
By The Rivers Dark

Aдриanna Pинska and Simon Cross

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Foreword

Credits

"By the rivers dark
I wandered on.
I lived my life
in Babylon."
"And I did forget
My holy song:
And I had no strength
In Babylon."
"By the rivers dark
Where I could not see
Who was waiting there
Who was hunting me."
"And he cut my lip
And he cut my heart.
So I could not drink
From the river dark."
"And he covered me,
And I saw within,
My lawless heart
And my wedding ring..."

– Leonard Cohen

—
Writers: Adrianna Pinska and Simon Cross

0th playtest

When it was a quick and dirty D&D module

DM: Adrianna Pinska

Players: Simon Cross, Neil Muller, Kevin Colville

1st playtest

Oh crap, it's almost Dragonfire!

DM: Wayne Human

Players: Andrea Hickman, Sean Finniss, Lucas Wheeler, Simon Cross (again), Graham Poulter

"If he was a lecherous pig, he would have let me inside!" – Andrea

"I thought the module was quite well food..." – Sean's follow-up SMS

—
System: The Window (<http://www.mimgames.com/window/>)

The Story

DM's Character Summary

Adalard

Adalard is Lord Payne's half-elven court wizard. His magical ability is weak, and his master abandoned him in Blackwater when he found a better apprentice, Osuald. He learned to supplement his magic with tricks and showmanship, and became a successful entertainer, eventually gaining the patronage of the Lady of Blackwater. He served her and her son for years, but lost his position when Osuald returned and humiliated him in a duel. Lord Payne, who fondly remembered his performances from his childhood, offered him a position at his estate. Adalard is a scholar of magical theory, and hopes to make a breakthrough that will make him famous and respected. When he isn't performing, he avoids people and concentrates on his studies.

Adalard has...

- Below-average **strength** (d20)
- Above-average **agility** (d10)
- Average **health** (d12)
- Extensive **knowledge of the world** (d8)
- Average powers of **perception** (d12)
- Poor **magical ability** (d20)

Adalard is...

- A skilled **showman** (d8)
- Highly knowledgeable about **magical theory** (d8)
- **Charming** when he wants to be (d10)
- Competent at **sleight-of-hand** (d10)
- Reasonably well-versed in **local politics** (d12)

Adalard has learned...

- Filibert's Fantastic Flames (d8): *colourful **flames**, which can actually burn*
- Leila's Lovely Luminous Lamps (d8): *bright, coloured dancing **lights**, which can be made brighter*
- Theodore's Terrific Transporter (d10): *"**manipulate small objects** at a distance"*
- Balthazar's Bountiful Bouquet (d12): *"**summon real flowers** from a nearby source. Works on any kind of flower, including cauliflower – and, for some reason, cabbage."*

Sigthorn

Sigthorn is an aging dwarven monk. He is the long-time caretaker and gardener of the Payne estate, having been hired by Lord Payne's late grandfather. In his youth, he was a zealot who favoured the Father and fought crime, but has mellowed out with age and come to serve the Mother. He is a spiritual advisor of sorts for Lord Payne. He was friendly with Altus, and has visited Red Creek before.

Sigthorn has...

- Above-average **strength** (d10)
- Average **agility** (d12)
- Average **health** (d12)
- Above-average **knowledge of the world** (d10)
- Average powers of **perception** (d12)

Sigthorn is...

- A **faithful follower** of the Two Gods (d8)
- A talented **gardener** (d8)
- Still quite skilled with a **quarterstaff** (d10)
- Fluent in several **languages**, and literate in several alphabets (d10)
- A competent **medic** (d10)
- Knowledgeable about **animals** (d12)
- Able to **survive** off the land (d12)

Sigthorn is carrying...

- A small pendant with the holy symbol of the Mother, which he wears around his neck
- A quarterstaff

Tad

Tad is an orc. He is quite intelligent, and a highly skilled soldier and tactician – a veteran of many battles and a former employee of many mercenary companies. He is now a man-at-arms at the Payne estate. He feigns stupidity and incompetence, because he has learned through unpleasant personal experience that humans don't like orcs who are too smart. The charade often frustrates him. He has met Altus before, and was on friendly terms with him.

Tad has...

