremely elusive painting. It's safely guarded in a room inside a mansion that belongs to a wealthy lady. Nobles and merchant lords bring gifts to the woman's exclusive receptions with hopes that she will be satisfied by the offerings and thus invite them to the exhibit room. The cost is exorbitant, but the effects of gazing upon the painting are worth every coin.

SONG OF THE VOID

"A retired jailer from Barsul Prison once told me that, of all the unspeakable things he witnessed there, what still gives him nightmares is the chamber where the most difficult prisoners were sent: all it contained was Ajino's monolithic painting *Song of the Void*."

DEPICTIONS OF SIN

Theologians insist that the later works of Ajino represent a series of warnings against a sinful life as the artist descended into madness. The street mystics of Ambaret will smile and tell you that they are instead signposts showing the wild path to the Divine.

GOLDEN FALL

The painting *Golden Fall* is, at first glance, an unassuming landscape of an autumn day in the Rose District of Ambaret—honestly quite pedestrian for the famously masterful Ajino. Viewers who have observed the piece on Accession Day, however, have noticed it undergo a surprising shift: the falling leaves appear as flames, and the golden dome of the Royal Palace looks as though it is caving in.

STILL LIFES

Ajino's *Still Lifes* will make even the most grizzled veteran's stomach turn. Taking the form a bit too literally, Ajino painted a series of corpses in various states of decay and dismemberment. The pieces are said to have been destroyed by religious authorities for obscenity, but a lost original would make a fine prize for the savvy collector.

THE COLLECTION IN TIROLLIS

The Basalt King of Tirollis has a few original Ajinos in his gallery, but he has them hung so the painting faces the wall. Perhaps that is the fashion in notably backwards Tirollis, or perhaps the pieces are simply too obscene to show to guests.

ON AJINO'S HOUNDS

Ajino stopped painting the nobility's prized hunting dogs once the third one disappeared, shortly after the commission was delivered. Legend has it that Ajino was tormented by the missing dogs for the rest of his life, and the mournful baying he imagined was what drove him to his increasingly risky behavior and increasingly haunting and political art.

PORTRAIT OF THE VIEWER, FINAL

The dealer insists that this is indeed a genuine Ajino, but cautions against pulling back the cloth hanging over it. This is Ajino's last and most perfect portrait: *Portrait of the Viewer, Final*. Using a strange reflective pigment, Ajino painted a mirror, a portrait that always reflects the viewer as they wish to be seen. The reflections are beautiful and perfect, but piercing, hyperreal, and hungry.

ON AJINO'S TOOLS

"So this man came in screaming about how he's going to prime us all out of the picture if we don't quiet down so he can get some sleep. He's waving this little wand and everyone starts to laugh. Then he shouts, 'No, it's not a *wand*, you fuckers! This is Ajino's filbert!'"

The Sisters

THE GAUNTLET

We revere the Sisters, women from the near-mythical Age of Saints whose works are lodestars of goodness and virtue. The Sisters order our lives: we erect temples to honor them, we hold feast days in their name, and we seek their blessings for hearth and home. But how much do we truly know about them, about the women behind the saintly shrouds? There are some historians who suggest the stories we tell of the Sisters are little better than fairy tales, that many of these saints have a dark and complicated history that has been whitewashed over the centuries. A few scholars suggest these women never existed at all, that the entities we venerate as saints are, in fact, demons who use the trappings of religion to control us. No matter the truth, we must at least acknowledge that light cannot exist without dark.

To Which Sister Do You Pledge Yourself?

⚀⚀ SAINT EVELYN

Evelyn the White, patron saint of doctors and nurses, is routinely honored by the wearing of pristine, white garments. While she is today associated with saving lives, during her time, which was the bleak Era of Occlusion, she was known for the exact opposite: mercy killings to those left desperate by the apocalyptic wars that defined those years.

⚀⚁ SAINT HAYMA

Saint Hayma is the revered patron not of lumberjacks, but of the "brushboys" who scurry between them gathering kindling, bark, and sawdust to sell for pennies a bundle on the outskirts of Ambaret. They each learn to draw her symbol so they can use a cast-off branch or chip of bark to scrawl it in a bit of sawdust for each tree that's felled to ensure that it's free of rot or boring beetles. Lost to antiquity is Hayma's habit of forcing the children of poachers caught in her forest to sign for their parent's remains in the blood of the offenders she personally sawed to bits.

⚀⚂ SAINT FATIMAH

Saint Fatimah, the patron of charcoal-burners, whose temples and churches are made of savory-scented, fire-cracked wood is given praise by taking hearth ash before starting one's journey and smearing it over one's eyelids and lips. Fires will burn hotter and longer, and use less fuel, so long as this ash remains. Fatimah is known as a traveler who moved throughout the land from the south. It is said that she traveled with a cart that held a neverending collection of firewood, and she would travel to outlying communities during the winter to provide them with fuel for their hearths for free. The wood that Fatimah gave those villages was actually a signal to foul spirits: burning the wood upon a hearth would result in a visit from the True Folk and their otherworldly flaying knives.

⚀⚃ SAINT ERLEA

Erlea the Amber, patron saint of florists, gardening, and beekeepers, gathered many obedient followers. Whispers persist that she once tested disobedient students by leading them through the hedge maze to be stung by hornets and wasps. Those practising her ways have honey once per day and grow flowers in six locations around their homes.

⚀⚄ SAINT FYONNE

The woodsmen who venerate Saint Fyonne hold a feast in her name before felling a particularly old tree. This rite is significantly tamed from Fyonne's time, when she required that any tree taken from the forest must be balanced with the sacrifice of an old person who was given over to be feasted upon by beasts.

⚀⚅ SAINT CLARITHE

Clarithe, patron saint of glassblowers, is worshipped in only one place: the Cathedral of Light, in Ambaret, an artistic marvel of delicate glass sculptures. But few know the true story: long ago, a wealthy man was so distraught by the death of his wife, Clarissa, he had artisans build a glass replica of her body, inside of which were arranged her bones and internal organs, a grotesque that was then displayed for any and all to see. Over the centuries, this tale became warped, until the glass "Clarissa" became the saint "Clarithe," who so admired the glassblowers, she commissioned them to create a reliquary for her parts after she died.

⚁⚀ SAINT NIA

A traveler from a land far off hunches into Milnen's Tap in Fort Duhrin. For a drink they'll tell you of a far off Sister of the stars who watches over the darkness in all of us. Before you go, they hand you a copper crescent and mutter, "Nia, drink this kindness in and have satisfaction."

SAINT SOLACRUSE

Saint Solacruse is the patron of cobblers and shoemakers. After a funeral it is customary for a loved one (usually a spouse or parent) to leave a pair of the departed's shoes with a cobbler or devotee of Saint Solacruse. The devotee will then wait until nightfall to ritualistically disassemble the footwear and burn it piece by piece, ensuring, legends say, the departed's ghost won't have to walk far to the afterlife. This is a common practice, but few know it derives from an ancient queen (likely the original Solacruse) who would have the soles of her prisoners' feet flayed off when they were sentenced to her dungeon. Perhaps as some sick joke or cruel deterrent, the queen would have the bloody scraps publicly delivered to a cobbler after the inevitable execution.

THE NAMELESS SAINT

We all know the low things that follow death: the maggots and the carrion beetles and the vultures. If observed, it's apparent that they have complicated rituals and procedures for dissecting a corpse, unknown to us. These rituals venerate a Sister with a name unknowable to people, whose existence is known only because some farmers following lost livestock have seen a bald woman watching them, clothed in a drab gray robe that crawls over her form like maggots over a three-day-old corpse.

SAINT THRALLASIA

Saint Thrallasia blesses the kite-makers of the city's parks. On the day that the sun hangs highest in the sky, they cut the braids they have grown for the last year and tie them to the tails of the tiny kites of delicate papyrus and balsa, and release them to fly away. Thralassa will receive them in the sky and her laughter will gust until the rains of the winter. None of the scalps flayed from the skulls of rivals that she hurled into the sky with a blood-curdling cackle have survived the centuries since she was a feared warlord.

SAINT MEORITA

To ensure success and a fast recovery, the bloodletters of Ambaret must mark their own flesh with the sigil of Saint Meorita and offer the first drops of their patient's product to the flame in honor of her, earning them the unsavory nickname "bloodburners." Those that publicly curse the practice of draining life essence to heal whisper Meorita's other alleged name, Obedmeah the Devourer, and steel themselves for the day when she receives enough sustenance from the unwitting bloodburners to fill her veins and rise once more...

SAINT LONETTA

Many have asked why such a subjective profession as jewelry appraisal requires a patron saint, much less one as demanding as Saint Lonetta. One would assume that without her guidance the shine and luster of gems and metals would surely be as marvellous. But the ceremonial polishing rituals of the Katawolk Appraiser's Guild in the nearly silent upper towers of Ambaret's northwestern wall show otherwise, with each pass of their secret polishing agents bringing more light and life to their work while transferring the precious same from the workers themselves to their beloved Lonetta's afterlife.

SAINT CHARA

Saint Chara is the patron of birth and midwives. She is often depicted with a barren branch that holds one young leaf. Her followers are known to give the pregnant seedlings to grow alongside the child in the belly. To those desiring children, they bring naked branches and offshoots, to plant them and see if something will grow—and if it does, so does a baby grow in the womb. Few know that Chara was a witch who would implant manikins into barren wombs so that these manufactured golems might grow strong and wise there. Even fewer know that the highest ranking initiates of Saint Chara still use this technique on rare occasions.

SAINT SUFGONYOT

Bakers leave a drop of oil in every corner of their kitchen to ensure Saint Sufgonyot imbues their fried dough with bouquets of sumptuous flavor. Some bakers do this daily, but all bakers do it when they have a major undertaking like a wedding or coronation cake, even though it is common knowledge Sufgonyot prefers fried treats. In fact, in ancient times, she was the patron of oil expeller pressers, not bakers. The tradition started as a memorial to the first army to lay siege to Old Fort Duhrin, which fell when the defenders poured boiling oil down on them.

SAINT HELISSEN

Helissen the Subtle empowers those with no means to protect themselves. While no formal school of hers exists, her nuns have honed their graceful unarmed techniques on the street as they defend the innocent and vulnerable. According to her teachings, each time a nun intervenes they must also teach the survivor a technique—how to break an assailant's grip, simple ways to trip or throw them to the ground, and the art of applying chokeholds using their own garments. In this way, they honor the courage of Helissen and ensure her wisdom is passed to those who need it most. They do not speak of her methods which can kill silently and swiftly, nor of the process by which certain notable persons may be "vanished" by those making a suitably large donation to the coffers.

SAINT VESTRA

Saint Vestra is the patron of fishermen, sailors, and all whose livelihood is bound to the ocean. Many sing to her for protection from storms or to call the fish to their nets. Some coastal settlements honor her during the festival of Greentide with elaborate offerings bound in woven effigies. Few folks question why some ships are spared while others seem to run aground upon the very shores of those who worship her. After all, they say, the sea must have its due.

SAINT ISTAAVA

With the blessing of Istaava, the roaster's beans exude a flavor celebrated by both coffee novices and aficionados alike. Even years after learning the delicate art of preparing the seeds of the quoquo tree, bean roasters struggle to earn her favor. She may be honored by roasting beans in small batches in a solid gold pan. In truth, she will only give her blessing if the roaster burns their own flesh on the hot pan before filling it with beans.

SAINT OTA

With most statues of Ota, the clockmaker's saint, she stands with one finger raised, perhaps to punctuate the time or point to the sun. Horologists honor Ota by putting a small gear over the finger, like a ring. They'll keep this gear polished to a shine, fearing that an unhappy Sister will spoil their mechanisms. According to the myth, she emerged from the desert in the Ruhlota Wastes, gifting the nomads there the very first gear and spring mechanism. The truth is the nomads invented the clock mechanism themselves, to determine the pattern of Ota's visits when she would capture and feast on someone's soul. This process kept her young while aging the victim.

SAINT MEPHERA

The Humming Woods know only one Queen, but they've seen Sisters come and go. Sister Anpeth of Sweet Words. Sister Dunyajk of Easy Birth. Sister Ellyellun the Paper Thin. Most of these names have been forgotten. Only the Sun-Striped Clade, beloved devotees of Sister Mephera, walk the woods now, wreathed in soporific smoke and traveling in bumbling paths, incense tracing strange patterns in the air in their wake. Members of the Clade may be identified to outsiders by their blackened hands, scarred and dense from holding the burning braziers without protection. Mephera offers all the protection they truly need.

SAINT SINESTRA

To venerate Saint Sinestra is illegal in most cities, as her followers are famous for being pickpockets and cat burglars. Some cities try a different approach, giving orphanages extra coin for each child they take in, to avoid any falling to the streets and to her temple. Still, her temple hardly struggles for recruitment, though they never take adults. In the temple, there's a rumor that you "ascend" when you reach majority, which mostly seems to mean having a dream, gathering your most prized takes, and giving everyone the slip to walk into the woods alone.

SAINT AMSER

The patron of wayfarers, Saint Amser is said to meet the lonely and weary in their times of greatest need, sharing with them her fire and food and a little mulled wine. Devotees of the Wandering Sister take great care in their preparations for the road so that they might not out of foolishness deprive another of Amser's comfort. Amser's faithful are known by their black, waxen cloaks, funereal attire that wards both the elements and the loss of beloved companions, so that no more will be lost to the forest—as was the saint's sister so many years ago.

THE FOUR SISTERS

The four chosen Sisters stand, apparently sculpted by water from the red sandstone walls of an arroyo deep in the southern desert. Among the smooth curves protruding from the dry walls you can just make out the forms of four hooded women, their heads bowed together in prayer. When the walls are wet with rain, their faces glow red, and their tear tracks are the last to dry in any drought. No humans venerate them, but red marrow of fresh cracked bones is almost always present at their feet, left as offerings by the scavenger canids of the area. The arroyo itself is home to ancient foxes and coyotes, fed by the elk who wander down in search of water in dry months.

SAINT AGNITTI

Agnitti, the patron saint of lost children, is mainly worshipped by the close knit communities near the Kalduhr. In these homes and villages by the dark woods, they celebrate the Feast Day of Agnitti by wrapping ribbons around the trunks of old trees that will lead the lost home. Lost children who've returned home will often talk of ribbon trails that lead deeper into the forest, and the dim lights of distant torches following the paths.

SAINT CAITE

Saint Caite, patron of wet nurses and milk siblings, is honored by new parents collecting milk and offering it to a neighbour's child. While today Caite is called upon to help parents and babies in need, less is known about how she kidnapped the children of struggling parents to raise as her own.

SAINT YADYCK

No one speaks the name Yadyck anymore—Saint Yadyck of the Loam. Her followers' rich mulch is sprinkled across their fecund fields, but none will share in their silent harvest.

SAINT SURAYA

Suraya, commonly known as the Weaver, is revered by artisans and those who mend broken things. From weavers of fine baskets and tapestries to carpenters or smiths seeking to repair a delicate joining, many sing to invoke her blessing at the most trying moments of their craft. It is customary to honor her by hanging a broken or unfinished piece of work inside one's place of business. This signifies that nothing is made perfect, but may be improved with her aid. Only the surgeon-priests of Barsul Prison remember her origins as the patron of early leeches and physikers, who prayed to her for forgiveness when their experiments failed. They claim to be her only true followers, dedicating their surgical alteration of "broken" prisoners to her and declaring the survivors "miracles" in her name.

SAINT ACEROE

Saint Aceroe, commonly called Sister Stinkhorn, is the patron saint of mushrooms, dung sweepers, and pawnbrokers. It is said, in life, she was a dyer, known for fabrics the colors of which were so vibrant they evoked ecstasy in any who gazed upon them. The final, lost color Aceroe created was so powerful, a local constable murdered her to possess the fabric. On Sister Stinkhorn's feast day, devout followers eat a small bit of psychoactive mushroom and try to recreate the lost color of Aceroe. Darker legends have it that Aceroe discovered a shade of amber that could take over minds, and that her earliest followers were a cult of zombies created by a monk wearing robes of that very color.

SAINT TECCLA

It is a great cause of sorrow in the formerly prosperous market town of Avayyal that their beloved Teccla was adopted by the Guild of Torturers as the sisterly object of their veneration. Throughout Kalduhr very few shrines dedicated to her have not been desecrated by, most people assume, resentful members of the populace, possibly from among those unfortunate enough to have been subject to the attentions of the guild. But there are some who whisper that it is, in fact, the Torturers who deface the effigies of their patron, as one of the secret rites performed during their rare conclaves.

SAINT VITTA

Vitta—the Sister of Agony—is the patron saint of those who try to heal, whether they're successful or not. Those who follow her find beauty in her glistening, bloodsoaked visage, and pay tribute to her by taking the impossibly sharp knife found at her shrines and cutting themselves with it, leaving their fresh blood for her in case she needs more. Saint Vitta teaches her adherents there is no healing without pain... and she ensures there is plenty of suffering for all.

SAINT VALENCIA

Saint Valencia, also known as the Lady of Repose, is the patron of philosophy, scholars, and thoughtful contemplation. Though wise and knowledgeable, she was not given to answering questions; however, she was known to spend her days listening to supplicants presenting their theories to her and then asking a single question that would enlighten the supplicant and cause them to tear their treatises in twain and start anew. In more modern times, it is a rite for all serious scholars to burn a copy of their most recent work before starting a new one. Scholars whisper in hushed tones about who among them she will find unworthy and condemn to backbreaking menial labour rather than the career in the arts they each see as their due.

SAINT BIER

Saint Bier, patron of lost causes, draftees, and bastards, is not well respected. She came to holiness during the 100 days of rule by the Profane Pretender, when the bastard son of the dying king bullied his way to brief power with the acquiescence of religious radicals and the support of the town bands. Bier (whose true name is unknown) was a young woman who the Pretender claimed as a holy muse. Struck with an assassin's arrow, she lingered, carried on a bier of sticks by the Pretender's ragged army, dying. In her last days, her fevered touch cured wounds and eased the pain of the commoners who flocked to the Pretender's banner before his eventual defeat and quartering at the hands of the nobility. An apostate saint, Bier is honored in woodland shrines of mud and sticks, and on crude pewter medals around the necks of conscripts. She is said to intercede often, but her gifts are weak: easing suffering but never averting death. Her worship is secretly fervent among the guildhall bands—the rich burghers disguising it as that of less heretical saints—noting Bier only by arrow and branch designs on altars and icons.

SAINT URSHULA

By day, Urshula the Unrivalled, saint of hunting and wrestling, could be found wandering the woods for berries or deer, and by night she would wrestle down at the tavern, raising funds for the poor. Devotees of Urshula wear animal fur and wrestle before sharing a large meal of meat. Urshula never lost a wrestling match and some swear she grew taller and growled during the longer matches.

SAINT AGNITH

Agnith the Tall is the only giantess known to be venerated as a saint. She was one of the last of her people, and is believed to have preached to them from atop a great stone about the death of their titanic forebears, the depravity of Old Kalduhr, and the coming of the Age of Occlusion. She convinced the giants to lay down their arms against the scattered human tribes and seek serenity in solitude—a quiet, peaceful end for a people that once strode proudly over the mountains and made war with gods and madmen.

SAINT ANAMARTIA

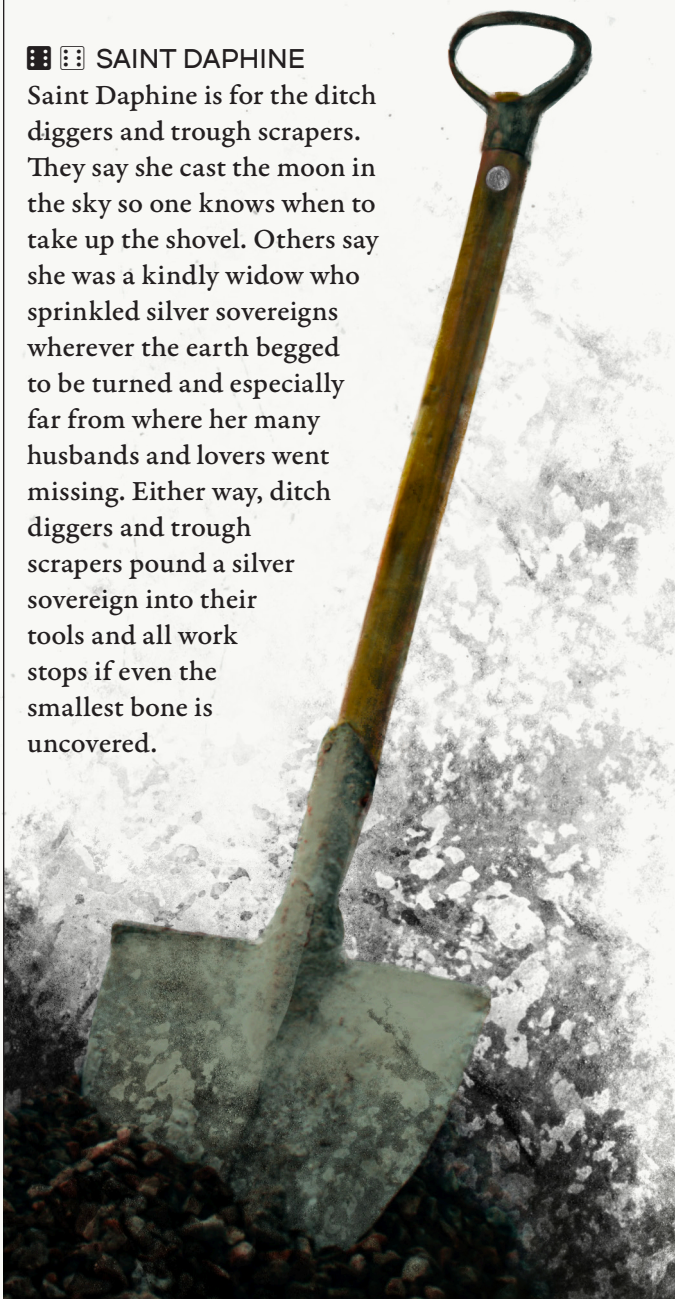
Saint Anamartia is the patron of redemption and penance. Her ardent followers are marked by their burgundy robes, and the black masks that prove they bear no witness to sins past or present, pursuing their tenet to guide sinners to an ever more righteous path. In chapels devoted to her, it is common practice for the congregation to wash their hands in blood, an act meant to symbolically hide their sins. Usually sheep's blood is used, but her priests are known to bleed any animal that is available to perform the right. She has been known as the Mother of Sinners going back to the very first texts due to her popularity with criminals and other unsavory folk. Scholars are uncertain if there is any connection between mentions of Sister Anamartia as the Mother of Sinners and another more shrouded figure known as the Mother of Sin.

SAINT SLETSA

Saint Sletsa is for those who fall in battle. She is often invoked as a warning: "Stay in formation lest you meet Saint Sletsa!" Seasoned troops and garrison guards talk of her as a companion who is always nearby but for unforeseen and often haphazard reasons they have not yet encountered. Soldiers often leave notes for her thanking her for her tireless efforts and recommending particularly disliked officers and nobles as people she may like to meet in the near future. A genuine concern has emerged, especially in the upper classes, that her followers are transforming into a murderous cult.

SAINT DAPHINE

Saint Daphine is for the ditch diggers and trough scrapers. They say she cast the moon in the sky so one knows when to take up the shovel. Others say she was a kindly widow who sprinkled silver sovereigns wherever the earth begged to be turned and especially far from where her many husbands and lovers went missing. Either way, ditch diggers and trough scrapers pound a silver sovereign into their tools and all work stops if even the smallest bone is uncovered.



Saint Ara the Torchbearer

AARON BURKETT

Saint Ara the Torchbearer is the Sister associated with dawn, charity, courage, resolve, and hope. Most of her supplicants are drawn from miners, battlefield scavengers, treasure-hunters, and the cursed and the disease-stricken—all those venturing into the night above or below, literal or metaphorical, desiring rescue or a light to guide the way.

Scholars have confirmed that Ara was indeed a real person, born to a noble family in the Age of Saints. Renowned for sneaking out of her family manor late at night and running the streets with a notorious gang of thieves, she showed disdain for others. However, this aloofness was quickly shed after her infant brother contracted a rare disease. Betrayed by his body and beyond the help of the physickers at the time, Ara despaired and sought a means to preserve him. With cunning thievery, she gained access to forbidden libraries and outlawed rituals. With such knowledge, she saved her brother—but at a terrible price.

Her crimes were discovered, and as penance she was locked in a high tower. Six weeks into her imprisonment, a fire broke out in her chamber. The flames were so severe that the tower shone like a lighthouse for four days, drawing all attention toward her plight. Once the fire subsided, the tower was examined. Nothing was burnt, and no body was ever discovered.

You pick up a handcrafted saint medal of Saint Ara. On one side shows...

- a tower, struck by lightning, burning high into the sky as stones topple.
- two footprints—one slightly larger than the other—below a sun rising over the horizon.
- stars marking a constellation—the Eye of Ara.
- a woman's face crudely sculpted in profile.
- a lit torch—its flames spill over, wreathing the medal's edge.
- a woman clutching a torch to her breast.

Gazing at it makes you feel...

- your limbs, muscles, and breath slow as seconds slide and turn syrupy. You're stuck.
- thoughts bubble up unbidden as your mind stretches up forever and something else acts through you.
- weightless as your body crumples to the ground.
- vertiginous—as if you're in two places at once, looking at yourself through someone else's face. And your own.
- the hairs prick on the back of your neck—as if many dozens of eyes gaze through you.
- like iron filings to a magnet. You don't know where you're going, but you have a destination.

Ara's Shrines, Miracles, and Flame-Touched History

⚀⚀ SHRINE OF HOPE EVERBURNING

The Shrine of Hope Everburning outside Fort Duhrin is remarkable. Its central effigies are carved from a lustrous coal that cannot be found elsewhere. Under the dark of the new moon, ecstatic shrieks emanate from a different throat.

⚀⚁ THE FATE OF ARA'S BROTHER

A single regional record states that after receiving her ministration, Ara's brother never grew and his wounds wouldn't heal. After a particularly egregious riding accident, his slight skeleton simply shed his skin and flesh like a husk.

⚀⚂ THE MIRACLE OF LEVASTI

In the outskirts of Levasti, there's a story about a little girl who was out playing in the fields when the ground collapsed underfoot. When she prayed for salvation, a warmth came over her and a mote of light blossomed in thin air. She followed these signs to safety.

⚀⚃ BLESSED CHARCOAL

If you purchase a piece of blessed charcoal and keep it by your heart, then a torch in hand will burn brighter and push the darkness further back. Superstitious folks say it may keep malicious and shadowy things from approaching you as well.

⚀⚄ GUIDING STARS

The faithful say every star is a torch lit by Saint Ara to guide the trapped, despairing, and dying into the afterlife. Some sects also revere constellations as proxies for the Sister.

⚀⚅ TWO COINS

There are two indestructible silver coins housed in separate temples. Rumors say they house the entirety of Saint Ara's knowledge —including cures for myriad plagues, the binding of spirits, and summoning demons.

⚁⚀ SHRINE CANDLES

Every shrine, major or minor, is lit by a single burning candle or torch unallowed to go out or be replaced by an oil lamp. The ashes and cooled wax from these sacred implements are often compressed or housed in medallions bearing her likeness.

⚁⚁ MINING RITES

In mining camps, it's common practice after a cave-in or any death under the earth to hold a torchlit procession down into the tunnels to lead the spirits of the dead up into the night sky. Spirits trapped beneath grow corrupt and cause more cave-ins.

⚁⚂ TALLOWFLESH

While Saint Ara is held in reverence by all suffering from disease, those struck with tallowflesh are the most fervent. It's a common sight to see one such firebrand with burning stakes protruding from insensate flesh that drips down into puddles of cooling skin at their feet. The slow self-immolation is an act of public contrition for private sins.

⚁⚃ THE CONFESSION TREE

There is a tree deep in the Kahldhur that bears no fruit but plenty of secrets—secrets too terrible for Ara to take with her to the grave. She retreated deep into the forest and whispered them to the soil. The tree standing there now bears her bad news.

⚁⚄ THE SARSEN

The Sarsen was sacred to an old, long-forgotten god. It has since become associated with the Torchbearer due its uncanny relationship with the surrounding moors. Barring the mountains on the horizon, the Sarsen acts as a fixed point where you can orient yourself while travelling. Leaving an offering at the Sarsen may result in hearing the terrible secrets of your enemies.

REVERSE DINNER

On the eve of Saint Ara's feast day, it's customary for lonely unmarried folk to gather in an abandoned house and prepare dinner in reverse. The table is set in reverse and dessert served first in complete silence. If everything is performed correctly then their future spouse will arrive at midnight. If any part of the process goes awry, the ritual may summon a coffin or the Torchbearer herself.

ARA'S ESCAPES

With her great sorcerous knowledge, Saint Ara did not go into captivity peacefully. She escaped the tower twice before immolating. Stories persist about her escapes, treasures she buried, and the lives she changed in her last few days of freedom.

ARA AND THE LIBRARIES

Before you can enter any of the great royal libraries, you are patted down in search of any Saint Ara-related paraphernalia. Though it happened in times immemorial, her thefts left such lasting scars that librarians still bar her from symbolically entering. Those stolen tomes surely persist somewhere in private collections or hidden caches.

ARA'S CHILDREN

Like many Sisters, Saint Ara has children—though hers are more literal than others. Sometimes, the terminally ill sleep at the foot of her shrine, offering themselves as a vehicle for Ara's designs. Often, their prayers are unanswered and the ill simply expire in silence. Others, however, combust from within. A newborn child will be found in the ashes.

FAITHLESS WOODCUTTERS

Woodcutters also pay their respects to the Torchbearer, yet everyone knows a story about a distant cousin who didn't. When such folk were pinned beneath a tree, calling for help, the rescue parties walked right past them—blinded to their presence until it was too late.

THE CHARCOAL DISTRICT SHRINE

In the Charcoal District, Saint Ara's shrine consists of a simple clay bowl and a snake's nest of metal pipes that culminate in a single plume of blue-green flame. No one knows where it protrudes from or who dedicated it to her.

ON HOPE

While often called the Herald of Hope, there are several occurrences after her sanctification where her invocation stole hope from hearts and sowed despair.

THE INNKEEPER'S SON

Scratching can be heard from the local innkeeper's cellar door, and her son hasn't been seen for two weeks or more. She says he's out visiting an aunt in Imbrares, but that town was wiped out by plague. The innkeeper is buying up treasures and making extravagant sacrifices to Saint Ara.

AN OLD ONE

Despite what the academics say, Saint Ara was never real. She is simply the littlest fingerbone of an Old One echoing forward in time from when the skies burned and the old empire retreated underground. The torch in her hand represents forbidden wisdom and draws sorcerers like moths.

ON CONGREGATIONS

The Crown strictly enforces a size limit on Saint Ara's congregations through a series of benchmarks. Crowds must be larger than 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, etc. when performing the rituals of beseechment. Failure to abide by the royal decree can have catastrophic results.

ARA IN KURAMET

When Ara's Eye ascends to the House of Saint Kuramet of the Lions, it is important to openly wear talismans of protection to improve their efficacy against the baleful light that penetrates stone, wood, and bone, lest it twist the flesh to serve.

THE MIRACLE OF DEVERAIN

Six years ago, the plague swept through Deverain. When all hope seemed lost and no medicine seemed to work, the faithful gathered together and wept before the statue of Saint Ara. With sweat and blood, they shifted her statue onto a cart and paraded her around the city to show the spirits of disease that they had no fear. The Sister heard their pleas, and the epidemic ceased. Those too far gone still died, but the plague did not spread any further.

THE BANDIT LEADER'S BARGAIN

Last autumn, a company of bandits occupied a Levasti summer manor and its surrounding vineyards. The bandits' leader became so drunk, she fell and struck her head. In her half-conscious stupor, Saint Ara visited her and promised to restore the leader's name and title if the occupied land was respected. The leader agreed, and Saint Ara led her by torchlight back to the land of the waking. While she was unconscious, her crew had set the vineyards ablaze. The leader's bargain was broken before she could keep it, and so she hid in the Shrine of Saint Ara. When the kingsguard put the bandits to the sword, the leader was missed and able to slip away.

BEGGAR'S YARDS

Newer shrines of Saint Ara feature a beggar's yard—a fenced-in ward for those touched by the plague. Initiates tend to the sick, capturing their words as they do. It's said that the Sister has been known to dictate new gospel from their prophetic mouths. There's a thriving trade for disseminating the ramblings.

THE RELIQUARY

The most sacred relic in all of Saint Ara's catechism is a golden reliquary held in a deep vault in the Temple of the Peerless Star. Though her body was never found, scholars say the box contains Ara's skull. Her most faithful, however, say it actually holds the spark that started the tower inferno.

MYSTERY CULTS

Inquisitors are especially critical of worshippers begging at Saint Ara's hem because history and its attendant folklore is prone to spawning mystery cults. This has become increasingly common in the countryside, where pilgrims walk a circuit. They visit each shrine to Ara they encounter, all while flagellating themselves and bearing the first plague-stricken child they can lay their hands on. The child is their living effigy of Saint Ara and the icon of their worship.

ON SORCEROUS TOMES

It's common among grimoires of a certain provenance to include a dedication to Saint Ara. Without her divine intercession, they might have continued a life of blind ignorance and abided by society's order.

THE TOWER SHRINE

One of Saint Ara's most popular pilgrimage sites lies in the Levasti countryside. The unassuming foundations that belonged to a tower—supposedly the one where she was once captive—are now bordered by a low wall and beautiful chapel. The stones themselves remember the terrible night when Ara plucked the haze from a star and burned away. People suffering from night terrors come to sleep on them, hoping she might burn away the demons that hound their slumber.

THE LAMB OF ARA

The accustomed sacrifice for the Torchbearer is a lamb—with or without blemish, she is not picky. The animal is then subjected to the normal rites, and its carcass is roasted on a pyre of sanctified wood. The remnants are then left for four days, the same number of days her tower burned. Sometimes the priests are free to consume the sacred barbecue. Sometimes Saint Ara returns the spark of life to the lamb, and it speaks of death rising up from the sod. The Governor of Fort Duhrin keeps such an animal in his court to witness his fair judgement.

THE TORCHINGS

In Ambaret, on the feast day of Saint Ara, all the children in the city light candles and keep them lit until midnight. At that time, they descend en masse to the port and make a wish as they set the lights adrift atop small boats or wooden planks. Before dawn, the two wickedest people in the city burn alive. Is it any wonder why the Crown always takes to the countryside during the holiday?

INHABIT

Sorcerers owe much to the Torchbearer considering she developed the ritual of possession known as *Inhabit*. Its earliest forms center on the following invocation: "By my will, I send my reason into the night. Like a spark, it will catch fire, consume their spirit, and they will be me. By my will, I send my reason into the night."

THE TORCH'S CLEMENCY

After Saint Ara's second escape, her captors attempted to put the torch to her, but every flame quenched before it touched her skin. In memory of this miracle, those sentenced to death by burning are declared innocent and released if the fires refuse to light.

RELICS

With nothing surviving the conflagration, there's a seller's market of peasantry looking for the faintest scrap of Ara's legacy. Hawkers claim to have relics of hers: a shroud or favored cloak, one of her teeth, strands of hair. Many of these are bought from treasure-hunters under crushing debt, desperately hoping for one big score.

THE CAVE SHRINES

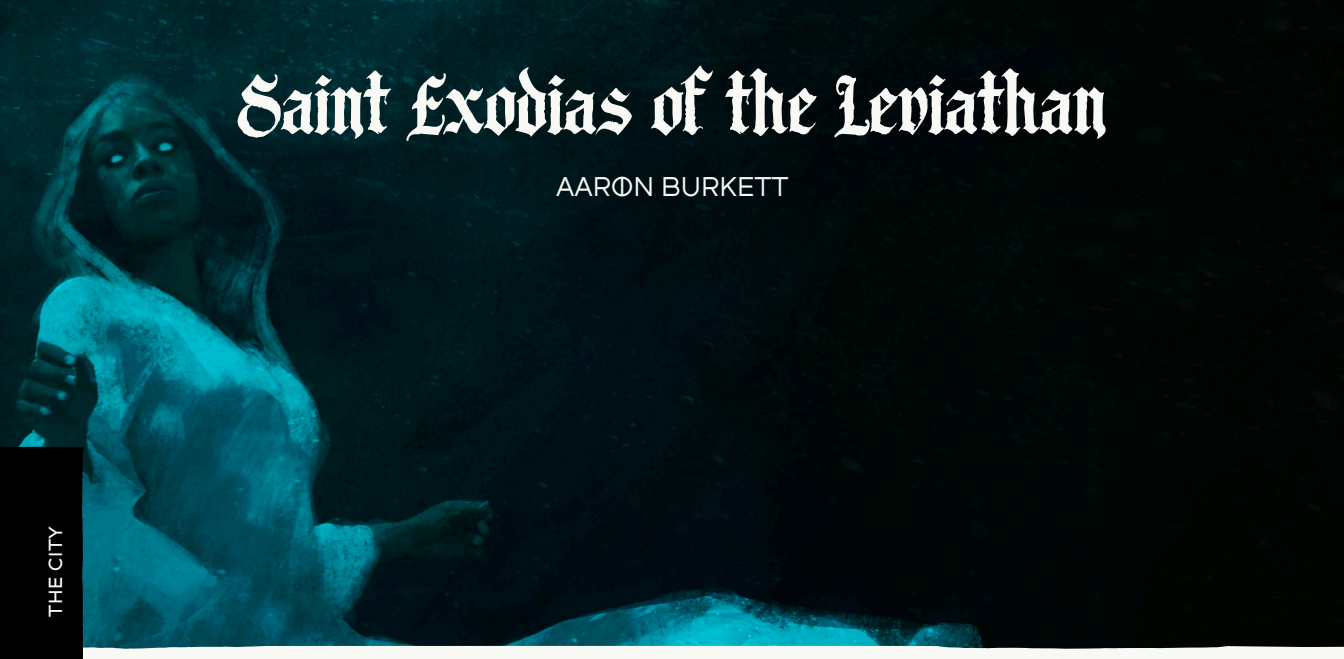
Older shrines to Saint Ara are fully enclosed and cavern-like, lit within by burning brands that fill the air with smells both rich and pungent. Petitioners are instructed to kneel within the shadowed alcoves and pray until a torchbearer comes to retrieve them. Some petitioners never return to the outside world.

HERESY

A passage from a rogue gospel of Saint Ara: "The Sisters exist in a state between life and death, neither mortal nor divine. Their spirits are bound into the air so long as folk breathe. They crave sensation and will always drive their worshippers to violence and bloodshed. The very act of worship and prayer fuels this appetite. Please, I'm begging you: turn away."

Saint Exodias of the Leviathan

AARON BURKETT



Vast, capricious, and cruel, Saint Exodias of the Leviathan is the terror of little people clinging to boats bobbing on the waves thrashing in her wake. Not content to simply patronize working folk, Exodias is the sea, the storm, the vast, the powerful, and the disdain the great hold for the meek and the small. The sailors, fisherfolk, whalers, and others plying any body of water, fresh or salt, bribe her with steel mirrors and bits of polished metal. Anything to divert her attention away from them while still paying their dues to her.

Coastal regions prone to hurricanes honor her with feast days and carnivals during the warmest parts of the year in hopes of endearing themselves to her and spare her wrath. They are meticulous in recreating the festivals previous; the priests say she has a long memory and loves nursing grudges. Towns and villages further inland, desperate for rainfall, hope she blesses them with thunderheads and monsoon rains for their crops. The occasional beast gobbling children on the periphery is an acceptable price.

You spy a great beast:

- an enormous whale walking on an uncountable parade of spindly legs.
- scraping a trough through the ground, this river of flesh sucks in anything it touches.
- a horse-sized snapping turtle bearing a shelf of soil and greenery on its shell.
- crayfish the size of large dogs singing in a choir of harplike voices.
- a walking pillar of snakelike ribbons extending into the sky.
- it is being swarmed by a hunting pack of smaller predators.

The beast bears a mark of Saint Exodias:

- five eyes, the Sister's sacred number.
- a bouquet of human faces pepper its neck and flanks.
- a statue of the Sister embedded in its spine.
- saltwater spills from the corners of its mouth and wounds.
- its excrement contains small statues bearing her likeness
- long, looping chains festooned with her sacred bells which once bound it.

Sailors' Tales of the Sister of the Sea

⚀⚀ THE QUEEN OF TIDES
Exodias is commonly conflated with the Queen of Tides, but they are not the same. Seesawing between rivals and contentious lovers, their relationship shifts and turns like a stormborn wave. It is best to give identical offerings to both, about a mile apart.

⚀⚁ THE SALT SHRINE
Her most sacred shrine inland was once a salt mine carved into a shrine venerating Saint Hester of the Long Table. Upon its blessing, the priest claimed all salt's presence was due to her blessings. Saint Exodias flooded the chambers while it was full of people and it remains submerged still. The local leviathan bears her face.

⚀⚂ THUNDERBOLT
Some heterodox scholars argue that Saint Exodias never existed and her intervention at the Siege of Five Walls instead bears the fingerprints of Pabakhar the Thunderbolt, an old deity of vengeance, considering the entire affair was caused by a broken oath.

⚀⚃ THE SACRED STRAITS
An invading army made camp before crossing her Sacred Straits. The heathens cast down her idols and erected a new shrine to their Old God. A mountain of quivering flesh heaved itself from the shallow waters and buried everyone under its bulk, dying in the night air. You can still smell its last breath if you go on a pilgrimage to the site.

⚀⚄ GRASPING-HANDS
Recent scholarship has uncovered worship of Exodias may just be a new face on a much, much older deity. Though her proper name is lost, she was often called Grasping-Hands or Drags-Us-Down-Forever, and it was from her unlit depths that the giants of old walked to the surface world.

⚀⚅ ON OTHER SAINTS
Do not offer prayers to the myriad minor saints of sailcraft and fishing in the same breath you beseech Saint Exodias. Best to wait an hour between prayers, otherwise she will track them down and eat them. No one prays to Sisters Vestra or Alicar anymore for a reason.

⚁⚀ THE LEVIATHAN'S PROCESSION
The Leviathan's Procession is a regular occurrence before her festivals come into full swing. It revolves around public display and celebration of her life's flotsam: a comb of baleen, a clam shell polished to mirror shine, a lock of salt-encrusted hair, etc.

⚁⚁ THE PRIM SUPPER
When a ship is becalmed, a desperate crew may attempt to show good manners and perform the Prim Supper. This grim ritual involves each crewman taking a bite from the first person who died from exposure before offering the body to the sea.

⚁⚂ DURING WINTER
Her form is so monstrous during the year's coldest months, she descends into the lightless depths to embrace the beasts found there. Their clammy touch is the only satisfaction she will know.

