

Player Background

It is late summer, and for the past two years, the city of Blackwater has been at war with neighbouring Larkbridge. Many young men of fighting age, both noblemen's sons and peasants from the surrounding countryside, have been called away from their homes and into the service of Lord Cedric of Blackwater.

Far away from the front, the conflict has begun to disturb the tranquility of Lord Payne's country estate. The Lord sent his only son, young Roderick, to war a few months ago. The Lord's vassals are expecting a difficult harvest, with most of their sons away and unable to help. There have been occasional reports of mercenary deserters raiding villages—fortunately, nobody has sighted the bandits for months, and it is hoped that they have moved on. Most worryingly, news has recently come from the neighbouring estates that Lord Sutton was slain in his manor by a Larkbridge assassin—his men-at-arms severely injured the culprit, but he ran off into the night and has not been apprehended.

Most of Lord Payne's men-at-arms have accompanied Roderick to the front, but the estate isn't entirely empty.

The Dwarven caretaker **Sigthorn**, who has tended the gardens since the days of the Lord's grandfather, can be found hard at work among the rosebushes, carefully weeding and trimming them. He is a quiet and contemplative dwarf, who seldom loses his temper—but a few men-at-arms who have had the audacity to cut across his flowerbeds have discovered, to their detriment, that his walking stick doubles as a quarterstaff.

Up on the walls of the castle, **Tad** the orc surveys the surrounding countryside while cleaning his sword. Tad was one of the only guards to be left behind, and is thought by most to be a hulking brute typical of his goblin kin—barely smart enough to know which end of a sword is which. However, his armour and weapons always seem to be well-maintained, and if the stories he tells of his mercenary days are true, he's managed to stay alive for quite a long time.

The tallest tower in the castle houses **Adalard**—Lord Payne's half-elven court wizard, hired a few years ago to replace the family's jester after his demise from old age. His sole duty is to entertain Lord Payne's guests with flashy displays of magic. When no visitors are about, he seldom emerges from his tower, where he continues his research into esoteric knowledge.

Elsewhere in the castle, young Roderick's city sweetheart **Verna** waits anxiously for more letters

from the front. Lord Payne gave Roderick his word that she would be taken care of in his absence, but it is no secret that he dislikes the young woman—given her unknown heritage, her relationship with his son is scandalous and inappropriate—and is searching for a pretext to send her back to Blackwater in disgrace.

This day began like any other, but now a curious development demands Lord Payne's attention. A messenger pigeon arrives at the castle—it bears no message, but is spattered with blood.

The markings on the bird's leg indicate that it belongs to the herbalist Altus—a reclusive and difficult man who lives in a cottage in the woods to the north—near the small village of Red Creek, which lies on the outskirts of Lord Payne's lands. He keeps Lord Payne supplied with medicines and other potions, in exchange for his generous patronage.

Lord Payne fears that Altus has been attacked, possibly by the mercenaries who have caused trouble in the area before. Someone must be sent to investigate his house, and to check whether anything has happened to Lord Payne's vassals in Red Creek. He is loath to send out his remaining men-at-arms and leave the estate completely undefended—but Tad can probably be spared, and Sigthorn and Adelard aren't very busy. Surprisingly, young Verna volunteers to accompany them, and Lord Payne agrees—perhaps a little too quickly.

Altus's house is almost three days' walk away through forested and mountainous terrain. It is early in the morning when the strange party sets out from Payne Castle. After spending two somewhat uncomfortable nights camping in the wilderness, and spending the third morning walking, they have finally reached their destination. . .