- High **strength** (d8)
- Above-average **agility** (d10)
- Above-average **health** (d10)
- Below-average **knowledge of the world** (d20)
- Average powers of **perception** (d12)

Tad is...

- An expert **soldier** (d8)
- A skilled **tactician** (d10)
- Good at **acting stupid** to put people at ease (d10)
- Proficient in various **goblin dialects** (d10)
- Familiar with **local geography** (d12)
- Knowledgeable about **local mercenary outfits** (d12)
- A competent **hunter** and tracker (d12)
- Aware of the basics of **field medicine** (d20)
- An awful **cook** (d30)
- Completely **tone-deaf** (d30)

Tad is carrying...

- A shortsword
- Decent armour (d12)
- A short spear, for hunting

Verna

Verna is a young con-artist, born in a Blackwater slum to a prostitute and an unknown father. She most frequently pretends to be some kind of disinherited noblewoman, and persuades rich people to pay her expenses. She recently acquired a substantial gambling debt to an orc gang boss named Uthnarg, and had to get out of town, fast. She agreed to accompany Roderick Payne to his country estate, and was somewhat dismayed to discover that it actually belongs to Roderick's father, who is not as foolish as his son, and does not like her at all. Now that Lord Payne has

sent his son to war, she believes her situation to be precarious, and fears that she will be thrown out of the estate should Roderick get killed. She has volunteered to help with the investigation in an attempt to make it more difficult for Lord Payne to get rid of her, by doing him a favour.

Verna has...

- Below-average **strength** (d20)
- Above-average **agility** (d10)
- Average **health** (d12)
- Average **knowledge of the world** (d12)
- Very good powers of **perception** (d8)

Verna is...

- An outrageous **liar** (d8)
- Devastatingly **charming** (d8)
- A fast **runner** (d10)
- Good at **climbing** in and out of windows (d10)
- Good at **sneaking** around (d10)
- Reasonably well-versed in **local politics** (d12)
- A little rusty at **picking pockets** (d12)
- Aware of the basics of **dirty fighting** (d20)
- A terrible **mathematician** (d30)

Verna is carrying...

- A small knife – good for peeling potatoes, or stabbing city thugs.

DM's Summary

Altus and the Red Teeth

Altus was a herbalist who lived in a house near Red Creek. His research was sponsored by Lord Payne; in exchange, he produced medicines and other concoctions on the lord's request. He shunned most human company, and avoided visiting Red Creek unless he absolutely needed to.

He came to a mutually beneficial arrangement with the Red Teeth, a band of rogue goblin and human mercenaries who lived in the forest. They searched the forest for obscure plants that he needed for his work, hunted animals for him to eat, and agreed not to cause trouble by raiding the village. In exchange, he paid them in Lord Payne's gold, and kept them supplied with tobacco and medicines.

Lilitu

Lilitu is a succubus who was summoned and bound by a nobleman and used as an assassin in the ongoing war. She successfully seduced and assassinated a local nobleman, while in a comely male form. While escaping from his estate she was severely injured by his guards – they also damaged the magical collar which makes her obedient to her master and limits her power. She is sufficiently free of its influence that she is capable of seeking to free herself, and this is what she is attempting to do.

Altus's fatal mistake

Lilitu came across Altus's house while fleeing through the forest. Taking the form of a beautiful woman, she told him that she was a noble-born refugee from the war-torn neighbouring region, and pleaded for his help. Altus succumbed to her mental manipulation,

and spent weeks treating her injuries without questioning her story too closely.

He gradually began to grow suspicious. He noticed the curious necklace which his visitor would never remove. He noticed that she avoided mentioning details about her identity. He noticed that he seemed more capable of thinking about her critically when he was far away from her. He possessed enough knowledge of esoteric magic that eventually, while out gathering medicinal lichen for his poultices, he realised in horror what he had invited into his home.

He tried to confront her, using an old dagger imbued with protective magic to defend himself, but by then it was too late – she had recovered too much of her strength, kicked the dagger under a bookcase, and beat him easily. Before Lilitu sucked the life out of him, Altus managed to get away for long enough to release his pigeons from their cage – but not long enough to write a warning message.