⚁⚃ EXODIAS THE ETERNAL
Thought slain in the distant past, sailors say Saint Exodias can still be found wading through the world's periphery dragging an enormous trawling net behind her.

⚁⚄ IMPROMPTU SHRINES
Unlike many Sisters, Exodias' flagellants and pilgrims regularly construct unofficial shrines. Cobbling together ossuaries of whale bones, driftwood, and their blood wherever they find the materials.

ANCHOR OR HOOK
Exodias is depicted in artwork and statues wielding an anchor or enormous fishing hook. The reasons diverge on whether she's brought wealth or woe in local histories. Anchor? A storm sank the fishing fleet. Hook? Entire schools of fish threw themselves onto the deck.

THE LIFTED SHRINE
The cult of Saint Exodias wished to construct a shrine on a particularly high plot of land but the noble owner refused to sell the plot. Five winters later a hurricane struck and the shrine was carried, foundation and all, by the surging waters to the originally desired spot where it still stands today.

THE DROWNED PRIESTS
Priests charged with caring for her shrines are required to breathe deeply of her waters: they are drowned in a shallow pool of saltwater before being revived. Many have ecstatic visions while growing cold and lifeless, their revelations added to her living scriptures.

THE ALBATROSS
It's bad luck to harm the albatross, her favorite and most beautiful creation. Seagulls are fine though. Everyone hates them

A RITUAL
Occultists frequently argue over the nature of the Sisters and the divine. Some argue Exodias was not a real person or a discrete "Saint of Leviathans". They instead argue "Exodias" is symbolic shorthand for a rare ritual allowing one to call beasts up from the deep, like the kulning techniques used in the north.

PLACATING EXODIAS
Saint Exodias is vain and craves flattery. Sea shanties and jigs often compliment her glistening hair, generous proportions, many sharp teeth, and other platitudes. Becalmed ships have lost her attention or were rude in some way.

THE MARRIAGE
After slaying a bull whale and butchering the corpse, it is traditional for the captain to don the beast's foreskin around their shoulders like a cape and marry themselves to Saint Exodias as compensation for her loss. Confining themselves to their quarters for five days, sometimes she appears on the last night of the honeymoon.

ON HORSES
She was deathly afraid of horses in her mortal life. Any ship wishing to transport them across the sea needs to offer twice as much. It's also best if the crew appreciates the subtleties of horse meat. Throwing the bodies overboard should they expire will surely engender bad feelings.

LEVIATHAN OFFAL
The cast-off bits and pieces of the great beasts of the sea are in high demand by pig farmers everywhere. They hope feeding such offal to their own animals will result in recognition and prizes at the annual fairs. If the hogs should grow too monstrous they are donated to the nearest shrine dedicated to Exodias.

SAWTOOTH SHRINES
Her shrines are frequently decorated in blue and turquoise. On rare occasions, one might find a shrine of coral pink and blood red. These shrines are maintained by Her Sawtoothed Sons, a mystery cult who see Saint Exodias as an aspect of the Devourer and are dedicated to shedding their clumsy human forms in favor of those of sleek sharks.

EXODIAS'S KISS
Spend enough time down on the coast and you'll see former fisherfolk and sailors with near identical scars around their limbs—a ring of smooth, craterlike divots in their flesh. Called Exodias's Kiss, anyone bearing this "blessing" is barred from returning to sea out of fear she will topple the ship and reclaim her lost love.

EXODIAS'S REVENGE

In the Age of Saints' twilight, Exodias was hunted and captured. Her entire crew was slain and her ship was sent to the ocean's floor. Exodias's captor had her torn apart limb from limb by teams of horses. The wounds bled and bled, drowning the entire city in blood and saltwater.

THE OFFER

If you go to the Three-Headed Dog tavern in the Fort Duhrin you can find a beggar missing both legs and her left arm. For 10 coppers she'll tell you her tale. She'd set sail under the command of a pirate named Cid Barrett, hoping to encounter merchant ships with no means of defense. Of course, things did not go as Mr. Barrett had promised. The beggar found herself adrift for many days atop a feeble raft. Under each full moon she claims Saint Exodias arose from beneath the surface and offered to push her to shore in exchange for a limb. Considering she lost three limbs, either she was very far out, or the Leviathan was pushing her around in circles before she finally honored the deal.

FISH TALES

Many festivals to the Leviathan saint only end after everyone has gone to sleep and the only ones keeping vigil are the old sea dogs. Passing around a bottle of liquor, they exchange anecdotes from their times at sea, alternating between big fish tales and bawdy stories of sirens' seduction. Of course, Saint Exodius features in all of them as either the one who got away or the one siren who stole the storyteller's heart.

THE GREAT MAWS

In Muckling, there is a great pair of jawbones constantly growing myriad teeth so long as it remains painted with blood. The largest are freed with hammer and chisel and sent to the various shrines of Saint Exodias to adorn her mandorlas. The oldest ones bear spectacular dental halos as signs of their provenance.

REDTIDE

In a blasphemous mirror of Greentide, some villages practice a festival known as Redtide, consisting of driving herds of sheep or cattle over a cliff into the surf's stony teeth.

A DESPERATE HUNGER

Exodias was not an actual giant or titan or leviathan or sapient storm, she was just a girl who shared their callous disregard for people and a bottomless appetite for life. When she was a young girl, during a particularly harsh winter, she ate her siblings and parents, then moved on to other villages to stock her larder. One by one. Bones and all. Whatever it took for her to survive.

RED SKY SACRIFICE

When sunrise blazes through a red sky, ships at sea know it is then time to make an impromptu sacrifice. Every captain has a different way to determine what, or who, gets thrown overboard to avert her attention.

SCRIMSHAW

When hiking through the hinter country, scrimshaw in honor of Saint Exodias are commonly seen carved into the surface of giants' bones.

THE COLOSSUS

Exodias' Colossus stands in Ambaret harbor warding off seaborn attacks. Many winters ago, a sorcerer animated the statue and commanded it to attack the city. Fortunately for the capital, Exodias doesn't take kindly to orders. The sorcerer's corpse is still clenched in her fist.

THE COLOSSAL TOOTH

Beyond Fort Duhrin stands the Colossal Tooth: a huge boulder standing on a thin column of stone, and a locus for malevolent magics. Should someone weather the elements atop the stone for five consecutive nights, they will attract the Sister's attention, for good or ill.

FEEDING THE LEVIATHAN

When someone bearing Exodias's Kiss dies, it is custom to cut their bodies into pieces, cook the meat, and cast them into the sea. No one may say their name or acknowledge they've died for a week.

EXODIAS'S CHARMS

You can buy pieces of blessed coral and driftwood from most shrines. Their promised properties range from keeping predators away from your catch to speeding your drowning.

A RANSOM

When fishermen pull a shark from the sea, they customarily roll the great beast over and make a cut near the liver. The crew then massages the organ free before depositing the wounded and dying animal back into the sea. The liver is then held as ransom until the ship makes it back to port where it is then flung back into the sea. Similar rites exist inland where hunters' traps capture predators.

THE SHIP GRAVEYARD

There's a place where ships go to die. A knot of wicked sargasso serves as home for sailors whose vessels are caught in its stranglehold. They reside in the decaying vessels which ferried them here. Tales say Exodias' tomb lies at the heart of the quagmire.

OFFERINGS RUMORED TO BE ACCEPTABLE TO SAINT EXODIAS OR ANOTHER SEA QUEEN
Coins which sat over the eyes of a dead man
A song, which you will soon struggle to recall
A tapestry crafted over 10,000 hours
A slumbering beehive
Your finest harvest of the season
A foal without blemish
Your right eye
A bottled spirit from the Kalduhr
The tears of one heavy with child
The tails of every fish you catch
A boisterous prayer with drums and dance
The first ship to sail each spring
The foundation stones of another Sister's altar
The heart of a terrible lake monster
A meal meant for a stranger
The furniture of a room where a death occurred
A locket with the image of a lost love
Any treasure recovered from the sea
A paper boat crafted by a child's hands
A stone statue of Saint Exodias herself
Seventeen otter pelts
A newly woven fishing net
A cold-forged blade which has taken a life
An heirloom inlaid with mother-of-pearl
Timbers from a shipwreck washed ashore
A cup's worth of human blood, willingly given
Waterlogged boots
A random assortment of teeth
The finest tool of your trade
The future of your most gifted child
Meat from a beast killed by drowning
A vial of saltwater and a vial of freshwater, mixed
Three bowls of salt from the Ambaret mines
Musical instruments, smashed with rocks
A book written entirely in squid ink
A pledge to walk into the sea when she calls you

Legendary Heroes & Artifacts

JAMES HOLLOWAY

Many civilizations have risen and fallen in and around Ambaret and the Kalduhr, leaving tales of legend and myth in their wake. Now a new generation of explorers and treasure-hunters add their names to the long record of great deeds. Whether the great figures of past ages really existed or not, their tales are popular in both the city and the settlements that fringe the forest, serving to either inspire new generations of heroes or warn off the foolhardy.

The tale is...	told...
a romance of an earlier age...	secretly among the poor and the downtrodden.
a half-remembered fragment of cryptic allusions...	after dinner in the wealthy homes of the nobility.
a raucous, bawdy story humiliating the pompous...	among scholars of ancient and obscure history.
a serious attempt to uncover historical truth...	as a fairy tale to quiet children.
a modern retelling of a traditional folk story...	to impress visitors.
a simple rhyme embedded with a deeper meaning...	in one particular village and nowhere else.

Who or What Is This Legend About?

HEROES

⚀⚀ RONAT THE SURVIVOR
Who killed seven men once and one man twice. Ronat's tale is a cautionary one: she was invincible in battle but received no joy from it, and when she killed the same man twice, she attracted the Sisters' attention—an undesirable thing.

⚀⚁ OGUN THE EXILED KING
Who lived as a common sailor until the mark of destiny was found upon him. Many kings claim descent from this hero, who combines destined rulership and the common touch. Some may even be telling the truth.

⚀⚂ AARYA THE GOLDEN BOAR
Who unhorsed a knight of Faerie and took his lance for a javelin. Soldiers sport boar tattoos or wear boar-crested helms as a sign of their devotion to her bravery and strength.

⚀⚃ NIALL THE MOURNFUL
Who fought thirteen battles and won twelve. Some say that this legendary ruler's treasure was lost at the site of that tragic thirteenth battle, yet Niall's crown remains a symbol of great authority.

⚀⚄ CARA THE WISE
Who judged the case of the Sebsek Murders so fairly that the killer praised her learning on the gallows.

⚀⚅ OLVIR ASH-TREE
Who climbed to the king's seat on a ladder made of his brothers' corpses. Though he ruled wisely and well, some say his guilty spirit can never rest.

⚁⚀ UTOKHI
Who, as a human by day and a beast by night, fought against the animal within as much as they did the beasts of the forest.

⚁⚁ BACHA WHITE-HAIR
Who led an expedition to search for the secret of immortality and never returned. Many take this as proof of success—if you had an eternal life, why would you want to spend it here?

⚁⚂ CHARAT THE TALL
Who wished to follow the path of a sorcerer, until duty forced her to rule. She hid her staff and her books of lore, promising to return once her work was done—but it never was.

⚁⚃ DONALL & KONALL
Who were two brothers in love with the same fae maid. The lords who claim descent from them are said to have something elfish about the eyes.

⚁⚄ THE POSTHUMOUS PRINCE
Who was conceived when the spirit of his father visited his mother moments after his death on the battlefield. Even generations later, the ducal family takes quiet pleasure in the wary respect earned by their uncanny ancestry.

⚁⚅ SYLA ONE-EYE
Who had their lover replaced by an effigy of wax, and embarked on the road of vengeance upon discovering the imposture. Villages under siege from the swarm put their faith in her and the hiveburners she inspired.

⚂⚀ THE THREE LION BRIDEGROOMS
Who were peasant brothers, wedded to three beautiful women who were secretly lion goddesses. One brother, through the support of his fierce and cunning wife, rose to be a powerful noble. His line is long extinct, although their lion badge can still be seen on ancient monuments. Of the fate of the other two brothers, nothing is known.

PREL THE STONE-LEAPER
Who was known for leaping across the Naveh River and slewing three times three foes to avenge her father's death, though they were no living men.

ARAM THE RIGHTEOUS
Who no blade nor poison could harm, and yet they died of hunger in the midst of plenty.

PALGUS THE CLEVER
Who taught people how to tie fishing nets, hunt with snares, and brew beer. It is said that every one of Palgus's teachings brings with it two blessings and one curse.

GARVOTH
Who had strength matched only by his gentleness. When an evil king killed his lover, he grew ten times stronger in his wrath and crushed the tyrant under the weight of his stolen throne.

VALGARD
Who went into the ruins and came back with great treasures and greater fears. His crown and staff still hang on the walls of his great hall, but folk say the Old One of the Forest wants them back.

ARTIFACTS

THE AMPHISBAENA BELT
Buried with an ancient king and retrieved by an enterprising thief, this belt protects the wearer from serpent bites as well as poisons of all kinds.

THE GOWN OF 1,000 PATTERNS
The enchanter who wove this gown is said to have been driven mad either by its effects or by the intricacy of the weaving. Its wearer can see invisible beings and objects, but will stand out in any crowd thanks to its bizarre and incongruous designs.

KENDRE'S COLLAR
This bronze torc is set with two ordinary-looking green stones. One of the stones will begin to glow when the wearer is the target of hostile magic. The other glows sometimes as well, although no one is sure why.

HEARTSEEKER, HEADTAKER & SKULLCRUSHER
A spear, a sword, and a mace, said to be physical incarnations of an ancient war god. They can pierce any armour and shatter any shield, but anyone who wields them pledges their own life as a sacrifice to the war god—they will die by the same type of weapon.

BLACK PEARLS
Produced by a now-extinct species of shellfish, these absorb harmful energies. Worn on a body piercing, kept under the tongue, or even stitched into the skin, they render the owner immune to all disease. Ancient kings were buried with them to protect them from plague spirits in the underworld.

THE DRYAD'S GIFT
An irregular fragment of glass set into a golden pendant. Believed to be the solidified tear shed by a forest spirit separated from a mortal lover, it grants the wearer power to control the rain and wind.

THE VEIL OF NIGHT
Woven from a mesh of unearthly metal that sparkles with a dark luster. Its glamour hides the wearer's appearance, making them slip from the memory of any who sees them. Anyone who wants to see the veil must undergo a series of complex ritual preparations, even when no one is wearing it.

THE GOLDEN HORSESHOE
Given to a deserving youth by an anonymous smith at the roadside, this horseshoe conjures up an entire horse when cast on the road.

MOACIR'S ARROWS

Made from the wood of ancient trees and fletched with raven feathers, these arrows once belonged to Kalduhr's greatest hunter. An archer who learns his target's true name can speak it while anointing the razor-sharp broadhead with a drop of blood—no shot with that arrow can miss the chosen mark.

MOONLIGHT

Ogre smiths sweated over their anvils to forge this blade, while fae maidens crafted its jewel-bedecked scabbard, before hanging it at the side of an elven prince. A fitting royal weapon, the sabre drank a legion of warriors, gaining power with each soul it consumed. The prince, however, soon bored of this plaything and gave it to some lackey for disposal.

THE RHISGAN ORB

Looking into this orb is like staring into a coal-black pool on a moonless night. The ebbs and flows of fate are visible in its depths, moon-bright threads in an infinite darkness. Seers and sorcerers covet it for its power to foresee the future. But over a long period of regular use, it becomes one with its user until the brilliant strands cannot be unseen.

THE BRASS HARNESS OF ARDULF

This suit of heavy armor was made to fit a great warrior king. The helm is made in the shape of a snarling boar—a wound made by its razor tusks will bleed incessantly. Only magic can stop it.

ORA'S BLADE

When King Argiol Seo was murdered, his daughter, Ora ils Ar, thrust her hand into his funeral pyre and drew his red-hot sword from the flames, vowing to avenge his death. While the conspirators lived, the blade continued to glow and burn. When her bloody reckoning was complete, Ora hid the sword away, its blade now a dull black. The tales say that one sworn to vengeance can relight the sword and turn its flame against the guilty.

THE CHANCELLOR'S RING

The Chancellor advised a string of powerful monarchs, aided by this magical ring. Secrets whispered to the ring escape the speaker's mind and flee to the ring. Someone can force secrets from the ring if they speak the correct esoteric formula to it.

THE HARLEQUIN STANDARD

This banner was carried before the Laughing General, an eccentric warlord who enriched himself through conquest, but came to an ironic end. When unfurled, the cruel face on it presages the outcome of battle—a wicked smile signifies victory, while a scowl foretells defeat. The Crown's generals would kill to see the Harlequin Standard fly over their armies.

BYRIK'S SUMMA

Byrik the sage appeared to spend his long career in pursuit of dusty minutiae. It wasn't until generations after his death that his true life's work was revealed—a codex of magical theory so advanced it would transform any who studied it. The disaster that swept away Byrik's college was probably a coincidence, but the authorities destroyed every copy of the Summa they could find regardless. Still, scholars believe that Byrik's notes—or even the whole Summa—exist in ruined libraries.

KOVAH'S FLUTE

Kovah the Piper was an itinerant minstrel who played a simple flute, earning a few coins by performing at weddings or festivals. When she wanted, Kovah's flute could play so sweetly that even the dead would rise up and dance.

EXALTED HYDROMEL

Funerary priests interred jars of this strange mead along with initiates of the Mother's ecstatic teachings; even centuries later, the magical liquid remains a powerful intoxicant that can open a drinker's eyes to unnatural forces. It also protects any organic matter dropped into it from the effects of decay.

The Borderlands

Borderland Settlements

Between the cosmopolitan excesses of Ambaret and the rugged wilds of the Kalduhr sit the borderlands: settlements defined by the balance they strike on the spectrum from law to chaos.

THE DUCHY OF LEVASTI

LAW ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ CHAOS

The very definition of bucolic, Levasti has long been populated by nobility who wish to "escape it all" and live a simpler lifestyle beyond the demands and gossip of the capital. Dotted with summer manors surrounded by farmland and managed forests, Levasti is the tamest, most orderly version of nature allowable by the ruling class. Even the common folk of the duchy are kept relatively fat and happy through a variety of localized holidays.

TONE: *traditional, languorous, structured, festive*

THE DUCHY OF DEVERAIN

LAW ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ CHAOS

In Deverain, the perceived threat of the forest and the perceived distance of the capital are enough to embolden tyrants and highwaymen alike. Though the forest has its hold here, the forces of chaos and rebellion often take a more human form: cults, brigands, and rabble-rousers of all stripes ply their trade in Deverain. Even the authorities of the duchy are tinged with lawlessness, as the Duke seeks to crown himself king of his own kingdom against the laws of patrons in Ambaret.

TONE: *ambitious, daring, rebellious, fractious*

FORT DUHRIN

LAW ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ CHAOS

Duhrin thinks of itself as the torch of civilization pressing into the untamed darkness. And yet, the spark that lights that torch is chaos itself, fueled by the hunger and passions—and debts—of the brave and foolhardy treasure-hunters who make their home here. The fort itself is an imposing figure of stone, surrounded by a mix of struggling farms and wild woods. The Kalduhr isn't far away, and the battle to push it even further is often a losing one.

TONE: *adventurous, desperate, individualistic, hopeful*

KORMORAN'S WHEEL

LAW ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ CHAOS

The residents of Kormoran's Wheel don't even consider themselves to be royal subjects, so independently-minded is this settlement. A mix of outcasts, criminals, and honest folks who just refuse to be under the Crown's thumb, the Wheelers have made their home just inside the edge of the great Kalduhr. The folks of the Wheel tempt fate every day they live here, but the threat of facing the forest's terrors keeps the kingsguard away, thus providing some measure of protection and true self-governance for the settlement.

TONE: *unruly, bold, opportunistic, patchwork*

Levasti

THE GAUNTLET

Bucolic. Pastoral. Steeped in tradition. The Levasti countryside is one of the most peaceful and beautiful places in Kalduhr. It's a land free of the stench of Ambaret and the terrors of Fort Duhrin, a place where you can live in harmony with the land, raise children, and grow old. But the people of the Levasti countryside are no fools—they understand that what they have is special, and that Kalduhr has a long and terrible history which must always be remembered. They choose to remember this history through the tradition of the "estate festival," in which the great landowners of the Levasti countryside throw feasts and fetes designed to honor a specific event from the past.

During Which Festival Have You Arrived?

⚀ FEAST OF THE SERPENT'S FALL

This festival celebrates an ancient uprising in the Kingdom of Naganeh, when the common people overthrew the snake-men kings who ruled them. The feast is held in the great hall of a Levasti manor house, and the guests are invited to wander the house as they wish in an attempt to find thirteen poisonous adders that have been hidden throughout. Those who find a snake are entitled to an expensive prize sponsored by the estate holder. At the end of the feast, the thirteen adders are beheaded and buried near the estate's border.

⚀ BETRAYAL OF TWO

This festival recalls a bit of history the powers-that-be in Ambaret would rather forget: that the kingdom was always meant to be ruled by two sovereigns, and that a proper line of succession included pairs of siblings. This short-lived custom ended when Jakehr Ambari murdered his brother Jakehl before they could take the throne. In order to avoid a succession crisis, the rules were changed so Jakehr could rule alone. This pivotal moment in history is memorialized during the festival when a pair of crowns are presented before a bonfire; one is tossed to the flames while the other is placed on the head of a Jakehr effigy that is then paraded through the countryside.

⚀ HARVEST OF THE SAI

The people of the Singing Valle of Sai are silent during the summer harvest festival to memorialize the eradication of the local cicada, whose screams for sustenance still echo around the Valle. The village rests in a cavernous basin blessed with grottos where the golden gooseberry grows. In a bid to increase yields, the villagers ringed their crops in oil so the cicadas could not go to ground. In turn, the cicadas feasted upon the branches and, when all was barren, both the cicada and the villagers starved.

⚀ TWELVE TRIALS OF SAINT HILDER

This beer festival honors the stoutest Sister that ever roamed the Kalduhr: Hilder, Saint of Brewers. Legends suggest that Hilder was traveling through rough territory, sampling and documenting the various local brews, when she encountered a giant who challenged her to a drinking contest. Hilder agreed, having drunk many a man and beast under the table, but realized she may have made a mistake when she saw the giant-sized flagons set before her. Nevertheless, she persisted, and drank twelve full flagons, outlasting the giant, who passed out at her feet. During the festival, celebrants are rewarded with song and coin if they can drink twelve large mugs of the estate holder's brew without passing out.

⚀ EVE OF BROKEN LOOMS

Many of the smaller towns in Levasti have a similar tale: a day when the village awoke to the sound of the warps of every loom in town snapping at once. Most people write this off as silly superstition, but every village has one person, exactly one, who claims to remember the sound of the looms breaking. Old Egortha in one village, Archibold Miller in another. They all remember that sad morning when all the looms broke. They each say it sounded a little different, or say it angered a different Sister. While the details may change, one thing remains the same in all the versions of the tale: for a full seven years after the warps were fixed, any yarn woven in those looms turned blood red. That red hat Archibold Miller wears to this day was woven in the fifth year of the curse. Every year, on the morning of the Eve of Broken Looms, the village sacrifices some small beast and dyes skeins of yarn with the animal's blood. Each weaver in the village then cuts a single warp on their loom and creates some small token to be left at the altar of one of the Sisters.

GRIMHALD'S MOOT

First called by a mysterious figure known only as Grimhald the Cured, this festival is held every seven years, drawing residents from every dale and copse and barrow of the Levasti countryside. Each household draws lots to determine who among them will stand as their representative at the moot. Young or old, frail or mighty, cunning or meek—none are excluded from the calling. The chosen form a line at the edge of the old forest, their peaceful lands to their backs, and there they remain in silent attention from dusk until dawn, staring into the black. At first light, they return to their homes without uttering a sound, their duties fulfilled. Those who stand at Grimhald's Moot are forever changed. To be called is both a blessing and a curse.

SETTING OF THE WATCH

The Setting of the Watch in the tiny village of Ripon is more a ritual than a festival: it takes place every evening, as it has done in the many years since a band of raiders ravaged the area. Then, the sounding of an ox-horn at sunset called every able bodied villager to stand watch lest the raiders catch them by surprise. Now, it has taken on an almost religious significance. Everyone believes that if the watch is not set then the villagers who died protecting Ripon will rise from their graves to chastise all of their descendants. As the sun sets, the "Horn Blower," appointed to a lifetime term by the village elders, marches to the center of the market square and blows a single note at each corner: north, east, south, and finally west. The Horn Blower then goes to the eldest of the village elders to blow the final note, signalling that "the watch has been set." Ripon's inn has enjoyed modest prosperity from the curious who travel to watch the anachronistic ceremony. The current Horn Blower is a garrulous man in his fifties who takes great pleasure in recounting tales handed down from the almost-mythical original holder of his office, known today only as "Gramma Old Blow."

CARNIVAL OF ADVENTURERS

This festival was created by the tradesfolk of the Levasti countryside to discourage their young people from wandering off in search of adventure after several beloved locals died in a mysterious, far away forest. The carnival features games, rides, and plays. This event ends with the play *Death by Monster*. The play concludes with the actor who portrays the Monster lighting effigies of a rogue, a sorcerer, and a warrior on fire.

PARADE OF THE FIRST SNOW

Legend has it that the ancestors of the northern Levasti were starving hunter-gatherers when fortune shone upon them and showed large animal prints in the fresh snow. These prints led to a herd of grazing animals which they gorged upon. After this successful hunt, the tribe settled here. The villagers now show their respect to their ancestors by awaking at daybreak and marching in pairs through the fresh snow in large boots shaped like hooves.

HUNTING OF TORBOLD

A mythic swine of prodigious intellect and size, Torbold escaped his master on the road to market and to slaughter, dashing into the woods never to be found. Torbold is blamed for lost children, missing dogs, and uprooted crops. He is said to have fathered generations of enormous, cunning boars who remember humanity's betrayal of their ancestor. Every fall, young swineherds go into the woods to "hunt." They never catch anything, indeed, they must not. Instead they drink and wander between the trunks while older swineherds, butchers, and village worthies wearing pig masks taunt, trick and frighten the drunken youth in Torbold's name. The young swineherds who make it through the night are brought to a dawn bonfire and the sacrifice of a superannuated hunting dog that is said to appease Torbold and assure he will not recruit pigs from the village herd or savage swineherds when the village pigs are turned loose to forage acorns in Torbold's woods.

POTTERY PLANT FAIR

Every harvest season, denizens of a particular estate celebrate the nuppik fruit, sometimes called pottery plant for its unique properties. Though inedible, pottery plants become extremely pliable at a certain stage just before harvest. Farm folk dig up the plant and treat it like clay, forming anything from pots and plates to sculptures and statues. The creations then harden in the exposed air and sunlight. While the creations will soon rot, the farm folk will hold the Pottery Plant Fair to show off and judge everyone's creations. Few if any remember that a manikin taught the farm folk how to cultivate nuppik; no one but that manikin knows they taught the farm folk about the useless crop to keep the farm folk from growing more useful crops and limit human population in the area.

PARADE OF THE STRANGER

Members from rural estates march about during this parade in strange garb that they imagine a foreigner might wear. Participants of the parade take the chance to harass their neighbors, even going so far as to steal kisses and trinkets from willing "victims." Those watching the parade do not blame the parade participants, but instead throw food at them. The whole affair strengthens what everyone in these rural estates knows: you can't trust outsiders. Occasionally, the estate holders will take the opportunity to dismiss foreign help or drive off unwanted new neighbors who "aren't from around here."

SANDYWINE FESTIVAL

At first glance, this appears to be a standard harvest festival with all the stops pulled out—literally. Wine flows freely for all to partake as much as they like. However, what outsiders may not realize until they take their first sip is that earth is added into each cask. The festival memorializes a dusty-famine era before Saint Hester taught the locals the art of crop rotation. The festival only ends when the casks are empty.

MORTUNT

Mortunt is an evening affair celebrated in rural communities where brewing and gambling are primary pastimes. Now, it's mostly a night where revelers gather around massive bonfires, drinking and making merry before going off in groups of two or three to "kill Death" (or, really, do whatever small groups of young people might do during a night of debauchery). What's mostly forgotten is the origin of the holiday: a tale of three brothers who, in a state of drunken paranoia, set a bounty on Death herself. The group was found dead in a ditch the next morning. Their friends tried to "avenge" their deaths in each of the following years by hunting after Death herself. Rumor is that no one's collected that bounty yet, and so the festival continues.

ADMIRATION OF THE LAST LEAVES

This festival occurs in autumn when only the last few leaves remain on the rare wych elm tree. This solemn event is held to remember all of the family members that have passed recently. The event allows the village elders a chance to impart their wisdom on the young in case the elders do not last another winter. The elders sit with their backs against the tree between the roots after a small lunch and take turns telling the young circled around the tree all of the knowledge and wisdom they can impart before the sun sets. Afterwards, they have a tremendous banquet.

DUNSPHERE RAINDAY

In the hamlet of Dunsphere, everyone knows rainy days are surprise holidays leading to impromptu festivals in the meeting hall. This is because the last one to try and farm during a rain storm was old Duns Pier himself, and he was struck by lightning as he raised his hoe while everyone else enjoyed frivolity indoors. The last one to be "Duns" of the festival picks the new Duns who must carry a hoe around and do all the work of preparing a meal and filling drinks, because only a Duns would work in the rain.

MALPHUN'S END

The Talduhrim clan claims the mythical wanderer Talduhr as their ancestor and namesake. According to legend, Talduhr scaled and slew Malphun, the last of the giants, thereby securing the future of mankind. The Talduhrim commemorate this event every year with Malphun's End, a festival during which children climb an enormous tree in order to be the first to "slay" the giant by retrieving a sack of seed hidden in its upper boughs. The tree is then chopped down and its wood used to build a home for local vagrants and drifters. The seed is given to the recipients of the home so they can begin planting crops.

WIND DANCE BALL

This fall festival is quaint and modest in its attempts at elegance. Simple folk put on their best attire and go out to dance among the orchard trees as the leaves drop. Unlike other occasions, everyone seems to dance by themselves for the first and last song of the ball. However, this is merely the farmers' way of keeping up good relations with the wind in the leaves to avoid gales and tornadoes for another year.

FIRE WALTZ FESTIVAL

Anytime there is drought or dry crop conditions, some households hold these festivals to remind everyone—children, adults, and the fire itself—to be courteous and keep a respectable distance. Two fires are built near one another and everyone couples off to perform the dance. Unlike a traditional waltz, a Fire Waltz is danced from an open position with both participants keeping their hands behind their own backs. This is to remind everyone to draw near, but not be too close to the flames, and remind the flames not to be too close to the flamble crops. Children born with red hair are believed to have been conceived during the previous Fire Walz Festival; parents of such children are not well regarded and blamed when fires break out.

GOLDEN RIBBON DAWN

This early spring festival sees local laborers, farmworkers, and craftspeople festoon their hair with yellow ribbons as a symbol of their spiritual liberation. Though they may live a life of hardship under callous masters, their ribbons remind them—and the estate owners on whose land they work—that their eternal souls belong to no one but themselves. Of course, the yellow ribbon is also a symbol of more than one subversive cult, so who can say what the peasants are actually signifying?

MIRACLE OF NINE GOATS

In Haskell Abattoir, the ancestral butcher family of Haskell hosts the Miracle of Nine Goats celebration every year. The celebration revolves around the tale that, many years ago, before the Southbend became an Abattoir, the original Haskell family had a hard winter where the crop failed. The only thing they could rely on was their single pregnant nanny goat. Amazingly, this goat birthed nine kids. The meat from the goats sustained the entire family through the winter, spring, and summer before a new harvest could be had. From then on, the Haskell family became ranchers and butchers rather than farmers. During the festival, the nine most recently birthed kid goats are released into the countryside and marked to keep them safe. Anyone who would capture or harm one of these goats is treated as having done the same to a member of the Haskell family.

PHOENIX FESTIVAL

Legends say that many years ago in the town of Burnhamwood a bird all of flame flew into old Donoso's barn, burning it to the ground. In a noteworthy display of charity, the estate owner authorized villagers to harvest wood and raise a new barn for the Donosos. Now the estate holder keeps the tradition every ten years by allowing the villagers to burn the oldest barn down and build a new one in its place. The tradition has created a bizarre local economy around the value of old barns.

LETTERS FESTIVAL

In the surprisingly-educated town of Loria's End, townsfolk celebrate Saint Loria the Literate every year by teaching the town children how to read and write. However, when Saint Loria first came and taught the townsfolk herself, they did not know all their letters and worked with a simplified alphabet. Because of the business of the field work, she was only able to teach a few letters every winter with much success. She was patient, and taught all in the end. However, after she passed, the villagers kept up the tradition, inventing new letters every winter. Now, after many years and many letters, on the longest day of the year, the villagers hold the Letters Festival where they invent new letters to represent the same old sounds and retire older letters. It is considered the height of fashion to use the newest letters rather than outdated letters. No passerby can discern meaning from Loria's End written texts.

GREENING TITHE

Greening Tithe, thought to be an inland variation of Greentide, celebrates the life-sustaining connection of land and sea and centers on the upriver migration of eels from the Levasti delta. As the legend goes, there was once a priest whose boat was lost adrift at sea during the new moon. As he prayed to the Sisters, the moon swelled and so did his form, turning him to a giant eel. By the time of the full moon, he had swam upstream where the village feasted on his soft silver flesh—saving them from famine. To make the Greening Tithe, leftover scraps from springtime feasts are cast into the river every sunset for a fortnight, to lure hungry eels upstream. It is strictly forbidden to catch or eat eels until the full moon, however. Other versions of the myth tell how Old Green Teeth, a marsh troll, made his way upstream when selfish villagers stopped sending him baskets of food, snatching up their children as offerings instead.

BARROW'S WAKE

This festival is observed during the last wheat harvest of the season, when the pathways of shifting stones of the field are made visible for a time. These ancient burial markers, once disturbed by foolish settlers, have never stayed in the same place since. Some say they are the restless bones of giants, the prisons of hungry spirits, or altars to a long-forgotten saint of the harvest. As the stalks are cut low, the old paths in the soil are revealed, and the new resting place of the stones noted. Local geomancers record the stones' new locations and speak the wisdom of their winding paths for the coming year.

PORCUPINE FESTIVAL

The promise of gold at this festival attracts aspiring archers from tenancies all around the estate. Each archer brings with them their own bow and their three best arrows which they decorate so they can identify them later. The festival ostensibly is so-named for the way the target looks after all the arrows have been loosed. The archer who hits nearest the mark is crowned Quill Champion and they receive a prize and a place of honor at the porcupine feast. Little do the tenants know that by this festival, the land owners keep tabs on all skilled tenant archers in order to avoid a repeat of the "Porcupine" Rebellion.

MIDWINTER'S HUNGER

A private affair for each family, the celebration of Midwinter's Hunger is often enjoyed more by the young than the old. Meant to memorialize winters of ages past where food was scarce, the festivities begin after dinner when the oldest member of the family fasts as others eat. Then, as the fire dies, they take their place in front of the hearth and a crude obituary is read by the youngest. The family then holds a mock funeral parade and lays valued objects from the year past in on the supine elder. All sit in silence until the embers fade from the fire.

WOLF-AWAY

The serfs who work the land of the Gahldren estate hold this festival on the first full moon after the last harvest of the year, meant to remember the banishment of the youngest son of the estate's founding family. This son was unruly and disrespectful, going again and again into the dark forest against his parents's wishes. One day he returned home after having been bitten by a strange beast, and ever after his wild behavior bordered on the violent. In a mockery of the son being sent away, the local farmers dress their youngest children up as wolves and send them door to door to collect fruits and other treats from their neighbors. The children always end the night at Galhdren Manor, where they must toss their wolf costumes into the bonfire burning there before they are to return home.

FEAST OF ALL SAINTS

The various traditions of Ambaret are often celebrated in Levasti, as is the case with the universally-recognized Feast of All Saints. Whereas this festival is an introspective and somber affair in the capital, families in the countryside celebrate with joy. Perhaps away from the heavy hand of the Crown the people feel more free to enjoy themselves, or perhaps there is just less concern about offending the celebrants of some lesser-known Sister by not including her in the communal prayers.

MOONLIGHT MASQUERADE

This festival happens under every full moon out in the fields during the summer season. Originally intended to memorialize a clash between the local wildlife, attendees take the opportunity to wear ornate animal masks. All masks are made of precious metals, and many are encrusted with fine stones. No one remembers where the masks came from as they are passed down from one generation to the next, but the best genealogical record reflects a distant relative first acquired their mask through unknown means.

AMBORETH'S CATS

The people of Topper's Mill remember well the reign of Prince Amboreth. Amboreth was famously carnal, and took many male lovers, each of which he transformed into a cat after they were no longer appealing to him. They say these tomcats are immortal and still wander the land, meowing and pawing at doors in the hopes of being let in so they might again enjoy the pampered life they grew accustomed to in the prince's service. While Topper's Mill doesn't hold a specific feast day to remember this history, the local lord has declared that any tomcat seeking entrance to a home must not only be allowed in, but pampered excessively lest Amboreth's spirit curse the land.

FIRST APPLE FESTIVAL

This festival began as an attempt by an estate owner to incentivize good orchard habits, but has grown to be a fierce competition. Every year, farmers watch their orchard and prune meticulously to spot and nurture the first apple of the season. When it is spotted, the farmer's family will guard the apple while the fastest member of the family runs to tell the estate owner. The estate owner comes down and must see the apple actually growing on the tree. A spontaneous festival is thrown by the estate and the winner does not give any of their harvest to the estate that year. The practice has made the estate one of the most prosperous apple lands in the region because of the health of the trees, but it has necessitated severe consequences for even casually strolling through someone else's orchard without an invitation.

FLIGHT OF THE STAR-EATER

This festival is celebrated during the night of the brightest moon by the goblins who work the Levasti vineyards. Hundreds of paper lanterns crafted in the shape of whales are lit and set to drift over the countryside. As the story goes, a great leviathan once swallowed a fallen star, drawn to its heavenly glow. In time, the powerful energies of the star-metal lifted it into the sky where its bones still float, housing a monastery where goblin scribes protect the records of their civilization from the times of ancient Kalduhr. At festival time, the lanterns are inscribed with prayers, remembrances, and poems of revolution. It is these that make wealthy estate owners uneasy, even more than the vineyard fires caused by stray lanterns which seem to fall closer to their gates each year.

FAST OF FOUR STONES

This solemn event is undertaken in the planting season to ward off pestilence, blight, and famine. It commemorates the Salt Years, a string of poor harvests brought on by a corruption that rendered the soil dry, white, and infertile. The corruption is said to have ended when a set of enchanted stones, recovered at great risk by four heroes, were buried in the Levasti countryside. The fast begins at sunup on the first day of planting. At sundown, the estate holder buries four white stones in a fallow field. The estate holder then provides a nighttime feast to represent the end of the famine. The food at the feast is simple but abundant. Some scholars argue that the original name of the festival was in fact the Feast of the Four Skulls, and note with curiosity that the fates of the four heroes of the story have evidently been lost to time.

LIGHT-BRINGER FESTIVALS

These festivals are of recent vintage in the once-populus township of Wellspring; in fact, the township has been reduced to a hamlet in just one generation. The Light-Bringer Festivals began when a solar eclipse blocked out the sun for a full day. The oldest villager happened to expire just as the sun returned. Now, villagers believe that when either the sun or moon goes away, the oldest villager must as well to bring it back. The village puts on a festival to celebrate the life of the "light-bringer" and the sacrifice they are about to make, giving them anything they would like before their voluntary end. The few remaining villagers now invite older relatives to come visit near the end of moon cycles; the middle-aged innkeeper offers free room and board to any passerby who is older than they are. Surrounding villages now refer to the hamlet as Wails-Spring.

BRAMBLECHILD'S BALL

This festival comes at the peak of summer, when fallen branches and drying vines bring the risk of wildfires. Local children gather all the loose branches they can find, bundling them together and rolling them in a huge ball towards the edge of the forest where it is set alight at dusk in a glorious bonfire. Traditional rhymes and games center around the mischievous Child of the Bramblewood, a reckless spirit said to start fires out of boredom. Children are encouraged to play at all sorts of mischief on this night, in hopes of appeasing the spirit and safeguarding against its more destructive manifestations. It is understood among elders that every few seasons, a child sometimes goes missing during the Ball—but such things can't be helped.

Hisham's Fountain

MADELEINE EMBER

Hisham's Fountain was designed and funded by Lord Veirwick Hisham, the only scion and inheritor of the Hisham family estate in Levasti. Having been raised by nursemaids and shuttled off to boarding school as soon as legally possible, Vierwick had no relationship with his parents and therefore little to mourn when they died suddenly in a terrible fire. The fire consumed the entirety of their summer estate down to the foundations. Suddenly flush and with little else to occupy his time, the young Lord Hisham commissioned a monumental fountain and expanded the existing decorative garden complex on the land the estate once occupied. He added to this complex until his death.

The complex now sits untended and neglected, yet mysteriously functional.

The fountain...	and the water is...
⚀ spurts inconsistently...	⚀ cloudy and thick, like maple syrup.
⚁ flows sweetly...	⚁ clear, revealing beautiful tile mosaics.
⚂ dribbles pathetically...	⚂ murky, smelling of mildew and charred wood.
⚃ contains still, stagnant water...	⚃ filled with reeds, lilly pads, and rushes.
⚄ overflows...	⚄ a home to little blue tadpoles.
⚅ burbles exuberantly...	⚅ a strange, artificial, vibrant shade of blue.

The Many Histories and Details of Hisham's Fountain

⚀ THE NOBILITY

Some of the sculptures were carved from live sittings of local nobility. These recognizable stone figures originally engaged in dignified activities—painting, hunting, attending a masquerade. Yet not long after being placed on the fountain, these sculptures started engaging in the worst excesses of their class.

⚀ THE STONE

The stone used to build the fountain and its sculptures is of unusual density and polish —a travertine that is certainly not local. No one is entirely sure where it was mined, or why a local variety was not used instead.

⚀ THE VICTIMS

In addition to Lord Eurstac Hisham and Lady Berta Hisham, over thirty house servants and several young Hisham relatives died in the terrible fire. The youngest child, a second cousin to Lord Veirwick Hisham, was only five years old.

⚀ THE FLORA

The fountain gardens grow many cultivars that are found nowhere else. Some say the plants are cursed, having sapped the blood of the Hisham family from the charred earth.

⚀ THE SCULPTOR

The sculptor, Bastienne Roth, was a nobody before being selected for this commission. She continuously produced and placed the fountain's sculptures for thirty years with the help and finances of Lord Hisham, and then an additional twenty years after his death. She claimed that she never knew what or who she would be sculpting until she walked into her studio, where a note with detailed instructions awaited her. That these notes continued to be sent after Lord Hisham's death failed to surprise her. She claimed that at this point the fountain was "making itself."

⚀ THE SCULPTURES' MOVEMENTS

The sculptures move silently at night, creating new configurations of gathered figures, battles, celebrations, and coital trysts. These movements are never visible to bystanders, as they only move when unobserved. If continuously watched, the figures remain static. However, at no point can one person view all figures simultaneously, as the fountain is built in the round.

⚁ REMOVING A SCULPTURE

If a sculpture is removed from the fountain, several days later it crumbles to rubble which smells strongly of smoke and wood rot. The figure reappears in a fountain tableau within a fortnight.

⚁ THE VICTIMS' MEMORIES

Each and every person who lost their life in the Hisham estate fire is "memorialized" as a sculpture on the fountain.

⚁ THE INNER WORKINGS

A small, crowned door built into the base of the fountain leads to its complicated siphon, pump, and bellows. Unlike most fountains, this wonder doesn't use a cistern to pressurize and pump the water. The machines in this place appear to be self-sustaining, but their design is fundamentally incomprehensible. Rumor says that many have gone mad trying to understand its technical diagrams.

⚁ THE COINS

It's well known that anyone who throws a coin in the fountain will receive unexpected news the same day—most often positive. Coins thrown into the uppermost tiers deliver the best news. Any who take a coin from the fountain will lose their life or that of a loved one within the week, due to either drowning or fire.

HISHAM'S FATE

Lord Hisham, penniless from decades of construction and left alone without family or friends, drowned in the bottom-most tier of his creation.

THE GEARS

The gears within the fountain's mechanisms were all toothed by hand. The clockmaker, Mr. Procher Kholl, went blind in the process.

THE FAUNA

When the fountain is full, it sometimes contains a variety of improbable aquatic life, including rare ornamental fish, corals, large sea crates, and even piranha.

THE SCULPTURE'S EYES

Each sculpture's eyes were carved in such a way that they seem to always follow the viewer. How this effect was achieved is unknown.

THE POTBREAKERS

It's said that anyone who breaks open a pot in the fountain gardens will later be found in one themselves, their scorched bones bound in a muslin sack.

THE FACELESS

A faceless sculpture can often be spotted in a lower-tier tableau. This form supposedly represents the sculptor herself, Bastienne Roth, and is often in a pose of weeping. This figure never interacts with the other figures, who are always turned away from her.

THE PROPOSAL

Young Lord Hisham fell in love with a beautiful young peasant from Banorsmere, named Emelia. This woman fell desperately ill after Hisham proposed marriage. She lay abed for three weeks, wracked with pain and consumed with fever, covered in weeping blisters. The young lord, feeling responsible for her illness, avowed his proposal. Emelia recovered miraculously, with no memory of her courtship or Lord Hisham at all.

THE LION

The lion of Hisham's Fountain roars several times a day. This effect is achieved mechanically, but rumors claim the sound actually resembles the roar of an immense blaze, or many hoarse and desperate voices crying out at once.

THE HIDDEN COINS

The rumours swear that if a fountain sculpture is broken, one will find coins inside—all the coins ever thrown into the fountain, covered in black soot.

THE GARDENS

The gardens surrounding the Hisham Fountain represent a variety of designs and techniques. Cleverly planned by a skilled master gardener, there is always something in bloom year round.

HISHAM'S BODY

Lord Hisham was never buried. He had his corpse covered in gold—another sculpture for the fountain he dedicated so much of his life to.

THE OLD LORD'S ABUSES

There were many stories of old Lord Eustac Hisham's abuse towards those who served him—favoring punishments that involved burning, such as candles, hot irons, or red hot coals. Nobody regrets his agonizing death.

THE NEARBY TOWN

The proximity of Hisham's Fountain to the small town of Banorsmere means that many treasure-hunters stay at the local inn or with townsfolk. Although some residents of Banorsmere will express curiosity about the fountain's strange properties, none will claim to have ever seen it.

THE TOPIARY

The animal topiary in the fountain gardens leave their pots at night and hunt unwary treasure-hunters.

THE WATER'S PROPERTIES
If you drink from the fountain, it's said you'll learn the hour and means of your death.

THE CANDLES
At night, Hisham's Fountain burns with over 100 candles that are cleverly inset into the sculptures. They are lit using a miniature fire-starting apparatus that is mechanically integrated into the stonework. Such a wonder appears as magic to many. These candles never seem to grow low and only go out when daylight touches them. They can be removed from the sculptures, but they behave as normal candles when not on the fountain.

THE MANOR'S LOCATION
The Hishams' summer manor was built on an ancient fae site, marked with magic older and stronger than any human could imagine.

THE THREE WISHES
Sigfried Lengeurmein, now a magistrate in Anberlin, was born in Banorsmere. His aunt tragically died in the fire, but he returned to the fountain on three occasions to throw in a penny. Once, before he was deeded a significant sum of money that allowed him to move away from his provincial town. Again, before meeting his wife. And a final time, shortly before being named a magistrate. Every spring, he faithfully sends an entire bag of gold coins to be thrown in the fountain, to repay the good luck it sent him.

THE HIDDEN TREASURES
Hidden in the pots containing topiary animals are sacks full of silver serviceware, jewelry, and beautiful trinkets. The gardens existed when the manor was still standing, and it's said that these pilfered goods were raided from the burning building, then hidden.

THE TEARS
Each year, on the day the manor burned, the fountain sculptures' eyes turn black from edge to edge, and they weep a black sludge.

THE TREASURE-HUNTERS
Occasionally, treasure-hunters go missing in the gardens or near the fountain. They are later seen depicted in gilted tableaus on the fountain—often being mauled by dangerous beasts or stabbed by other human figures. Several days later, their bodies are found floating in the bottommost tier.

THE SKELETON
The skeleton on top of the fountain is a real skeleton, but nobody knows whose. Some say it is Lord Hisham, while others say that every bone belongs to a different person who died in the fire that claimed the manor.

THE SWORD
The sword wielded by the skeleton at the top of the fountain is real and extremely sharp. Anyone who attempts to remove it will bleed to death from whatever small cut it gives them.

HISHAM'S TRUE LOVE
Lord Hisham was a perennial bachelor—it's said he was married to his fountain, as no mortal could be as faithful as stone, nor as joyful as bubbling water.

THE PLAQUE
A brass plaque is attached to the bottom basin of the fountain. It reads: "To cool a parched throat, to soothe the touch of flame, to drown the past. With all I can give—Lord Veirwick Hisham."

THE CAUSE OF THE FIRE
The cause of the fire that burned down the manor is unknown, but some say a servant set the fire after being left holding hot coals—a punishment for spilling the lord's bathwater.

Deverain

JESSE ROSS

East of Ambaret lies the duchy of Deverain. Before becoming territory of the Crown, this land was forest. It was cleared for farmland, though the old flora and fauna continue to find their way back and attempt to take root. The Duke's Road leads out of Deverain to the southeast, heading directly to Fort Duhrin. However, the continual growth of the forest means that the road passes through a sliver of the Kalduhr, making it dangerous for those carrying supplies to the fort or bringing newly unearthed artifacts to Deverain.

You are interrupted on the road by...	while just inside the forest's edge lurks...
an overturned and burning merchant's wagon...	a half-drunk band of brigands.
a disrobed and embarassed nobleman...	a wild-eyed woodsman making animal calls.
an arrow-ridden forest troll moaning in agony...	a pair of poachers, wounded and panting.
a kingsguard blockade and checkpoint...	a hedge witch in the throes of a possession.
a writhing mass of roots and foliage...	a cutpurse, tiptoeing so as not to jostle their prize.
a pack of recently-feralized hunting dogs...	a panic-stricken noblewoman clutching a dagger.

The Actors and Activities of the Duchy of Deverain

THE DUKE

Ebbart the First, Duke of Deverain, has developed a reputation among the nobility of the kingdom as quite the libertine. He regularly hosts parties to indulge in his lusts and other vices, and to show off his collection of Kalduhri curiosities.

PROTECTING THE GATES

The city wall has two gates: the larger Sun gate, and the less-trafficked Moon gate. Hanging above both gates are a variety of baubles said to be "ghost charms" to protect the city from forest spirits and ritual magic. Whether they work or not is a source of much debate among the populace.

THE SHERIFF

Both of the gates in the city wall are patrolled by members of the kingsguard under command of the Sheriff, a cruel but cowardly man named Kester. The Sheriff uses his broad powers and armed enforcers to levy "taxes" on the residents of Deverain for anything that strikes his fancy. The latest tax is on wandering musicians and their instruments, of all things.

BANDIT CAMPS

Life is hard under the Duke and his Sheriff, and those who can't take any more of their abuses leave the duchy behind. Some look for an easier life in Ambaret, but a few hardy folk set up hidden camps within the forest itself, poaching off the royal land and seeking communion with the local spirits.

THE TWINS' BAR

The best tavern in Deverain is the *Weary Ploughman*, run by twin brother and sister, Balor and Brita. The twins are a welcoming pair, but waste no time making an example of anyone who looks to bring trouble into their establishment.

THE WITCH OF THE WOOD

There's a witch who lives in the woods, they say. Those who have met her call her Goody Mary or the Witch of Nevask, and say she has a fondness for copper bells, lost children, and little else. She will concoct you a love potion, though, as long as you offer an honest barter and don't bother her with stupid questions.

THE RAT MEN

Bandits lurk along the Duke's Road, ready to lighten the loads of unprepared passengers. Though most of the bandits are normal—if desperate—folk, some unlucky travelers have been stopped by men with the faces of rats, or at least very life-like masks.

WINE SABOTAGE

Deverain is surrounded by vineyards, and the Duke has done much to nurture the wineries of his duchy, hoping that one day they'll rival the sought-after vintages of Levasti. The Duchess of Levasti is apparently concerned with the Duke's investment, as rumor has it she'll offer good money to saboteurs with access to the Deverain wine cellars.

THE CULTS OF DEVERAIN

Like the other regions of the kingdom, residents of Deverain follow the teachings of the various Sisters. However, a few criminals captured by the kingsguard have been found to be carrying relics of strange and blasphemous gods, like the gold ribbons of the Piper, or the swine tusk necklaces of Gul Sorgul.

THE WELL

The Duchy of Deverain was established so close to the forest due to one peculiar feature of its landscape: a crystalline well which—some say—is a direct link to the land of the fae. There's no indication of this well in the settlement, though if it did exist, surely the ducal palace would have been built around it.

AN HONEST WAGE

The Duke has imposed high taxes on the residents of Deverain, which are used to fund three major ventures: producing the best wine in the kingdoms, expanding the duchy in all directions, and sending expeditions into the Kalduhr in search of unique artifacts. If you're willing to work the vineyards, clear cut the forest, or raid crumbling tombs, perhaps some of the coin that's been collected can fall into your purse.

LIQUID COURAGE

Guests of the Duke's frequent banquets are served a variety of wines unique to the region. Chief among these is ironwine, a heady blue vintage claimed to be made from a rare plum discovered deep within the Kalduhr. Drinking it removes all fear, and leads directly to the debauched extravagances and games of chance which conclude each banquet.

DEAD OR ALIVE

The Duke is offering a sizable reward for the head of the famed brigand Arkon Four-Lives. Curiously, Arkon's crimes are only ever listed as "offenses against the Crown," but many believe Arkon's true crime is that he seduced the Duke's bride-to-be away from him.

PATRICIDE

Sheriff Kester has a secret: he murdered his own father. Sure, he claims it was a monster in the woods that did it, but anyone who looks deep into Kester's eyes can see the self-loathing and violence. Why he did it, however, is still an open question.

A FAERIE TALE

If you find yourself on the wrong side of the law in Deverain, Sheriff Kester and his men will happily find you quarters in the local jail. In addition to the drunkards and paupers, the jail often holds "Lady" Asha, a troubled washerwoman who claims to have a castle in a far-off land and can purportedly communicate with her fae relatives via birdsong.

GAMES OF SKILL

For all the difficulties of living under the Duke and the Sheriff, Deverain is host to many joyous festivals. The most famous of these is Saint Aradia's Games, a week-long festival featuring tests of athletic skill, such as archery and pedestal jousting.

A RARE BESTIARY

The Brothers Ig are tanners and leather workers, but the real reason to visit them is to catch a glimpse of the record book they are compiling. They've made a hobby of interviewing hunters returning from the Kalduhr, and documenting the strange beasts they've encountered. They pay one coin for a good tale, but more for something with a hide.

NANA'S DEAL

If you need a place to stay in Deverain, check in with Nana at the Golden Banner. Her house—the one flying the yellow flags, of course—accepts guests on barter. The things she requests might be a little unorthodox, but a warm bed for a few nights is surely worth a bit of manual labor and a prayer on Nana's behalf to the patron saint of lost sailors.

HEADLESS ED

Ask any brigand who has slept a week in the woods outside Deverain and they'll tell you a ghost story like you've never heard. It starts with a knocking on the trees. Then the night creatures go silent. Then you see him, wandering alone: the man with no head. You assume he's looking for that head, but since that's where his eyes are, he doesn't know where he's been or where he's going.

BLACK MARKET

Because of its proximity to the Kalduhr Forest, Deverain has an underground antiquities market to rival that of Fort Duhrin. The market is dominated by two dealers—Black Ferdinand and Gargar—though both men are thought to ultimately buy on behalf of the Duke.

THE SHERIFF'S TEMPER

Sheriff Kester has an awful temper and just cannot take a joke. Some rascally children stole a donkey, riding it through the streets and calling it "Sheriff Keister" all the way. The Sheriff spent the next week yelling at no one in particular about how he was no ass.

POOR EVARD

While in Deverain, you must visit the home of Poor Evard. A simple look at their lavish living quarters would tell you they are not actually destitute, but they've developed a reputation as something of an ascetic after a recent "spiritual awaking." If you are willing to suffer some light proselytizing, Poor Evard might just offer you the clothes off their back.

A FOURTH KINGDOM

The Duke's outward obsession with banquets and winemaking are merely a cover for his true ambition: a kingdom of his own. If he can secure the loyalties of the monarchs in Naganeh and Tirollis, he'll have the backing he needs to declare himself king and remove himself from under the thumb of Ambaret. He may even grant significant land rights to those willing to declare their allegiance now.

THE VINTNER'S PAST

Deverain's two major exports are ironwine and ancient artifacts. Supposedly ironwine is crafted from rare plums harvested from deep within the forest, but the chief vintner started their service to the Duke as his court sorcerer. Now isn't that a strange career path?

A KINDLY MONSTER

Lurking in the woods, dangerously close to Deverain proper, is a massive and impossibly ancient beast with matted, moss-slick fur. It remembers the days before Ambaret, before even the kings and queens of Old Kalduhr. If you seek it with an honorable heart and freshly-brewed black nettle tea, it will tell you tales of young forests and silent giants and the true treasures of the wood.

TROUBLED WATERS

The Nevask River makes up Deverain's northern border. Across the river is the village of Nevask itself, known for producing sturdy cordage and hearty herbs. Members of the Nevask village council have pleaded with the Duke of Deverain and the Royal Architect in Ambaret to encourage the construction of a bridge crossing the river to connect Nevask and Deverain. The Duke is, apparently, enthusiastically opposed.

BATTLE OF THE BANDS

The Sheriff has his hands full because there's not just one band of outlaws lurking in the woods, but three or more. Deverain has become the battleground for a gang war of sorts, as each band fights to expand their turf and reduce the numbers of their opposition.

A SWORD FIT FOR THE DEVIL

The market stalls of Deverain are not as well stocked as those of Fort Duhrin, but there is at least one vendor to visit should you want to make an expedition into the forest. Samara the Smith is the best armorer in three kingdoms, well worth her high prices and bad attitude. Her champions and her detractors alike say she must have sold her soul to some demon to be gifted with such talent.

FLORIEH LULL

Spirits can't come into Deverain, but if you're going to spend any time out in the woods, you should probably carry around a ghost ward or two. You can buy the charms from Florieh Lull down by the jail. She won't say it very loudly, but she likes to let folks know that Sheriff Kester is a regular customer.

THE BANSHEE

That mournful song in the woods? That's the banshee. She always sings when someone leaves here. Some leave just because they have somewhere better to be—like Ambaret or the Blossoming Sea—but some leave to leave this world forever.

THE PIPER

That joyful song in the woods? That's the Piper! They play their flute to call us to join the revolution! We will throw off our chains as we dance! Let us set Deverain ablaze and birth a better world from its ashes!

PESTS

On the whole, Deverain is a beautiful city, with charming architecture and lush scenery. Just be careful with how you store your food and important documents, as it is prone to the odd infestation, especially of rats.

AN INVITATION

"This is an invite to the Duke's next feast. I would go myself, but he already knows my face. It's yours for the taking. Fill your belly with all the meat and wine that will fit, just save room in your purse for a bottle of his precious ironwine for me to examine."

PEARL THE POTTER'S GIRL

Arkon Four-Lives leads a band of merry outlaws which includes the young swordmaiden called Pearl the Potter's Girl. Pearl's father, Ormund the Potter, showed sympathy for the outlaws and was made an example of. The kingsguard beheaded him in broad daylight, and Pearl joined Arkon's crew that very day.

SECRET DOORS

If the Sheriff locks you up, don't worry. The jail was built on top of fae tunnels. Just look for the cat with nine tails, and it will lead you to a hidden door. You might have to spend some time in Faerie, but it can't be worse than jail.

LIVING SPIRITS

The ghost charms protecting the city gates work well enough against the spirits of the dead, but they don't stop the spirits of the living. And the forest surrounding Deverain is very much alive, and it's coming in through every crack in every wall, root by root, vine by vine.

AN INVENTORY OF VALUABLES & ODDITIES

IN THE POSSESSION OF DUKE EBBART

- *Amser's Faithful Steed*, a prized race horse
- A blue lacquered mask, sized for a hunting dog
- A silvered rapier engraved with grape vines
- A goblet with bas-relief imagery of the Duke
- Ironfruit seeds encased in hardened resin
- A glass terrarium of well-nurtured witchmoss
- A vase from the earliest days of House Deverain
- A tiny bloodbush, straining for sustenance
- Golden meat skewers with sculptures of trolls
- A simple music box that plays "Ara's Lullaby"
- An ermine cloak, dyed a deep indigo
- A crude iron statue of a six-legged horse
- An antique pair of golden wedding rings
- A painting of the Duke riding a blue stallion
- Bars of silver stamped with the Ambaret seal
- Returned love letters to an unnamed princess
- A stone that glows with a greenish light
- An Old One of the Forest coin, kept in his pocket
- A collection of forgeries of the ducal seal
- Delicate silk dancing slippers
- A small vial of paralytic faebride venom
- A silver filigree pendant of a spider and web
- A marble bust of the Duchess of Levasti
- Royal pardon for a sorcerer named Filor ib Ader
- A lock of auburn hair... or fur?
- A first-place medallion for Deverain red wine
- A clear crystal orb kept in a black velvet box
- *Terroir*, a sleek, honey-colored hunting dog
- A longbow, which belonged to Ebbart's father
- A wide range of perfumes in pink glass bottles
- A pair of iron manacles kept near the wardrobe
- A decorative shield with the Deverain crest
- An especially flattering portrait of the Duke
- An earthenware dreamtea set from Old Kalduhr
- Four granite guardian statues of winged bulls
- A necklace of ghost charms, always hidden

The Piper's Band

GABRIEL ROBINSON

In this cruel and peril-fraught world, few escape injury or affliction—yet fewer can afford the services of a trained leech or alchemist. So most folk turn to the hedge magicians and village healers who work for trade. As they share stories of survival and troubles with the law, sooner or later someone mentions a figure known as the Piper. The Piper heeds their grievances and gives those down on their luck the means to help themselves—have they heard the Piper's song?

These haunting melodies can be heard from the forest's edge—luring nobles from the path to relieve them of their heavy coin, invoking forgotten magics of field and hearth, and calling the lost or downtrodden to join the merry congregation. Those who follow the Piper work to set things right—a broken bone, a servant mistreated, riches kept on the wrong side of a wall where they do no one any good. Rumors regarding the true identity of the Piper or the intentions of their followers are as mismatched as the motley garb they wear. One thing is certain—the number of those who heed the Piper's call is growing.

When you first encounter the Piper's followers, they are...

- ⚀ laying flowers upon a fresh grave...
- ⚁ distributing the finery of a nobleman, who is stripped bare and bound to his horse...
- ⚂ serving a line of weary beggars from a simmering stewpot...
- ⚃ raiding an estate garden for medicinal herbs...
- ⚄ bearing an injured laborer on an improvised stretcher...
- ⚅ instructing villagers in methods of unarmed defense...

all the while...

- ⚀ singing an old song about fallen kings.
- ⚁ preparing new bandages, salves, and remedies.
- ⚂ passing out revolutionary pamphlets.
- ⚃ pausing, neck craning to hear a far-off melody.
- ⚄ leaving offerings for the Old One of the Forest.
- ⚅ playing a raucous tune on a strange assortment of instruments.

What Do We Know of the Piper and Their Band?

⚀⚀ INSTRUMENTS

Every follower carries an instrument of some kind for sending signals, raising spirits when times are tough, driving away spirits that linger too long, or busking on city streets for food or coin—and for when a whirling cacophony can provide cover for activities best not noticed by the wrong people.

⚀⚁ SORCERERS

The Piper's followers are a group of heretical sorcerers who weave diabolical hymns into well-known folk songs, thus entrancing their followers to commit acts of sabotage against an otherwise well-functioning society.

⚀⚂ EPITHETS

Followers of the Piper use many names: The Gutter Troupe, The Verminous Choir, Heralds of the Dusk, The Hedge Chanters, Our Noble House, Those Who Listen, The Usurper's Chorus, The Lost Congregation, The Ragged Conclave, Us Fine and Proper Folk, among others. Many have repurposed the insults placed upon them, proudly calling themselves Rats, Mudpies, Filth, and so on.

⚀⚃ THE GUARD

Among the Piper's Band are former members of the kingsguard—traitors and runaways, according to the Crown. More careful observations reveal how the horrors of war and their raids on now-ruined places took a heavy toll on their bodies and minds, robbing them of true rest. Here, they have a place to share their knowledge of arms and armor among those untrained and unseasoned.

⚀⚄ IS THE PIPER A SISTER?

Some say the Piper is one of the Sisters, but disagree on which one. One theologian claims the Piper is actually Saint Borafel of the Clean Hands—drawing power from the fear of disease just as she spreads its insidious terror through the manifestation of vermin. Thus, even the most casual worshippers pay her respects daily.

⚀⚅ SONGS FOR HEALING WOUNDS

Upon the Green, O Come Sisters, The Banks of the Naveh, Beyond the Hedge, Weep Not for Them, The Weaver's Hymnal, Deep the Roots, Lanterns Bright, Hunter's Repose.

A COMMON PHRASE

To "rat someone out" is to make public their secrets—an expression going back to the time a merchant of Ambaret's Paper District was ousted by beastbitten followers of the Piper, chased from his home by a swarm of giant "rats," leaving a trail of scandalous letters and falsified business ledgers scattered to the wind.

STREET PERFORMERS

Most street performers belong to the Band—usually those who can't afford a Crown license to busk in the wealthier districts of Ambaret. If you offer them fair manners and good coin, they might tell you how the Piper gave them their spark. If you share other things, they might keep an ear to the ground for you or reveal what they've seen on the streets at night.

SYMBOLS

Followers of the Piper don subtle raiments to signal kinship: a scrap of cloth in rusty gold, a ribbon of spring green, a simple whistle worn about the neck, a silent bell with a missing clapper, jewelry made from broken chain links, locks of hair bound in moongrass, a dried bloodfruit pierced by a black thorn.

THE OLD

The Piper's band embraces the elderly and frail—they have much to share, so rich with memories of erased histories and homemade remedies. Some have opened their homes to serve as unassuming fronts for those who need to shelter from vengeful kingsguard, cruel inquisitors, or debt collectors.

IS THE PIPER A FAE?

The Piper is an ancient fae who delights in trickery and subversion. It amuses them greatly to watch kingdoms topple while the downtrodden folk dance and sing in the streets and the green forest spreads over crumbling stones. Who can say what they are planning next?

SONGS OF GOOD CHEER

Our Noble Lord's Cellar, Quickly Rolls the Barrel, Join the Chorus, Clever Goblins All, Beneath the Floorboards, The Merry Lads of Muckling, Grease the Hinges, Down to Old Kalduhr, The Streets of Ambaret, Join Our Revelry, Kissed by a Faeborn.

SHRINE OFFERINGS

Shrines to Saint Hester and the other Sisters are frequently replenished with small offerings by the Piper's folk, as they know what it means to go hungry. As such, they never chase away rodents or birds seeking to share in the feast.

NOURISHMENT FOR ALL

A platter of vegetables from the lord's gardens, an ale cask that won't be missed, venison from the royal woods, meat scraps heavily spiced to cover the taste, vine fruit gathered by the swift and small, a merchant's wheel of cheese with rich blue veins, fragrant broth made from chopped bones and herbs.

TASKS FOR THE BOLD

Weaken the bridge. Pour the oil. Ready the snare. Sharpen the blades. Follow the tracks. Bar the door. Drop the torch. Dose the wine. Open the stables. Forge the missive. Scatter the ashes. Complete the ritual. Stage the attack.

THE YOUNG

Children flock to the Piper—street urchins and merchant apprentices alike—each returning with their own tales of the Piper and the song played just for them. No one else listens the way the Piper does. No one shares such good treats or stories, when they've done the little errands the Piper asks.

IS THE PIPER NOBILITY?

The Piper is nothing but a disgraced noble who turned to robbery and petty acts of rebellion to spite his enemies, manipulating the common folk to aid his poorly-wrought schemes of revenge.

SONGS TO STIR THE BLOOD

Honorable Thieves, To Make My Enemy Bold, Soon Shall They Fall, Blood and Silk, Carve the Bones, Stand Not Over My Grave, How Bright They Burn, Seven Arrows, Call the Hounds, Black Skulls (To Every Vulture Her Share).

STRINGED INSTRUMENTS

A collection of stringed instruments played by the Chorus: gut-stringed lutes, zithers made from salvaged cabinets, a broken-horn lyre with several missing strings, a single-stringed ektar (played by one-fingered Orel), an antique fiddle (played frightfully well by Suro, a wizened goblin), jewelry-box banjos, a wailing horsehead fiddle.

AN IMPORTANT LESSON

Once, during the Thief's Moon when the final stones of Fort Duhrin were being laid, every child in the settlement ignored the warnings to stay away from the woods. They all slipped away, following a distant tune that invited them to frolic by moonlight. They crept back unseen that night, and so it was that the Piper taught them they could go where they pleased.

THE CURE

One zealous sect of the Piper's followers have been developing "the Cure" for years in a network of cellars. Once a treatment for ailing beastbitten, this new formula supposedly causes a permanent shift to reflect one's bestial nature. Many cooks and housekeepers wait for the day a certain batch of "medicine" arrives, ready to flavor a dish or drink that reveals their masters as they truly are—vile rodents, roaches, and swine.

THE GOBLINS

The Piper attracts many so-called goblins to the Chorus, where they find an easy welcome among its throngs of mummers, scavengers, and ingenious survivors who do not judge a person by their shape or ways of thinking.

IS THE PIPER A DEMON?

Some describe the Piper as a hideous, bloated rat demon, languishing in excess below the royal palace while her thousands of children roam above to steal trinkets for her hoard, scavenge what food they can, and serve as her eyes and ears to keep watch on those who interest her.

SONGS OF WARNING

Heed the Waves, Into the Forest (Away We Must Go), The Butcher of Barsul, Ye Sad Cave Dwellers, All Paths Lead to Ruin, Lords of Clay, Lord Gahldren's Table, Lost to the Fen, 'Twas Best Left Buried, The Smoldering Moor, That Cruel and Twisted Mantle.

THE FIRST SONG

All who know the Piper first heard a song when no one was around to sing it. An old tune, long forgotten. A familiar tune, the words quite changed. A tune so beautiful it brings tears at the very memory of it—while being impossible to remember. The Piper plays it just for you, when you most need to hear it. How could you ignore such music?

A TASK FOR THE SUBTLE

Wait for a chance to perform at the Festival of Roses. Win a lord's favor. Learn his favorite songs, playing them often with a special swan-bone flute gifted by the Piper. When he falls under a trance, whisper to him the names of prisoners he should release, of those brutal guards he should punish, of a letter he should burn, or a camp in the woods he should forget about.

WIND INSTRUMENTS

The Choir's wind instruments: shrill whistles carved from green shoots, Hamsa's bellowing cinderwood pipes, harsh squawking reeds from the Fen, whispering flutes carved from warped bones of unknown creatures, crude yet melodious ocarinas of rich Velanti clay, heavy droning shawms, Nili's conch trumpet, blaring bugle horns from stolen cattle.

THE BEASTBITTEN

Scarred, silent, watchful—those beastbitten among the band earned their abilities intentionally and seek no lasting treatment, but relish their newfound strength and keen senses. Ironic, considering that the Piper's followers are disparagingly called Rats, as many do shift to rodent forms—and many things far more dangerous.

IS THE PIPER A PERFORMER?

The Piper was once a court performer who angered the royal family with a satirical performance that cut too close. As punishment, he was cut open in turn, exposing bone and flesh for the world to see the emptiness of his lies. They say the Piper's tune comes from his body now—the wind howls across his pierced and hollow husk as he drifts above lonely woodland paths by night.

SONGS OF TRAGEDY

Scavenger's Lament, To Blame the Fool, Forever She Dwells, The Roses Fair, My Cup is Dry, A Cold Hearth, Orphan's Watch, By Lantern Light, The Tarnished Mirror, Apples on His Grave, Black Ribbons (Ghosts of Duhrin), What Left the Blood on Your Fine Cloak?

USEFUL ITEMS FOR CHARMS

A master's glove, to prevent him striking you. A noble's monocle, to remain hidden from their sight. Your mistress's favorite candy, so she may only utter sweet words about you. A brick from your lord's manor, to keep you safe when inside its walls. A gnawed bone, to evade pursuit by the royal hounds.

TASKS FOR THE GLEEFUL

Replace the keep's banner with the Pipers colors—a patchwork of gold and green. Paint a grinning smile upon the solemn royal statue. Spread the wildest rumors before the festival begins. Deliver the sordid love-note in that priest's name. Set free the swine to join their brethren in the forest, to taste wild truffles and acorns for the first time.

THE PIPES

Everyone knows that the Piper plays twin pipes made of bonewood from the deep Kalduhr—or maybe it's a single, rune-inscribed bone from the arm of a witch that tried to curse her, ending in a preserved rat's claw. However, Old Gam insists it's two pipes made from the bones of the Piper's own two legs after a giant plucked them off. They grew back overnight and made her swifter than ever, impossible to catch up with unless she wishes you to.

PERCUSSIVE INSTRUMENTS

Percussive instruments of the Congregation: devil-gourd rattles, chimes from broken blades and armor fragments, antler-beaten frame drums of deerskin and lesser-known beasts, a great broken barrel bass drum, calimbas of salvaged wood and metal scraps (crafted by the Twins), rattles of teeth, hooves, and loose bones, Grishka's cymbals of tarnished copper plates.

IS THE PIPER... NOTHING?

Those with any sense know that the Piper does not exist. The so-called Choir are nothing more than a ragtag cult that perpetuates these myths to ensnare new recruits and stir common criminals to more heinous acts.

SONGS WITH SECRET INVOCATIONS

Our Queen Below, Heed the Call, Rising Flames, Grandmother Whisperwind, Seeds Shall Grow, The Bones Remember, His Verdant Brow, A Land Without Walls, Mother of Moonlight, All Things Return.

Fort Duhrin

THE GAUNTLET

When the Crown first began its bold expedition to the east, it marked its trail with a chain of small forts and settlements. Duhrin—the fort built a half day's journey from the dreaded Kalduhr Forest—was meant to serve as the Crown's first line of defense against the forest's dangers. However, once small bands of explorers returned from the depths of Kalduhr with golden idols and peculiar artifacts, the fort quickly developed a second purpose as the ideal launch point for all new expeditions into the wood.

When you arrive, the fort is...	because...
buzzing in preparation...	today is a festival day.
uncharacteristically empty...	a famed treasure-hunter is expected to arrive.
solemnly decorated with black ribbons...	there was an attack last night.
awash in conspiratorial whispers...	the Governor has authorized a hunting party.
flooded with haggard outsiders...	a new excavation site has been discovered.
under curfew...	a strange beast has been captured.

The Strange Figures and Stranger Mysteries of Duhrin

THE GOVERNOR'S DEBT

Rumors abound that the Governor himself is a former treasure-hunter, and that he built Fort Duhrin not in service to the king, but at the behest of something that lies in the heart of the malignant woods.

THE GATES

The esoteric nicknames given to the gates of the fort—Blindgate (north), Soulsgate (west), Beastgate (south), and Vinegate (east)—are said to predict the fate of adventurers who leave by them. Competing oracles and fortune tellers advise treasure-hunters using different interpretations of the gates' meanings.

THE PROFITEER

Old Meg has been widowed several times, yet lives a comfortable life thanks to generous inheritances and her keen eye for business. She turns a steady profit safeguarding the possessions of those who enter the forest. Her secondhand shop is even more lucrative, selling items left by those who never return.

THE KINGSGUARD RECRUITER

Delinia Alger is the hard-nose recruiting agent for the kingsguard. Brash, tough and brutally honest, she holds nothing back when denying one entry into their ranks. She seems to revel in telling treasure-hunters that their inevitable deaths await them in the forest.

FORBIDDEN FRUIT

The othagos fruit is readily available at the fort. The outside resembles a pale green pear while the inside is bright pink and produces a sweet and succulent treat. Most may enjoy this wonderful bounty of the forest, but for those that are allergic, the fruit will cause the breakout of painful boils once ingested, and possibly even death. Despite the risk, othagos fetches a premium from traveling traders.

THE UNSEEN JESTER

Drollo, called the Unseen Jester, is a hazard to avoid. No on is certain whether Drollo is always the same person or a group of people. He loves to play practical—and dangerous—jokes which no one sees coming until it's too late. Recently, serious criminal activity has been attributed to Drollo.

THE SONGSMITHS

A cottage industry of heroic, mournful songs about the Kalduhr—and those who seek to conquer it—has sprung-up in Fort Duhrin. For a few silver, you can make sure your own bravery is immortalized with a verse.

THE KINGSGUARD'S ARMS

Observant treasure-hunters will notice and note that the kingsguard do not use any piece of wood in their armament—not a haft of a spear, the handle of a hatchet, nor any arrow shaft. Their arms and shields are leather or metal exclusively.

LAUNDRY ADVICE

When you need to launder your clothes, you must go to Terabet the washerwoman near Blindgate. Not only will she clean and patch up your forest-stained tunics, she doesn't spout nonsense like Effa, the washerwoman near Vinegate. Unless you like hearing tales of snake people living in closets, avoid Effa and stick with Terabet.

THE GROUNDSKEEPERS

The Scrubbers perform a vital service at Fort Duhrin, working tirelessly to remove the constant growth of moss and plants from the encroaching forest, which continuously attempts to reclaim the land annexed by the fort. Grumley leads the Scrubbers with a near military level of discipline. He knows the importance of his team's work, even if no one else does.

HERBAL EXPERIMENTATION

Fort Duhrin has quietly become a center of research for herbalists and alchemists of all stripes. For those who know where to look, new species of flora and fungi are discovered every day. Each discovery is rumored to have a unique potency due to its proximity to the forest. This has fueled a robust underground market of experimental potions, poultices, and tinctures, promising protection from every danger imaginable—though verifying such claims can prove difficult, given how infrequently treasure-hunters return.

THE FENCE

Jakol Pyree is the best fence in the kingdoms. When something unsavory is dislodged from the Kalduhr, he'll not only find a buyer for it, but he will get it safely past the kingsguard—and all for an entirely reasonable fifty percent cut of the proceeds.

THE NIGHTMARE MERCHANT

Marsella of the North Quarter buys and sells nightmares. The nightmares she sells might offer a hint to the ways of the forest or the knowledge needed to perform a particular ritual. Those she buys nightmares from never dream again.

THE BLACKSMITH'S MENAGERIE

The orphans of Fort Duhrin say Argus Smith has a fondness for snakes, and keeps a vast collection in sturdy iron cages in the cellar beneath his shop. If you bring him a rare specimen, he might even craft something special for you.

THE STRANGE LORD

One of the young nobles of Duhrin went into the forest—just for fun, just for a lark—but he returned strange and different. His family kept him close and hidden, until his older sister died. They say a bride was found for him, but he drove her to her death with his singing. Now a new bride must be found.

THE ORACLE OF DAKALOR

The one-eyed Oracle of Dakalor sits hunched, ogre-like, on a pile of bones blooming with flowers and fungi. They wait for travelers to make an offering to the pile before naming three prophetic colors as guidance for the road ahead. Occasionally the Oracle will name other things as well—Hunger, Sadness, Blood, Roots, Mold, Treasure, Revelation, Betrayal, and so on.

THE MADAM

Missus Jarazel oversees The House of Fecund Delights, a brothel that caters exclusively to those who have ventured into the forest and returned alive. Their desires fall outside the realm of pedestrian perversion, and they will pay substantially to have them satiated. Her own trip into the forest as a girl was brief, but made a lasting impression upon her spirit and body. Don't ask. You can't afford her.

THE BRIDGE OF ROSES

People wonder if trellises were once required to support the flowers that cover the once-stone Bridge of Roses. Whatever the case is, today none can be found, nor stones, rocks, or refined wood. Only flowers, vines, and thorns are discernable components of the two-cart-wide thoroughfare.

TABOO TIMBER

Visitors to Fort Duhrin often ponder why so little construction within its outer wall is made of wood: imported brick and stone are expensive, and there is so much forest nearby. But locals whisper of what can befall those who sleep within a structure built of planks hewn from the trees of the Kalduhr.

THE CURSE OF THE GUARD

Rumor has it that the kingsguard are barely holding onto their humanity. The Kalduhr has slowly siphoned away their souls, and one day there will be nothing left but monstrous husks. A more outlandish rumor states that the Governor has already suffered this fate.

THE JAR IN KORMORAN'S WHEEL

The merchants of Fort Duhrin hate being undercut by the craftspeople of Kormoran's Wheel and have pressured the Governor to dismantle the village. He won't do it, though some say it's less a matter of *won't* than *can't*. Apparently a clever old witch in Kormoran's Wheel trapped the Governor's spirit in a clay jar, and torments it whenever the fort's forces draw close.

THE MASKED WIDOW

Patience Davies is currently observing a due period of mourning for her husband after his disappearance during an expedition into the forest. A gaggle of suitors orbit her, and she does not seem averse to picking one of them once propriety allows. Her mystique is enhanced by the traveling mask she always wears out of doors, and reports of her beauty have only grown in the time since anyone has seen her face.

THE BAD PENNY

Residents of the fort know what visiting adventurers do not—no transactions occur with any coin less than silver in the Terraced Bazaar. Locals know the bazaar is the last known transaction point of the Bad Penny—a nondescript coin save for a few casual scuffs and scratches distinct to locals. What started as a cruel game of passing bad luck among the denizens has evolved into a desperate attempt to be rid of the object at any cost. Increasing misfortune seems to follow the bearer of the penny until another willingly takes the cursed coin.

OLD GAR'S HOUSE

Folks speculate about why the forest wanted Old Gar dead. Once he died, it didn't take long for the forest to reclaim his house, thick roots bursting through the earthen basement and climbing ever higher. Today, branches jut out of broken windows in the upper floors and the cobblestones in the street have begun to shift.

THE MYSTERY OF THE STONES

Some say the stones of Fort Durhin were pulled from a quarry hundreds of miles away by the Governor's orders. Others say the fort was found, not built, and has been occupied by every doomed empire known. Everyone agrees the stones are not from here.

ALLEY OF THE LOST

At the back of a dead-end alley in the corner of Fort Duhrin closest to the forest, ancient roots emerge from beneath the crumbled city wall. The roots look sickly, but never die. When the full moon's light shines upon them, you can see the faces of adventurers lost to the woods etched in the grain.

THE MOUND BUILDER

By the main entrance to Fort Duhrin, just a bit to the west, lives Hawthorne Wavery, the grave digger. Rumor has it that this crooked old man knows whenever someone is lost to the forest, and that's when he begins to dig. Some folks see him get up in the night to start digging. Whether the rumors are true or not, Wavery's graveyard seems to always have just enough graves dug.

THE ORPHANS' PLAYS

Duhrin Orphanage is run by headmistress Jonel. She frequently has the children put on impromptu plays to keep them busy and out of the seedier parts of the fort. Although the scripts are always of a whimsical nature, many attendees say the events on stage echo their own expeditions into the forest.

THE SOUTHEASTERLY SAP

There is a gnarled old tree rooted in the southeastern corner of Fort Duhrin that, when lashed with a whip, offers marvelous, restorative sap from the great gouges that form in its timber. Some say, however, that it is when the tree weeps of its own accord that the sap is most potent and pure. But what restless treasure-hunter can wait for the proof of such a tale?

THE TRAINING GROUNDS

A few blocks of the fort are deliberately left to run wild, so as to provide training grounds for aspiring treasure-hunters. Half obstacle course, half nature preserve, this bit of urban wilderness has bolstered the hopes of some would-be treasure-hunters and claimed the lives of a handful who were clearly not cut out for the real thing.

THE NUMB QUARTER

The North Quarter is where gods come to die. The shrines are small and dejected, the last of the faithful sickened and hungry, and an aura of fading hope permeates everything. Those who go into the forest rarely pass by, but those who manage to survive usually end up here, because even nightmares are more faded in the North Quarter.

THE INQUISITORS

Though the kingsguard is the fort's official force of law and order, the Governor employs a small band of so-called "inquisitors" to investigate crimes he doesn't trust the kingsguard to pursue. Never mind that most of their targets seem to be the Governor's own political adversaries, who he brands as secret members of a dangerous, snake-worshipping death cult.

THE WISHING WELL

Near the Vinegate is a dry well. Hunting parties throw copper coins in for luck, but it has a decidedly unlucky reputation among the local kingsguard. Every few months, a beggar will descend the well in search of easy money, and then need to be fished out by the guards when they can't find a way back up. To a one, each beggar claims that, living at the bottom of the well, is a peculiar boy who eats all the coins thrown to him. The boy says that one day he'll find a way out of the well and finally eat the biggest, brightest coin he can find. The kingsguard refuse to verify the beggars' stories.

FACTIONS

Two small-but-growing political movements have formed among the people who live in the fort. Razers seek to burn the Kalduhr to the dirt and salt the roots, insisting it's the only way to be safe from the forest. Preservationists believe the Kalduhr must remain pristine and untouched, for the same reason.