Lilitu disposed of Altus's body by throwing it in the slightly intelligent compost heap behind the house. She packed up what food and medicines she could find, stole a few of the most useful books, and burned a few books which she thought could be used against her by throwing them in the fireplace. After cleaning up the most obvious evidence of her presence, she left for the nearby village of Red Creek.

The goblins are disappointed

The Red Teeth visited Altus at the appointed time and found his house empty, with blood smears on the floor and signs that a struggle had taken place. Surmising correctly that someone had offed him, and their arrangement was no more, they ransacked the place – taking the remains of his tobacco and money, and anything else that looked useful. They were disappointed not to find any food or medicine.

Now that Altus is dead, they see no reason not to raid Red Creek again – Old Man Foster's cows have more meat on them than deer and rabbits, and they don't run as fast.

Lilitu in Red Creek

Lilitu pays a visit to the wealthy Argent family – she can smell their greed and lack of morals. She gives them a taste of her power, and promises to bless them with magic and immortality if they assist her in a ritual. The ritual she has in mind will break her collar, and restore her freedom and full powers. While there is a chance that the collar can be removed by brute force, Lilitu sees no reason to allow some dull-witted human to take a swing at her neck with an axe, and risk having the unstable magic of the collar blow her head off, when there are perfectly good sacrificial victims all around her, free for the taking.

She instructs the Argents to desecrate the small temple in the village – its holy influence is disturbing to her. She visits the Short farm, where she devours the life force of one of the fields – turning the living wheat to dry, crumbling stalks. She is observed by young Algy Short – and takes the opportunity to capture him for the blood sacrifice. Children make better sacrifices than adults, because they are pure and innocent. Algy tries to run away, but she is faster – and once she has grabbed hold of him, she lifts him up into the air and flies to the Argents' manor.

Algy's distraught parents blame his disappearance on the marauding Red Teeth.

Lilitu intends to abduct at least one more child, fearing that Algy's sacrifice will not be sufficient.

Brief Timeline

| | |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3 days ago | Altus dies; Lilitu arrives in Red Creek; Pigeon arrives at Payne castle |
| 2 days ago | Players depart Payne Castle; Short field is blighted; Algy Short disappears |
| Yesterday | |
| Today | Players arrive at Altus's house |

World Paradigm

Religion

The dominant religion of the world is the faith of the Two Gods: the Mother, the goddess of the sun, life and light; and the Father, the god of the moon, death and darkness. The Father is not evil; he and the Mother are two sides of the same coin, and neither can exist without the other. The Mother is kind; the Father is just. The Mother rewards; the Father punishes.

Most ordinary faithful folk make offerings to both deities with equal devotion, but more zealous followers tend to favour one or the other. The Father's followers are more militant.

The deities are known to all races, albeit by different names and faces – but their worship is not universal, and some communities are decidedly less devoted than others.

Humanoid species

The world contains humans, elves, dwarves and goblins. Large goblins are known as orcs; the term "goblin" is used both to describe the shorter cousins of the orcs and the race as a whole.

Goblins and humans can interbreed, as can humans and elves.

Elves are practically immortal; both dwarves and half-elves are very long-lived when compared to humans. Goblin and human lifespans are similar, but goblins have a lower life expectancy because of a poorer diet and a less advanced understanding of medicine.

Languages

Elven is the language of magic; all mages know at least enough elven to understand the magical vocabulary.

Strange Creatures

There are many strange and mysterious creatures in the world, but they are encountered infrequently and their habits and origins are not completely understood. There is even a lot of uncertainty about the existence of some creatures. Many monsters of legend are completely or mostly fictitious, and many descriptions of real creatures are extremely inaccurate.

In particular, most people believe demons and other monsters to be hideous and obviously inhuman creatures with horns, bat wings, tails and hooved feet; even succubi and incubi, demons who visit people at night to have intercourse with them. Vampires, incubi and succubi are believed to take on more attractive forms temporarily (somewhat true), but their real forms are visible in mirrors (not true). Their seductive powers are believed to be exclusively a form of magical mind control (mostly true).

Succubi and incubi are actually the same creature; they are hermaphroditic demons which can take any male or female form.

Most peasants firmly believe that monsters will flee in terror before images of the Mother and Father, being wicked and sinful creatures. This is partially true for demons and vampires, who are discomfited by the presence of holy objects.