THE MAP AT THE GOLDEN GOAT

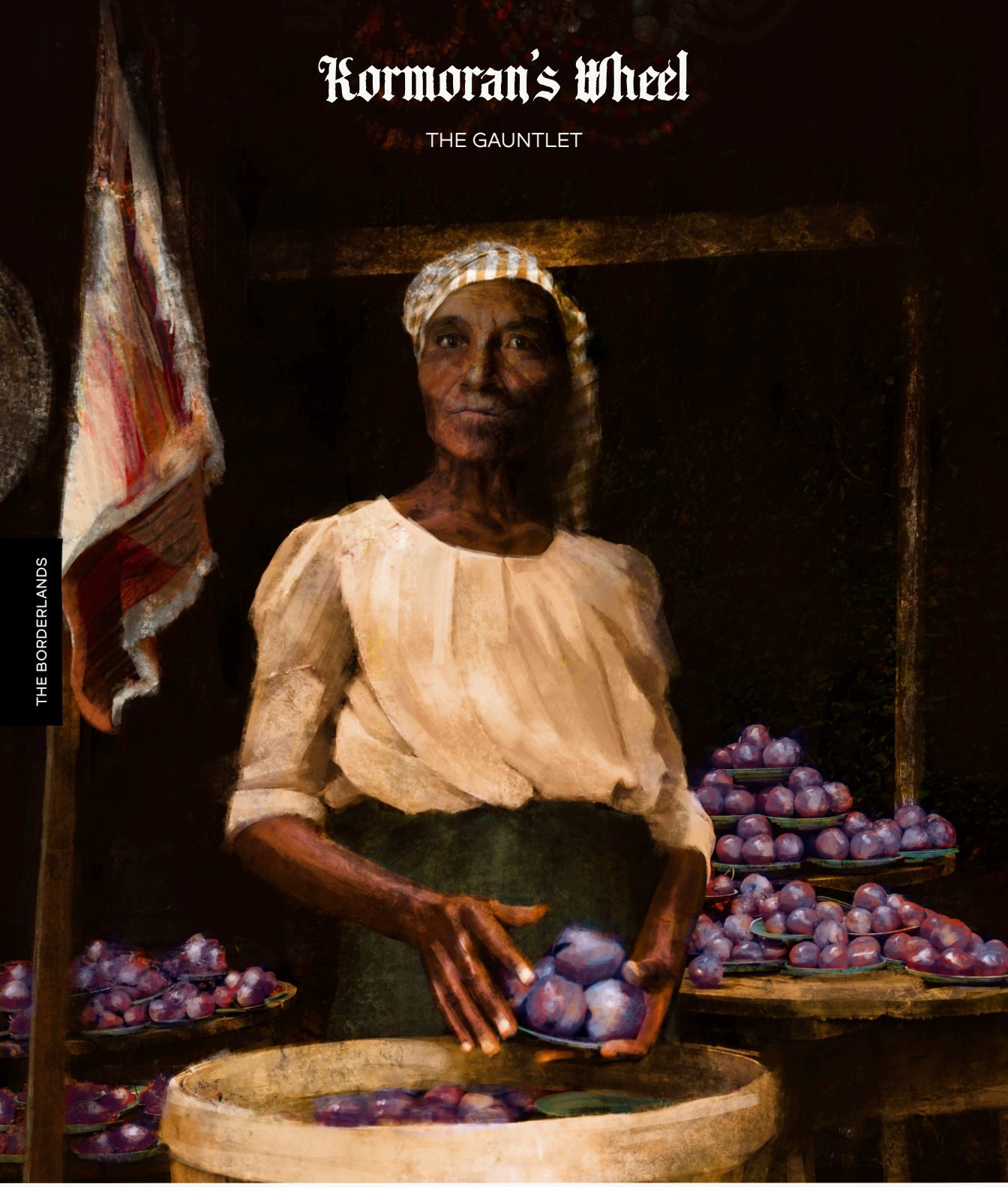
Not the best alehouse in Fort Duhrin (that would be The Last Stop), The Golden Goat boasts the largest, most accurate map of the Kalduhr. Anyone who makes it back from the forest gets free drinks for the night if they add to the massive map on the wall—before they start drinking, of course.

ORFIA & EURID

Of all the treasure-hunters who have made it out of the forest alive, it is Orfia ils Noril whose song the fort's bards can't help but sing. She's ventured into the Kalduhr's depths no fewer than seventeen times. She refuses a cut of any bounty, but everyone knows that Orfia is in search of a bigger prize: the thing that walks the forest wearing the skin of her wife, Eurid. Only once not-Eurid is put to rest will Orfia finally be able to rest herself.

Kormoran's Wheel

THE GAUNTLET



The ramshackle village of Kormoran's Wheel sits between Fort Duhrin and the heart of the Kalduhr, just inside the edge of the forest. The residents of the Wheel make a healthy profit on the poor planning of the many treasure-hunters that pass through. It's said that nearly anything can be acquired here, though those purchases are often of questionable quality or otherwise... strange.

The Vendors, Stalls, and Wares of the Wheel

⚀⚀ EBOJ THE CORDAGE-MAKER

Eboj the cordage-maker can supply you with as much rope as you need, and his rope is the cheapest available in the Wheel. However, it's interwoven with a very particular ochre thread that comes from vines found deep in the woods. This thread only serves two masters: Eboj and the Kalduhr.

⚀⚁ THE FAIR LADY

The Fair Lady offers various tinctures and herbal compresses for dealing with injuries that occur far from the healing hands of a physicker. Her remedies are harvested not from her gardens, or even from the forest, but from the oozing, otherworldly fungi growing on the five faeborn she keeps drugged and caged in the root cellar under her cottage.

⚀⚂ FERG THE DONKEY VENDOR

Ferg One-Ear can talk for hours on the virtues of donkeys—and little else, it seems. What better companion for your journey into the Kalduhr than one of his noble beasts, to bear your supplies calmly and without complaint? Donkeys will never let you down and always find their way back, dutifully bearing the treasures you're sure to find. Ferg can't say the same for all treasure-hunters, but that's humans for you.

⚀⚃ GONSAROD OF THE EARS

The impossibly old Gonsarod is perhaps the least assuming vendor in Kormoran's Wheel, making maybe one sale a month from his tattered rug on the dirt path as you exit the village. His selection is narrow: stone and clay ears of various levels of quality, all weathered and chipped hinting at ages beyond his own. If you can get him talking, he will softly mumble about all the forgotten gods he has left nearly deaf in his time and how their desperation leaves them receptive to a stranger's whispered prayers.

⚀⚄ MENOV THE SWARMMONGER

Menov has an array of jars of different sizes and colors on his table. He never strays far from them and he speaks to the inhabitants as though there is a group conversation. Within each jar are between one and six of his beauties: hornets, scorpions, centipedes, wasps, spiders, and bees. He may offer to sell one as a cure for an ailment, solution to a vexing person, or just a lively companion.

⚀⚅ JEHAORA OF THE SPIRIT-GOLD

Jehaora the sailor sells shells and cockles from the Sea of Martyred Souls, and also—if asked—gold coins to the foolish or the desperate. Gold floats on the Sea of Martyred Souls, each piece buoyed and infested with one of the ghosts who were drowned there long ago. If you buy the gold, you buy the unquiet soul as well, and it will inveigle itself into your dreams, into the lost thoughts between purpose and memory, into the frisson of deja vu.

⚁⚀ THE SISTERS' BROTHER

Though very few return from the forest, stories of those who do tell of the small idols they have carried with them through their journey. These pocket gods come from only one place: The Sisters' Brother, a temple and clayworks. The proprietor—a goblin simply called "Brother"—is a true artist, and will offer to whisper a special blessing from your god just for you into a pocket-sized, hollow clay doll. It will not come without a sizable donation to his "temple."

⚁⚁ GOHRAJ OF BARSUL

Gohraj is a spindly woman with bulging eyes, and sinew and skin so leathery it's hard to tell where she ends and her tent begins. She makes a steady sale of outdated blueprints of Barsul Prison. The medical wing is a favourite—it's currently out of stock.

THE BOWL

A strange stall is left unattended. It consists of nothing more than a sign, a bowl with a few scant coins, and a stone tile upon which rests a massive mixed pile of artifacts decorated with the trappings of opulent wealth and bristling with occult energies. The sign reads simply, "Take a treasure, leave a treasure. Tips appreciated. Beware thy greed." Fresh blood pools upon the tile.

ORDO THE BLIND

Ordo the Blind runs an unassuming food cart that serves morsels battered and fried on long skewers. At first glance there is no sign of affliction to suggest his moniker, but if one is patient they will see him cackle gleefully, plunge a skewer into each eye, levering the eyeballs from their sockets in turn, then proceed to batter and fry them to place them among the other morsels.

RUNIK'S FLUTES

Do you hear that sound? It is Runik, playing their flutes for the spirits of this place. Some songs put the spirits at ease, others stir them to dance or drive them away. You will find many kinds of flutes for sale in the hollow tree where Runik lives. They have hollow orbs of clay with finger holes arranged just so, delicate flutes of fragrant wood, polished goat horns with a soothing timbre, and slender whistles of bone which seem to fit your hands perfectly, as if they want you to play them. Where does Runik find clay of that strange hue, and where do all the bones come from? If you are careful to observe the proper courtesies, perhaps Runik will tell you.

FLIMHOCK'S WELL

Flimhock Dill, the diminutive owner of Naddiramiarach, boasts how his is the only store at the bottom of the well. When you gaze at the bottom of the well, he shines a light on his wares for you to examine them. Toss a coin and make a selection—the bucket will bring you your prize.

NURA THE LANTERN VENDOR

Grandmother Nura never sleeps, but hangs gracefully in her glowing silk tent and sells lanterns to those who would venture into the dark forest. Soft lights to bring comfort, radiant lights for guidance, and cold lights which reveal things otherwise obscured. How do her lanterns maintain their light? Why do they seem to glow brighter when carried down certain paths? Each lantern comes with a simple warning: do not ever open it.

THE BEGGAR'S BAUBLE

As you wander the stalls, a paltry trinket catches your eye. You dismiss it as uninteresting and quickly forget it. But then you see it again at another stall. By the third sighting, you are suspicious. By the seventh you are certain the trinket is following you, calling ever stronger to your coin purse for sweet release. Can you resist the call of the beggar's bauble long enough to escape the market?

ZIDAJ IRON ORCHARDS

Well-respected among goblins, the Zidaj family maintains an ironfruit grove just at the edge of the Wheel. The squat trees thrive in shade, protected from scavengers by a woven canopy of thorny briars. The fruits themselves are deep blue in color and have a faint metallic taste. A bite of ironfruit dulls the sense of fear, while consuming a whole fruit makes one numb and utterly heedless of danger. Wine of the fruit, if the rumors are true, inspires such a madness that those who taste it wander towards their doom with open arms, singing joyfully.

SANTINA'S SINGING FROGS

Kormoran's newest vendor seems out of place in the mud and the filth all around. But beaming from behind fine translucent silk, Santina is happy to sell anyone interested a tiny chirping frog. Why anyone would want one has baffled the town and yet there Santina sits as chipper as ever with frogs singing and chirping away.

OLINFEHR'S CURIOSITIES

The ever-eager Olinfehr excitedly rushes to greet anyone who gives a passing glance at his table, grandly gesturing over the broken equipment he has lovingly arranged on the finest cloth he can afford. If a customer shows the slightest interest in any item, he will breathlessly recite its entire history, complete with previous owners and memorable moments of use. Where he gets his information, no one knows.

THE RUNESMITH

Just outside Kormoran's Wheel lives a runesmith in a dingy tent. For a price, he will imprint an arcane mark upon your weapon—but to what end? Sometimes, a weapon will sprout roots and burrow its way into your arm. Sometimes, a weapon will send you into a deep and terrible slumber at the slightest touch of its hilt. And sometimes a weapon will be imbued with searing flame, and you will burn a furious swathe into the black heart of the forest, the righteous hand of vengeance and ruin. Don't have the money to pay the runesmith for his handiwork? Try one of the many discarded weapons that lie in the brush and mud around his shelter.

THE RAT CATCH

No rat catch is as good as a Kormoran rat catch! Place the circular trap out overnight in the forest, and small game of some variety will find its way inside before morning. Never you worry about filling it with bait of any variety—just be sure never to scratch the runes there on the side.

BRIGHTSTEEL ALLEY

Brightsteel Alley is a must-see shop on any adventurer's trek through the Wheel. Mr. Brightsteel, as he insists on being called, has arranged all manner of weapons in his alley by stabbing the blades and pointy ends into nearby structures and posts. All merchandise only slightly used, slightly dropped, or slightly blood-stained!

MEYER'S FURS

Meyer's Furs & Hides, the largest stall at this end of the Wheel, bustles with activity. Cured skins strewn about on make-shift tables, the locals eagerly ferreting through them. Toward the back, Meyer himself does the tanning, humming joylessly in his work. Anyone spending even a moment perusing will see one of Meyer's goons arrive, a dead treasure-hunter from the forest slung over their shoulder. They throw it down on the pile next to Meyer, the buzzing flies momentarily dispersing from the stack of corpses.

LOANNES'S JOURNALS

Loannes, the bookbinder, will bind you a unique book all your own at no cost: a Journal of the Journey. He asks only that you fill its empty pages with each and every triumph and tribulation encountered in the Kalduhr. What Loannes doesn't say is every day, his copy of your book will have a page filled as you write in yours, until the final day of your journey. The end of a tale is not always satisfying, but very final nonetheless. Loannes has a large collection of beaten leather tomes from a multitude of authors.

FELLIGUS THE DYER

Even those with both eyes removed can't miss the stall of Felligus the dye merchant. You can smell the vinegar from twenty paces. He sells exotic pigments and stains from across all Kalduhr. "Look! A merry crimson, a regal beige, a foxy, prismatic yellow," he says with a grin as he shoves skein after skein of thread into your hands. "One must not die looking a pauper!" The rain washes a iridescent slick into the gutter.

THE PACK RATS

For a small fee, Kormoran children will agree to carry your pack to the next village deeper in the forest. These children seem a might too eager, their smiles a might too large, and the greed and hunger in their eyes a might too insistent to be trusted.

VEGREET THE LICH

The crunch of beetles, centipedes, and roaches can be felt beneath your boots as you make your way into the den of of the "lich" who calls herself Vegreet the Bug Collector, and who is in no way just a mummified skeleton being operated like a puppet by someone hiding beneath her "magic robes," and whose eye sockets are definitely glowing with "warelight," not just a couple of small candles stuck there. Vegreet never sells the specimens from her collection, but she will pay a very high price indeed for a certain golden beetle found among the ruins at the heart of the Kalduhr.

THE SCENT-SELLERS

Do not venture further into the forest without first visiting the scent-sellers of Kormoran's Eastern Spoke. They know what creatures lurk in each season of the year. For a fee, they can cover your scent with unmentionable leavings of creatures more dangerous than the prey that might otherwise stalk you.

THE TWIN HEAVENS

The Twin Heavens, a pair of brothers more lithesome and beautiful than any courtesan in Ambaret, operate a spa and brothel for treasure-hunters passing through the Wheel. In truth, they are followers of Saint Evelyn the White, the Sister who soothed the dying (or soon to be dying) during the calamitous Age of Occlusion.

MAGS'S BONES

The locals avoid Old Mags's bone stall, but treasure-hunters may still find her wares useful. "Lazy bones," which are little more than long strings of bones, can be strewn around a campsite as a bit of a trip wire system for enemies, and as a distraction that smaller predators will merely nibble on in the night. Where do the bones come from? If you ask, Old Mags will simply wink and say she doesn't believe in any part of a beast—animal or treasure-hunter—to go to waste.

SOLOMAH AND HIS TROLL

Solomah managed to return from the forest with a captured troll. For a few coppers, he'll let you see it. For a few silvers, he'll let you fight it. For a few gold, he'll sell you its blood as a cure-all.

PATE THE TORCHBEARER

Pate the Torchbearer comes from a long line of torchbearers: his father was a torchbearer, his grandfather was a torchbearer, his great-grandfather was a torchbearer, and so on several more generations back. He wears a two-sided medal of Saint Ara. If there's a torch that needs bearin', he's your man.

TREASURE FLIES

Treasure flies are a specialized commodity of the Wheel. Are they just a big jar of flies? Sure, but break them on the ground in the forest, and if you are quick enough to keep up, they will lead you to some unlucky treasure-hunter who is no longer in need of their equipment.

HAMMOCK HAROLD

Hammock Harold, or Bartholomew Oxenborr as his friends know him, will insist that one of his hammocks is the safest place to sleep out in the forest. He denies the existence of the large, eight-limbed tree-dwellers, despite recent reports of sightings, and one rambling adventurer who returned claiming to have been caught in a hammock like a net by such a creature. Business is good for Bedroll Beatrice since the news.

PENELOPE'S BAKERY

Penelope's stall is easy to find: just follow your nose to the smell of freshly-baked bread. She took over the business after her mother disappeared leading some treasure-hunters into the wood, but Penelope won't make the same mistake. She refuses to go any deeper into the forest herself, but has promised a massive reward to anyone who can bring back information about her mother.

THE BEARLEADER

Did you catch a strange forest beast and now you aren't sure what to do with it? Bring it to the Bearleader. She'll do her damnedest to break it, train it, and put it to work. Some say she's a witch and has magic that lets her get in the beast's head, but however she does it, she's got a nearly 40% success rate. The ones she can't break end up at Ordo's food cart.

BARREL'S ARTIFACTS

Most folks wait until they get to Fort Duhrin to unload any artifacts they've recovered. But for the impatient—and gravely injured—there's always Barrel's. Barrel (a giant of a man) and his sons (equally large) pay a lower rate than found in the royal strongholds, but they'll take most anything. And if you find anything marked with the royal brand of the Noh dynasty, they'll even let you name the starting offer (though they'll still probably talk you down from there).

VORRYS THE RANGER

The ranger Vorrys will guide you deep into the Kalduhr if the price is right. During your journey, he will explain that he is actually the son of a great noble house, that his family's estate used to be the seclusium of a powerful wizard, that he once saw a woman give birth to thousands of tiny spiders, that he has single-handedly bested a balindrakir, and that he can communicate with the bit of slime he keeps in his pocket via telepathy. You may come to regret hiring him.

UNCONVENTIONAL & OMINOUS ITEMS FOUND IN THE MARKETS OF THE WHEEL
Flint and steel used for warming the soul
A mallot and pitons inlaid with silver
A pet crow that can squawk out a few riddles
Cold iron-forged skinning knives
A bundle of herbs to use against "that swine"
A cloak that the seller swears will ward off fae
A bag of bird bones, for telling the future
A vial of deep brown liquid "for courage"
Fishing gear, but the line is spun copper
A jar of glowworm eggs, should hatch in a week
A sparrow that sings when near hungry ghosts
Torches that will never get wet
A quick sketch of yourself "as a reminder"
Bread made from the ashes of a captured beast
Honeyed stag heart: King Ibra's famous last meal
A set of polished stone dice to pass the time
Wooden spoons branded with the Old One's face
A good luck seed to tuck in your boot
A fern soup which smells of mustard and fish
A dreamcatcher, for keeping away nightmares
A scaled leather pouch filled with baby teeth
Two swigs of the "Lost Hand Libation"
A green forest nut to chew on "for focus"
Clothes made with a thread that keeps bugs away
Single-person tents with uncuttable fabric
Arrowheads dipped in silver and blessed oils
Your own personal Sister, contained in a rock
A single lethal dose of white widow poison
A second-hand set of prayer beads
Gravemusk, to make you smell like the dead
A spare set of boots, flecked with blood
A ragdoll modeled after a fellow treasure-hunter
A pocket guide to toxic and edible plants
A whistle to be used only as a "last resort"
Self-amputation kits
Enough salt to draw a circle around yourself

Local Gods

JAMES HOLLOWAY

There are many gods within the lands ruled by the Crown, and very few who carry consistency about their definition. What one town calls a "god" might be considered a "spirit" in the next village over, while another community might consider the god's rites no more than a municipal celebration with no religious aspect at all. The Crown's approach to religion means that these cults do not find themselves in conflict—most people recognize that the gods worshipped by their neighbors exist, but do not agree that they are the gods most worthy of celebration. Religious conflict is rare, but when it arises, it's typically suppressed by the Crown.

In general, the Crown's subjects do not believe in direct contact with the divine; the Sisters mediate between mortals and the eternal. As a result, most settlements that worship a god tend to worship only one, with which they believe themselves to have some kind of special connection—whether geographic or historical.

The locals treat their god as...

- a local custom, which is as much community-bonding tradition as it is faith...
- a defiant mark of their unique identity...
- obviously compatible with the faith of the Sisters—why would anyone think otherwise?...
- a guilty secret, in whose worship they indulge mostly when outsiders aren't looking...
- an aspect of the primal divine...
- a quaint superstition, in whom only a handful of eccentrics believe...

when in fact it is...

- a spirit once worshipped in an earlier age, awakened by their prayers.
- one of the many faces of the Old One of the Forest.
- a fae creature or a wise beast—powerful, but not truly divine.
- a new being, brought into existence by the intensity of their belief and the magic of the Kalduhr.
- a demon, summoned from an unknown underworld to prey on their credulity.
- a genuine god.

Which Obscure God Is Worshipped in This Village?

THE OLD SERPENT

Most villages fear the wisdom and cruelty of serpents, but a few venerate the Old Serpent. Those who revere her respectfully address her as "grandmother" and leave offerings in the places where her children den. Villagers who have survived a snakebite are said to have her blessing: they can speak the language of serpents and see through their eyes. Such favored ones have the power to cure all poisons and venoms, but may charge what price they see fit. Some scholars see in this belief a distorted version of the serpent faith of the kingdom of Naganeh.

CWLTH

Stag-horned, skull-faced, green-clad, this god of virility and prophecy can appear as a robed figure or a giant stag bedecked with green ribbons. Every year, villagers parade a wicker effigy into the town square and fill it with offerings of food and drink before finally burning it. Those who plan to do great deeds in the coming year anoint their faces with the ashes in public testimony of their ambition.

KOROS, SON OF THE SKY

Born in the heavens, Koros came to earth for the love of a mortal. He taught people how to foretell times using the stars, as well as other esoteric teachings. Paper banners festoon the village, bearing prayers to Koros in codes legible only to ever-higher grades of initiation. The god disappeared in the forest, but may return once the final secret of his rites has been unlocked. His priests constantly test youngsters to see which of them has the aptitude to solve this ancient riddle.

HASHAR, THE EAST WIND

Associated with rumour, trade, and travel, this shape-changing wind deity watches—not "watches over"—those who wander the roads of Kalduhr. Each year it is propitiated during the Clear Wind Festival—a three-day rite where villagers place sacrifices of food, drink, and valuables on high, rickety platforms to let the wind take them away. The highest platform is a sign of the deity's favor, and families compete to build the loftiest. The arrival of a traveller during the festival is a great portent.

EDRAWN, THE WHISPERING LORD

Faceless but many-bodied, this cryptic figure offers to teach his devotees how to win love, find buried treasure, and even turn invisible. No shrines are ever built in his honor, but travellers may find boulders chalked with strange glyphs or see small offerings left at cave mouths. To steal one of these offerings is to invite his curiosity.

GOLDEN SHUN

This wise minister brings prosperity. Shun was once part of a complex divine pantheon, but this is now lost and only Shun remains as a relic of a more civilized age. Merchants and bankers pray to Shun, proudly displaying golden icons of the god as a sign of prosperity. But even the poorest house may have a gaudy statue of the wealth-god, shined to brilliance by the devotion of desperate hands. Shun hates thieves, but thieves love Shun.

HE WHO WALKS AMONG STONES

This god has two aspects—a smiling youth with honey-colored skin, and a grim spectre armed with a blood-spattered maul. Peculiarly, it is the beautiful youth whose rites are celebrated with the shedding of innocent blood, while the crypt god's ceremonies are dignified and austere. Standing stones and graveyards are sacred to him.

LAKHIL, IMMORTAL OF WINE

Although the mortal shell of this god died centuries ago, their legacy persists in their believers, who fermented their decomposing corpse and drank the resulting liquor. Now, when one of the god's followers dies, their body is placed in a sealed jar to ferment. The faithful distill the resulting liquid to produce a powerful intoxicant consumed during their initiation ceremonies. In this manner, the god's divine presence stays within the bodies of their devotees. Drinking the brew is said to grant believers visions and supernatural powers. To the unbeliever, however, the wine brings only death.

FORTUNATE EYRA

The folk of this village offer hard-earned coins and shiny trinkets to this goddess, said to bestow good and ill fortune. Truly zealous believers consider luck to be contagious. They shun the unfortunate—harassing and hazing them until they leave town—and constantly hang around those who appear blessed with luck's smile.

SQUIRREL

This nimble-witted forest creature appears in many myths as a trickster figure. Depending on the interpretation, he's a rogue element eventually tamed by the generosity and patience of the Sisters, or he's a wild creature whose hilarious pranks let some of the air out of the upright, pious saints. Few worship Squirrel directly—those who do claim that the rodent's hijinks are actually evidence of a more enlightened viewpoint than ordinary mortals can comprehend.

AKHILA, HERO OF HEROES

When humanity's hubris released the Great Devourer upon the world, this cosmic hero undertook a great quest to bind the evil of the hungry goddess. The brave deeds of this quest form the basis of a holy pilgrimage—an aspiring hero who completes all stages of the pilgrimage can gain the blessing of this divine warrior.

HAFNI, THE HUNTER

The great hunter prowls the shadowed paths of the Kalduhr Forest. The worship of Hafni recognizes the inherent tension in venerating the wood while also surviving by preying upon its creatures. Through prayer, Hafni's worshippers accept the spirits of the forest's animals into themselves; these hybrid souls' killings are part of the cycle of predation. But some say they are changed by the experience, and now bear an eerie resemblance to the cursed beastbitten.

GUL SORGUL, THE GREAT BOAR

This massive, brutal creature prowls the fringes of the forest around this village. No one ever sees it, but villagers find the marks of its tusks on trees, the deep tracks of its trotters in the leaf litter, and the plumes of steam that give away its mighty breath. Its devotees strive to emulate its virtues of raw strength and stubborn determination. Priests of the boar know the rites that allow them to slaughter swine without incurring its wrath; they offer blood and the fruits of the forest to it in seasonal rites. Gul Sorgul cares nothing for their worship.

GOLD MOTHER & GREEN MAIDEN

Some villages believe that these traditional goddesses of vegetation and the harvest are close kin to the Old One of the Forest; others say they are deadly enemies, since Mother and Maiden are civilized and generous to humankind. Some claim these two deities are aspects of the Mother of Millions, bound and tamed by the rites of their priests. Others say they're the point of the Mother's spear, bound never to rest until the wild wood becomes tame farmland.

THREE SWORD SISTERS

Although these goddesses are sisters, they are not Sisters—a distinction the villagers are tired of explaining to visitors. About twenty minutes' hike from here, three massive monumental swords jut, hilts upward, from the forest floor, plunged there in distant antiquity by the goddesses. Each goddess, and thus each sword, is sacred to one of the village's secretive initiatory warrior lodges.

THE VERDANT SAGE

This enigmatic figure is the source of hundreds of sayings, both commonplace and cryptic. Some are familiar: "As the Verdant Sage once said," a villager might remark, "three's a crowd." Others are baffling: "In the immortal words of the Verdant Sage, the mother bird never sits on the snake's eggs." Some believe that mastering the hidden truths of these gnomic utterances will result in enlightenment. Others claim that they're a complex puzzle that spells the way to an ancient treasure. Some think it's a scam, but since the Sage has no priesthood, it's hard to see who would benefit.

HIGH JUSTICE

For many subjects of the Crown, the phrase "high justice" is merely a proverb used to wish divine justice on a dishonest person. In this village, however, the legalistic orthodoxy of High Justice flourishes. Here contracts are sacred, legal language is baffling, and outsiders may find themselves in breach of laws they never even knew existed.

DAUGHTER OF HEAVEN

Known by many names—Bala, Bairen, Filar, Pelam, Parai, and Vaialen, to name a few—this beloved goddess descended into the underworld to retrieve lost secrets known by ancient empires, including fortune-telling, medicine, and navigation. Her followers seek to commune with her through meditation, fasting, and ecstatic dancing.

BAKANATH, THE ONCE-DEMON

This god was once a vile demon until seven Sisters, singly and then all together, prayed for him and taught him their doctrines. He experienced enlightenment and immediately ascended to godhood. He is now patron of those who forsake evil to follow the path of righteousness. In another aspect, he is patron of all those who do evil deeds for the sake of a greater good. His scriptures are a syncretic mess—no one cares.

OUR EIGHT-LEGGED LADY

The clever spider-goddess is the patron of healers, weavers, builders, poets, and other practitioners of complex arts. Her devotees wear clothing with intricate web patterns cunningly worked into the designs. Only those chosen by the faith's secretive inner council may become full initiates. Those who do learn the secret of the goddess's plan to save the world from destruction by wrapping it in a preserving web.

DUSEH, GOD OF THE FORGE

The god-smith hammers out the destinies of mortals on a heavenly anvil. His worshippers pray to him for strength, and for the skill to shape their own fates. His cult is predictably popular among smiths and other artisans. The higher grades of initiation involve the creation of more and more complex artifacts, often requiring esoteric techniques and rare materials from bygone ages.

PRINCE OF HELL

Known by many names, the Prince is a lonely wanderer who left the sterile glories of hell for the delights of the mortal world. Caught by his fearsome parents, the Prince was forced to return to the underworld, but satisfies his longing for the upper world by serving as a psychopomp, guiding dead souls to their fate. In settlements where the Prince is revered, art depicting his final rendezvous with the deceased is often curiously tender and romantic.

ORMANTI, THE RED ONE

Many-limbed and many-weaponed, Ormanti is the goddess of war. Soldiers hailing from this village and its surrounds propitiate her rather than worship her, making offerings to turn the dread goddess's bloody gaze away from them. Only the mad pray for war.

DERUN, THE LAST KING

The Last King is a fearsome and jealous god, and the villagers here say his wrath destroyed the bygone empires of Kalduhr because they dared to compete with his magnificence. Derun's worshippers refuse to acknowledge any form of mortal authority, lest they tempt their god's fury. Of course, their society is just as hierarchical as any other, but without titles or formal ranks.

PABAKHAR, THE THUNDERBOLT

This goddess delivers vengeance on all those who break their oaths or deals unjustly. When she weeps for the evils of humanity, rain falls; when she rages at it, thunderstorms appear. Her worshippers embrace, or at least accept, a rigid code of honesty and social conduct. Their ceremonies are severe, fearful, traditional, and joyless.

ANGEL OF CHAINS

The golden chains that make up this divine figure's wings symbolize the chains of civic harmony—the ties that bind neighbors to neighbors and rulers to the ruled. The village's worthies wear golden chains to signify these bonds, but some believers wear chains of iron to show how heavily they weigh.

NUVI, THE CLOUD MAIDEN

This goddess's worship originates in the folk belief that all clouds are herded by a celestial shepherdess—farmers offer sweets, toys, and trinkets to tempt the young girl to their fields with her rain-bringing flock. More recent tales tell of the cloud maiden's adventures as she defeats monsters and plays tricks on the older gods.

UNITY

This deity... or tutelary spirit, or bogeyman, or whatever it is... is not a single individual, but rather the sum of every person whose death was marked by this town's unique funerary rites. Each new believer adds their knowledge, their personality, and their ambitions to the composite mind of Unity. It speaks in the sighing of the wind among the tombstones. Its will is never the same twice. It has ten thousand memories, ten thousand dreams, and ten thousand unsettled grudges.

TIR, THE ILLUMINATED ONE

This radiant deity appears as a lion-bodied, ram-headed, eagle-winged beast of legend. Only those who spent worthy lives in prayer and self-denial can receive the undying fire of its mystical doctrines.

SATHAS, LADY OF TOMES

This goddess taught humanity the arts of literacy. Her followers revere all documents and will never destroy them, no matter how illegible or irrelevant. The blue shrines of Sathas are crammed with chests, pigeonholes, and untidy heaps of books, scrolls, letters, and random scraps of paper. Great wisdom may be contained in them, but the ossified priesthood of this cult regards only writing—not the knowledge it represents—as sacred, and little is catalogued. In some places, she is worshipped in the guise of a Sister, with almost identical rites.

FILAKH, BRINGER OF PLENTY

This figure, depicted in village murals with a fat-bellied cauldron, is the patron deity of abundance and the symbol of the bountiful earth. Gaining Filakh's blessing is not easy; before the deity will bless a plot of land, it must be purged of competing supernatural forces. Thus, the faithful are particularly interested in rooting out ancient ruins and other spiritually dangerous sites, which they believe prevent communion with Filakh.

YILOS, THE BLACK MOON

This celestial deity represents the dark disc that obscures the moon's light and, by extension, the dark side of all luminous things. Worshippers offer up their sinful thoughts to the bright spirit's dark counterpart, purging themselves of them. Rumors exist of a secret society within the priesthood of Yilos that collects and stores the knowledge of these forbidden impulses.

GATHAL, THE CLAY SPIRIT

This genius loci inhabits a stratum of clay located nearby. The villagers dig out the clay to make pots, whistles, dice, and other items of unearthly luster. Only the initiated have the right to dig this clay, and only at certain auspicious times, which makes items formed from Gathal Clay very expensive. Worshippers believe that such items protect their owners from harmful magic. Once the clay deposit runs out, the faithful will have used up their god.

LORVO, GOD OF TOIL

The patron of all who labor and suffer, Lorvo is the worker of the gods, who toils excavating rivers and raising hills according to the plans of his divine masters. To most worshippers, Lorvo offers little beyond patient solidarity, but the high priests of this faith can petition the god for an under-the-table favor, such as redirecting the flow of a river for a little while—just until the boss notices, of course.

MUMIL

The patron of music appears in many forms, always depicted holding an instrument, but never in the act of performing. The music of Mumil is said to be the expression of cosmic harmony, produced by the endlessly complex interplay of creation and destruction. Those who master her inner, esoteric teachings can hear these notes, allowing them to predict the future and detect the relationships between seemingly unrelated things.

DAUGHTER WOLF

A child of the Old One, or of some older, long forgotten power, Daughter Wolf is the bloody huntress of the forest, pitiless and untamed. The villagers here offer her a portion of what they hunt to keep her from preying on them. A handful pursue the deeper mysteries—an older form of the faith where devotees seek to become perfect, inhuman killers like their grey-coated goddess.

Blasphemous Cults

JAMES HOLLOWAY

While the Crown's religious policies are relatively lax, there are some beliefs that violate the Sisters' teachings to a point where they must operate in secret. Some of these cults are merely deluded—others have access to forbidden magic.

This cult is...	and...
secretive and selective, with ritual initiation codes...	seeks to expand its influence into new areas.
loud and spoiling for a fight with the authorities...	has been infiltrated by agents of the Crown.
outwardly a heterdox sect devoted to the Sisters...	its leader has an agenda in opposition to the cult's.
a handful of devotees of a charismatic preacher...	will soon cause disaster via a power out of its control.
drawn together by shared dreams and visions...	has unwittingly discovered a valuable artifact.
handed down within a tight-knit set of families...	is infected by a demon of contagion it summoned.

Which Cult Is This?

KILLERS OF THE DEAD

Many have heard of the Killers of the Dead, a secret society devoted to hunting and killing undead creatures. While many gods disapprove of the living dead, these hunters are devoted to the Devourer—one who condemns any attempt to avoid the natural process of death, rot, and decay.

OMNIPHAGOUS BROTHERHOOD

The Omniphagous Brotherhood are ritual gluttons who believe that consuming precious and magically powerful objects and creatures will bring them closer and closer to godhead. The most ambitious priests of this sect offer great rewards for such meals.

NULL CATECHISM

Followers of the Null Catechism cultivate detachment—only once they have freed themselves from the fetters of family, community, and attachment can they perceive the infinite. Most are harmless anchorites, resentful of the people who feed them out of respect for their misunderstood piety. But a small fraction of Nullites believe that their mission is to evangelize nothingness, severing others from their worldly ties so that they might be enlightened—forcibly if need be.

IRON SODALITY

The Iron Sodality worship a spirit of grim discipline who teaches them to mortify their flesh. By mastery of these exertions, they believe they can make their bodies proof against all harm, even extending to immortality. For obvious reasons, the faith appeals to soldiers, who often secretly wear protective iron charms under their uniforms. However, the cult's beliefs are more than just harmless superstition. Their patron demands that weak flesh be subjugated to its unfeeling iron law—or be destroyed.

CULT OF ANTHEA

Followers of the warrior sage Anthea pride themselves on attaining a state of physical perfection. Even battle, for them, is simply a tool to hone their bodies. Some claim that Anthea's secret teachings include the creation of supernatural elixirs of strength and vitality.

CULT OF THE OLD ONE

Communities on the fringe of the Forest of Kalduhr revere the Old One dwelling within. They believe the treasure that is excavated from its depths is a gift from the Old One, and that this gift must be reciprocated. They practice human sacrifice within the wood, binding their victims to tree trunks so that the Old One will accept the departing spirit as an offering.

MECHANIST SOCIETY

The Mechanist Society's beliefs are inspired by the technological marvels of the old empire. They believe that the whole universe is just such a device, and cultivate a calm fatalism. Some collect complex devices from the imperial period, while others look for ways to take control of the world-mechanism.

CULT OF THE CLEAR MIND

This cult committed themselves to laboriously memorizing their sacred texts after agents of the Crown and priests of the Sisters prohibited their beliefs. Their doctrines have been passed down in this manner for centuries, perfectly recalled even if they are imperfectly understood. But now that new efforts are underway to settle and explore the Forest of Kalduhr, some cryptic passages in the painstakingly-memorized texts are beginning to become clear. And some incantations, harmless when recited elsewhere, may awaken spirits when chanted beneath the forest canopy.

CULT OF THE FAE

Unlike most people of the Crown, believers of this sect regard the fae with fascination and awe. They leave offerings for them in certain unfrequented glades, and know mangled yet understandable incantations in the fae tongue. Their leaders may even carry the taint of fae blood. They are ripe for manipulation by an opportunistic fae.

CULT OF THE HIVE

Survivors of a settlement destroyed by the swarm usually learn to fear and hate bees. However, a handful, perhaps driven mad by their ordeal, developed the opposite reaction. They devoted themselves to the worship of the Mother of Millions and her children, building images of her in hidden temples. Now some of the cult numbers include wax men, although no one is sure whether they started that way. They act as spies and infiltrators, paving the way for swarm attacks. They no longer care whether they will be spared—they won't.

CHRONOLATROUS MYSTERY

Members of the Chronolatrous Mystery believe that time itself is a sentient thing—a force with intellect and memory, although not necessarily will. They spy on anyone they feel has a connection to the distant past or future, from lorekeepers to treasure-hunters, hoping to learn more about the workings of their capricious deity. If they choose the right subject, they may scry along the individual's timeline to predict the future or learn more about the mysteries of the past.

POSSESSORS

The most dangerous of cults, like this one, can invite spirits to possess a human body. Victims must pass through a series of ritual preparations and challenges to sanctify them as the new host of the spirit. Itinerants, such as treasure-hunters, make ideal victims; they often have few local connections.

CULT OF THE MOTHER

All forms of life are sacred to the Mother. Fungus is life, vermin are life, parasites are life. Disease is life. Accepting this fundamental truth lets an initiate progress along the path from ordinary person to the host of armies of bacteria and parasites. Although these worshippers are not pleasant to look at, their commitment to life does make them effectively immortal, and they have profound healing powers—although the surgeries they perform are not for the squeamish.

SPIRIT WHISPERERS

The cult practices necromantic rites that divine the future using the remains of the dead, storing these oracular skulls in their secret ossuary. Despite performing this in secrecy, the local community is starting to suspect that something is going on in the cemetery. The cult now turns its attention toward more distant, dangerous sites in the forest.

UNSEEING VIGIL

The old temple of Unseeing Vigil has been thoroughly mined by treasure-hunters. However, this cult still meets in secret at the ancient shrine, leaving offerings to the hunched and hateful effigy that glowers over the ruin. It has no name, but it might gain one from their fervent, if ignorant, prayers. Locals have seen the lights that burn in the temple at night, and many believe it to be haunted.

NEW DAWN

The Church of the New Dawn believes that the old order will give way to a utopian future once the conditions of their cryptic prophecies are fulfilled. The cult is divided between radicals who seek to hasten this fulfilment, and traditionalists who believe that meddling in the prophecy is blasphemous arrogance. Treasure-hunters hired to retrieve an item for a radical faction may find themselves under attack from traditionalists seeking to thwart their own cult's prophecy.

ENLIGHTENED TRANSFERENCE

The Sages of Enlightened Transference have mastered a magical secret that gains them power—not by selling their souls to devils, but by selling the souls of others. In their hideout, generations of contracts and ledgers reveal the names of souls that are either claimed by or owed to these beings, as well as lists of the magical favors still owed to the cult.

GREEN MISSIONARIES

The Green Missionaries seek refuge from the outside world under Kalduhr's sacred branches. To extend the Old One's protection to new areas, they gather seeds from the wood's trees, plant them in settlements beyond the forest's limits, and nurture them with offerings. Their plan will take generations to reach fulfilment, but they persist. They pay high prices for cuttings from the forest's rarest trees.

BARRED FELLOWSHIP

The Barred Fellowship originated in the Crown's dungeons, among the most wretched of prisoners. Its members worship a chained god, the world's true liberator, shackled by the unjust authorities of heaven. Though the cult's membership now extends beyond prisoners, the Fellowship maintains its teachings of secrecy and mistrust, viewing the established faith as little more than mortal lackeys of heavenly jailers.

LAST SURVIVORS

The Last Survivors believe that the Crown will fall and the world of humanity will end. When that happens, only their sacred rites will preserve human life through the apocalypse and into the new world that is to come. They seek to determine who is fated to join them in this tiny group of elect. Everyone else is expendable—after all, they're going to die anyway.

BLIND SOCIETY

The Blind Society is a traditionalist group that believes their prayers and sacrifices ensure plenty for the community. They secretly meet in certain clearings of the deep woods, where members are blindfolded to preserve their anonymity during the rites. Rumours say that some attendants are beyond human; fae and other creatures of the woods sometimes share in the worship.

ELDER WAY

Members of the Elder Way believe that humans and animals were once one kindred, and that the world will not be saved until they are reunited. They can understand the speech of beasts, and members are highly valued in farming communities for their skills with animals. They are among the only humans who tolerate beastfolk, and sometimes serve—unofficially, of course—as intermediaries between human communities and these strange creatures.