During the course of the module, the players may find clues which lead them to believe that some kind of monster is responsible for the deaths and disappearances that they are investigating. Here are some possible candidates that they might think of, with successful **knowledge** checks:

- Creatures that are **inhumanly strong**: vampires, werewolves, demons
- Creatures that **rip out throats**: vampires, werewolves, monstrous animals
- Creatures that can **suck the life from living things**: vampires, ghosts and spirits, succubi and incubi

- Creatures that are **beautiful, charming or seductive**: vampires, succubi and incubi
- Creatures that can **fly**: vampires, succubi and incubi
- Creatures that have **large black feathers**: giant monstrous birds

The Window

A brief introduction to The Window roleplaying system

The Three Precepts

The intent and flavour of the rules is described by three precepts:

- Everything about a Window character is described with adjectives rather than numbers.
- It is the actor's responsibility to play their role realistically.
- A good story is the central goal.

Traits and Skills

Traits (i.e. stats) and Skills are described using adjectives. Each adjective is also associated with a die on the competency scale (see next section). The die is what is rolled when the Trait or Skill is tested.

The Traits are: *Strength, Agility, Health, Perception* and *Knowledge* (of the world). Adalard has an extra trait: *Magic*.

Skills can be very broad or very specific. It's up to you as the DM to rule whether a particular aspect of a character's prior experience is applicable to the situation.

Competency Levels

The competency levels (and generic example adjectives) are:

- d4 - Incredible
- d6 - Very High
- d8 - High
- d10 - Above Average
- d12 - Average
- d20 - Below Average
- d30 - Low

Rolls

Rolls usually require rolling less than or equal to a difficulty set by the DM, on a single die. The default difficulty is 6, but feel free to adjust as you like. Lower rolls are better successes; higher rolls are worse failures.

- **Success Roll**: Used to determine the success of an uncontested action. Roll the appropriate Skill or Trait die against the difficulty.
- **Contest Roll**: Each contestant rolls an appropriate die. Lowest roll wins. Ties are ties.
- **Health Roll**: When a character is struck or suffers other injury, you may call for the player to roll their Health Trait die against a difficulty. If they fail, you may drop their Health Trait by zero or more competency levels (usually they drop to the next biggest die). This is the primary damage mechanic. Adalard, Sigthorn and Verna start with Average Health. Tad starts with Above Average.
- **Armour**: Before asking for a Health Roll, you may declare that the character's armour could protect him or her from injury. The player then rolls the armour die against a difficulty. If the roll succeeds, he or she need not make the Health Roll. Only Tad has armour – it's standard issue (d12).

Use rolls sparingly.

Module Flow

Part I: Altus's house (1/2 hour)

The players arrive at Altus's house, and investigate it, looking for clues. They should find his body, and a holy dagger which will later help them to fight the succubus. There are optional minor combat encounters with an intelligent compost heap and a wolverine.

Part II: Red Creek (1 hour)

The players enter Red Creek, and speak to various villagers to find out what has been happening in the village. They should become at least a little suspicious of the Argents, who are very rude and inhospitable, find out about young Algy Short's disappearance, find out about the mysterious blight which has affected the Short farm and investigate it, find out that the village has previously been raided by the Red Teeth, and find out about June Foster's dubious relationship with the Argents.

They may discover that the small temple has been desecrated, and may attempt to cleanse and resanctify it.

The players should not have to visit every single household in turn in order to speak to all the families – that could get quite tedious and time-consuming! News travels quickly in the village, and after they have visited one or two farms, most of the other villagers will come to meet them, happy that Lord Payne has sent them his representatives: the Shorts are concerned about their missing son and their blighted crops, and the Mosleys are concerned about the neglected temple and the villagers' lack of faith. The Elms have no pressing problems, but they are interested in the welfare of the village. Only the Argents will actively avoid the players; and Old Man Foster will be reluctant to leave his farm, and too proud to ask for help.

Short descriptions are provided for all the villagers, but it isn't necessary for you to give all of them equal screentime. Choose a few that the players seem to take to, or that you think are best suited to the way you want to present the story, and concentrate on them.

This section should wrap up with the players making arrangements to eat and sleep somewhere. Any of the villagers can offer the players dinner and a place to sleep. The Shorts don't have space inside their house, but they will generously offer one of their barns anyway.