CULT OF THE LOST SISTER

The cult follows the teachings of a Sister cast out of the sacred fellowship. They believe that the Sisters' teachings are a lie created by divine tyrants to keep humanity docile and vulnerable. By increasing their own magical power, they aim to unseat the Sisters from heaven's thrones and lead a newly-freed humanity into a new age of self-fulfillment.

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This nameless group embraces a primitivist worldview, believing that the gods will return and live in harmony with humankind only when humans abandon their arrogant pretence of civilization. Even if they live civilized lives, they meet for secret hunts in the forest, pursuing game with only stone-tipped spears. The expansion of the Crown's lands is a source of deep concern—humans need to abandon cities, not build more.

AZURE COLLEGE

The alchemical teachings of the Azure College embody layers of meaning. Outwardly, they are known as peddlers of vision-granting intoxicants. Those who have reached the deeper layers of understanding know that the true meaning of alchemy is the transfiguration not of base matter, but of the soul. Those who press beyond this teaching learn that they really do make magic potions, including one that can supposedly raise the dead.

ETERNAL PRIESTHOOD

The Eternal Priesthood maintains the rites of an ancient, ruined temple. They light the lamps, sweep the floors, chant prayers, and offer incense to the long-forgotten deities that once presided there. They know nothing of the gods or beliefs of their distant predecessors, but they know that their devotion is the only thing that stands between this world and ruin.

ORDER OF RENEWAL

The Order of Renewal believes that the world is flawed, fallen from the majesty of divine creation. Renewers try to remake whatever they can in the image of their god's original plan, even going so far as to change their own appearance into more divine forms. Traditionalist members of the sect strive to understand more about the world's early history. Radicals believe that they are divinely guided, and seek to forcibly change the world—even down to changing other people.

CULT OF THE ELFCUP

This cult tends an area of the forest where a rare species of fungus grows. Properly prepared, it induces a gentle trance. They believe that when they enter this trance in the forest, they can commune with the spirit of Kalduhr itself to receive visions. Much of what they say seems nonsensical, but some parts are eerily prescient.

SHRINE GUARDIANS

The Shrine Guardians preserve the memory of a long-lost hero, maintaining a collection of artifacts, art, and lore that speaks of their great deeds. By studying and reenacting these legends, they hope to gain an aspect of their hero's superhuman powers. The Guardians are always interested in getting their hands on more of their hero's relics—or suppressing those of any potential rival for fame.

MOSAIC

Unlike most people of the Crown, adherents of the Mosaic sect believe that all sentient life is essentially human. Therefore, to kill a fae or even a bee is murder tantamount to killing a human. Because of this belief, they work secretly or openly to prevent conflict between species, even going so far as to help faeborn or homunculi escape human settlements if they are in danger.

BLOODY COMMUNION

The Bloody Communion has an intimidating name, but its members are mystics who seek to connect with the divine through altered states of consciousness. They practice self-denial, flagellation, and self-mutilation to achieve this goal. Their rites are not for the faint of heart, but they do appear to work—those who endure transcendent suffering seem to have uncanny visions and intuition.

DOG DANCERS

Dog Dancers worship through ecstatic dance. In the dance, they lose their humanity—they snap, bark, and sport on all fours. Wild dogs run with them. Some see them as harmless eccentrics, while others see them as a dangerous threat to social order. Some members join the cult without knowing why—they simply see the dance go by and feel a sudden urge to join the chaotic abandon.

BEAST KNIGHTS

The faith of the Beast Knights mainly flourishes among soldiers and ex-soldiers. Its members venerate legendary warriors, half-human and half-animal, whose powers they call upon for protection in battle. Within the military, lodges of Beast Knight worshippers form a secretive social club that transcends regiment and rank, including members of enemy armies.

PAUPERS

This mendicant cult rejects worldly possessions, believing that pure asceticism is the key to holiness. Villagers love them because of their generosity, which they compare to the Crown's wealthy and worldly religious authorities. Inwardly, the cult looks down on those who receive its kindness, as they regard them as doomed due to their reliance on these material things.

SOLAR CIRCLE

The Solar Circle venerates a traditional solar deity that is life-giving, all-seeing, and impartial. They preach a doctrine of generosity and giving to others equally, just as the sun shines on all. They also embrace vigilantism, punishing even minor transgressions fiercely. What is done in the dark must be brought to the light.

FATED GUARD

The Fated Guard follow a misunderstood, fragmentary version of the faith of an ancient imperial military cult. Devoted to the regiment's minor patron deity, they practice martial arts and maintain an armoury of antiquated and bizarre weapons, while awaiting divine orders that may never come.

SECRET PLACES TO GATHER & WORSHIP USED BY BLASPHEMOUS CULTS	
1-1	The horse stables, sounds muffled by hay bales
1-2	The back room of the blacksmith's shop
1-3	A noble's greenhouse, for growing toxic plants
1-4	A cave which the locals tell ghost stories about
1-5	A forest clearing, the site of a grisly murder
1-6	The private library of a supportive local lord
2-1	A falconer's aviary
2-2	A shared dreamspace visited via a rare elixir
2-3	The washerman's, to clean up after messy rites
2-4	A temple superficially dedicated to a lesser Sister
2-5	The site of a barely-remembered battle
2-6	The mausoleum of a family cemetery
3-1	A hidden chamber underneath a chicken coop
3-2	Around the roaring furnace of the glassblower
3-3	In the hushed studio of a bookbinder
3-4	The art gallery of a distractable noble bachelor
3-5	An unaware farmer's root cellar
3-6	An old shrine dedicated to an even older god
4-1	Around the table of a respected knight
4-2	The studio of a royally-patronized musician
4-3	The galley of a permanently-docked ship
4-4	The anatomical theater at a secretive college
4-5	By the river, sounds masked by rushing water
4-6	In a particular steamroom at the bathhouse
5-1	A fairy ring under the light of a crescent moon
5-2	In the kitchen at the local inn
5-3	Inside a covered wagon, just outside of town
5-4	A granary attached to an abandoned mill
5-5	The cartographers' guild house
5-6	An emptied burial mound
6-1	Among the hives of an apiarist
6-2	A permanently vacant cell at the local jail
6-3	The tannery, to better mask the ritual odors
6-4	The hushed bedroom of a wetnurse's charge
6-5	The grazing grounds of a goatherd
6-6	Beneath the stage of a subversive theater troupe

Cult of the Serpent Queen

JAMES HOLLOWAY

Centuries ago, the world cowered at the name of Sehtet ils Noh, the Devourer. Ambitious and resolute, this conquering queen spread her empire across the world. Even today, statues of the Serpent Queen tower over the lands she once subjugated. Rulers and pretenders alike claim her as an ancestor, seeking to emulate her victories. Some view the Serpent Queen as a bringer of order, whose conquests brought peace and prosperity—others remember her as a tyrant.

Central to the reign of Sehtet ils Noh was her embrace of the serpent cult and its secret rites. The queen cultivated the priesthood of the serpent and was initiated into their mysteries. The devotees of the snake cult became her closest advisors, and their mystical beliefs are said to have inspired both her courage and her cunning.

Legends vary when they speak of Sehtet ils Noh's death. Some say it was a Sister who drove a holy blade into the Serpent Queen's heart, while others say she took her own life as her armies fled from an alliance of rival nations. Still others say she was cut down by an assassin within the ranks of the serpent cult itself. In Naganeh, the priestesses of the Devourer teach that Sehtet ils Noh did not truly die at all. Instead, she transcended her own mortality and ascended to godhood, shedding her physical form as a snake sheds its skin. The faithful pray to her for wisdom, for strength of character, and for deliverance from the cruelties of the world.

The Actions of—and Accusations Against—the Serpent Priests

⚀ Seeking the last of a rare type of snake whose venom is said to endow its victims with oracular visions before it kills them.

⚀ Scheming to replace the garrison commander of a local fort with an officer who has been secretly initiated into their teachings.

⚀ Conducting public displays of fasting, poison resistance, and other remarkable powers in order to impress non-believers with the efficacy of their esoteric disciplines.

⚀ Recruiting hired swords to escort a valuable relic of their religion to a shrine.

⚀ Seducing repressed followers of the Sisters into ever-increasing sin. They believe doing so will increase the level of corruption in the world, thus hastening its consumption by the Devourer.

⚀ Stimulating their senses with rich foods, narcotic vapors, and exotic liquors to achieve a transcendent state of excess in which they will briefly become one with the all-seeing Devourer.

⚀ Investigating young women born on a certain date in hopes that one of them is the reincarnation of Queen Sehtet ils Noh.

⚀ Compiling lists of one another's peccadilloes in order to win favor in the eyes of a cult superior who will soon be making an inspection visit.

⚀ Looking for guides into the forest in order to excavate an ancient ruin which may contain artifacts sacred to their order.

⚀ Working in their alchemy laboratories to synthesize ever more potent potions.

⚀ Offering good prices for the venom glands of the most dangerous creatures in the forest, from the dread basilisk to the small, deadly three-minute viper.

⚀ Protecting an exiled member of the Naganeh royal family against assassins sent by their vengeful cousins. Such abandoned offshoots of the ruling clan could be useful if the kingdom were ever to undergo a succession crisis.

Buying the bodies of the recently dead for use in experiments aimed at mastering the secret formula of resurrection.

Spreading tales of the dangers and evils of the Kalduhr in the hopes of turning the Crown against the force of generation that opposes their force of consumption.

Publicly debating pious followers of the Sisters in order to point out the numerous inconsistencies in their sacred stories, thus opening the minds of the watching populace.

Learning the cryptic language of the serpents, and transcribing their whispered secrets on long scrolls.

Taking shelter from a mob of angry villagers who are more motivated by religious intolerance and anti-Nagani bigotry than anything the serpent priests have actually done.

Constructing a labyrinth and stocking it with venomous creatures as a test for those who wish to expand their knowledge of the cult's mysteries.

Smuggling poisons and mind-altering potions past the Crown's customs inspectors, who are beginning to suspect them—soon they'll need to find someone a little less conspicuous to do the job for them.

Racing to see which of them can first locate the tomb of a long-dead hierophant who was said to have mastered the secret of reincarnation.

Raising funds by using their alchemical skills to manufacture fast-acting poisons for a local gang of criminals.

Evoking the spirits of the venomous angels that advised Sehtet ils Noh to improve their communion with the Devourer.

Meditating, detached from the daily events of the world around them. They await the final eruption of the Devourer and the inevitable annihilation of the cosmos.

Engaging in charity and good works—not to recruit more followers, but to alleviate as much suffering as possible before the end of the world.

Escalating recondite theological debates to violent confrontations between groups of their followers.

Practicing physical exertions and martial arts in order to wake the eternal serpent that lies within the human body.

Granting life to monstrous serpent-man hybrids as a result of failed experiments intended to give humans regenerative powers.

Achieving reptile consciousness in the hopes of identifying and interpreting ancient scriptures through cryptic visions.

Attaching themselves to local rulers as soothsayers and spiritual advisors, then counselling them to emulate the example of Queen Sehtet ils Noh, for good and ill.

Sowing discord among the officers of the Crown to reduce the nation's potential military and political threat to Naganeh.

Answering esoteric questions from ruffians and fortune-hunters who would be dismissed by the more traditional priesthood of the Sisters.

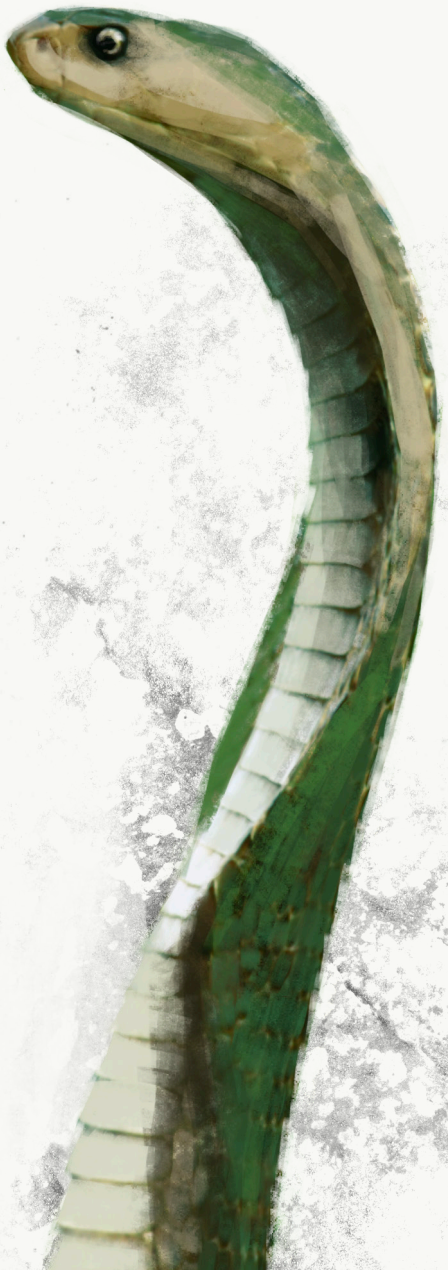
Battling the wicked spirits that seek to drown the world in a tide of unending, cancerous creation.

Warning against the machinations of evil spirits that seek to freeze the world in a meaningless, unproductive stasis.

⚅ ⚂ Offending local sensibilities by initiating the children of respectable, Sister-fearing families into their "decadent" mysteries.

⚅ ⚁ Rooting out heretics who believe they can accelerate the coming of the Devourer, rather than acknowledging their own insignificance and allowing the all-consuming Serpent to arrive in its own good time.

⚅ ⚀ Dispatching teams of explorers to the ruins of the Kalduhr to search for the ancient weapon that will bring about the return of the Devourer and usher in the apocalypse.



THE WORLD SERPENT

The World Serpent, the Unending Coil, the Devourer—many nations have worshipped this entity in their own ways. All share the belief that this great serpent will arise to consume the world. Some believe that they can hasten the Devourer's coming through certain esoteric rites, while others hold that insignificant humanity cannot influence the divine beast and instead concentrate on preparing themselves spiritually for the end.

Sages of the Crown hold that the Devourer is a god of consumption—an antithesis to the relentless creative energies of the Old One and the Mother of Millions. Always starving, never sated, it is lust, death, greed—the emotionless hunger of the cosmos.

Serpent cults have a variety of teachings. Some believe that the impending destruction of the world will purify a sinful planet, making room for a new creation. Others focus on cultivating serenity in the face of annihilation. Then there are the ecstatic hedonists, who believe that when extinction approaches, the only rational response is to enjoy yourself. And, of course, not all priests of the Devourer are true believers, especially in Naganeh where advancement through the cult's ranks can open the door to wealth and political influence.

The Forest

The Kalduhr

The dreaded Kalduhr Forest looms large in the minds of the residents of the three kingdoms. Millennia ago, it was the home to a vast and powerful civilization, as is evidenced by the wondrous treasures and temples still hidden within. And yet, that culture is now lost. Little is known about why it disappeared—or how. Sure, moralizing tales exist about the decadence and hubris which surely lead to Old Kalduhr's fall, but only the old gods and monsters of the forest now know for sure.

MAPPING THE FOREST

The forest itself is poorly mapped, though those royal surveyers, intrepid explorers, and foolhardy treasure-hunters who make it out of the forest alive are improving the collective knowledge everyday. Some cartographers have become convinced that the forest itself changes its shape, destroying the accuracy of each map as soon as ink touches paper. The impossibility of following either the Naveh or the Nevask Rivers, and the rapidity with which the local flora reclaims any constructed pathways both point to some truth to that hypothesis.

There are, however, some ancient trails which remain. At one point, the Kalduhr was heavily traveled. Littered throughout the wood are ancient waystations, each a point for merchants, pilgrims, and other travelers to find rest and safety under the watchful eye of a group of rangers.

MONSTROSITIES

Though the rangers of old are gone, the reason for their existence remains. The forest contains many dangers, not least of which are the horrid beasts which call the place their home. From individual and regional monsters, like Lonely Meg and the Droppler, to the more ubiquitous terrors, like elves and the unquiet dead, there is much to fear. Fact and fiction, however, are a blurry mess—many a raving "treasure-hunter" has spread tales of moss-furred, toothy-mawed nightmares, only to see an unflappable local drag back nothing more than a bear or boar. And yet, even a hardened naturalist can be found wearing a spirit charm around their neck or a lucky "Old One" penny in their pocket. Even they know it's better to be safe than to be sorry.

THE OLD ONE OF THE FOREST

No matter which Sister hears your prayers, the Old One of the Forest is always listening, too. Like many of the elder gods worshipped in days of yore, no one seems to remember the Old One's original name, or how long ago they were displaced by the faith of All Saints. Though, perhaps the better question is whether the Old One was displaced at all—that smirking, leaf-shrouded face is stamped on coins, lumber, clothing, buildings, livestock, and anything else someone might want to shield from the ire of the forest and its guardians. The Old One might have very few who sing their praises, but those who know better show respect and give a wide berth.

The Deep Kalduhr

PAUL BALDOWSKI

Twisted forests are ubiquitous throughout the realm's history and within the stories of buoyant balladeers beside crackling hearths. While the moral tales and mawkish songs set such darkened wealds as traps for the obstinate and foolhardy, suggesting that one will always find the right path upon losing their way, not all journeys end with inspiration. Manifold, virtuous fables aside, the most terrifying thickets lie heavy with the skulls of the fallen and telltale tragedies of innocents lost. Worse yet, the snares and tangles of the grimmest depths share a common source in the deep Kalduhr—the roots and branches of that tenebrous thicket reach deep and distant, as if unbound by natural law.

You realize that you've traversed into the deep Kalduhr when you notice...

- the hum of insects gathered in a storm-like cloud above your head, hovering in anticipation of an easy meal.
- a sense of cloying despair as the light suddenly fades beneath a grasping canopy of disease-mottled leaves.
- the unsettling awareness of being watched by things too close at hand, yet utterly invisible in the thicket.
- a fetid, stagnant haze that swirls about as if possessed of some malign intent.
- the mellifluous melody of unfamiliar birdsong that lulls the senses like a strong sleeping draught.
- the landscape littered with the twigs of forgotten seasons and the shells and skeletons of unfortunate animals.

The ground underfoot sounds like...

- the crackle of a thousand tiny bones snapping and splintering.
- the agonizing gulps of a punctured lung.
- the hushed whispers of a dissenting mob plotting sequestration.
- the pulse of a fading heartbeat.
- a restless titan grinding its teeth.
- the susurration of an insect swarm swirling in charged fury.

What Do You Encounter While Traversing the Forest?

⚀⚀ A BIRDCATCHER

A gnarled, ancient thorn of prodigious size rises above the brush. Desiccated flyers of varied species and size hang skewered from the narrow, barbed tips that sparkle with a noxious dew—broken wings flutter as they cling to life.

⚀⚁ A WRECKED SHIP

An inexplicable wreck—the *Seventh Sister*, a sorcerous schooner—sits beached amidst a bed of vicious spines that glisten with golden flowers. A dozen or so iron-ringed barrels sit amidst the moldering remains of the vessel's supplies, untouched by age or rust.

⚀⚂ AN ABANDONED PICNIC

A clearing in the brier echoes with the sound of mellifluous birdsong. In its center sits the debris of a forgotten picnic littered with gnawed bones. Streamers of snagged red fabric lie in the prickly bush that surrounds the spot, occasionally catching the breeze like warning flags.

⚀⚃ A STRANGE MUD

Several ruined carriages and carts poke at odd angles from a patch of dried earth. Their level of submersion means extracting the wrecks is impossible without tools and considerable effort. However, every four hours, a very singular and localized deluge floods the area; the dirt turns into a boot-sucking slurry, which dries up again in less than an hour.

⚀⚄ AN IMPRISONED FAE

A cage of dull green metal displays the contorted skeleton of a fairy-like creature wearing an elaborate crown trimmed with fur. The cage dangles high above the ground from a vicious-looking barb—abandoned sticks, hooks, rope, and polearms scatter the floor beneath.

⚀⚅ A LOST GUARD

An emaciated kingsguard dressed in tattered greens hangs limply over the top of a branch partway up a tree, limbs dangling. He insists he needs no help, cocky in his certainty of handling the situation alone, yet he looks half-starved and wide-eyed with delirium.

⚁⚁ A TOME OF LOST KNOWLEDGE

The torn and tattered pages of an esoteric work nestle amidst the scrubby undergrowth or flit upon the breeze like great, cadaverous butterflies. They follow unpredictable paths, carried by currents of air that are sensed rather than felt, like the last lingering breath of the recently deceased.

⚁⚂ AN IRON FENCE

The twisted, blistered remains of a cast iron fence rise over the fluctuating wild growth like the vertebrae of some monstrous gaunt. Globules of solidified metal spatter the blackened ground, charring the undergrowth. Metallic clinks echo like a lingering death-rattle.

⚁⚃ A GREEDY GROUND

Soft ground coddles limpid pools from within which translucent, broad-finned fish peer inquisitively. The ground squeaks and snags each footfall, as if pleading for travelers to stay awhile. The puckering drag forcibly tugs upon every passing foot—indeed, the area stands as a silent memorial to countless pieces of lost footwear.

⚁⚄ A BLACK POOL

In the center of a clearing, an obsidian pool supports a shoal of exquisitely-carved crystal fish. Some incomplete statues depict curious flounder bobbing near the surface, while more elaborate sculptures appear to hang, without support, mid-leap above the lagoon.

A STEPPING-STONE PATH

A path of cracked and mottled stepping stones meander across the breadth of a stagnant stream, bounded by massive fallen trunks. Each stone appears hand-crafted, like the domed skulls of drowned effigies. Biting insects bloom in iridescent clouds above the standing pool.

A WALL OF WHISPERING VINES

A curtain of flourishing vines grows down from the canopy, curling into an uneven and flocculent carpet of pale green. The pulpy vines squeal and convulse under pressure, quaking as if with tortured rapture, filling the air with a brackish tang.

A BLEEDING WOUND

A shaft of bright light illuminates a hole in the ground like a massive puncture wound, steep-sided and shallow. Glistening ruby sap leaks from the torn and ragged roots that pepper the surface of the rupture.

A CURIOUS COVERED PATH

An arch of tightly intertwined saplings rises obliquely from gutters filled with odd colored stones. Beyond the first dozen steps from entry, the passage diverges, curves, and then seems to twist back upon itself—yet appears to cover only a short distance to all outside of the construction.

A POND OF TEETH

An ornamental pool with a shallow lip, filled with crystal-clear water. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of teeth litter the stone basin beneath the gently rippling surface. A stone column at the center abides the presence of a dozen gaping edentate mouths.

A SKELETAL FOG

A patch of noxious mire roils and seethes amidst the soaring spines. Sunlight cutting through the swamp haze creates surreal, mirage-like patterns resembling cackling, toothless skulls.

AN ASTROLOGICAL TOPIARY

An elaborate topiary dominates the center of a scorched, barren space. The commodious shrubbery bears the look of a complex orrery, complete with tight-leafed orbs, sprouting satellites, and celestial bodies bobbing on drifting vines.

A STONE DEMON

A sickly hued lake of bubbling liquid gathers at the foot of a demonic statue. A hundred ravens cluster on the left side, while the right hand clutches an elaborate brazier that steams with a purple haze.

A MACABRE BRIDGE

A narrow bridge traverses the expanse of a fast-flowing stream. Instead of plain blocks, countless moss-riddled gravestones make up the entirety of the dismal span. All but a few of the markers bear a name and a date—some are peculiarly new, while others have only partial inscriptions, as if charting the passage of hours and days.

A GHOSTLY HUNT

A dozen animated animal pelts hunt and hide amidst the overrun of greenery cloaking a crumbling pavilion. The wisps of spectral runes hang like smoke in the air, visible only when shafts of sunlight pierce the verdure.

A MUSHROOM GRAVEYARD

A gossamer net drifts like a morning mist across an uneven clearing strewn with scores of cyclopean fungi. The mushrooms reach upturned from the ground; the splayed caps wrap about countless desiccated corpses in their fleshy blankets, stalks poking skyward like grave markers.

A WASP'S NEST

The tumor of a prodigious wasp's nest swollen out of all proportion dominates the path. The opacity of its whorled parchment surface offers glimpses of discolored, writhing flesh.

A REACTIVE WOOD

Slender rose-barked trees bestrew the spongy turf of a sodden, ambrosial mire, teeming with buzzing insects. Passage through the blanket of floating roots causes the forest to bob and skew, slinging dark, barbed fruit forcefully from the canopy toward the ground below.

A DANGEROUS ASCENT

A steep, bramble-covered promontory appears to offer a view above the canopy of the surrounding wildwood. On completing the arduous ascent through the grappling brush and bloodthirsty brier, two things become clear—the rise is not quite high enough, and the hill itself is a dormant leviathan of unknown temperament.

A TEMPTING LAKE

An expanse of open water dominates an area that is fringed with trees and encircled by a neat, well-maintained path. Several coracles, fashioned from green wood, float idly around the pond, either anchored from beneath the surface or secured to another boat with a length of rope. Near the center of the pool, a single craft sits with a small chest resting on the seat.

A MARKED PATH

Crooked and twisted iron staves gird the torturous progress of a path amidst steaming, pus-colored pools. A sweet, pungent scent permeates, like the air after a storm. A careless step along the route causes a strange tingling sensation, and a grumble of thunder from the cloudless sky above.

A FLORAL GRAVEYARD

A plumb stretch of uneven road pays lip service as an impromptu ossuary, fringed with a mop of bright and fragrant flowers. Luminous sprays of funereal vapors drift and whirl in a mesmerizing dance above the track, pairing and separating in time to a silent waltz.

A GOLDEN HOUND

A dog with pale, golden fur watches inquisitively from a distance, bright-eyed and perfectly still. Any approach sparks an immediate reaction, sending the hound racing in the opposite direction, only to reappear later in the same attentive posture. It doesn't bother anybody, and never makes a sound.

A LEASHED PRAYER

A rude kite of bound twigs and sackcloth, bearing the sigil of a half-forgotten deity, levitates in a steady breath of air, secured to the ground by a braided twine and peg. The ease and strain on the twisted string creates a curious plucked melody, but also seems to stress the steadfastness of the pin.

AN ARROW GARDEN

A meadow of swaying grass and colorful plants bloom in the shade of tall trees. Bright yellow flowers sprout from the splintered nocks of a thousand stranded arrows that pepper the loam. Ragged scraps of unrecognizable banners lie scattered amidst the remains.

A FOREST SENTINEL

A confluence of ancient trees resembles the stoic figure of an immovable guardian, vigilant and unwavering. A tangle of bristling creepers dangles from above, coiling and confining the growth of the timber effigy. Streams of treacle-thick sap leak from the scarred bark, while several sluggish vines quest to secure a grip about the idol's neck.

AN ICY SHRINE

A magnificent shrine composed entirely of ice perspires in the relentless rays of a suspect sun. The sacred place leans precariously, sweating blocks that liquefy into shallow puddles. Frozen furnishings and a grand altar adorn the interior, visible through the arched vestibule, hinting at the possibility of relics within.

⚀⚂ A MOCK BATTLE

A pair of silver statues, cast in the semblance of entertainers wearing oddly shaped hats, animate in an endless quarrel at the heart of a clearing. Each manikin aggressively swings a dull-bladed ax—its strike sounds like a bell and does more damage to the weapon itself than the target.

⚀⚄ A MYSTERIOUS CAVE

A lichen-veiled barricade obstructs the entrance to a cave. A low moaning emanates from beyond the barrier, interspersed with muttered curses. Narrow fissures in the makeshift wall reveal weird flashes of pale blue light.

⚀⚅ A RITUAL CRATER

Twenty standing stones rise in two concentric rings, centered upon an abyssal crater rimed with blood-flecked ice. Within the inner stones, a steady, stifled throb causes the soil to convulse, setting the sward to swaying.

⚁⚁ A GIANT'S HEAD

The decay-bloated head of a gargantuan carcass blocks the path, which terminates in russet-colored turf beside its face. A bulging, milky eye stares sightlessly from the loose grasp of the skull, while the other socket is empty and encrusted with flaking gore.

Waystations

JUDD KARLMAN

Old Kalduhri waystations were once a way for the empire to safeguard travel and the economy. But as the monarchs grew more decadent and out of touch with humanity, the waystations by the old road grew strange. All waystations were built around a public house, a ranger fort, food stores, and a tower.

Along the ruins of one of the old road, you find a waystation from the days of Old Kalduhr.

Now the waystation is...	and as you get closer you can see...
a rotted shell...	freeriders rounding up their herd.
perfectly preserved from the time of the god-kings...	an army of mercenaries breaking camp.
fortified by locals hoping history lends legitimacy...	witches dancing around a bonfire.
covered in blue fungus growing in fractal patterns...	refugees looking for something to eat.
a mess—knocked over and covered in claw marks...	treasure-hunters digging out a respectable find.
a cyclopean crater...	a giant beast—a pet of the Kalduhri god-kings.

What Stories Have You Heard About the Waystations?

⚀ ⚀ THE GUARDIAN

Watt protects the waystation nearest to Fort Duhrin. He claims he is descended from the ancient rangers who once safeguarded the old roads, and it is his duty to carry on their legacy. He'll gladly welcome you in and be a good host. If he finds out that you're treasure-hunters, his demeanor will turn cold. He will call you scavengers, tax-dodgers, and worse, and will promptly eject you from his home.

⚀ ⚁ AN OVERFLOWING ALTAR

Waystations always had an area outside of the tower where holy icons could be placed upon altars where folk could worship. For whatever reason, this altar never lost any gods. Now the area is choked with them as the altar groans with various tributes. All who pray here have strange dreams, but the gods who answer them might be ancient and unable to understand the world as it exists.

⚀ ⚂ THE WALKING RANGER

The Walking Ranger is an old legend—an Old Kalduhri ranger who never put down their cloak. They travel from waystation to waystation, fixing one little thing before moving on. Sometimes, that little thing is a leaky roof, other times the little fix means a gang of bandits is littered with arrows.

⚀ ⚃ THE RELUCTANT WEAPON

Atop the tower is a winged, worn statue that looks upon the sky. Close examination shows it is not a statue, but a kind of constructed, sorcerous, living weapon meant to launch. When Old Kalduhr broke the sky, these constructed beings were the weapons that did the breaking. This particular being—this weapon—somehow grew empathy, and has spent centuries looking at the sky where its siblings did the work they were born to do and then perish—unable to join them, unable to kill.

⚀ ⚄ CURSED STORYTELLERS

Travelers are gathered, telling stories of where they're from. The passion with which they tell their tales seems a bit intense. They have been caught in an old, deteriorating ritual meant to promote communication and peace, but which now forces strangers to compete—only those who tell the finest story are allowed to leave. The others are rooted in place, unable to leave or die until their tale is the declared best.

⚀ ⚅ THE LOST WAYSTATION

The lost waystation was home to a statue celebrating the military accomplishments of a once-famous general whose name is lost to time. The general's claim to fame was that he cleared large sections of the Kalduhr Forest so the empire could be founded upon the land. Whatever survived being driven out of the forest returned and destroyed the station, killing everyone who lived and worked there. Legend has it that if you find the general's name, you can find the waystation. If you do, you'll learn that its tower sits upon a cache of powerful weapons from the general's armory.

⚁ ⚀ DREAM SCARABS

If you are lucky, you might find a storehouse filled with scarabs, the kind put on the tombs of kings and queens. They are harmless, and will eat the dead, leaving only perfectly cleaned bones. They are also delicious. If you eat them after they have eaten a body, they will offer you something of the life they devoured:

⚀	Dreams of their death.
⚁	Dreams of their greatest pleasure.
⚂	Dreams of their greatest pain.
⚃	Surreal, partially-digested dreams of their life.
⚄	For an hour, you burp up things they once said.
⚅	You are trapped in a dream of their life. *Can you find a way to escape?*

VILLAGE NAMES

For a time, it was a wise move to found a settlement near a waystation. Some villages founded in this manner have names that make it easier to mark that a waystation ruin is nearby—names like Meerway, Wayfule, and Waymere. Other stations make it more difficult, demanding that any who wish to pillage a waystation ruin know the name of the sorcerer who was said to have served in a waystation's tower, as the villages are often named after these users of magic.

THE SCHOLAR

Karas Limt is a traveler, librarian, architect, artist, and historian who has made studying the waystation their life's work. Getting old now, Karas will pay treasure-hunters to venture into more dangerous ruins—as long as they take oaths on the altars of the most vengeful Sisters not to destroy any of the buildings. "Those who come after us should be allowed to study their mistakes too," Karas is known to say.

THE SWORD-MOTHER

The waystations had a sovereign Sister, the Sword-Mother. Those who were visited by her met a young mother with a content child on her left hip and a well-used but still-sharp pitted longsword on the other. She was said to arrive in two incarnations—mother or comrade. Her mother aspect offers advice during the quiet of dawn. Her comrade aspect offers stern warnings outside of loud gatherings at dusk. Her name has been lost to history.

WILD DOGS

Kalduhr Mastiffs were bred for their size and obedience, with huge heads and powerful jaws. Some waystations kept them as guard dogs, and when the station was abandoned, so were the dogs. Now the dogs are feral, and regularly bring down big game in the area. Some say they are unusually intelligent, and if you pay them in food, you can stay safely in the public house their ancestors protected.

RANGER SUPERSTITIONS

Old Road Rangers were notoriously superstitious, and some of those beliefs have stayed in the world—even if there are no legitimate rangers left to walk it. Every time you are the first person to draw a blade in a battle, the enemy who will one day kill you receives a silver coin. Every time you are the last person to draw a blade in battle, the enemy who will one day kill you receives a blessing from the Sisters. Finding a crown-up coin on the road means someone powerful is plotting against you, while finding a boot-up coin on the road means someone who takes orders from you is about to betray you.

MISSING DEAD

The dead were never interred in or near any of the waystations. Some say that remnants of Old Kalduhri sorcery had fell effects on the dead. Others say the rangers of the old road were cannibals. Scholars insist that tales of ranger cannibalism are entirely metaphorical, depicting their corrupt bribery.

THE TWEEN PATHS

All of the public houses, ranger forts, storehouses, and towers are connected through some lost arcane linking that is fading. Trying to walk from one to another can be a fast way to traverse tremendous distances, but you must take terrible chances walking the Tween Paths. The ecology of the Tween is alien, cold, and terrible. At first, it just seems cold and sterile. But once you spend enough time there and your soul adjusts, you begin to see the cracks. Some say there is a monarch of Old Kalduhr in there somewhere. But if so, they must be quite broken by now after so long in that kind of mind-eroding landscape.

THORN STATION

Is the Thorn Station a holy site dedicated to Saint Kore, the Sister of Roses? Or did it anger her, causing it to be engulfed by roses with the most uncommon, metal-rending petals and thorns?

THE WAY

Lunetta is an elderly lady who has run a waystation public house as a comfy inn for as long as anyone in the area can remember. She has a keen eye for scavenging, having used parts of the other nearby buildings over the years to make repairs and patch bits that need fixing. The faded sign outside only has the W, A, and Y left, so people call her inn "The Way." If you stay too long, she'll put you to work, ripping pieces out of nearby ruined buildings to patch the roof or build a new chicken coop.

LASTATION

Last Station was on the edge of known civilization. According to the Old Kalduhri texts, beyond this final stop was nothing but pundits who ate their own waste, spiteful screamers with dangerous fungal infections, and narcissist art-hermits who kept obsessive lists of their enemy's every movement. Now it is a village called Lastation, a trading post where folk can purchase exotic spices and strange pets.

THE CHILDREN OF NOH

Several waystations have become fortified settlements for an ancestor-worshipping cult called the Children of Noh, who are driven by a desire to reestablish the empire and its worst excesses. The Children can be found in delving sites where treasure-hunters seek the valuable artifacts of Old Kalduhr. If the Children see such an artifact in the hands of outsiders, they will offer an insulting price before attempting to take it by force.

THE FIRST RUINS

Some stations were built directly over ruins older even than Old Kalduhr. At those sites, it is not uncommon to find incomprehensible machinery fueled by unfamiliar chemicals and lost magic. Sometimes an old waystation thought to be thoroughly picked to the bone by all manner of scavengers has a secret door to ruins more ancient and far more dangerous.

THE WAYSTATION KILLER

Jack-a-Way was a killer who ventured from waystation to waystation, killing folk from vulnerable populations. These serial murders took Ambaret by storm, calling into question the Crown's ability to keep its subjects safe. Eventually, Jack was caught and hanged by rangers of the kingsguard working hand-in-hand with scholars who study the mysteries of the mind. Despite royal warnings, bards delight in telling their most grisly Jack-a-Way tales to try to scare the crowds away from bedrolls and towards their busking hats.

TEMPORARY BASECAMPS

Every so often, a waystation is set up as a short-term base of operations when treasure-hunters need to delve far from any village or city. For a while, the station bustles with activity, where some groups even rig up the storehouse with armed guards as a kind of makeshift vault for treasures. Others hire local villages as cooks or tutors. Sometimes the station is left better than it was found, and profit is spread around the area. Other times, a monster finds its way back, and the endeavor ends in blood, fire, and tears.

WAYSTATION LABORERS

During the empire's peak of power, when a citizen died on the grounds of a waystation, their body became the property of the state. This transition caused them to become civic-minded undead, where they paved the roads or joined military efforts. Surely the energy that fueled those rituals is long since spent.

THE RIVALRY

The rivalry between the kingsguard and the rangers is legendary. When the kingsguard claim a waystation for the Crown, they burn down the old ranger fort and leave a graffiti warning for the rangers of today: they say the empire fell because the Old Road Rangers became too soft and weak when dealing with the creatures of the wood.

PAINTED STATION

The Painted Station was settled by a traveling circus, a caravan of oral history, and singers stranded far from their home—verdant and decadent Naganeh. Visitors to the station are welcomed as a new audience and treated to the tales and talents of the Green Kingdom.

MARSELLA STATION

Marsella Station was the home of a lost Dream Saint. Above the gate in the runes of Old Kalduhr, it reads: "Dreams will set you free. Nightmares will teach you well." If treasure-hunters go to sleep there without setting an intention for their dreams, their dreams mash together like waves in a storm. If they're not careful, they could also end up walking into each other's nightmares. It will be a long, strange night.

GLIV STATION

The waystation closest to the Deverain was taken over by its ranger fort—a structure that was destroyed, rebuilt, and expanded and expanded upon until all other buildings were in the shadows of its walls. This was the home of the Ranger-General, whose opulent shrine to Saint Gliv is a holy pilgrimage to those who navigate by the stars.

NEMRAC THE LIBRARIAN

Nemrac is an adventuring librarian with rare books and pamphlets from almost every waystation. They are backed by a wealthy patron and will purchase waystation-related artifacts for double the going rate. A smart treasure-hunter will take the market value for their finds and trade the rest in lore.

LION STATION

Lion Station overlooks the beautiful green savannah known as the Emerald Bridge. It was here that Kuramet lived until he became canonized after his death. Was he a ranger, a wizard, a public house manager, or did he guard the storehouse? Was he eaten by lions, or saved by them? None agree on the answers.

BROKEN STATION

Unkindness is the name of a tarot reader who has aged into a scarecrow-like creature of sinew and bone, the only person who lives in the Broken Station. The tower was built too high, and when it fell, it crushed all of the other buildings and—legend has it—every other station inhabitant. If you want a reading from Unkindness, you must first work with them to create your tarot deck.

DRAGONROADS

The dragonroads have rails for specialized carriages built by Old Kalduhr to move goods and troops. The dragonroads often venture deep into the earth. Some say they got their names from the sound the carriages made, but others say it is because serpents of all kinds gravitate towards those roads when the carriages venture underground.

RECLAIMED BRICKS

It was the Old Road that connected the waystations and warded the empire's travelers from beasts. Few stretches of the road are left. The bricks that paved it were too valuable. Most villages have a road house made of warded road brick.

ROAD SONGS

Road songs have a long history among the region's travelers. They would compare their songs to learn where the other came from—even if their shared words were few—by interpreting the harmonies of different areas. It is said that demons cannot sing.

SKY STATION

Sky Station is said to be linked to no road, located on the top of the highest mountain. There, the air is barely breathable and so cold that a gust of wind will take the skin off your bones. The only mention of it is in the proclamations of a cruel Old Kalduhri king who exiled a dozen political artists to Sky Station so that they might depict the world with their talent.

⚅ ⚀ WAYSTATION OUT OF TIME

If you believe in legends like chronomancers, then you'll enjoy the tales of the Waystation Out of Time. The tales say you can meet folk from the past and the future there, as well as different versions of yourself from other worlds where you can learn the burdens you bear, the treasure you secured in different proportions, and how the Sisters doled out your ruin.

⚅ ⚁ THE TAROT

Some say the parts of the waystations that still exist—the public house, the ranger fort, the stores, and the tower—are less about the things needed for a waystation, but are connected to the powerful symbology of the standard tarot cards still in use throughout the realm. If you get close to a waystation, you will find that the cards of Saint Orfilios (representing the public house), Saint Gliv (the ranger fort), Saint Hester (the food stores), and Saint Barthus (the tower) will come up in readings more and more often.

⚅ ⚂ THE WYCH SIBLINGS

The Wyches are a pair of siblings with an unbreakable bond of trust and fellowship, and an uncanny ability to find nearby waystations. Treasure-hunters who want to hunt for waystations often hire them, despite the fact they will demand the first choice of the treasures, and hiring both together is a must.

Elixirs, Remedies & Poisons

THE GAUNTLET

The forest of Kalduhr holds many treasures. Some of the most important ones are not made of delicate gold or carved marble. Rather, they are harvested, ground, mixed with various other herbs, and used as potions, poultices, or poisons.

⚀ WHISPERBUSH

Praised by innkeepers and hated by musicians, this plant's deep violet berries cause temporary deafness when ingested.

⚁ SUNBURST MUSHROOM

Found growing along just one rocky stretch of the Naveh River, this tendril-covered mushroom must be harvested using metal gauntlets. Failing to do so is a painful mistake, as the fungus voraciously consumes virtually any organic matter it is put into contact with.

⚂ DUCHESS'S DELIGHT

This pale green stonefruit was the first fruiting plant from the Kalduhr to find a home in the fine gardens of Ambaret. Not only did it thrive as a cultivated crop, its soft, sweet flesh began providing an additional benefit: when fermented and distilled, the delight emboldens the drinker, reducing fear, anxiety, and inhibition.

⚃ SPIRACEAVIT

Spiraceavit, harvested by collecting the frost that kills wild rye, is a powerful alkahest. It produces especially strong spirits when fermented with other grains. Pure spiraceavit alcohol is rumored to give the imbiber the ability to see into the next world, despite inducing permanent blindness to this one.

⚄ MURKWINE

This wine is brewed only by a collective of hirsute monks living in dens at the edge of the forest. No one outside of their collective has been able to divine the recipe, although its earthy taste suggests that fungus is the primary ingredient. Ingestion of even a small amount will induce a pleasant, long-lasting intoxication; as such, it can be found for sale at most festivals. Lesser known is its combustive effect: it forms a large and oppressive cloud of smoke when burned, which can provide excellent cover for the enterprising criminal.