Part III: The Bandit Raid (1/2 hour)

When it has gone dark, the Foster farm will be raided by the orc Grathnar and his Red Teeth, who will try to steal one of the cows.

It isn't necessary for the players to kill all the bandits; the bandits are pragmatic and open to negotiation. Tad can recognise some of the bandits from his mercenary days, and this could open dialogue with them.

The players should have the opportunity to talk to the bandits, and question them about the death of Altus and the disappearance of Algy Short – they will deny killing Altus, although they probably will admit to ransacking his house, and deny all knowledge of the boy.

How amicably the bandits depart can vary greatly.

During or after the fight, someone should notice June Foster running to the Argent house, follow her and realise that the house is empty. If all of the players become involved in the combat with the bandits, June can be found cowering in front of the front door when it is over. If some of the less combat-savvy characters follow June instead of fighting, June can let herself in through the kitchen entrance. This will give some of the characters an opportunity to follow her into the house, speak to her, and possibly start investigating inside.

As the interaction with the bandits is wrapping up, someone will raise an alarm – another child has gone missing!

Part IV: The Ritual (1 hour)

By this time, the players should have a firm suspicion that the Argents are somehow involved in what has happened. Their disappearance should confirm their suspicions, and lead them to break into the manor. After searching all of it, they will find a secret passage in their cellar, and follow it outside, to a cave by the river where the succubus Lilitu is preparing the ritual which will free her. The Argents and their manservant are with her, and they have the two missing children.

Lilitu will try to use her power to dissuade the players from interfering with her, offering them various temptations.

If they attack her, she will use the Argents as her first line of defence, but she is herself very strong, and quite deadly. The players may find it difficult to defeat her by brute force, although the dagger will be helpful.

Scenes

Altus's House

See *Figure 1* for DM's map and *Figure 2* for players' map.

First impressions

Sigthorn and Tad have visited Altus before, so they are somewhat familiar with his house – but they haven't visited often. They may make **knowledge** checks to attempt to recall things about the house or Altus.

Altus's house is twenty steps away from the stream. It is not so much a cottage as a large lopsided shack. It looks like it was made by hand, out of logs tied together and packed with mud and clay. The roof is thatched. There are somewhat chaotic clusters of vegetables and herbs planted all around the house. When the wind blows from the house towards the players, there is a foul stench of rotting vegetation. If anyone goes to investigate the source, it isn't difficult to find – an enormous **compost heap** behind the house, piled up against the back wall.

Many footprints are visible around the front of the house. Some are of bare feet in various sizes; some are of boots. With a successful **tracking** check, someone can determine that they head off into the forest vaguely in the direction of Red Creek. They disappear in the rocky area near the river.

Inside

The inside of the house looks a lot more civilised than the outside – the walls are smooth clay, the windows have shutters, and there are many bookcases and shelves. There is a fireplace in the centre of the house, and hanging curtains which bisect the interior into a front room and a back room.

The house looks like it's been **ransacked**. Most of the shelves are empty; books, boxes and broken bottles and jars lay strewn all over the floor. One of the curtains has partially been torn down. There are **strange sounds** coming from the back room, behind the other curtain: thumping, rattling, and animal snarls.

There are many clues to be found inside the house. Let the players find them without a check if they look in the right places and ask the right questions. If they don't, prompt them with **perception** checks and divide up the information among those who succeed. If anyone succeeds particularly well, they can receive more insight or detail.

The front room

There are **smears of blood** on the floor, although they are not immediately obvious, because they're obscured by the mess. A **tracking** check can be made to find out more about the smears:

- Something heavy and trailing blood was dragged from the back room out through the front door.
- The footprints from outside continue inside, and are all over the floor. They were made some time after the dragging occurred.
- There is one footprint that seems to have been made earlier, before the blood had congealed. It is a small bare foot – perhaps belonging to a woman, child or slightly-built goblin.

A few **large black feathers** are scattered around. They are far too large to be pigeon feathers, and they aren't writing quills. **Knowledge of animals** may reveal more information:

- They're the right colour to be from a raven or crow.
- They would have to have come from a very large specimen.

- They are slightly the wrong shape for crow or raven feathers.