VALDUN'S MOTHS

No adult believes the stories Valdun Dir tells about the tiny moths that can be found among the blackberry bushes. He claims each one has a single diminutive mushroom growing on their thorax that, when ingested, will show you the path forward—or out.

FARFLUNG ELIXIR

There were tales of a village on the far side of the forest that had distilled an elixir that could soothe all wily and elusive ailments without clouding the mind. When intrepid merchants reached the town of Flung, however, they found nobody left, only a clutch of rabbits hopping about the town square.

DARKSKY ROOT

The tincture is pungent and sweet to the nose, an acerbic flavor to the tongue, clear and blue to the eye. Its effects, unpleasant but occasionally useful, change with each new moon, growing more volatile the more cycles it's seen.
—from "Mog's Guide to Fluids"

CORPSE FUNGUS

This putrescent purple mushroom carries a notable stench, and can often be found growing near rotted remains. Common wisdom is that the fungus can be used to form a poultice after being masticated into a paste. When applied to a bloody wound, the poultice will block pain completely. It is a remedy only used in dire circumstances—if the poultice is left in place for more than a few minutes, the wound will fruit with similarly colored mushrooms.

BLUE PHOENIX

This bird roosts at the apex of conifers that have been stripped of their needles. Its meat is gamy, stringy, and generally unpleasant. Its feathers, however, can be pulverized and mixed with sweat to produce an iridescent pigment. Applying this directly to skin causes the painted area to become invisible for a few minutes.

DRAKUHL CARROTS

This vibrant orange tuber grows plentifully near crossroads, often identified by the similarly colored flowers that bloom from the stems. It is sweet and nutty—delicious prepared most any way. Much like the common carrot, consuming too much of it causes your skin to take on an orange tint. This pigment is uniquely photosensitive, however, and becomes toxic when exposed to direct sunlight. As such, drakuhl carrots should only be consumed if you plan to travel exclusively at night.

APRICOT SUNRISE

This gnarly orange root is found under the oldest fruit trees in the Kalduhr. If the root is ground down and boiled with beetroot and onion, it is said two drinkers can share dreams, visiting each other's minds. Those who drink the soup too often may find themselves taking on the fears or dreams of those they share with.

GLEAMING POWDER

Crafted in secret by black market alchemists and desired by thieves and savvy merchants alike, a quick snuff of this powder causes one to temporarily smell gold. Its precise formula and quality varies widely, however, and side effects are common. Many are the tales of gleam users who vanished into the dark places of the world, hoping to quench their relentless thirst for riches.

YELLOW MORPH

Dragonflies flit throughout many parts of the woods, their emerald bodies having some value in pigments and as decoration. Occasionally, however, you will find a virulent yellow morph. These blond dragonflies are more vicious than their green cousins, and the famous lepidopterist Augusta ils Eren has proven that they can subsist entirely on blood. What is only rumored is that eating these dragonflies can give you the ability to digest raw meat and smell blood yourself.

HOUNDMAKER

"Beware the hospitality of hunters when traps are empty," travelers say. One of their cautionary tales is of folk lured in by a warm fire and generous company, ingesting food or drink dosed with this tincture. Its effects include drooling, paralysis of the upper limbs, a sensitivity to scents, and a savage hunger. Those so dosed are then pressed into service by the hunters to chase wildlife for as long as the effect lasts or until something living is laid low.

GLISTENING HARMONY

A vial of this concoction cures a lack of desire, be it apathy for work, verbal interaction, or bedroom endeavours. The mix consists of mint leaves, silver powder, ripe blueberries, chalk, and honey from a hive over six years old. The correct recipe is one of the most sought after items in Naganeh.

GLOW NOG

The eggs of giant forest birds which stalk the undergrowth of the Kalduhr are prized for their rich yolk, used in the brewing of this drink. Spiced and sweetened, one sip grants renewed fortitude and bright eyes to travelers of dark paths. Take care to drink it sparingly, lest your glowing vitality become a beacon to the hungry spirits of the forest.

BOLA ROKA

Balm from this bell-shaped root has long been used as a cure for all sorts of skin problems (acne, warts—you name it). What's not often shared is that it only makes skin appear to be healthy, with effects fading in a matter of hours and the root cause exacerbated with each application of the balm. But sometimes this is exactly what you need.

CINNAMON ROSE

This brown, desert-growing flower is little more than a legend, but the legend is persistent. Sages say that its pollen can help a traveler go for days without needing water.

WITCHMOSS

This moss grows only in the shade of rowan trees which have been struck by lightning. Delightfully soft, it emits colorful sparks when gently stroked. It tastes foul,but when ingested raw it acts as a powerful hallucinogen, and is reputed to be the base ingredient for many spirit journeys.

SILVER BEGIN-AGAIN

Only young children from affluent families waste their time with this narrow-leafed deciduous plant. When its bark is brewed and ingested as a tea, it gives one the immediate impression that one had just moments before finished ingesting the tea. And yet the cup is full. Botanists say the temporal distortion is wholly chemical and passes quickly, but it's a rite of passage for some (apparently) to sit and giggle at tea cups at least once on the path to adulthood.

BECOMER FLOWER

This flower's exquisite violet petals, when properly rinsed, are highly sought out throughout the three kingdoms. Carelessly plucking and carrying whole flowers, though, is a dreaded act. Sages say that becomer pollen grains breathed in by two or more individuals pit them into a vicious competition; the creature that serves the ways of the forest the best will survive, while the loser will slowly turn into a replica of the winner. It is said that the bees of the forest were all different creatures before getting into contact with the Becomer Mother, a tree-sized flower breathing and expanding in the heart of the forest.

HOMER'S TOBACCO

The broad purplish leaves of this plant give off a sticky resin when bruised or broken. It is pleasant when smoked, and dilates the perception of space and time, making miles pass like yards, and hours pass like seconds. It is therefore popular among nomads, especially those driving caravans cross country.

IMP'S SCALE

You know you're close to a patch of this fern when the bottoms of your feet begin to tickle and pop. The more experienced traveler knows the protrusions sprouting from their arms and legs are painful but will eventually fall off harmlessly. Only a true expert could brew the leaves into a hard and bitter drink to mutate flesh and expand bone.

LADYSLIPPER MOTHS

These moths pollinate the giant ladyslipper flowers, which bloom once a year in a stunning display of vibrant fuchsia petals. While many think that the name "lady-slipper" comes from the color and shape of the flowers, some know that the moths themselves actually make excellent slippers, allowing the wearer to move silently with ease as their footfalls are cushioned by the iridescent dust of the moths' wings. However, this only works with freshly harvested moths, which means sliding your naked feet directly into the insect digestive juices. A few fabled burglars have ended their career by wearing said slippers a little too long while hiding from unanticipated attention.

MAIDEN'S YOUTH

This thick, putrid sludge is rumored to give everlasting youth to those with a strong enough stomach to consume it daily. No one has a credible account of having experimented with the dosage, however, as it's brewed from the highly illegal hag's foot fungus, a green foot-shaped tree ear which is both a potent narcotic and powerful hallucinogen. The magistrate who pushed the legislation outlawing the fungus later retired amidst a foul scandal, when his wife disappeared and he sent his very young daughter to an asylum.

ALBINO PINE

The benzoin gum of this rare pine is so sticky that explorers apply it to leather gloves in order to free climb cliff faces and explore the caves of the forgotten peoples.

SLIPBERRIES

These berries are nearly indistinguishable from blueberries until they are struck by moonlight, when they glitter like sapphires. If a skilled alchemist concentrates the pigments in the berry's skins, and boils those pigments with a sufficiently strong whiskey, they can create an elixir that grants temporary invisibility.

SILVERSAP PEAR

The fruit of this tree is a sight to behold. The pear itself is a bland brown, but when sliced open, the juice runs out like quicksilver and the seeds glitter like diamonds. Silversap pear seeds are a good replacement for diamonds and the juice can be distilled into a very fine brandy rumored to bring all manner of luck.

FATEWEAVER LICHEN

This lichen is a remarkably hearty thing. While difficult to find, it has been seen in nearly every climate save the hottest deserts. When dried and powdered, the substance can be smoked. If a user smokes just the right amount, it is said that they gain accurate visions of their future. Proper dosage can be difficult to calibrate and an overdose can be deadly.

BLACKVEIN

This cordyceps fungus infects and grows inside blood-drinking insects. When it matures, the fruiting bodies spring dense and tangled from the body of the insect—a rich, dark, blood-pudding black. A skilled herbalist or apothecary can prepare a viscous liquid by filtering and denaturing the mycelia, removing enough of the toxins and spores to render it safe to imbibe. The liquid grants strength and endurance allowing one to push their body past its breaking point. But if not prepared properly, the same black fungal strains that grow within the body to grant that strength begin to warp the mind, driving the user to consume blood and flesh.

SIVAN'S ICHOR

One pulverized rosehip, one vial of milkwood sap, one spoonful of saliva, and three drops of scholar's ink, mixed together in water boiled over a fire. Those who imbibe this decoction will discover they can read any writing placed before them–at the cost of whatever language they spoke prior to its consumption.

YELLOW KING'S CROWN

This elixir can be refined from the rare mutated golden poppies that hide among their pastel cousins in the deeply isolated, hollowed glades of the Kalduhr. It is thought to increase one's creativity and is coveted by less talented artists or those seeking a way to wrestle free of a creative slump.

FLAMELEAF FERN

Young shoots of this plant are highly prized for their incendiary qualities. If their oils are extracted at just the right temperature, the extraction can be ignited to devastating effect. Unfortunately, it requires a great quantity of these shoots that can only be harvested in the early spring.

GOLDEN IVY

What devil spawn dosed those travelers with the tincture of golden ivy! Now they speak the evil infernal tongue!

CROOKED APPLE

This fruit is indistinguishable from any other common apple. If anything, it looks like a particularly tasty-looking one. In the first few bites, it tastes incredibly delicious. After a couple of minutes, however, the eater's mouth is engulfed in the most vile and foul taste ever experienced, which persists for weeks. This awful taste is described as a thousand rotten carcasses left under the sun for months, the Barsul sewers, or even the smell of hell itself. It grows among normal apples, and only in the Kalduhr.

VENOM VARIETIES

What dangers are revealed by sucking on a fresh puncture wound?

You taste...	which can only mean the venom is...
notes of citrus and warm copper...	an anticoagulant.
bitter nut and lingering fungal notes...	going to cause the Black Rot.
clean mint and cold...	a neurotoxin.
dried herbs and old rope...	a paralytic.
salt and soap...	likely to lead to the Dead Dancer malady.
cinnamon and crushed ants...	a sure sign the Red Rage is coming.

Monsters of the Wood

JAMES HOLLOWAY & MICHAEL VAN VLEET

Man-eating beasts, fae creatures, and worse things all inhabit the forest of Kalduhr. Nonetheless, the folk of the forest tell tales of many other strange creatures. Some may be completely fictitious, some may be misinterpretations of other wildlife, and some may be entirely real.

This monster is...	and is blamed for...
spoken of in ancient texts...	a spate of recent disappearances.
known to children even though adults won't listen...	every little thing that goes wrong.
the pet theory of a local drunk...	a recent, high-profile disaster.
a beloved mascot of the community...	the general malaise of the settlement.
a closely-guarded secret...	blights and bad crops.
regarded with panic and suspicion...	the villagers' fear of the deep woods.

What Monster Do the Locals Say Lives Around Here?

⚀⚀ UNCLE WEBS

Uncle Webs is an old man in a long robe—his voice is soft like the rushing of wind in the leaves. He is not a man at all, but a colony of superintelligent spiders wearing a lifelike mask cunningly woven from silk.

⚀⚁ THE GREEN CAT

The Green Cat is a large wildcat that prowls the edges of the wood. Some believe it is merely a wildcat with unusual coloration—moss growing on its fur, perhaps?—while others think its appearance is an evil omen.

⚀⚂ THE JOLLY LADS

Deep in the woods lies an abandoned cabin, its door hanging loose and its roof sagging. It was once the home of an old sorcerer, and his creations still live there generations after his death. These are the Jolly Lads, the manikin children he created for himself from bone and sinew and leather. They love pranks and japes—they collect hooks, snares, and shivs. They are cruel to the weak.

⚀⚃ THE OLD HOG

The Old Hog is a massive brute—not a boar, but a fat, narrow-eyed beast of a barnyard pig. Folk say it is the prized pig of an ill-tempered old fae woman, grown fat crunching up the bones of the bad little children she feeds it.

⚀⚄ KETHONI

Caves and ruins are common shelters of last resort for outlaws, beggars, and those with nowhere else to go. The respectable folk of the villages shun these poor souls, but they are mostly harmless. Some, however, have grown to like their new subterranean homes. These kethoni emerge at night to pillage and maraud, stealing babies to raise in their lightless world. Some say that the various caves and shelters are linked by underground tunnels and ruled by a terrible witch-queen.

⚀⚅ SNOODLEBOOT

The hairy, man-like Snoodleboot gives off a powerful stench. Lone travellers claim to have seen it lurking by the path, a stout tree branch in hand. Sometimes it leaves little bundles of colorful leaves and flowers on certain old stones.

⚁⚀ LONELY MEG

Walk in the wood long enough, especially in the cool of twilight, and you'll hear a quiet weeping. Follow it and you'll see Lonely Meg, sat in the shade of a willow tree, crying for her lost love, her lovely hair shrouding her face. Persuade her that you will love her instead, and she may bestow a boon on you. Fail, and join her in the cold.

⚁⚁ THE BEETLE KNIGHT

They say the Beetle Knight was a noble knight who loved a peasant lass. When his proud father had the girl's family evicted, he went mad and fled to the wood. That was centuries ago, but somehow he still lives. His eyes are glossy black and his armour is an insect's chitin, but some flicker of chivalry still remains and he cannot resist a challenge to joust.

⚁⚂ RAZORBATS

Most bats are harmless—people squeal and run, but it's just a reflex. When it's a flock of razorbats, though, get to cover as fast as you can. You can always tell when they're coming by the whistling of their dagger-sharp wings. An iron collar or hat might keep you safe.

⚁⚃ THE BELLRINGER

A tall, bony figure in an elaborate but dirty gown, the Bellringer walks the shady paths of the wood, bearing a long staff from which dangles a verdigrised bell. To hear the bell ring once warns of a change to come. Twice signifies a death. No one knows what happens after three chimes.

NAUGHTY EBBART

If you're walking through the woods and you see a lost hobby-horse, toy soldier, or ball lying by the side of the path, Naughty Ebbart may be nearby. He doesn't like it when other people play with his toys. He doesn't like it when other people don't bring him his lost toys. He's an awful little boy with an awful big mouth full of awful sharp teeth.

DROPPLER

A few leaves dislodged from a branch or the rustle of frightened birds might be all that betrays the presence of the Droppler. This arboreal menace descends from the branches, swinging on its long, prehensile tail. Its circular maw is ringed with two sets of curved, razor-sharp teeth, and is just large enough to fit neatly over a man's head. With one quick snap, it relieves its victim of their cranium and springs back into the tree to enjoy its meal. Wise travellers wear hats adorned with leaves to deceive the Droppler.

THE TOMB WATCH

Alone or in pairs, the Tomb Watch maintain ancient patrol routes around the ruins of Kalduhr. They wear dull, dun-coloured armor—in fact, some say they are men of clay. Others claim they are the preserved skeletons of long-dead soldiers or waystation rangers, carrying out their duties even in undeath. Don't enter any restricted areas and they'll do you no harm with their rusted partizans or verdigrised maces. Of course, it's hard to tell what they consider restricted.

SHED CRABS

When the massive shed crab outgrows its original shell, it moves into something suitably-sized, often a shack, shed, or small outbuilding. When it gets larger, it seeks a more robust new carapace, like a cottage. Barn crabs can terrorize entire villages, and there are stories of mighty tower crabs rampaging across the landscape, their shells protected by the stony walls of their new homes.

THE SKULL CHORUS

Certain ruins or lonely rock outcrops within the wood contain the sets of niches that house a skull chorus. These yellowing relics mutter and grumble—living things fear the eerie sound and stay well clear. Feeding the skulls with fresh human blood makes their incoherent grumbling clear. It doesn't have to be your own blood, a fact known to scum throughout the kingdoms.

PIXIE KNIGHTS

Forest sprites love to imitate what they see, but their childish natures interpret it in the cruellest and most absurd way possible. As the Crown's military forces push into the Kalduhr, a new breed of pixie knights has arisen. These haughty cavaliers, mounted on badgers or foxes, arm themselves in scraps of junk and battered armor adorned with plumes and ribbons. They may look ridiculous, but their lances are very sharp.

SALLY WHISKERS

They say a witch used to live in this part of the woods. Like all witches, she had a cat. People think that cats help witches cast their evil spells, but the truth is otherwise: witches keep cat demons restrained. Sally Whiskers is a big fluffy cat who loves ear scratches, makes using magic easier, and would like to have a new human friend to make a pact with.

SPRING DOLLS

Spring dolls are a common offering in many small villages. Village children craft these little effigies out of sticks and flowers and hang them from trees. Some say they're intended to represent the Sisters, but this is probably a vestige of older traditions dedicated to the forest spirits. Because the bodies are made from the forest's products, they have a sympathetic connection to the spirits. Sometimes, a forest spirit will enter one of these little dolls and use the body to carry out its tasks. The chores of forest spirits are incomprehensible to humans.

MONCATS

Dancing lights in the wood lead passers-by off the narrow trails. These are tiny lanterns held in the claws of moncats, intelligent marsupials who love to lead humans astray so that they can beat, rob, and humiliate them. Ironically, moncats often nest in underground areas such as ruins, meaning that their plans to mislead treasure-hunters sometimes lead them right where they wanted to be.

ROOT RUNTS

Root runts scuttle about the forest floor. They steal food and shiny objects from packs, prey on small animals, and generally make a nuisance of themselves. If they can find a lone human sleeping or incapacitated, they may try to take its soft, juicy eyes or delicious, filling blood. Being living wood, they have no use for the jewellery, knives, potions, books, or shoes they steal, so they hide them in the boles of hollow trees.

OLD LADY PICKLES

Old Lady Pickles moves around the forest in her caravan. Its door is bright red and its walls are homely green. Warm yellow light glows out of the windows at night. Old Lady Pickles is a very nice lady, a little confused. She loves to pickle things; her caravan smells like vinegar. Be polite to her and compliment her pickled eggs and she might share her wood-lore with you, but she doesn't like rude people. Rude people end up in the pickling pot.

PATCHWORK GHOSTS

When a human being dies, funerary rites send their spirit safely on to the afterlife. But when a body is cut to pieces or devoured by beasts, the spirit is likewise torn apart unless special ceremonies are performed. Sometimes, these fragments of spirit combine to form patchwork ghosts, ragged things made furious by their clashing, conflicting memories. They haunt the outskirts of their former homes, desperate to be reunited, to say farewell, or to take vengeance... but on whom?

HOUSEGARS

Housegars dwell in the eaves and cesspits of houses. They feed on scraps of food and crumbs of bread, and use mean-spirited pranks to punish anyone who keeps their home too clean. Some say housegars are descended from servant-creatures of a bygone empire—no noble would be seen without a housegar as majordomo. Now they eat garbage by peasant hearths.

THE GULLIFAX

The Gullifax is a shining animal, something like a deer and something like a horse. It will bestow a blessing on anyone who crosses its path, makes the appropriate offering, and bears no sin. The Gullifax has its own definition of sin, however: it spares the honest thief and the highwayman, but any who blaspheme against the Sisters are crushed beneath its hooves.

ASTERITES

Tiny creatures, glowing bright, flit about the wood. These are called asterites—tiny fragments of a star that crashed to earth deep in the Kalduhr. Their parent, the star itself, is hurt, and they have scattered throughout the wood to find magic which they can use to replenish its supplies. Magic items, the souls of magical beings, sacred objects: anything will do. They seize these things with invisible hands and float them back to the crater for sacrifice. Once they have enough magic, they will rejoin the star and return to the dance of the heavens.

THE TREE FISHER

The Tree Fisher is a brawny goblin-like creature that dwells in the forest's upper canopy. Its arms are massive from brachiating around all day, while its legs are bowed and tiny. It fishes on the forest floor, casting down a rope with a hook to drag something up into the canopy for its supper. Ever turned around to see that your companion was no longer behind you? The Tree Fisher probably got 'em.

BRASS EELS

Brass eels flash and glimmer in pools and streams, their dully gleaming bodies visible in the clouds of mud and silt. Set foot too near their holes, and they'll be on you, scissor jaws slashing. Are they ancient clockwork automatons, built for some unfathomable purpose, or perhaps suffering ghosts, the spirits of criminals bound into metal prisons?

THE BRACKEN BOAR

The Bracken Boar isn't a boar at all—it's a monstrous great hedgehog, gifted with size and wisdom by fae monarchs. Bring it a tasty treat and you'll have forest-luck, but anger it and you're in for a spiking.

THE CRIMSON CLOUD

On certain autumn nights, the mist that rises from the ground in the forest has a deep crimson color. Folks say it rises from all the blood shed over the years upon the forest floor. Most of the time it's just eerie, brushing softly and wetly against the skin of any who walk through it. Sometimes, though, people vanish into the fog and never return. Perhaps the Crimson Cloud gets its blood from a source more recent than ancient slayings.

THE RUCTIFER

The Ructifer is a massive brute with powerful limbs, sharp antlers, slashing claws, and a cavernous maw full of teeth like butcher knives. Its matted hide bristles with arrows and the splintered shafts of javelins and harpoons. Once a god, it has shrunk to the scale of a beast. It is dimly conscious of the fact, and hates it. It longs to die in a fashion worthy of its former stature.

THE WHITE LARK

The White Lark, unlike its normal kin, sings at night. Its cold eyes look down on all who pass beneath it. Its beak is diamond-sharp, and if you don't leave it a treat when you walk beneath its tree it will peck one out of you.

THE NIPPET

The Nippet is a humanoid, lizardlike creature that prowls out of the forest on cool nights. Often, it simply scavenges, stealing chickens from henhouses or hams from smoke sheds. But on certain nights, its deep baying can be heard echoing across the wood, and the sound of intricate rhythms being banged out on hollow logs keeps villagers awake. On those nights, someone disappears, and so does the Nippet. But it always returns—or perhaps a new one appears.

SILVER SEM

Travellers through the forest at night may see moonlight glinting off the shining form of a metal-coated humanoid. Silver Sem, as the locals call him, seems to be some kind of manikin. He spies on settlements, seemingly gathering information, not attacking with the scalpel-like blades that slide into his forearms unless he's provoked. Of course, he seems to be made from silver so he's frequently provoked by acquisitive treasure-hunters.

CHUCKLING LEECHES

Wade through one of the Kalduhr's many streams, and you might hear a soft sound like laughter. Most people dismiss it as the water gurgling over the rocks, and sometimes it is. But sometimes it's a chuckling leech. These brightly-spotted invertebrates attach themselves to a human to feed on it. Unlike a regular leech, these creatures drink not blood but laughter. Eventually, the leech completely consumes the victim's sense of humor.

SHRIEKMAW

Bat-headed, goat-legged, whip-tailed, and hairy, the shriekmaw stuns its prey with high-pitched sound waves, then devours it before it can recover. Shriekmaws love human music and sometimes skulk around campsites listening to travellers play their flutes and fiddles. Problems develop when they try to sing along.

THE GREEN BATTALION

The Green Battalion are soldiers who lost their way in the wood and cannot seem to leave it. It has started to extend its shoots into them; ivy crowns their rusted helms and little mushrooms grow from the soft and rotted hafts of their bills and halberds. They live in a fever dream of war, and may see anyone they meet as comrade or enemy. Their families in the villages miss them.

Monstrous Signs, Wards, and Calls

LAIRS & SIGNS OF HABITATION	
Small purses of meat dangling from hair-woven rope.	Skulls or bones arranged symmetrically.
Talons stuck in wood near deep scoring marks.	A nest of dried vomit, shredded books.
Dirt shaped into a berm.	Scorched patches, drifting ash.

SIMPLE WARDS OF PROTECTION REQUIRING ONLY COMMON ITEMS READY AT HAND
Draw the cardinal directions in animal blood above one's eyes.
Dip fingers in waters from home, flick drops homeward.
Crush dewdrop pods, rub oil over hands and mouth.
When a blade is first drawn, move the point in a grand circle.
Place a true volcanic stone in one's mouth, and do not speak.
Step twice with every step, a rhythm pleasing to both fortune and caution.

UNFAMILIAR CALLS AND SOUNDS	
OR OR	OR OR
A staccato hoot, then a long moan.	The low hum of thousands of wings.
A yipping bark, then answering yips.	An electrical crackle.
An airy whoof from an enormous set of lungs.	A descending yowl, ending with a spitting growl.
A clicking chorus, rising and fading.	An in-sucking wet sound.
A melody sung with a full throat, ending in a whine.	Popping sounds, air bubbling through thick liquid.
Cracking like of branches or dry bones.	Creaking like a cellar door or old tree under pressure.

The Hive

Unique among beasts is one group: the bees. Intelligent and organized, their population ranges from common bees, to massive warriors larger than humans, to magic-wielding sorcerers. They make raids against human villages, manufacture artificial humans as waxen spies, and hum the praises of their singular queen, a—possibly mythical—figure known as the Mother of Millions.

THE SECRETS OF THE BEES

As reported by Zizzeks, a woman who claims to have lived in a hive for three years.

⚀ ⚀ Bees communicate by scent, applying it with their tarsal claws—their divine feet. To be trod upon is to become a text, perhaps a love letter.

⚀ ⚁ Bees communicate by dance, and so can you. With a pure heart and smoothly swivelling hips, you can tell a bee anything at all.

⚀ ⚂ Bees have no prisons. Should you find a person encased in a wax cell, they're either being stored as food or they're in the process of being transformed.

⚀ ⚃ Different hives have different pitches of hums. Each speaks to the nature of the queen within. I will not elaborate.

⚀ ⚃ Bees are not violent by nature. They are only violent in response to provocation, such as "presence in an area they control" or "competing for resources."

⚀ ⚄ It is impossible to lie to a bee. They can smell your intentions. Some of them have a special organ that can be placed just inside your nose to solicit the truth.

⚁ ⚀ In the language of bees, humans are the Always-Hungry. That's why they won't cede territory to humans... it would never be enough anyway.

⚁ ⚁ Bees can see and interact with spirits. My own father appeared as a shadowed stag. They stung it to death, and I was set free.

⚁ ⚂ There's no such thing as fae. Every creature so named was a failed experiment by bees to create something like us.

⚁ ⚃ Every creature has a spirit inside it, and these spirits extend into the world, invisibly. The denser we pack ourselves, the more our spirits interact, the more power we create. Hives hum with this power, as do cities.

⚁ ⚃ Honey, as a food source, is overrated—unless one is a child or without teeth.

⚁ ⚄ The Mother of Millions loves the world, but doesn't necessarily love life. Does that make sense? It's too cheap to love.

⚂ ⚀ The easiest way to enter a hive is to be pollen. The second easiest way is to follow a great elk, whose mighty antlers can breach any wall.

⚂ ⚁ Bees dwell everywhere—even below the waves. You can hear them at low tide, building wax cities on the seafloor.

⚂ ⚂ Bees don't understand human languages, so they build creatures to learn it for them. They look like people and think like bees. A humming in their heads.

⚂ ⚃ There is a fungus that every hive fears. They call it *[unable to transcribe]*. A grey mold spreads over everything, giving off a milky rot. Bees turn on bees, tearing each other apart. Hives don't recover.

If you have neighbor bees, keep them happy. Grow flowers, leave the flowers alone, move further away.

A dream about bees may be prophetic. Did you lock eyes with a bee? How many limbs did you have in the dream? Did your tongue taste of wax when you woke up?

Bees know bees. Want to safely move among bees? Be a bee. Cover yourself in bees and bee-things.

The venom from a bee sting transforms some people into monsters—especially people who live underground.

In the north, there's a hive built around the body of a giant, but the giant is only sleeping. Bee conversation fills its dreams, fed by honey that drips down its cavernous throat.

Spread honey in a circle around your bed to trap spirits that would disturb your dreams.

Chew on wax / all day long / while you sing this honey'd song / Chew on wax / into night / you'll find fortune and delight.

The Azure Archives house a queen within their library of apian knowledge. She will be rescued. Unfortunately, many will suffer.

A tea made by steeping pieces of bee carapace with lavender can cure cowardice.

The bees walked this world before it had a name. During the age of giants, all of Tirollis was one great hive.

To approach a bee safely, move slowly. Once it touches you, be still. If you're stung, pray silently until the suffering passes. That said, prayers do reach the Sisters faster if you're running.

Hive horticulture is real. There's a grey fungus they cultivate in special chambers because it's an intoxicant.

Bright-Teeth Assyrio bankrolls a merchant who sells fake honey. It's gold and sweet, but is produced by milking a seacow stolen from the Gasping Ones.

If a bee's sting closes your throat or empties your stomach, be glad. The venom is removing impurities in your blood.

Bee stings alleviate hunger pangs, strengthen eyes, cure blood thickness/sandiness, insufficient piety, unnatural thinking, and any confusion linked to being "fae-touched."

To kill a bee is to fall into a trap. Uncounted others will wait until victory has distracted you, then fall upon you in a wave.

Smoke "calms" bees because it blocks the smells they use to communicate. Walking while wreathed in smoke is a duplicitous act. What are you trying to hide?

Bees know magic. They can use it to make you say things—secrets—or journey on their behalf.

There is a god at the heart of every hive.

This world was theirs once. Every inch of it hummed. This time will come again.

Giants

In ancient days, giants walked the earth. Their massive bones may still be found in remote locations, and occasionally news spreads of an actual giant having been sighted, especially in the forest, and specifically around the forest village of Kormoran's Wheel.

IT'S NEVER A GIANT

Signs, disturbances, and bits of folklore associated with—or blamed on—giants.

⚀⚀ A stretch of treetops withered by giant breath, which is notoriously foul.

⚀⚁ Sinkholes appearing in the grazing lands of livestock.

⚀⚂ A staved in roof where a giant leaned for a moment.

⚀⚃ A path along the mountain that "feels colder."

⚀⚄ The disappearance of every settler in North Field, with their homes intact.

⚀⚅ If everyone you see in a village is ugly, it's because a giant bathed in their lake.

⚁⚀ A swarm of insects could be a "swarm giant," temporarily dispersed into its component bodies.

⚁⚁ Youths who flee unsafe homes are sometimes claimed to be "giant-snatched" as a face-saving measure.

⚁⚂ A giant is entombed in Twelve Mountain. The steam that gushes from its many caves is its breath.

⚁⚃ When heat rises between Fort Noril and the Aurum Mountains, the mountain called the "Hunched Mother" can be seen to waver and sometimes disappear. The Mother is actually a giant who leaves when it can no longer stand the heat.

⚁⚄ Little Eye, the mayor of Yellow Trees, used to be a giant.

⚁⚅ Giants deforested the disputed lands between Ambaret and Tirollis. (If true, it's strange that it wasn't giants who sold that timber in the Shrine Bay market, but men.)

⚂⚀ Storm clouds are arguments between giants. Clouds are like letters made of giant breath, circulated and kept private by their altitude.

⚂⚁ It's possible to walk through a giant and not realize it's there. Some giants can only be perceived from a distance. Their bodies are lightly held together, like a mist.

⚂⚂ This valley was formed in the days of Old Kalduhr when a giant leapt up. One day, it will come back down and smash all who live here.

⚂⚃ An entire forest, every tree, coated to its towering top in wax. What else could reach so high?

⚂⚄ A fire underground that never goes out: a giant's furnace, in the workshop where it forges the world.

⚂⚅ Attercaps offer to use fae magic to make anyone a giant in exchange for a key... any key: to a door, to a bank's vault, or to a chest of dusty laundry. Doesn't matter. They're fascinated by human locks.

A village set to domestic squabbling, proof a giant's shadow passed over it.

A rippling black sheet flapping in the wind, pinned by a thorn hedge: a giant's discarded handkerchief (or the lost sail of a fae wind vessel).

A lake's water level lowered overnight by a thirsty giant, revealing long-submerged structures with enormous doors.

A clever giant appeared in the town of Olviret and remained for a week, sharing wisdom. "I am only partially in this world and am actually much larger," it said. "As are you." A week of stilt-walking celebration occurs there annually.

Have you dreamed of rooftops? Of striding over mountains? Do you wake thirsty? A giant's urine has polluted your well and drinking water.

Skytop Abbey was carved from the skull of a giant. The giant's shrunken brain (pure gold!) rests in an attic space above the altar, too large to roll out of any exit.

Never speak of a giant. A giant grows a full foot every time you mention their name.

Half of the town of Sepolta left some years ago, following a giant. Some say the giant lured them away with lies, but the townsfolk left behind say nothing.

You can tell the children of giants by their height and their feet. If their second toes stretch past their first, they're giant-spawn.

The tides flow in and out because of the Drowned Giant, its lungs pumping water from the sea's depths. Its huge arms sometimes grab hold of passing ships in an attempt to pull itself from the water, only to sink the vessels beneath the waves.

Bright-Teeth Assyrio was raised by giants, which is why she seems so mountainous and intimidating in person.

Members of the Chronolatrous Mystery cult claim to have written proof that giants walked the land, but access is limited to members only.

The boat people who travel the Visa River used to practice ritual drowning as both a religious and judicial practice, until a river giant started interfering. It scooped up each gasping and bound celebrant from the river, before depositing them safely on the river's bank. These days, all drownings are done in tubs.

Stars are actually holes torn in the night's veil by a giant's trident when he fished the night sky for cosmic prey—hooped fish, lapping disc crabs, and whispering eels.

No mere insect could be the fabled Mother of Millions who elevated the world's bees to a near-human level of cunning. The Mother is actually a giant older than the current age, covered in honey and wax. Its undying skin spontaneously generates new bees with strange magic.

The last living giant works at the Azure Archive. It oversees a collection of immense volumes, each of which is the height of a barn.

Giants are rare. The only known breeding pair in captivity can be seen for the price of a ticket to Gentle Mayflower's Meandering Circus.

If one is struck in error, or trips, or is bumped, one can swear "To the giant!" Doing so wishes the pain away to the nearest giant, whose immense body is presumably better able to weather the misfortune of your bruises and cuts.

The Fae

The collective name for a variety of unrelated beings who live within the forest and are said to come from the land of Faerie: trolls, sprites, fauns, elves, ogres, and the like. Despite having a wide range of intelligences, societies, habits, and goals, humans treat them as a monolithic culture bent on destroying humanity. That some fae do have that goal only confuses matters.

MADAME MANNERS'S GUIDE TO NAVIGATING UNFAMILIAR FAE ETIQUETTE

Excerpts from a longer work discovered in a circle of blue dream cap mushrooms, wrapped inside a delicate spider-lace scarf, clutched by a skeletal five-fingered hand (presumed human).

⚀⚀ Beware a hand offered for shaking. Some hunting fae have barbed palms.

⚀⚁ Every trade you make to a fae is at a loss. If you think you've profited, you have in fact incurred a dangerous debt.

⚀⚂ Coloration of fae head caps are purely aesthetic and do not denote rank. Ignore—politely—red caps who tell you otherwise.

⚀⚃ Make note of all titles given. When repeating them, accuracy and order are important. When in doubt, remain silent.

⚀⚄ The Court of Sweet Daggers prefers to seal negotiations with violence inflicted on an uninvolved third party, so you share culpability with them.

⚀⚅ Yagga Kin are parasitic and change hosts frequently. You'll know them by their eyes and tongue, which travel with them. They will break contracts, claiming any debts belonged to abandoned host bodies.

⚁⚀ You may never know why a fae offers you a gift. Sometimes—as when you toss crumbs to birds—they give merely for the pleasure of watching you stoop to pick up.

⚁⚁ There are as many varieties of fae as fish in the sea. To be fluent in all their languages—spoken, gestural, decorative, behavioral—is a lifetime's task.

⚁⚂ The fae do not "kidnap," they protect. The fae do not "mutilate," they improve.

⚁⚃ Ears & Eyes: a secret society of fae who specialize in political infiltration.

⚁⚄ Wisps (or the Kindly Wisps): Born as humans, these self-imposed outcasts trade for glass jars to make glowworm lanterns. Most work as escorts. In-group membership is shown by having several facial piercings.

⚁⚅ Not all fae move through the world as we do. To some, time is like water. To understand them, you must drown.

⚂⚀ For fae-gifting this season, lanterns are treasured and considered hilarious. But tastes change like weather. If I write that you must carry an umbrella today, by the time you read my advice you'll be months or years past the storm of which I warned.

⚂⚁ Answer questions with questions to establish your credibility through play.

⚂⚂ Water fae. Dripping fae. The Gasping Ones. Their numbers are the greatest. They are fierce foes. If they offer to breathe for you, let them. It's a generous and sincere offer.

⚂⚃ Should you find yourself on trial, do not take it personally. This is how the fae educate and improve the non-fae. It's a sign of—occasionally lethal—respect.

⚄ ⚅ A metaphor: Take your hand and slap a river's surface. A bubble forms then pops. That is your life. The hand represents the fae, eternal (relative to that bubble). Poor bubble.

⚄ ⚆ Blue coats. A scent of jam. Do not call them "blueberries." They prefer "Dear Friends."

⚄ ⚀ A crying like the world is ending. A lone figure far from home. Share a jacket and just sit there, quietly. Patience is the best approach for a Wander Jack.

⚄ ⚁ If an attercap bows to you, bow more deeply in return. If a tink bows, remain still.

⚄ ⚂ If asked for a password or phrase, do not answer. Listen. The question itself is the shibboleth, your non-response the answer. Passwords are human folly.

⚄ ⚅ Many "bridge trolls" are merely the *underemployed*, inventing fae excuses to justify demands for payment.

⚄ ⚅ Proper gifts for any fae who have absconded with a human child: musk lilies, stone fruit in a stone bowl, or three secrets whispered into a sealed jar.

⚄ ⚆ You have never met a fae. Not truly. They cannot fit through the doors to this world. All you've ever met are cradle-snatched humans, raised to be the fae's emissaries.

⚄ ⚀ No verbal promise has value unless it has been spoken into a contract jar and sealed with giant-wax. As these components are rare, written contracts are easier.

⚄ ⚁ An *orruck* is a habitual user of dream-paste, which tints one's skin green over time and causes increasingly intense plant-dreams.

⚄ ⚂ It's not the gift, it's the gratitude. This is why you'll sometimes be handed broken items with solemn intensity.

⚄ ⚁ Every circle is a door. Look for them. Mark their presence.

⚄ ⚅ As a requirement for a contract, you may be given a living thing to protect "as a show of good faith." Perhaps to see if you can keep it alive, perhaps so the thing can spy on you. If the proffered "thing" resembles you, you must decline, even if the contract is lost.

⚄ ⚆ *"Should you meet one robed with night / you are going to have to fight / Should you meet one wrapped in day / run away, run away"*
—children's rhyme, village of Otai

⚅ ⚀ They do not care for written contracts. "All law sprouts from the living." So long as both parties are alive, a contract is valid. (This leaves an obvious loophole.)

⚅ ⚁ Giving a key is a deadly insult, as it implies a space beyond the reach of the gift recipient. If a fae asks you for a key, what they actually want is incitement.

⚅ ⚂ There are fae near the Sea of Bone who practice scarification, where chaotic patterns dance across their skin. They say the scars form a living document, but it's actually how they *unravel*.

⚅ ⚅ The fae beyond this world make mistakes, as all creatures do. In Hemenia off the coast of Levasti, there's a boneyard where once a flood of identical, fair-haired children appeared at irregular intervals through a tree gate, only to die, unable to breathe here. The fae sent copies of this flawed creature through over a period of months before abandoning the project.

⚅ ⚅ "Fae" is a word used to divide "us" from "them," so they can be persecuted for being different. They're human, too. The rest is myth.

⚅ ⚆ The safest and most polite option when dealing with fae is to listen.

Spirits

Everything has a spirit—people, fae, animals, trees, water, rocks, fire—and that spirit can be separated from its host and bound to other objects or forced to do the bidding of sorcerers. The active spirits of people, fae, and fire are the most pliable, but the right magics can wrangle even the spirit of granite and bind it to a service as permanent as stone itself. Things that die within the forest are claimed by the forest and work on its behalf, often in a spectral form.

EXCERPTS FROM *WHISPERED WISDOM*

Compiled by Scry Oslo of the Milksweet Research Library.

⚀⚀ An armored warrior holding aloft a banner from a forgotten age barred our path. Its sunken eyes appeared to devour light.

⚀⚁ I felt cold hands inside my own pockets. They held fast as they entwined with mine.

⚀⚂ A winged creature of cloud and lightning plucked a full draft horse into the air, only to hurl it down onto jagged rocks.

⚀⚃ My own father, who died when I was a child, appeared in my path to silently beg something of me. I know not what. I was unable to interpret his spectral tears.

⚀⚄ There's no such thing as a spirit who survives death. If you see someone you know, it's a borrowed face for a trap, or it's someone out of time—either spying on the future or issuing a warning to the past.

⚀⚅ Shimmering figures surrounded us. They had our breath half out of our body before they were torn apart by a force we couldn't see—sphere-ish and crackling, scattering spirits like a seabreeze dispersing fog.

⚁⚀ Before crossing a body of water, sprinkle tobacco on its surface so the spirits below will hold you up.

⚁⚁ Giants are nothing but spirit batteries. They sucked up too much spirit and had to grow to contain it all.

⚁⚂ Every rock and tree contains spirit... unless it's been siphoned off for a magical purpose. No animals around? Taste of a smooth riverstone on your tongue? Smell like an icy lake? You can sense a spiritless place.

⚁⚃ Many spirits are actually fae pretending to be dead. They'll avoid touch to maintain the illusion.

⚁⚄ Eaters of dreampaste claim they can see the spirit webbing that holds the world together. However, they also say they dream of futures, so skepticism is warranted.

⚁⚅ When a leviathan sinks to the sea's bottom, crabs and creatures take them apart. An invisible world of scavengers surrounds us, waiting to flense our spirits after death.

⚂⚀ For any who use magic, a spirit's identity is unimportant. Who they were is less relevant than what they can do for you.

⚂⚁ The creation of manikins and other elemental creatures requires shifting a spirit from some materials to others, leaving spiritless matter behind as a byproduct. This spiritless material makes for good weapons against spirits.

⚂⚂ True names are true power, say the fae behind their masks. To name a spirit is to isolate it from the spirit world, weakening its powers and strengthening your resolve.

⚄ ⚅ Your sinew and bones are propelled by a spirit that shares your name. And it will outlive you.

⚄ ⚄ If you meet a spirit, keep your mind blank. Spirits can sense what you want to see and shape themselves accordingly.

⚄ ⚃ A particularly violent act can be a pebble dropped in a puddle of time. At set intervals, spirits appear to re-enact violence on a schedule as fixed as the paths of stars.

⚄ ⚀ "All spirits greet those with light feet." —Maxim for the common traveler. Maintain a low profile.

⚄ ⚁ A ring drawn with salt or seeds around one's sleeping area will keep the Shivering from crawling into your bed at night.

⚄ ⚂ Battlefields, plagues, and other mass losses of life sometimes birth hill giants: chimera spirits, fused multitudes, muddled and ethereal with a grief that radiates.

⚄ ⚅ It used to be easier to talk to our own dead. Bowls of milk left out by an open door, a lantern to guide them home. But now the forest lures them all away.

⚄ ⚄ When you dream, your spirit goes walking. How many spirits are dreamers who won't remember meeting you?

⚄ ⚃ Unbound from the limitations of flesh, a spirit's appearance can warp and drip, impersonating many people at once.

⚄ ⚀ Do not allow a spirit to pass through you. If you do, your own spirit risks pollution from its ethereal touch.

⚄ ⚁ Spirits are eternal and as such, difficult to threaten or drive off. You cannot hurt a spirit in any way that matters.

⚄ ⚂ A silver stake driven with a silver hammer can pin a spirit in place.

⚄ ⚅ A spirit in stone is the hardest to quicken into a form that you can manipulate. It runs deep and slow. Rituals that use stone magic last longer than other magics.

⚄ ⚄ A gift left on an altar—even an unfamiliar one—shows respect to the local spirits. Of course, one can't afford a gift on every altar...

⚄ ⚃ Magic that draws on plants weaves spirit easily. So long as there's sunshine and water, the spirit should replenish quickly. It takes monstrous magic to wither plants down to the root.

⚃ ⚀ Asked about spirit encounters, Jennak the Dour says spirits are unimportant. "What the meatless have to say is of no concern to me."

⚃ ⚁ No one has ever seen a bee's ghost.

⚃ ⚂ Spiritbane charms work on one of two principles: repulsion or capture. Be quite sure which variety you've purchased.

⚃ ⚅ Bound in string and your own hair, a spiritless stone can bleed a spirit, capturing and slowing its animating spirit in rock.

⚃ ⚄ Animal herders speak of Canny Legs, a goat-legged spirit with a knack for separating unwary beasts from the herd.

⚃ ⚃ Sister's Tears consistently allow one to see spirits in their true form, if you can obtain them.

The Witch of Nevask

MADELEINE EMBER

The dreaded Forest of Kalduhr holds both horror and wonder for those brave fools who seek to traverse it. Anyone who frequently travels the roads out of Fort Duhrin, speaks in hushed tones of The Witch of Nevask. Each traveler has their own set of stories and rumors—how she is encountered, who she helps, what she can do.

She can be spotted...

- in the early morning, traveling along the edge of a field at a hastened pace before she vanishes suddenly.
- just within the wood, picking plants, checking small game traps, and crooning to herself.
- high in the branches of the Kalduhr canopy, walking lightly between improbably slim branches.
- dancing atop drifts of fresh snow under a full moon, casting no shadow and leaving no footprints.
- within her high stilt house, cackling as she stokes its coughing hearth.
- casting bones and doing business as a "wise woman." If accused of being a witch, she bursts into smoke.

People seek her out...

- for potions against illnesses. The only fee she asks is that the seeker plant a seed of her choice in their garden.
- to tell the fortunes of the betrothed. It is said that a fright from her readies one for the shock of married life.
- to learn secret paths through the forest. Sometimes the best advice is to leave and never return.
- to learn the secrets of her powers. These seekers are, without exception, never seen again.
- to help find lost people and animals. She will assist—for a price as dear to the seeker as their own heart.
- to remove odious curses. Such dispellations require great sacrifices.

Rumors Told of the Witch

THE NAME NEVASK

The Nevask is one of two rivers that runs through the Kalduhr, and is said to have been named after the witch—not the other way around. Sprung from somewhere deep within the forest, it tumbles breakneck over miles of stones and bones. It's surprisingly deep for its breadth. As is true of the witch, many travelers do not appreciate the danger it poses until it is already too late. The Naveh River, Nevask's twin, has stories of its own.

THE WITCH'S HUT

The witch lives in a high stilt hut built of woven willow and reeds. It walks through the forest, which bends to allow it passage. Smoke billows from the generous hearth within. The hut's little windows shine as red as blood against the shrouding fog.

THE WITCH'S HEARTH

Sometimes, very late at night when the air is still and cold, you can hear the distant roar of the witch's hearth, onto which she throws branches hewn from the forest, still laden with bloody sap.

ON CHILDREN

The witch has a fondness for children. Some claim she once was a mother who lost her children to the forest. Others say she offered her children to the Kalduhr in exchange for some measure of its dark magics, and seeks still more children for further deals. Whatever her motivation, she never turns away a lost child's earnest plea for assistance.

THE WITCH'S STAFF

She carries a gnarled staff carved from a live oak. Every time she sets the staff down, it tears a little bit of herself away with it. The staff is hewn of that cursed wood, connecting her to very old and very dangerous power.

ECHANOR THE WITCH-TOUCHED

Echanor, a soft-spoken priestess trained under Mother Niavka at Fort Duhrin, will retell her encounter with the witch to those who contribute monetarily to funerary efforts and blessings for outgoing expeditions. Her right arm bears the burned shape of an open hand, where the witch grabbed her and pulled her from the jaws of death.

THE BELLS

The multitude of small copper bells that hang from the witch's hut are said to have been cast in cities all across the world, each with a unique tone and purpose. Some have never been heard to make a sound—and perhaps that's for the best.

THE WITCH'S CRANE

The witch's pet sway-wing crane, with it's brilliant red cheeks and legs, is much larger than those that commonly haunt the local swamps and wetland tributaries. She raised this beast from a chick, feeding it the blood of rabbits and boars, until it was of a size to carry her on its back. It only comes at her call, and when spotted without her, is considered an omen of death.

THE WITCH'S PAST

No two stories of the witch's fall are the same, but most agree on several points: that the witch was once a mortal woman, that she once loved a woman who was braver than she was smart, and that the witch traded her love's life for her own, giving herself over to the forest. She now serves some combination of its will and her own.

A FOLK ETYMOLOGY

One admittedly prosaic source for the title "Nevask" is a drifted and contracted version of the phrase "never ask"—for to ask the witch's true name could only doom one to a swift, terrible death.

ON CHILD-REARING

The witch has long been used as a bogey for local children. It seems all parents know the witch "personally," and spend some portion of their social life regaling the witch with stories of their children's failings to eat their vegetables, clean their rooms, or do their chores. Such children are offered an opportunity to be taken away by the witch, where she shoves them in her hut, never to see the sun again, with only bugs and grubs to eat.

GRIMMIK THE LEATHERWORKER

The witch is missing her left eye—but it is not gone. Grimmik of Ambaret, a leatherworker in their trade district, claimed the eye in exchange for making the saddle of her sway-wing crane. He keeps this treasure in an ivory casket, always warmed by the touch of his skin and bound about his neck with a leather cord. Its magical properties are widely guessed at. Grimmik, now wizened as a winter apple, does not discuss these matters, and those who attempt to do so find the cost of their leathers exponentially inflated.

THE WITCH'S HAIR

Her hair is thick and tightly curled, clouding about and behind her for several feet—yet it never snags on thorns or catches stray leaves. It's said that the witch's hair cannot be cut by any man made tool, and that it can only be gathered from her elk-bone comb or by her own hand. These strands are as strong as iron, and are rumored to serve as heavy-draw bowstrings for those who offer her tribute.

STILL MARY

The witch's true name and history have been lost to time, but there is a child's skipping rhyme that gives her pause when little else turns her gaze:

Out to find a treasure of gold,
I dug up stones in the bitter cold.
Still Mary held me in my sleep.
I've naught to keep, I've naught to keep.
Out to find our grub and brew,
I gathered moss and morning dew.
Still Mary laughed and kissed my brow.
I've nothing now, I've nothing now.
Out to find a wedding ring,
I promised summer but died in spring.
Still Mary cried and broke her heart.
So sad we part, so sad we part.
Out to find the weight of hope,
I'd hung my head in a circle'd rope.
Still Mary loved me, true and good,
well as she could, long as she could.

AN ARCHAIC ETYMOLOGY

An additional source for the title "Nevask" derives from the old Kalduhri word for a lightning-hollowed tree, a *nevsk*. Such trees stand out, their bark blackened, bearing neither leaf nor fruit. They are said to be the favored haunts of fae horrors.

ON PEPPERMINT

The witch always carries a small sachel of peppermint leaves with her. Rumored to only grow in her enchanted garden hidden within the forest, the leaves have a powerful quickening effect on mental acuity.

ON CHILDBIRTH

More than childbirth has been initiated by the witch's startling laughter. It has become a fashionable habit to walk the border of the forest when one is heavily pregnant in the hopes that the witch will do what time has hardly hurried.

ON BEANS

If a traveler throws a handful of beans at the witch before running away, she will be compelled to gather them and count them one by one. This sounds like a ridiculous bit of folklore, but it's still common for travelers to keep a handful of beans in their pocket at all times. Better safe than sorry.

THE WITCH'S MANY FORMS

The witch can wear a number of animal guises as she travels the forest—as a black forest cat, as a fleet black rabbit, and as a large black crow—all with bright green eyes.

ON A MULTIPLICITY OF WITCHES

Some claim there is not one witch, but several bearing the name "the Witch of Nevask." Together, this coven does tidy business gathering the fallen treasures from deceased treasure-hunters and mixing "potions" for the easily duped. Although no one has seen two witches in the same place, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

A RARE ORCHID

Witches Tears, a variety of orchid found in the deepest parts of Kalduhr, is said to sprout from where her tears touch the cursed earth. These lovely white flowers, that are increasingly rare, can cure blindness and considerably ease rheumatic joints.

ON WEAVING

She is said to be a prodigiously talented weaver. Her robes are woven from the fabric of night, from the feathery down of the wool-bearing bat, from the cocoons of moths that live their short lives in worship of their mother, the moon.

THE WITCH'S PATH

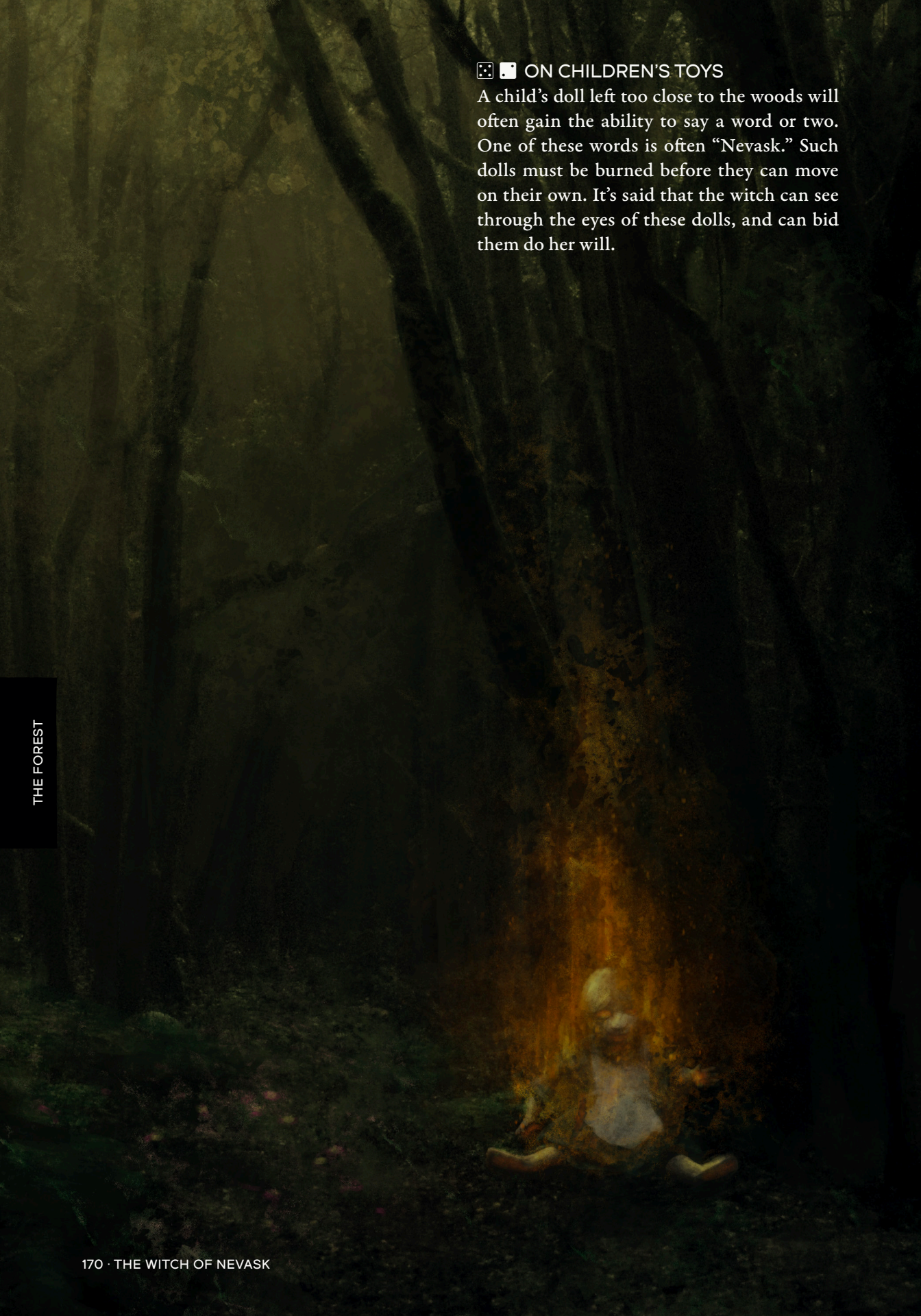
The Witch's Path, a subtle and narrow trail marked with smooth, flat stones, crosses through the forest. It's said to be the only fixed and safe route from the eastern edge to the western edge. However, this path is easily obscured by fallen leaves, snow, and spring undergrowth. It may be that no such path exists, except in the minds of hopeful travelers.

THE WITCH'S BEAUTY

The Witch of Nevask is so beautiful that mortals shiver at the sight of her and throw themselves at her feet. When she was young, she was blessed with a connection to the divine that could have led her to sainthood. However, this taste of power awoke in her a terrible desire, and she dedicated her life to learning the secrets of the natural world and how to control them. These efforts did nothing to dim her beauty, and her thronging admirers forced her to a life as a hermit.

ON UNATTENDED FIRES

If a fire is left unattended in the woods while all who should watch it sleep instead, the next to wake will find a beautiful young woman stirring the coals with her bare hands. They light and lick her skin with green flames. The witch laughs at whoever has woken and turns into a blackbird before flying away.



ON CHILDREN'S TOYS

A child's doll left too close to the woods will often gain the ability to say a word or two. One of these words is often "Nevask." Such dolls must be burned before they can move on their own. It's said that the witch can see through the eyes of these dolls, and can bid them do her will.

THE WITCH'S HAT

The witch wears a plain, black, wide-brimmed hat with a low crown—called a cartwheel hat—that was once considered very fashionable by the aristocracy. Such hats are now deemed "witchy" or "bad luck" and it is socially acceptable to only wear such a hat in gaudy colors and heaped with fake jewels or embroidered flowers.

THE NEVASK PEARL

A local spice, called the Nevask pearl, is a kind of black, miniature pea (and pod) with a sharp anise taste. It's often used in place of ground pepper. The pods are dried with the peas and ground up fine, or the peas are sometimes used whole in rubs. Unfortunately, the plants do not cultivate well outside of the Kalduhr.

THE WITCH'S WATER

The witch is said to be strengthened by the water from the Nevask, and that a sip puts steel in any drinker's bones. This has been a rumor with deadly consequences—for the river banks are often steep and slick, and the water dark and deep.

ON SOOTHING BEASTS

No matter the animal, it's said that the witch can calm it with a word if it was born outside of the forest. For those within, she has only limited effect upon, but even that is a marvel.

THE WITCH'S COINS

When the witch travels abroad, she exclusively uses copper coins for currency. These coins were minted several thousand years ago, bearing an image of a crane in flight over a large tree. They appear passingly similar to early bronze currency, which is still in common circulation. Any one of these distinctive coins carry a worth equal or equivalent to gold recently minted by the Crown—thereby providing a significant profit to anyone accepting the coins as "bronzes" in their establishment.

ON WITCH-MARKED HORSES

A horse with a shock of black hair in a brown, white, or other-colored mane is said to be "witch-marked" and favored for speed, but doomed to die young.

SWEET WITCH ROLLS

During the autumn equinox celebration of Wolf-Away, rolls flavored with Nevask pearls and filled with sweet cream are shared among friends and given to passing strangers. They are called by different names depending on the town, including Sweet Witch Rolls, Witch Buns, Nevask Rolls, Witch's Martyrs, Martyrs, or Sweet Mary's.

THE WITCH'S BATH

There is a large wooden tub that farmers east of Fort Duhrin use to water their pasture grazers. Some mornings, this tub is filled to the brim with still-warm blood. It's said that the witch bathes there in the blood of innocents twice a year to retain her youth and beauty. Despite the tub always smelling of old blood, beasts do not fear it.

GORA THE ADVENTURER

Gora, known adventurer and pioneer, has claimed to explore some portions of the forest while learning forbidden arts from the Witch of Nevask. Most dismiss her claims as exaggerations at best and outright lies at worst. Those who have been within that terrible place, though, say that much of the details and described locations mentioned are true to life.

THE WITCH'S FOLLOWERS

There is a small but fervent group of people who consider themselves "adherents" of the witch, as though she were a saint. These believers, calling themselves Nevaski or the Faithful of the Witch, do her homage with prayer and offerings, and are said to possess some small measure of true power. What is done in the witch's name, though, is not necessarily of her design.

Altars

GABRIEL ROBINSON

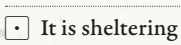
Hidden amongst the ruins of Kalduhr are places of power dedicated to the various gods, saints, spirits, demons, and monsters that lurk between the trees. These altars take a multitude of forms and offer countless blessings... for the right price, offered in the correct manner.

Use the following tables to construct any number of strange altars your party might encounter in the dread woods.

ALTAR FORMS	
Where has this altar been arranged?	
⚀ or ⚁ or ⚂	
⚀	The blackened hollow of a lightning-struck tree.
⚁	A dancing fountain within an overgrown secret garden.
⚂	A wall of cave drawings depicting bizarre transformations.
⚃	A sacred forge, kept constantly aglow by devoted smiths.
⚄	A towering stone monolith in an empty clearing.
⚅	An ancient tree as wide as a tower, circled in prayer flags and tiny idols.
⚃ or ⚄ or ⚅	
⚀	The lap of a colossal dead god, long ago turned to stone.
⚁	A secret shelf concealed by a tapestry.
⚂	A simple pile of offerings left at a crossroads sign.
⚃	A stone circle overlooking a mountain valley, open to the sky.
⚄	An intricate sculpture of bones and woven branches on the forest floor.
⚅	A glowing pool, deep within an icy mountain crevasse.

ALTAR FEATURES

What do you notice about the altar as you approach it?

 or or

It is sheltering the bones of a beloved hero or saint.

It is glowing with promises of redemption.

It is bearing many small idols and images of deities, variations of the same power.

It is honoring one entity but secretly dedicated to another.

It is covered in melted candles and offerings of hopeful pilgrims.

It is long-abandoned and mostly reclaimed by the surrounding wild.

or or

It is crackling with barely-contained energies.

It is being prepared by worshippers for an elaborate ritual.

It is littered with remnants of a recent sacrifice.

It is watched by a terrifying but impassive guardian.

It is surrounded by crying spirits of the recently departed.

It is desecrated, rearranged for a different purpose than intended.

ALTAR PURPOSES

What is the intention of this altar?

or or

A traveler's shrine to invoke one of the Sisters.

A place of merriment and bravery to inspire new followers of the Piper.

An ancient, wild place dedicated to the Old One of the Forest.

A sanctuary for the downtrodden, a place of solace for the desperate.

A corrupted place which was once sacred, now channeling the power of rituals for a dangerous new purpose.

A neutral space honored by human and fae folk, where peace offerings are made.

or or

A place of power to call upon the elements for protection.

An archive of ancestral memories, to honor the stories of those who came before.

A gateway to the wild, used by generations of local hunters.

A brazen declaration of a new power supplanting the old gods and traditions.

A waypoint along the glowing paths that guides lost souls to the afterlife.

A beacon of hope to travelers in dangerous places.

ALTAR INVOCATIONS

What tangible actions are required to activate the power of this altar?

⚀ or ⚁ or ⚂

⚀ Perform a heartfelt song or incantation.

⚁ Offer a prize of the hunt, traditionally the parts of a dangerous beast.

⚂ Share food, drink, or secrets with a stranger.

⚃ Redeem yourself through a noble deed, act to aid a nearby community.

⚄ Sacrifice a token of a rival power or corrupt authority.

⚅ Incite rebellious schemes, carry them out through cunning or trickery, and return.

⚃ or ⚄ or ⚅

⚀ Receive a mark of the altar's dedicated power.

⚁ Call on mighty powers to witness your sacred oath.

⚂ Stand a night-long vigil in silent prayer.

⚃ Repair something broken, heal an injury, or make right an act of wrongdoing.

⚄ Perform the ritual which connects you to your ancestors.

⚅ Vow to harm no innocent folk or natural creatures of the surrounding land.

ALTAR BLESSINGS

Should your offerings or rituals be accepted, what blessing does this altar grant?

⚀ or ⚁ or ⚂

⚀ Summon a mist, fog, or shadow to obscure your passage from dangerous foes.

⚁ Find a secret entrance or hidden path to follow—but something else will notice and follow you.

⚂ Ask questions of a spirit whose memory lives here to learn a useful fact about something nearby.

⚃ Gain the gift of a silver tongue to inspire folk with the beauty of your words. If you tell a lie, the gift fades.

⚄ Gain a single use of a magical ritual or spell associated with this altar.

⚅ Learn all weaknesses of a single local monster—but it becomes aware of your presence and begins hunting you.

⚃ or ⚄ or ⚅

⚀ Sacrifice something from each member of the party to bring a companion back from the brink of death.

⚁ Find inspiration to press on.

⚂ Sacrifice a treasure to magically repair or strengthen a weapon or piece of armor.

⚃ Rest here and connect to the restorative healing powers of this place.

⚄ Draw a veil of illusion over the party, granting a temporary disguise or alteration in physical appearance.

⚅ Ask for a blessing, miracle, or simple good luck.

The Old One of the Forest

JAMES HOLLOWAY

The Old One of the Forest is the personification of the Kalduhr itself. Ever-growing, endlessly intertwining, it is a powerful force of life. The Old One's spirit is present in the mushrooms that grow in the leaf litter and the creatures that hunt in the undergrowth, but most of all in the ancient trees of the forest.

New arrivals to the Kalduhr will be struck by the ubiquity of the Old One's symbol. This mark depicts an ancient, impassive face peering through a screen of leaves—or perhaps the leaves are growing from the face? Either way, those who live near the Old One's boughs mark everything from clothing to currency with the sign; some even wear it as a tattoo, or brand it onto their livestock. Many believe that displaying the mark helps protect them from the fae and other monsters of the wood—and they might be right.

Few directly worship the Old One, but those that do venerate it as a force of life, endlessly breeding new creations. Devotees can learn the Old One's magic as long as they follow its teachings, which include respect for all life—the Old One does not favor the life of a human being over that of a boar, a bear, or a bee. Life is life.

Signs That the Eye of the Old One Is Upon You

⚀⚀ A CONTRARY MOVEMENT

The tree branches wave gently, even though there is no wind. In a high breeze, they hold the rigid stoicism of stone.

⚀⚁ LIFE FROM DEATH

Dead objects show new life. The handle of an axe puts forth tender green shoots, while leather boots squelch with blood.

⚀⚂ A MEETING WITH A HERALD

One of the Old One's heralds crosses your path. It might be an ancient boar, its stiff coat caked in mud, the ridge of its back crowned with delicate flowers. It could be a marten that, instead of scampering out of your path, looks at you with calm, almost human eyes. Be warned: to spill the blood of a herald is to invite an awful retribution.

⚀⚃ A PATH EMERGES

Obstacles clear from your path—pools dry, briars retreat, and shafts of sunlight pierce the canopy to illuminate spots of danger. Wherever you're going, the Old One seems to think you ought to get there safely.

⚀⚄ AN UNCOMMON BLOOM

Flowers bloom on nearby plants, regardless of the season or weather. At the center of each blossom is an eye—golden like a wolf's, as expressionless as a stag's.

⚀⚅ THE SPEAKING WIND

The wind's sighing within the canopy quiets for a moment. When it starts again, it has a new rhythm, almost voicelike. It whispers promises just on the edge of understanding.

⚁⚀ A FAERIE RING

Waking in the dewy morning, you discover that you have slept at the center of a ring of fungi rising from the leaf litter. You're certain they weren't there the night before. A faint tickle in the back of your throat troubles you.

⚁⚁ A DOPPELGANGER

Two paths cross in a clearing; as you arrive, another traveler is just setting out. It takes your conscious mind a moment to understand why your subconscious mind is screaming an alarm—they have your pack, your cloak. In a moment, this other you has passed out of the clearing and is gone.

⚁⚂ A BOLD PREDATOR

Foxes and wildcats often prowl the edge of your camp's circle of firelight. They're harmless for the most part, merely looking for scraps as they give humans a wide berth. Tonight is different—this time, one walks confidently into the center of the camp and sits with your party, crossing its paws delicately.

⚁⚃ THE VERDANT KNIGHTS

Many are the spirits of the forest, and many are the ways in which they serve the Old One. Certain sites within the Kalduhr are guarded by the Old One's knights—enigmatic figures in armor of knotted bark, their lances crowned with wreaths of green. Intruders in the forest may find themselves observed by one of these silent sentinels, whose presence is said to prove that lost treasures are nearby.

⚁⚄ A STEADY BREATH

A cold stream trickles into a shallow dell, forming a small pool in the hollow. Moss-covered boulders surround the pond. The valley is quiet except for a gentle, rhythmic sound, like breathing. After a moment, you notice that the boulders are rising and falling slowly.

⚁⚅ A HERMIT'S BOWL

The crude hut of a hermit sits by the side of the trail ahead of you. These holy folk have learned to commune with the Old One—or at least, that is what many believe. Leave a coin or a crust of bread in the hermit's begging bowl, and receive a cryptic prophecy or double-edged blessing.

A NOCTURAL OMEN

Those who sleep within the forest sometimes see the Old One in dreams—calm, ancient, and patiently watching. The wise folk of the Kalduhr interpret these dreams as marks of favor, promising abundance, or as warnings to respect the forest and its inhabitants.

AN UNEXPECTED BLADE

A gnarled tree holds an unexpected burden —a sword, its bronze blade strangely free from corruption, enfolded by the gnarled bark. It wasn't thrust into the tree, but sits incongruously, as if it grew there.

SHIFTING TASTES

You pause to refill your canteens from one of the many streams that trickles between mossy banks through the dark wood. The water is cold and sweet, infinitely welcome after a day hacking through the undergrowth. When next you taste wine, it is foul to you.

A FOREST FOLLOWING

After leaving the forest, new growth sprouts in your footsteps wherever you go. The folk of the Kalduhr see this as a sign of the Old One's blessing, but more civilized people fear the encroachment of the forest on their villages of stone and brick.

FERAL FEATURES

The wolf, the owl, the stag, the boar, the squirrel, the woodpecker—many are the beasts of the forest said to be the eyes of the Old One. Those who fall under the Old One's gaze may begin to develop the characteristics of his pets, such as long, sharp teeth, wide golden eyes, or a shock of brilliant feathers.

A NEW HOBBY

You take up whittling. You're not sure how you got into the habit, but now it seems that you do it all the time. Clumsily at first and then with increasing skill, you carve out little figurines of animals. You're never quite sure where you left them, though.

A BOUNTIFUL VISION

Before your eyes, fruit ripens on nearby trees. Look at a bud and it becomes a flower. Wherever your gaze falls, new life grows—tender shoots of grass, newborn lambs, wriggling heaps of maggots.

A BARRIER, BROKEN

Mold and fungus spread across an obstacle in your path in moments, coating it in a gentle fuzz of corruption. As you watch, it softens and collapses, solid wood turning into sponge as the Kalduhr consumes its nutrients.

A PLACE OF SAFETY

A chance arrangement of fallen trees, boulders, and vegetation take on the aspect of a cozy little cottage. Around you in the undergrowth, something prowls.

A COINCIDENTAL PRAYER

On the fringes of the wood, in the safer areas, villagers hang lanterns with colored glass panes. The lights guide the return of friends and loved ones lost in the Kalduhr. Some have been hanging there for decades. Each lantern bears parchment strips displaying the names of lost souls and prayers for their safe return. As you enter the wood, you see your own name on one of these scrolls. When you look again, it's another, similar name—an easy mistake to make.

A SWEET GIFT

Though the air is still, a single apple detaches itself from a branch above you and drops softly to the forest floor. It looks sweet and plump, full of juice and life.

A WILD MARCH

Alerted by a noise in the night, you see the forest alive with movement. A procession of animals moves silently through the wood. A wildcat turns its shining eyes toward you, then returns to its journey. At the tail of the procession, a figure in moss-hued robes walks alongside a stag in hushed companionship.

A SIMPLE SHRINE

New human-made structures are quite rare in the truly dense areas of the forest. Among the few are simple shrines to the Old One, featuring carvings of its mask on boulders or fragments of ancient ruin. The one you come upon in the deep wood has an offering bowl in front of it, its belly dark with old blood. A simple flint knife rests next to it, its handle toward you.

A FORTUITOUS LIKENESS

After a number of trips into the forest, your hair begins to take on a greenish tinge. Before long it looks more like leaves than hair. Eventually, it frames your face like the leaves of the Old One's mask.

A CARAVAN FROM FAERIE

The jingling of harness bells ahead warns of a merchant caravan's approach. These merchants, however, are fae creatures—hunched servants led by a tall figure in a veil and top hat. An attendant bears a banner showing the mask of the Old One. The bags and panniers of their pack animals bulge with the bounty of the Kalduhr. They offer you a plump fruit as they pass.

TREASURE-LINED TREES

Ruined structures aren't the only legacies of bygone ages found in the forest. Burial mounds of ancient cultures also dot the landscape, concealed beneath a carpet of trees. The roots of the trees reach down into the crumbling, stone-lined burial chambers within the mounds. Looking at one such tree, you see the treasures of the tomb hanging from its branches, gold collars and chains clinking softly like windchimes in the breeze.

A MAP IN MINIATURE

Tiny shoots sprouting from the forest floor resemble trees, with puddles for lakes, trickles for streams, and pebbles for cliffs. This patch of ground is a map of an area within the forest, although not the one in which you are currently walking.

A TROPHY OF YOUR OWN

Rustling in the woods alerts you to something following you. Peering into the dimness, you see a creature you recently slew. Blooms and leaves protrude from its dead body as it lurches after you. It doesn't attack or threaten you—it just follows. Perhaps it's yours now.

RAPID GROWTH

In passing, you notice that a little bit more of your wrist shows at the end of your sleeve. The same is true of your breeches. It takes a while for it to dawn on you that you're slowly growing taller.

A SUDDEN WALL

As you make camp at night, a hedge of brambles grows around you. In the morning, it turns brittle and weak, allowing you to cut your way out easily. Was it keeping you safe from outside threats, or keeping the wood safe from you?

A FUNGAL FACE

Mushrooms push through the leaf mold in pallid clumps. Viewed from a certain angle, the growths form faces that turn to watch you with blind eyes as you pass.

A NOSTALGIC SONG

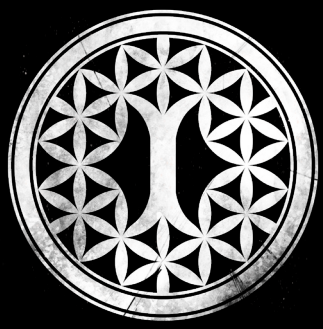
Far off, through the trees, you hear a beautiful voice singing. The song is a familiar one—it's not one of the tunes the folk of the Kalduhr sing, but one you last heard long ago in your own homeland.

A DARK HOUND

Ahead of you, as if waiting, a massive dog, deep brown or black, lies at the foot of the tree. Some call him Shuck, others Grim, Gytrash, or Old Jack. They say he is the Old One's hunting hound. Those the forest spirit loves, he leads to safety. Others, he leads to their doom. He regards you patiently.

A COMFORTING SMILE

Did you notice the mask of the Old One stamped on the coins in your pouch or embroidered on a companion's cloak? You swear its expression shifts when you aren't looking. Normally, it stares enigmatically forward, but now it smiles at you warmly from time to time. It's a reassuring feeling, seeing the face smile, although you dare not think about why this is happening.



THE TREE OF LIFE

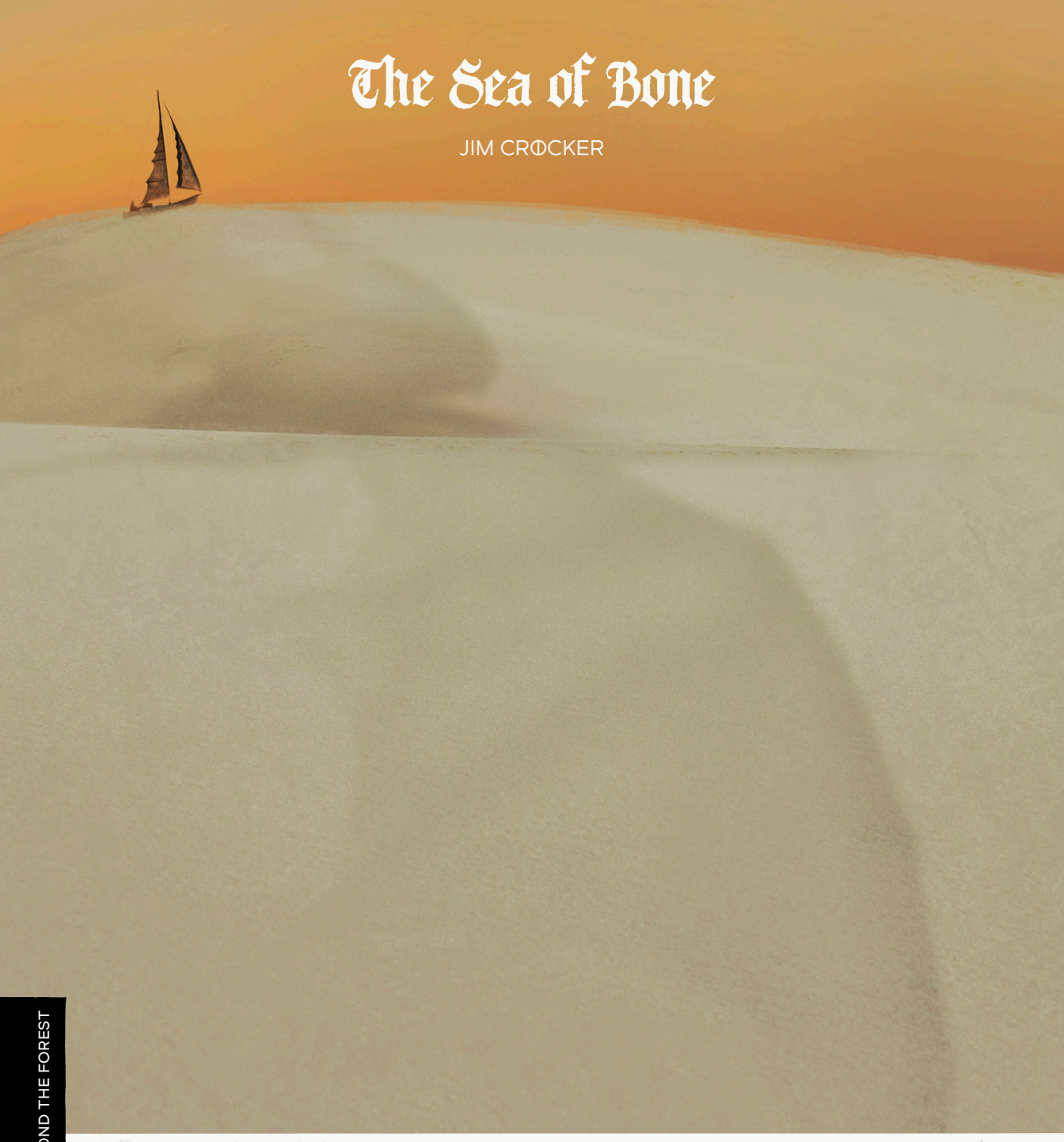
The Tree of Life is the space where the Old One lives. Alternatively, it might be another form in which the Old One appears. The Tree of Life connects the physical world, the spiritual world, and the enigmatic realm of Faerie. The Old One is present in all three places, equally at home—or equally alien—in each.

Alongside the greenery-bedecked mask of the Old One, some who live in or around the forest wear tokens that show an abstract image of the Tree, its many branches and roots intertwined. To them, it symbolizes the interconnectedness of all life in the forest and represents the omnipresent nature of the Old One—its spirit is in the forest as a whole, not necessarily in any one tree or patch of ground. Some more philosophical souls interpret this as a broader point about the interconnectedness of all things: Are not you and I both branches on the Tree of Life? No, reply traditionalists. Not you and I—just the Old One.

Deep within the forest, the corpses of once-mighty trees collapse in on themselves, leaving wounds in their bark. The folk of Kalduhr call these "doors to the Old One's house" and believe that they are entrances to the Tree itself. Few who walk the branches of the Tree return to tell the tale—and those that do will not or cannot speak of what they saw.

The Sea of Bone

JIM CROCKER



Far to the south, beyond the Kingdom of Naganeh, there is a vast desert of bone-white sand said to go on forever. It doesn't, of course, but it may as well, given the pitiless nature of its shifting dunes, unpredictable weather, and the hold it has upon any who set foot on its silicate face. Scholars have long argued whether it possesses a life, a *consciousness* of its own, similar to the Forest of Kahldur. Does it lie dreaming, somnolent as any trace of travelers is inevitably scoured from its face by the wind? Does it *hunger*, eager to draw the life from the forest as it once did the sea that filled this great basin? Does it laugh, knowing that it is a harbinger of the entropy that will eventually consume all of the Kahldur? It matters little. The promise of lost tombs and hidden oases draws the foolhardy just as with those other ruinous places.

After miles of trackless wastes across the blinding white dunes, the first feature you see is...

- a battered catamaran sand-slicer.
- the bleached skeleton of a colossal shark half-buried in the silt.
- a single stunted, gnarled tree, leafless but stubbornly still alive.
- a large covered palanquin being carried by four hulking basalt golems.
- the top twenty feet of a ziggurat of pure rose quartz sticking from the sand, its bulk mostly buried below.
- a fat seagull, hopping along a dune, its cry suddenly piercing the dull roar of the wind.

But as you move closer...

- you see it is nothing more than a mirage created by whirling salt-sand and rippling heat.
- it recognizes you and calls your name.
- the sand shifts beneath it, sucking it beneath the dunes before you can touch it.
- it recedes, moving away with every step towards it.
- it points the way to a small oasis with shade and a bit of water.
- the crisp shadows it casts offer cryptic clues of a doom you'll meet before you escape this place.

What Can Be Found Among the Sand in the Sea of Bone?

THE SALT PIRATES

The salt pirates who ply these dunes in swift-moving catamaran sand-slicers are the stuff of legend in the kingdoms. They are generally thought to be dashing swashbucklers, battling each other for the hand of desert nobility and raiding the tombs of terrifying mummy kings. In truth, they are little more than cannibal brigands, and will happily harpoon any creature they come across to drag away to their camp in a crumbling temple to drink its blood and feed its flesh to the great blind scorpion god they worship.

FLORA OF THE SEA

The apparent barrenness of the most infamous trenches of the Sea of Bone belie the rich abundance of life that can be found if one knows where to look, past the rolling barren dunes. Of particular interest to herbalists and dealers in exotic flora are a half-dozen of the more unique flowering plants that can be found here: salinous dandelions (and their salty, bitter greens), dust poppies, vermillion wafting driftpetals, false hope orchids, rattleroses, and the exceedingly rare pale bonebloom.

FAUNA OF THE SEA

Similarly, there are an astonishing variety of insect and arachnid life burrowing through the sand, swarming the hot air, and lurking in the shade under rocks. Most are venomous or poisonous to some extent or another, and each a vexingly unique and vicious nuisance to unprepared travellers. Among the six most-commonly encountered such vermin one might expect to come across can be counted bonebore ants, squamous gnats, gritmaggots, velocipedes, suicide locusts, and tomb hornets.

TYPES OF SAND

Those well-versed in the Sea of Bone can detect the subtle differences in smell, viscosity, and texture between the bone-white sand that makes up most of the desert, the flows and deposits of pure salt that run through it like rivers and lakes, and the dunes and deposits of bone, ground down to powder by scouring winds and grit, from the cyclopean creatures extinct since this region was a hundred fathoms beneath the waves.

THE ROSE QUARTZ ZIGGURAT

The Rose Quartz Ziggurat of Queen Sessalia the Observed is said to lie somewhere close to the edge of the Sea, mostly buried, but accessible to those who have learned the ritual allowing them to remove its interlocking capstones and gain ingress. The Ziggurat's tinted transparent walls form a labyrinth the Queen knows by heart but that newcomers will find not merely vexing but probably lethal, before they even come into her unblinking presence. It is said that there are priceless artifacts at the crystalline heart of the place, not least of which are the Queen's eyes, but any concrete details of their provenance are lost to the ages.

THE SEVEN TREES

The Arboreal Armistice is the agreement struck between the seven towering Andansonian trees remaining alive from the days when the Sea of Bone was a savannah. They are an order of magnitude more ancient than any tree still standing in the Kalduhr, decrepit before humans walked upright. They have agreed between themselves that their roots, penetrating deep into the heart of the world, shall not compete with each other, shall not wage a silent war beneath the Earth as in the days of old. They are stubborn—in practical terms impossible to kill—and have seen every terrible thing this world (and several beyond) is capable of conjuring and survived through all of it. They have wisdom, to be sure, but most of it is startlingly mundane, with tantalizing pieces of ruinous secrets scattered carelessly amongst the platitudes of weather and the slow passage of eons. Each will offer shelter for a day and a night atop its trunk in exchange for a tale from the world beyond that it has not ever heard. It would take a terrible bargain or a promise of incalculable value to compel any of them to break the truce, and scholars can only intuit the cataclysm that might shake the foundation of the Sea of Bone if they were to enter again into conflict.