Certain kinds of things are **missing** from the house: there is no food, no medicine and no money to be found. Anyone who knew Altus well can make an **easy knowledge** check to remember that he was a compulsive pipe smoker – there is no tobacco in the house, and no pipe.

There is a **small dagger** under one of the bookcases. The metal is matt and dull, and the dagger is plain and free of decorations, except for some writing in a strange alphabet on either side of the blade.

- If anyone checks, the dagger is very sharp.
- Someone **familiar with weapons** can notice that in spite of its unassuming appearance this is a very fine dagger – it is well-balanced, and suitable for throwing.
- Adalard and Sigthorn know that the writing is elven, and are able to read it. It says: *Mother protect me / Father grant me strength.*

There are a few burned-up books in the fireplace. Adalard and Sigthorn are able to decipher from the remnants that they were books about magic and theology. One title is still clearly visible on an unburned spine: *Of day and night*. On a successful **magical knowledge** or **religious knowledge** check, someone knows that this is was an old bestiary of mythological creatures associated with the Mother and the Father.

The back room

The back room contains an unmade **bed**, an overturned **writing desk**, and wicker **cages** built into the walls and floor. There is a large amount of **blood** splattered around the writing desk and cages. One of the cages is empty and full of pigeon droppings and feathers. The other cage contains an **enraged wolverine**, which is throwing itself against the bars and snarling.

The wolverine is hungry – it hasn't been fed in days. If the players take pity on it and open the cage, it attacks someone and tries to eat them. If they don't, it's been trying to break out of the cage for days, and the wicker gives way eventually – perhaps while they're there. The players may be able to come up with an ingenious plan to release the wolverine and chase it into the forest without getting hurt.

- The wolverine is a stocky, muscular animal the size of a medium dog.
- It is **quite strong (d10)** and can **claw and bite (d12)** quite savagely.

There are some **bloodstains** on the bedding. A successful **medicine** or **tracking** check reveals that they are older than the other blood smears and splatters – perhaps as much as a few weeks old.

The compost heap

The compost heap is huge and smelly.

A **good perception** check reveals that the compost heap **twitches slightly** at irregular intervals.

On a successful **perception** check, someone will notice the **foot** sticking out of the compost heap. If they grab it and pull, they will discover that the compost heap has many mobile tendrils, is **very strong (d8)**, and doesn't want to let go of its meal.

- If anyone loses a **contested strength** check to pull the body out, they end up stuck in the compost heap, which will try to envelop (*strength check with a bonus*) and eat them. Although it takes it a very long time to digest a person, suffocation is a more pressing danger. A person whose mouth and nose are submerged in compost must make a **good health** check to avoid passing out from the stench and the lack of air.
- The compost heap is extremely difficult to kill – it has **superhuman health (d4)** and feels no pain. It is possible to neutralise it for a while by chopping it into pieces and dispersing it; it will eventually re-form if it is left alone.

If the players succeed in pulling the corpse out, they can examine it more closely. It is wearing a loose robe, and is partially digested. Anyone who knew Altus can identify the body as his. Successful **medicine** checks may reveal more information about it:

- The cause of death is a ripped-out throat.
- The body also has numerous bruises and several broken bones, but no cuts apart from minor scratches.
- The throat was not cut with a blade, bitten or clawed; the wounds look as if they were made by the fingers of a humanoid's right hand.
- Anyone who succeeds at an **easy fighting** check knows that it would take incredible strength to rip out a man's throat with one's bare hand – and it is likely to cause damage to the hand.

If the players have failed to find the dagger inside the house, they can find it now, clutched tightly in Altus's hand.

Some rags and strips of material have also been dislodged from the compost heap. There are also little pieces of thread and mushed-up leaves mixed with them. With an **easy medicine** check, someone can recognise them as cut-offs of bandages and surgical thread and discarded poultices – although the poultices are an educated guess; smelling them over the compost is impossible.

Entering Red Creek

See **Figure 4** for the DM's map, and **Figure 5** for the players' map.

First Impressions

Sigthorn has briefly visited Red Creek, and been in its temple. He may make **knowledge** checks to attempt to recall things about the village.

The village lies in a valley, and the buildings and fields become visible to the players from a distance as they emerge from the forest, following the river. A round of **perception** checks can be used to determine how much detail the players notice about the area.