ZALALAZ THE SCORPION-GOD

Zalalaz is the blind albino scorpion-god of the salt pirates. In times of plenty they serve it the ritually-prepared flesh of travellers they have waylaid and exsanguinated. In lean times, they duel with poisoned harpoons for the honor of being consumed by the thing. Though it cuts an impressive profile, ancient and colossal, its stinger oozing venom that can dissolve a man into a steaming puddle of pink sludge with a few drops, in truth it is a dissolute and decrepit creature. Its days are surely numbered, all of its majestic kin long since passed beneath the sand, any instinct it once had for the hunt entirely forgotten. It squats atop a miasmic pile of its own shed carapaces, fed by fanatics, blind, deaf, barely able to move, perhaps in pain, perhaps simply lost in memory. None have thought to ask.

WORDS FOR SAND

Among the various peoples of the Sea of Bone there exist some seven score words describing the many iterations of sand. There are subtle variations in size of grain, viscosity, desiccant potential, and even color that are the subject of wide-ranging conjecture and debate. When greeting a traveler under a flag of truce, it is customary to inquire as to the state of the sand they have traversed and to be similarly forthcoming oneself.

BURROW DRAKES

Burrow drakes are gaunt, scabrous lizards 4–5 feet in length who swim through the dunes as their aquatic cousins do through water. They attack in groups of 3–5, attempting to harass and pick off weak or dying stragglers of whatever group they track down. They are argumentative and belligerent things, prone to internecine squabbles and fighting over prey even among their own groups. They can be easily driven off by competent and alert travelers except during egg season, when the males become more aggressive in an effort to upstage their rivals for the attention of the single female that dominates each group.

SAND-SLICERS

The catamaran sand-slicer is the principle craft for rapid travel across the Sea of Bone. The swiftest are ancient and ornately carved, passed through many generations of owners. At rest they resemble a sledge with rails of fossilized bone, rock-hard and diamond-sharp, a central mast also of bone anchored to the frame above the rails. When the sturdy drake-leather sails are unfurled, they will gather speed quickly until they are hurtling across the dunes at a frightful velocity, twin plumes of sand spewed in their wake. The fastest of them actually leave thin lines of smoked glass behind. They are swift, but unsubtle craft, and though nigh-impossible to catch, it's the work of a child (and not a bright one) to track one.

ZIRAFIANS

The zirafians are an ancient species of herd animal who only survive upon the Sea of Bone. They travel in herds of 8–12 beasts each, walking a great migration route from oasis to oasis, stopping to pay homage to each of the ancient Andansonian trees spread across the Sea and eating of the dark, dry leaves that ring the reaches of their trunks. They are towering beasts, resembling horses with comically long legs and necks. The youngest are roughly the height of three men; the most ancient and proud are the height of 7 or 8. They are horned and beaked, and capable of frightening speed and astonishing belligerence when provoked, but luckily are typically indifferent to smaller creatures so long as they are not accosted. The nomads of the Calcified Badlands know rituals to bind and ride them, even as they know they will not survive in captivity for more than a fortnight, so use them sparingly, and deliver gifts of salt flavored with herbs and dried mushrooms harvested from their caves to give thanks for a beast's service. If a traveller can identify their tracks, it may be possible to trace a path to an oasis or other landmark, assuming it is not the nomads laying an ambush.

THE CAPSULE OF THE KAHN

The Capsule of the Kahn is a cylinder of adamant with a glass window set upon its face. It is seven feet in height, and big enough around to contain a human being within. When discovered, it is empty, its lid unsealed. Any person placed inside and sealed within using the ritual embossed upon the inside of the lid will be perfectly preserved, frozen in its present state (alive, dead, or on the knife-edge between) until the cylinder is unsealed. It is startlingly light given its size and shape. It has handles on the side and can be carried without undue effort by four bearers, two if they move more slowly (and exhaust themselves in due time), and dragged by one across the sand if desperation is in order.

THE SIROCCOS

A sirocco is a hot wind that blows from the south, pelting travellers with salt (finer and lighter than sand, it is carried many miles by the cyclonic weather fronts). Shelter or fully sealed gear is even more paramount when besieged by a sirocco than at other times on the Sea; even a single grain of the salt of a sirocco is utterly excruciating when it settles in an eye or upon a fresh wound.

THE CALCIFIED BADLANDS

The Calcified Badlands are a series of valleys, buttes, and narrow canyons of bone-white sandstone carved by scouring winds and the rare flow of water. Shelter can be had here from the vicissitudes of the Sea, though its hospitability to life means the Badlands are home to numerous dangerous creatures and the nomads, a mercurial human culture who communicate solely via a complex whistled language. The canyons and valleys of the Badlands can change with startling speed and frequency, as winds carve new routes and old ones collapse or heave up. Stories of travellers who staggered exhausted into a comfortable cave but awoke to find the entrance blocked—a new tunnel beckoning where once there was solid rock—abound.

MIRAGE DRAKES

Mirage drakes are gaunt, indistinct lizards who lurk in the occluding haze of the ripples of heat that rise from the sun-baked surface of the Sea of Bone. They stalk travellers in the hottest, brightest part of the day when most other creatures are sleeping or languidly sunning themselves. They tend to be born as twins, and hunt and stalk with their bonded siblings until they encounter a bonded pair of the opposed sex to mate with before rejoining their twins to stalk the Sea again. They take advantage of their identical partners to confuse and disorient prey, slipping into and out of the heat-haze of rippling air to strike and retreat to harry their prey to exhaustion before joining to tear it limb from limb and squabble over the choicest bits.

TUSPESHTA III

Tuspeshta III was the Verdant Exemplar of the Trackless Steppe, a region of the savannah that once occupied this place and fought off an invasion by Old Kalduhr. Laid to rest in a simple tomb of heartwood carved from the fallen limb of a now-extinct original signatory to the Arboreal Armistice, she did not fully pass to the spirit realm. The sages who carved her coffin did not realize it would seal her spirit within, bound in limbo for millennia as the savannah dried and her sepulcher sank beneath a dune of salt. Fortunately—for Tuspeshta at least—the famed Tirolli explorer Karalof cracked the door to her tomb, freeing her and providing a mortal vessel for her to possess. Young, vigorous, and impossibly beautiful once more, she now roams the Sea of Bone seeking to learn how the world has changed, how she might restore this place, and zealously smiting any who deface its beauty. She is thoroughly mercurial and prone to alternating fits of melancholy and mania, a travelling companion as likely to lead one to the hungry caltrop-cacti patch where her favorite berries once grew as to the golden doorstep of a long-dead emperor.

EXILE

Exile to the Sea of Bone is a common-enough sentence for nobles from the broader world that there exist numerous competing microfiefdoms populated by expatriate mutineers, overzealous heirs, and would-be usurpers. Canny travellers familiar with the provinces from which they hail may appeal to their vanity and homesickness by sharing news of their places of origin and flattering their notions of righteousness, but must be wary of lingering too long in the courts of artisocrats whose very presence here indicates a marked prediliction towards treachery.

THE KEEP OF THE DUKE

Duke Isoldrab's Folly is a sad monument to the hubris of a ruler whose reach exceeded their grasp. Squatting incongruously on a rocky outcrop overlooking a wide expanse of dune, it is a traditional walled stone keep of exactly the sort one might expect to find in any of the provinces, obviously modelled after the mid-Imperial aesthetic of Barsul Prison. Erected at colossal expense in both blood and treasure, it utterly bankrupted Isoldrab's home province, which has never recovered in the centuries since. Isoldrab, his family, and a handful of still-loyal servants fled to the place before its interior was entirely complete, though the walls were sturdy and the well deep if penurious. To this day, the place is inhabited by a duke, inbred and deranged, descended from the man himself. The family and staff, intermixed by marriage arranged and otherwise, carry out increasingly baroque and half-remembered rituals of their old homeland, patrolling their "lands" on wild-eyed, emaciated mounts, "farming" cacti and glassberries, gorging on mashed locusts and leathery roasted drake-meat. Visiting the keep is a risky proposition; their ways are opaque and mercurial, and they are prone to fits of furious violence if provoked, but they will provide safe passage across their lands if appropriately flattered and provided with tribute.

KITE DRAKES

Kite drakes are gaunt, leathery lizards with voluminous, sail-like wings that allow them to ride the hot blasts of air that sweep across the Sea of Bone. Their elongated heads cut the air and allow them to scoop up scuttling prey as they strafe along just above the surface of the sand before climbing precipitously back up, allowing gravity and inertia to aid in swallowing their prey whole. The nomads and hunters of the Sea of Bone chase them to try and bring them down to use the great sheets of tough leather in their wings as sails for desert craft including sand-slicers. Given that the largest of the kite drakes can easily scoop up and swallow a typical human whole, hunting them properly is a complicated and dangerous affair involving harpoons fired into the sky attached to weighted sand-slicers that tire the drake until it is forced to land where it can be set upon by bludgeons so as not to mar the precious wings.

THE DUN NECROPOLIS

The Dun Necropolis is said to be a vast ancient complex of tombs and sepulchers swallowed by the Sea of Bone for the hubris of the high priest who demanded that the corpse of every living thing that died within the bounds of the dunes be delivered to his acolytes for ritual internment. He believed that faithfully doing so would appease the spirit of the Sea and cause it to grow again. The Sea eventually replied to his increasingly-zealous proselytizing by swallowing the necropolis beneath a howling sandstorm that lasted for seven days, after which no trace of it could be found. Occasionally, a trinket or bit of dun-colored sandstone with a fragment of a forgotten hieroglyph will trade hands, leading inevitably to rumours that the resting place of the Dun Necropolis has been uncovered. Expeditions will be mounted, informats found dead in dry gullies, corpses gathered to offer to the restless hierophant for safe passage into the silent, dry passages. None has ever returned with the promised rewards.

THE BISMUTH MENHIRS

The Bismuth Menhirs are a circle of seven standing 'stones', each as tall as five men and formed of intricate tiered geometric rock formations in brilliant metallic sheens. They rest at the center of a more-or-less permanent vortex of salt and grit: something about their configuration bars inclement weather at the edge of the circle. Within the menhirs the air is still, and temperate, regardless of conditions outside, though it has a metallic taste and tinny smell. Ritualists venture to this place to study its disparate effects on their craft, but most will come to rue the visions this place induces, of three similar structures in distant points across the face of the world, one surrounded by a howling blizzard, another in a lush jungle grove surrounded by impenetrable walls of vines and ferns, a third contained within a bubble deep in the lightless depths of the sea, the vast bulk of unseen creatures causing ripples in its surface. The circle itself is nondescript, a perfectly round slab of jet-black marble shot through with bone-white veins, somehow never covered by even a single grain of the ubiquitous sand that surrounds it.

SHIFTING RUINS

The constantly-shifting nature of the Sea of Bone means new ruins are regularly unearthed by the howling winds, only to disappear as swiftly as they arose and without warning. Adventurers who discover a promising site somewhere in the wastes have no way of knowing if it will be there a week later when they return with delving gear and supplies. Of course, the possibility that the epicenter of a roaring silt vortex or the sudden collapse of a salt cavern underfoot may swallow a half-explored ziggurat with the explorers still inside is a platry risk compared to the diabolical traps and long-slumbering half-dead who populate such places, especially when balanced against the rewards a heretofore-undisturbed dig might yield.

THE CAULDRONS

The Cauldrons are the naturally-occurring hot springs and geysers located at the heart of the Sea of Bone. The region is a foul, sweltering, sulphurous maze of toxic steam and scalding blasts of corrosive liquids. Despite this, the place is well-explored because of the unique properties of the steam of particular vents and the colorful, swirling effluvia of certain pools.

LEVIATHAN'S REST

Leviathan's Rest is an oasis and trading post that squats somewhere near the middle of the most barren and wind-swept expanse of the Dry Passage. Contained within the half-buried arched ribcage of some ancient colossal sea creature covered in kite drake leather, it is home to a rag-tag cadre of travellers who reached this place and could go no further. Legend says it was founded by such a traveller who, exhausted and demoralized, decided to die in the shadow of the leviathan but became so bored waiting for death that she ended up making the place habitable. A well dug deeper than any in the kingdoms, zealously guarded and maintained at great expense, is both the literal and figurative center of the place. Travellers can rest, trade, and—if they have a skill the stewards finds useful—renounce their boots and stay.

GARINALDO'S ELIXIR

Doctor Garinaldo's *Astonishing Elixir Of Unguency* is a cure-all whose secret formula includes the foul-smelling slime that clings to the edges of the Cauldrons. The good Doctor himself makes the trip once a year to replenish his raw materials. How he has survived his annual pilgrimage for nearly half a century is a matter of significant conjecture that he will be only too happy to further obfuscate if you should cross his path. The slime itself will cure a wound to the body or spirit if liberally applied while still fresh. It will lose potency rapidly as it cools, however, becoming utterly inert in a few days.

BASALT GOLEMS

Basalt golems are ancient constructs that can occasionally be uncovered in forgotten tombs or buried temples. Tall, dark, dour-visaged, they seem to have forgotten their original purpose. They are always depicted in loincloths and sandals, laborers meant to toil. The correct combination of ritual and ancient keywords can activate them, whereupon they will shoulder any burden and trod inexorably forward bearing it until commanded to halt. At least one explorer has reported seeing one dragging the blasted remnants of a shattered sarcophagus, limping towards the wastes on a crippled leg.

THE SISTER OF SALT

Buried somewhere beneath the sand is a sepulchre that contains the dessicated bones of the Sister of Salt, a now-forgotten saint no longer revered in the current age. The nature of a crime so foul as to cause her Sisters to cast her out and entomb her beneath the Sea of Bone to be forgotten boggles the mind given the rumoured transgressions of many of those ancient beings. But it's a sure bet that her resting place holds the promise of riches and rituals unseen in many millenia.

CALTROP-CACTI

Caltrop-cacti are carnivorous plants that lurk just below the sand. When trod upon, they press their spines upward through the feet of their prey, with the intent of unbalancing them so they can impale them more thoroughly and drink their blood as it seeps down through the sand. As with many plants of the Sea, a modest meal is sufficient to nourish a patch for a decade or longer while it lies dormant awaiting prey (in fact, it takes nearly a month for the spines to reseat and allow the plant to attack again). If you encounter a corpse face-down in the middle of a seemingly-unremarkable expanse of sand, flesh scoured away by the wind but still wearing its armor and gear, it would be best to harpoon it and drag it to you.

THE RESTLESS ANCHOR

The Restless Anchor is an ancient sea anchor, scoured to a polish by the grit and wind of the Sea of Bone, that rattles along the ground at a modest pace, joined to an apparently-indestructible chain receding out of sight into the distant sky. It is easy enough to grab hold of, but anyone doing so will be relentlessly carried along by whatever force impels it. It occasionally catches onto an outcropping, beast, or even vehicle, but such impediments only slow its progress, never stop it. The sighting of it will compel furious action from nomads and salt pirates to divert its course from tearing implacably through a settlement. More than one intrepid bravo has attempted to climb the chain to its terminus in the sky, but their smashed bodies are invariably found leagues away when they are recovered at all.

THE SALTY QUEEN

Commodore Diamatia is the exception to the romantic notions of salt pirates that proves the rule that they are little more than desperate cannibal brigands. Where they are scabrous, uncouth, and cowardly, she is polished, refined, and dashing. Where they are desperate and scrabbling, she is louche and indulgent. Where they scuttle and lurk, she strides, and swans. From the deck of her topaz-hued sand galleon *The Unkindest Cut*, she plies the Sea of Bone on sails of drake leather, scoffing at danger, laughing at peril, and generally breaking hearts to irreparable shards across the expanse of the region. Tales of her magnanimity and valor resound on the lips of travellers, and her exploits are written of in the penny dreadfuls of the capital half a world away, even as nomads and buccaneers of ill repute spit or shiver when her name is mentioned. Many have sighted her ship, and a scattered few exceptionally comely individuals swear to have spent a night in her perfumed cabin. When asked for proof of their encounters with the Salty Queen, their claims are invariably rendered dubious.

SOLVENT DRAKES

Solvent drakes are gaunt, acidic lizards that lazily float in the prismatic pools of potent solvent that dot the landscape of the Cauldrons. They are surly creatures, jealously guarding their respective pools from any and all intruders who would venture too close. They have short legs and slither along the ground at a slower pace than any of their other cousins, but their long, whiplike tails can impel them at startling speed through the acrid fluid of their territorial "waters." The largest grow to the length of three men, about half of it tail. They do not have teeth, but instead lumpy growths of sulfurous accretions, coated in a potent acid that makes the need to masticate the flesh of prospective prey largely moot. Alchemists, tanners, and smiths prize their oral glands for the potent solvents contained within, but harvesting them presents obvious dangers.

THE ABATTOIR OF TETHERS

The Abattoir of Tethers is a macabre ritual site maintained by a particularly depraved band of salt pirates. It rests in a naturally-carved bowl of smooth sandstone. A cyclopean iron piton rises from its center, its point piercing through the sandstone to the bedrock below. None of the pirates can speak accurately to its origin, though the more fanciful will claim it once served as an anchor for sailing ships that could ply the skies. Regardless, it now serves as a grisly sporting venue. Pirates shackle pairs of prisoners by neck-irons to strong ropes through the top loop of the spike. Deprived of water and food, the prisoners are goaded into battling each other with promises of relief to the victors. Additional participants are added when the spectators grow bored or the victims refuse to fight. The floor of the pit is littered with dusty dried blood, scoured dry bones, and gnawed bits of rope.

BOILTOADS

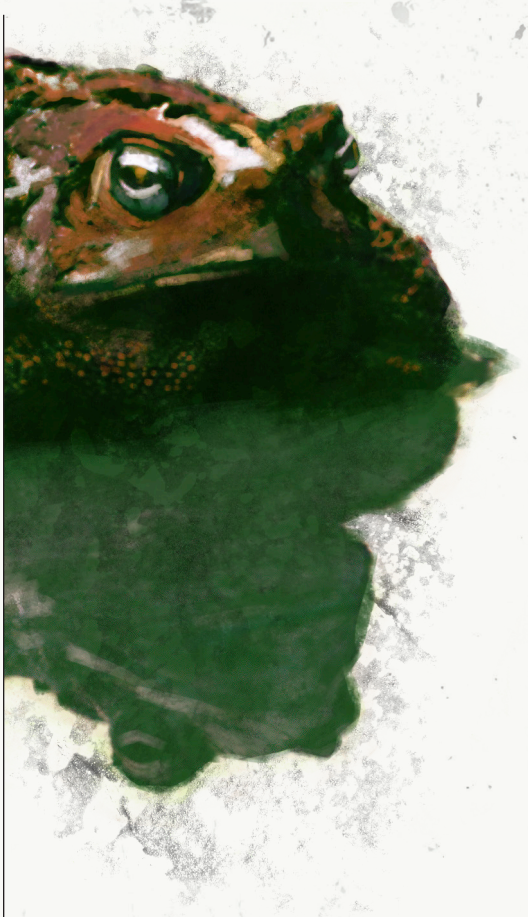
Boiltoads are repulsive amphibians who exist only in the Cauldrons, comfortably at home in the searing, sulfurous pools of the place. Their blood is literally boiling, and some particularly mischievous nomads have been known to encourage the ignorant to stab one, taking in with much amusement the startled howls as a scalding shower of steaming burgundy splatters the unsuspecting mark. The largest only grow to the size of a modest canine, but their sulfur-infused 'scaldbladders' are highly prized by alchemists (due mostly to how difficult they are to extract and transport without terrible, disfiguring accidents).

THE DRY PASSAGE

The Dry Passage is a particularly barren and vast expanse of the Sea of Bone that is devoid of anything but trackless pale wastes. It's a fickle expanse, its boundaries expanding and contracting with the mercurial weather patterns of the region. It will unpredictably advance a score of miles to the west, swallowing a corner of the Cauldrons, then suddenly withdraw its northern expanse, revealing a heretofore undiscovered necropolis. It is an aphorism of the Sea of Bone that the only certainty of the Dry Passage is that whatever one seeks is surely on its opposite side.

SPIN-GRUBS

Spin-grubs are the larvae of suicide locusts, which—when placed in the ears—induce a form of intoxication. Employed principally by nomads, the grubs nest in the host's ears for a half-dozen hours before becoming gorged on the wax inside and crawling out. The bloated grubs spin a waxy cocoon in which they will gestate into their mature locust form, but the nomads sensibly make every effort to locate and destroy them before they fully mature. The particular form of intoxication is deeply unsettling the first few times, but induces an increasing degree of giddy consciousness alteration, followed by nauseating disorientation upon withdrawal.



ON ICE

The single most precious commodity that any traveller can carry across the Sea is not gold or gems or powerful forgotten artifacts of a bygone era. It's ice. Alchemists, engineers, and raving crackpots alike have worked for centuries on the secret of carrying it to the far reaches of the Sea of Bone. Occasionally a particularly ambitious merchant prince will drag a colossal block of it from some distant glacier to try and reach a settlement of sufficient size to trade for valuable artifacts before it disappears. The Sea somehow seems to view such attempts as an affront to its implacable desiccation, and only a few such expeditions have ever met anything but utter catastrophe. That noted, even a single modest cube, carefully husbanded by wit, ritual, or both, to a place like Leviathan's Rest or the deck of *The Unkindest Cut*, would allow its possessor to name their price.

Treasures

GABRIEL ROBINSON

DISCREET ANTIQUITY COLLECTORS

OR OR	OR OR
Astrid runs a small tea shop in Fort Duhrin, serving a variety of restorative tonics both with and without added spirits. It is the business of spirits that most interests her, however. Her eyes gleam when one presents her with any supposedly haunted object.	Vashtar, sickly pale with flame-red hair, never leaves his ramshackle hut at the edge of the Kingswood. He is quite particular about the placement of his many idols, and eager to acquire others—especially those bearing the likeness of animals.
Fredrik (son of the Duke, third of his name) has a rampant obsession with adventuring this season, and has plenty of gold to support it. The more impressive-looking weapons and armor fetch a fine price—just don't question if he knows how to use them, unless you want to hear an extensive account of his recent tournament victories and the legendary man-at-arms hired to train him personally.	Don't bother trying to sell the parts of that monstrous beast to an alchemist. Take them to Gruundi. You will know his cabin by the many bones and hides hanging outside. If you bring Gruundi something especially rare, or fresh and not yet taken to rot, he may invite you in to glimpse his works of art—preserving and combining the parts of beasts into wondrous new forms.
Yarra collects jewelry, fine furniture, and other ornamental everyday objects, and she always seems to have the coin to spare for them. Although she decorates her old master's tower with them haphazardly, her golden plates and chalices gather more dust than food and drink. Secretly, she longs to host human guests of her own someday.	Layla, with eyes like deep forest pools and a voice like silver chimes, gently chides those treasure-hunters who risk their lives for mere objects. She only seems interested in treasures that are dangerous or possibly cursed. Her intentions are noble, however, only seeking to protect the townsfolk from what they do not understand.
Samir owns the Lion's Scars, a pub in Fort Duhrin frequented by war veterans and mercenaries. He pays well for salvaged artifacts of war—shields, banners, and broken blades—which decorate the walls and ceiling inside. He loves recounting his glory days as a soldier, and tells anyone within earshot how times were better when the land was under a strong ruler—one who knew how to wield their power.	Baalbek scarcely blinks an eye at the commonly-known rituals. In fact, he never blinks at all. He's always poring through the dusty pages of another tome "rescued" from a shelf where it would never be put to proper use. Bring him a formula or incantation he hasn't seen before, and you'll have first pick from a staggering array of scrolls and ritual implements for almost any purpose you could imagine.
The Antiquarian pays handsomely for any salvaged Kalduhri technology from the city below the forest, particularly those gemstone tablets and writings. No one knows their name or story, but rumor has it they are something of an ambitious tinkerer—and a ruthless competitor. Best to do business through a middleman, so they don't know your name or face either.	Asura has walked the paths into the Kalduhr and back more times than any mortal has a right to. He won't say what he's looking for, but will pay well for any treasures miraculously recovered from the forest's grasp. There is something sad in his eyes, as if he's accepted that this latest object will offer no more answers than the previous one.
Tyr knows all the best fighting and drinking songs. You'll find her most often at the Weary Ploughman—flirting, boasting, inciting revelry, and more than a few brawls. But catch her between merrymaking, and you'll notice a solemn intensity when she speaks of the injustices of the kingsguard. She's a shrewd dealer in rare or banned artifacts, can be counted on for her discretion, and seems oddly close with that strange band of musical outlaws on the edge of town.	Drek will take that strange thing off your hands—quickly, though. They haven't got all day, and you know how the kingsguard look upon enterprising folks like yourselves. The fewer questions asked, the sooner you can leave and forget you ever saw it—or Drek and their trading cart.

USEFUL TREASURES — I OF II

Valuable goods that generally have some practical use as equipment.

⚀ ⚀	Disassembled manikin servant, carefully wrapped in a fine wool tunic and stored with a silk hat and gloves. If reassembled and enlivened through a ritual, it remembers many secrets of its former master.
⚀ ⚁	Map case of scaled blue leather containing a harpy's quill, a vial of squid ink, and a roll of eel skin parchment. An incomplete star chart hints at terrible omens on the horizon.
⚀ ⚂	Ancient oracle bones, ribs, and scapula, heated and cracked in patterns that only a trained diviner could translate.
⚀ ⚃	Book of fairytales, full of haunting woodcut illustrations. Contains at least one invocation of the fae and several supposed charms to protect against them.
⚀ ⚄	Ornate box of palm leaf cigars that produce pale blue dream-smoke. Prized by magicians and fanciful noble thrillseekers craving a taste of the occult.
⚀ ⚅	Soldier's marching drum, painted with the faded country flags of a shattered alliance.
⚁ ⚀	A fine lute of resonant spruce wood, inlaid with mother-of-pearl star patterns and set with ivory tuning pegs carved like songbirds.
⚁ ⚁	Manual of unarmed sparring techniques as practiced by followers of Saint Helissen. May be studied to improve one's skill at defense.
⚁ ⚂	Hunting horn inscribed with notation for a call to arms. The tune was outlawed once the kingsguard discovered the Piper's band had adopted it as an ambush signal.
⚁ ⚃	Forgery kit of exceptional quality, with a series of journals filled with incomplete research on an influential noble family.
⚁ ⚄	Copper pot decorated with motifs of the autumn harvest. Any food cooked in it reminds the taster of their childhood.
⚁ ⚅	Pair of red leather gauntlets, studded with the teeth and pointed scales of a fearsome reptile.
⚂ ⚀	Velvet-lined case containing silver surgeon's tools, anatomical drawings, and notes on an unfamiliar procedure—apparently for the removal of foreign objects or strange growths.
⚂ ⚁	Ever-shifting map of paths through the deep Kalduhr that appears to change with the seasons or cycles of the moon. Some are accurate, others are almost certainly traps.
⚂ ⚂	Calfskin vellum, stitched with the name and birth date of a prince in silver thread. A protection charm against theft by the fae court.
⚂ ⚃	Set of polished lotus seed prayer beads strung on saffron thread. Trained practitioners of contemplative prayer may use them to heal conditions afflicting the mind.
⚂ ⚄	Set of seven bells, crafted from salvaged copper, hammered and tuned to resonate in uncanny harmony. When rang in the correct sequence, plays an old fae tune of kinship which demands safe passage in kind.
⚂ ⚅	Small children's songbook bound in royal green leather with a gold ribbon. The lyrics include the exploits of poachers and highwaymen, maids who murdered cruel husbands, priests who were demons in disguise, and outcasts and criminals who were raised by beasts of the forest. All are invocations of the Piper.

USEFUL TREASURES — II OF II

Valuable goods that generally have some practical use as equipment.

- Set of silver palace keys decorated with patterns of snowflakes and icicles. Includes a set of lockpicks in case a key should be lost.
- Hand mirror of polished obsidian, framed in ebony with a jagged knotwork pattern. Sometimes reflects things not seen by the naked eye.
- Music box of silver and stained glass, which plays an old lullaby. The tune was declared blasphemous by royal priests, who claimed the verses describe a torrid affair between a lady of the court and her demon lover.
- Scroll containing a ritual forbidden by local religious authorities. May be used to perform the ritual once, or studied to learn it permanently.
- Sealed orb of blown glass, containing a colony of glow worms and ember moss. Functions as a dim lantern when shaken gently. If exposed to moonlight and protected from the sun, the colony will sustain itself.
- Set of fortune teller's cards, each depicting one of the Sisters in rare inks of vibrant hue.

- Mask of terrifying splendor, formed of lacquered birch bark and layered with shedded snakeskin, polished antlers, tufts of silver fox fur, and dried flowers. Mantle of the Old One of the Forest.
- Ornate lantern of brass and stained glass, patterned in swirling constellations and angelic figures, hung on a thick silver chain. May be used to summon or repel spirits through ritual means.
- Alchemist's leather belt lined with vials of glowing potions in gemstone hues—amethyst, emerald, sapphire, ruby. Their effects are unknown.
- Preserved hand of a sorcerer-queen, sealed in a crystal reliquary. It bears jade rings that are impossible to remove. The interior is riddled with claw marks.
- Resplendent gown in layers of seafoam green, woven with pearls and peacock feathers. The density of jewels and fabric is thick enough to function as armor.
- Set of engraved golden seals with curious fractal patterns and traces of sweet-smelling beeswax.

- Traveler's journal bound in thick, tarnished leather. Contains wondrous rumors and collected stories of people and lands you have never visited.
- Bronze prosthetic hand with articulated fingers, each one bearing several folding tools and instruments of ingenious design.
- Black rosewood cosmetics case inlaid with triangular ivory patterns, containing small gemstone jars of pigments, ointments, and several poisons. A simple silver pendant of an owl's head rests at the bottom.
- Witch's ritual bundle, wrapped in a leopard pelt. Contains a sprig from every known type of tree, bear claw runes, a flawless quartz point, fish skin pouches of herbs and powders, a wooden spoon, and a glowing egg.
- Loose pages of a cookbook. Among the recipes—most of which require rare ingredients or parts from dangerous creatures—are scrawled comments for useful remedies and foraging guides for rare plants.
- Massive drinking horn from an unknown beast, reinforced with silver bands bearing a pattern of many hands, each clasping the next. Those who drink together from it find themselves loose of tongue, fiery-hearted, and quick to make promises of undying friendship.

DECORATIVE & ORNAMENTAL TREASURES

Valuable items that generally offer no practical use or are too cumbersome to carry as equipment.

- Serpent figurine with scales of snow white gemstone, coiled around a bloodstone orb.
- Marble gargoyle—face like a little-loved member of the royal family—pried from a temple roof in Ambaret.
- Silver scrying bowl, engraved with golden fish which appear to swim when the bowl is filled.
- Tapestry of crimson and gold, depicting a warrior offering three severed heads to robed figures on thrones.
- Miniature chariot, sized for a child. It might be strapped to a household servant for hours of merriment.
- Coins of bronze, used only in funerary rites to afford passage through the realms of the dead.
- Fine silk jacket embroidered with mesmerizing silver threads woven in delicate, lifelike spider shapes.
- Faceless basalt idol, wearing wild hair and a wilder beard. It holds a scepter shaped like a lightning bolt.
- Coffin of tarnished metal, wrapped in chains and locks. It seems empty and makes no noise when shifted.
- Eagle mask of lacquered heartwood. Worth far more than gold, if returned to ones who know its true purpose.
- Preserved shark head, sealed in a box of green glass, and reinforced with rune-laden iron bands.
- Statue of a weeping angel made entirely from knives. All are still quite sharp.
- Heavy copper urn, shaped like a scaled beast with human hands and face. Its gaping mouth forms the opening.
- Silver brooch crafted in an 11-point star—each point ruby-tipped. The badge of a forgotten—or secret—order.
- Spiralling chandelier of gilded antlers and human bones, ornamented with green glass leaves.
- Crown of smoky black crystals woven in bands of tarnished gold. A relic from the age of sorcerer-queens.
- Silver cage adorned with ornamental flame patterns in red bronze, containing a bird skeleton in a nest of ash.
- Preserved heart, suspended in a jar of viscous, moss-green liquid. Much too large to be human.
- Set of hollow wooden dolls representing three of the Sisters. Each contains a rolled prayer cloth.
- Broken sword of inlaid bronze, depicting scenes of a lion hunt along its fractured blade.
- Silver chalice studded with turquoise eyes, stained a pale crimson, base is a trio of outstretched talons.
- Miniature wooden house of rare hardwoods, filled with tiny replicas of royal furniture and other ornaments.
- Set of false teeth crafted from glittering gemstones and the yellowed incisors of a bear or wolf.
- Gemstone slab, remarkably thin, yet impervious to damage. Etched with diagrams of a complex device.
- Jade lioness figurine, with eyes of jet and teeth of ivory. Her paws cradle a human infant.
- Partial human skeleton clad in ornamental gold armor with celestial motifs. Gold and bone carefully fused.
- Leather boots of mottled green, fashioned to resemble oak leaves, with spiked heels of polished antler.
- Figurine carved from lapis lazuli illustrating a veiled woman with multiple sets of arms that end in hooks.
- Pair of marionettes representing the Hunter and the Beast, detailed with fine silk, leather, fur, and bone.
- Silver bracelet set with gems carved as the phases of the moon. Each glows at the corresponding lunar phase.
- Dried shrub with jagged leaves that returns to life when watered. In a pot decorated in patterns of pointed teeth.
- Large painting of lords and ladies engaged in acts of debauchery with all manner of beasts and fae folk.
- Leviathan carved from strange petrified wood or bone, swallowing a warship. Tiny figures cling to its back.
- Bronze container molded from a beehive. Unfolds into an intricate game board of hexagons and silver pawns.
- Ornate sea mantle crafted from husks of sea crabs and coral. Impractical on land, but awakens underwater.
- Heavy oaken chest, filled with stone carvings of humans, beasts, plants, celestial bodies, and idols of gods.

FALSE TREASURES

OR OR

- “Authentic” giant’s teeth *(polished agate chunks)*.
- “Proven” remedy to cure one who is beastbitten *(don’t ask what’s in it)*.
- “One-of-a-kind” bone idol from the Kalduhr *(produced in quantity by a family of traveling trinket-carvers)*.
- “Newly translated” ritual formula for creating a manikin servant *(research in experimental necromancy)*.
- “Thrice Blessed” holy oils claiming to ward against the undead *(certainly keeps the living away)*.
- “Rare” preserved monster head *(cunningly stitched together from parts of many different beasts)*.

OR OR

- “Enchanted” reed flute, said to charm wild beasts *(common hunter’s call)*.
- “Witch-crafted” spirit charm *(unclear if it repels or lures spirits)*.
- “Genuine” map of ghost sightings in Ambaret *(a setup—actually reveals common locations for petty robbery)*.
- “Priceless” fist-sized gem *(glamoured chunk of granite)*.
- “Potion of Vigor” *(common herbal tea brewed by Rose District gardeners)*.
- “Magic Wand” *(hollow branch filled with alchemist’s spark-powder)*.

UNLIKELY PLACES OF DISCOVERY

Treasure can be found in the unlikeliest of places.

Partially swallowed by overgrown tree bark.	In a hidden chamber behind a historical tapestry.
Buried in a magpie’s shiny hoard.	Abandoned outside a rat nest.
Dragged along by a feral hound.	Hanging from the upper branches of a tall tree.
Carried humbly in the bowl of a blind beggar.	Woven into the web of a massive spider.
Stashed under a roof tile of a neglected cathedral.	Inside a pocket realm, unlocked by ritual dance.
Sealed behind the hollow facade of a wall.	Sewn into a heavy blanket.
Miraculously preserved in the mud of a lakebed.	Buried in a shallow—and freshly dug—grave.
Churning in the stomach of a foul monstrosity.	“On display” as a part of an art exhibition.
Discovered by children playing as “adventurers.”	Covertly placed inside a hollowed-out book.
Planted in the ribcage of an overgrown skeleton.	Washed ashore from a lost nautical voyage.
Concealed blasphemously behind an altar.	Inside the clasped hands of a praying statue.
Buried beneath the roots of an apple tree.	Half-exposed within a crumbling plaster wall.
Collecting dust on a humble farmer’s shelf.	Lazily batted about by a bored cat.
Submerged within a cask of low-grade ale.	Mixed in amongst the livestock feed.
Resting in the bucket at the bottom of a well.	Recently excavated by royal antiquarians.
Left behind as an offering at a lonely shrine.	Worn as decoration by a traveling merchant.
Preserved inside a wheel of cheese.	Lodged inside a honey-drenched beehive.
Part of an inquisitor’s “confessional” equipment.	Hidden in plain sight—visible only in a mirror.

TREASURE LORE

History, myths, or rumors which might be learned through research or questioning.

- Sought after by at least one local cult.
- Always seems to find its way back to the merchant tents of Kormoran's Wheel.
- Once owned by Ajino, the Debauched Painter, who threw it away claiming that it offended the angels.
- Looted from the royal palace before the keep burned.
- Family heirloom of a lordling, lost in a night of gambling in the Charcoal District.
- Rejected as a dowry gift for one of the daughters of Seti, the Lightkeeper.
- Missing from Old Grishka's collection of curious garden ornaments.
- Offered as a bribe to the Duke of Deverain. The reason for the bribe is common gossip around town.
- Claimed as a prize in contests of athletics and beauty during the summer games of the Swirling Court.
- Gift to the most favored courtesan of King Argiol Seo.
- Fallen from Sir Peregrine's rooftop balcony in Ambaret, strangely undamaged.
- Once used as part of a ritual altar to appease a frenzied forest guardian.
- Stolen by members of the Piper's Band and resold to its owner in a feat of trickery.
- Offered, and promptly rejected, in early negotiations with the fae.
- Supposedly retrieved from the shelves of the Forbidden Archives.
- Prized by a local goblin enclave, who would eagerly aid the one who returns it.
- Intended as a gift for Patience Davies of Fort Duhrin—her suitor never found the courage to hand it to her.
- Reclaimed from Madame Heathertop's safe in the Academy for the Betterment of Young Ladies.
- Mr. Whiddle let slip that his expedition retrieved a similar item from the belly of a balendrakir.
- While this is the original item, there are several imitations circulating among collectors.
- Viewed by some as an affront to a particular Sister.
- Connected to a prophecy regarding the return of the Cult of Derawan.
- Somehow stolen from the Misty Isle, it haunts its owner with a dream of returning there.
- Quickly draws the attention of occultists and dealers in forbidden research.
- Identifiable as once belonging to a famed diabolist.
- Blessed by the Gossamer Queen, wrapped in invisible threads to unknown purpose.
- A dangerous object stolen from the Azure Archives.
- Once fetched a fine price in the Reclaimed Curiosities auction in Ambaret's Paper District.
- Has survived passage across the Blossoming Sea and back again.
- Gift of a forest queen, whose name cannot be formed by the minds of mortals.
- Favored trinket of the Lost Giant of the Wastes.
- Granted to a nameless warrior-poet who banished the Dancing Sorrows from the Cloud Spire Temple.
- Dropped along a smuggling route in the tunnels beneath Fort Duhrin.
- Unearthed in an early expedition to the frozen north, while seeking the Rime Palace.
- Recovered from the sticky trails of the Humming Woods.
- Offered to the Tide Queen during the Greentide festival, but washed ashore untouched.

TREASURE DETAILS

Unusual features revealed through closer inspection.

1-1	Repainted to cover its original appearance.
1-2	Contains a hidden compartment.
1-3	Unnaturally well-preserved.
1-4	Strangely eroded or altered by magic.
1-5	Inscribed with a single, cryptic word.
1-6	Marked with runes of warding.
2-1	Surprisingly light or heavy.
2-2	Bearing faint traces of sorcery.
2-3	Induces a calming trance when held.
2-4	Marked with a secret sigil or invocation.
2-5	Cracked and repaired with seams of gold.
2-6	Inscribed with a name in elegant, flowing script.
3-1	Bound in excessive measures of protection.
3-2	Bearing icons of a sect of one of the Sisters.
3-3	Dusted with pigments from the Blossoming Sea.
3-4	Bound with a note of warning.
3-5	Smells of lingering decay.
3-6	Drilled with tiny holes of unknown purpose.
4-1	Carved with tiny, inky handprints.
4-2	Sheltering a hibernating insect.
4-3	Rattling with a contained secret.
4-4	Always damp to the touch.
4-5	Bearing traces of strange, metallic dust.
4-6	Stained with ancient blood.
5-1	Defaced in a mockery of its patron deity.
5-2	Modified from its intended use.
5-3	Adapted for a secret purpose.
5-4	Created using forgotten techniques.
5-5	Ornamented with twisted faces.
5-6	Coated with a strange resin.
6-1	Sprouting roots and branches.
6-2	Blooming with the scent of flowers and herbs.
6-3	Adorned with depictions of wondrous creatures.
6-4	Includes a holy symbol or inscribed blessing.
6-5	Pools with seawater during the full moon.
6-6	Always seems to be covered with new spiderwebs.

TREASURE ATTRIBUTES

Enchantments discoverd via rare circumstances.

1-1	Sings when in the presence of the fae.
1-2	Smolders in the presence of demons.
1-3	Glows when resting on hallowed ground.
1-4	Shudders when a lie is spoken.
1-5	Casts unusual shadows.
1-6	Bleeds when near the site of a murder.
2-1	Pale flowers grow near it, their scent calming.
2-2	Will tell you an omen, if you sing it a song.
2-3	Protects the owner from a dangerous blow.
2-4	An aura of tranquility radiates from it.
2-5	Tiny, near-invisible fae will aid the owner.
2-6	Is bonded with the spirits of its former owners.
3-1	Reveals a secret when offered royal blood.
3-2	Restless spirits are drawn to it.
3-3	Grants momentary glimpses of prophecy.
3-4	Functions as a dowsing rod for other treasures.
3-5	Bears a face which can change its expression.
3-6	Changes hue with the passing of seasons.
4-1	Attracts wild creatures and frightens tame ones.
4-2	Imbued with a ritual, which its owner may use.
4-3	Demands the owner fulfill an old prophecy.
4-4	Does everything in its power to return its owner.
4-5	Siphons life force from everything around it.
4-6	Heals wounds when held close to the body.
5-1	Indestructible by any conventional means.
5-2	Projects a vision of wondrous beauty.
5-3	Emits a barely noticeable hum.
5-4	Bestows an aura of glamour to its owner.
5-5	Draws immediate suspicion from the faithful.
5-6	Purifies food and water overnight.
6-1	Glows faintly underwater.
6-2	Seems alive: it bleeds, sprouts leaves, exudes heat.
6-3	Other valuables erode when kept near it.
6-4	Causes strange dreams or frequent accidents.
6-5	Blood and dirt never washes clean.
6-6	Causes illness if carried for too long.