What can be seen below:

- A small, round building in the middle of the village, at the confluence of the two tributaries. Sigthorn knows that this is the **temple**.
- A cluster of buildings near a field with **sheep**. (*This is the Mosley farm.*)
- Another cluster of buildings near a field with **cows**. (*This is the Foster farm.*)
- A cluster of buildings and fields of some kind of **grain**, probably wheat. If someone succeeded well on their **perception**, they may be able to notice a large circular patch in one of the fields which seems discoloured. (*This is the Short farm.*)
- A cluster of buildings, and quite a lot of smoke or steam rising from the small building close to the river. With an **easy knowledge** check, someone can guess that this is a **smithy**. (*This is the Elm smithy.*)

- A large, fortified manor house, with outlying buildings. (*This is the Argent manor.*)

David Elm

As the players approach the village, they can make **perception** checks. On a good success, they can see a **small boy** watching them out of a nearby tree.

The boy is **David Elm**, the smith's ten-year-old son. He isn't allowed to be out playing by himself, ever since his friend Algy Short disappeared, but he isn't afraid of anything, goblins included. He's been lurking in the forest near the smithy, pretending that his stick is a sword, and looking out for bandits.

David is suspicious of the players at first, but can easily be persuaded to trust them and talk to them. The talk is eventually cut short when he hears his mother calling for him, sounding angry – he hurriedly runs home, well aware that he's in trouble.

Little Temple

First Impressions

The temple is obviously **not popular** – the glass in the windows is broken and dirty, the potted plants are dry and dead, everything is dusty, and there are giant cobwebs in every corner of the ceiling.

There are a few small wooden benches lined up to face an **icon** of the Mother and Father – a carved and painted wooden disc hanging on the wall. It was once a fine work of art, but the paint is fading, and the gilded detail is starting to flake off.

Anyone who makes a successful **religious awareness** check or a good **perception** check can feel a sense of **wrongness** in the temple, far from the pleasant, peaceful atmosphere they would expect.

Desecration

Anyone who makes a good **perception** check notices that the icon is askew, and in fact seems to be lifted away from the wall a little – as if there were something hidden behind it. If anyone checks, they will find a **dead rat** nailed to the back.

A successful **tracking** check reveals that the dust on the floor of the temple was recently disturbed – but because the players have just walked over it, distinguishing other tracks is very difficult. On a good success, someone can be reasonably confident that the previous tracks were made by one person, who was wearing shoes.

Cleansing

If the players remove the rat and make an effort to clean up the temple (good **religious awareness** check), the unpleasant atmosphere will lift as the temple's positive influence is restored.

Lilitu notices instantly if this happens, and will once again send out one of her infatuated minions to corrupt the temple – but she will probably wait until dark.

The next time the players enter the temple, they may find another dead animal, symbols scrawled in blood, or something even more horrible – like a non-essential body part of one of Lilitu's young captives. The more confident Lilitu is that her ritual will soon be complete, the less subtle her minions will be.

The icon can potentially be removed from the temple and used to **ward off** Lilitu – she will recoil from it, and find its proximity very unpleasant. If the players try to do this in front of the Mosleys, they will be outraged by this disrespectful handling of a holy artifact, and will require considerable **persuasion** to allow it.

Elm Smithy

Inhabitants

- **Gavin Elm** (46): the village smith. He is a large, muscular man, and has quite a temper. He is rather opinionated, and has something to say about everyone in the village. The Mosleys are obnoxious fanatics, the Shorts let their children run wild, the Argents try to cheat him when they buy his wares, and Old Man Foster is being cuckolded by his young wife.
- **Anna Elm** (33): his wife. She is very protective of David.
- **David Elm** (10): their younger son. He's been given a hiding for sneaking out to play by himself – ever since Algy Short disappeared, his parents are worried that he will also be taken by bandits.
- **Grandpa Elm** (76): Gavin's old father. He is a wealth of information about folk superstitions, some of which are actually true.

Gavin and Anna also have an older son, **Benedict** (15). He was conscripted into the army. They are very worried about him.

Gavin has been instructed to make swords for the war effort. He isn't very good at it; most of experience is in making farming equipment and other tools. He has been improving his techniques, but it is a slow, frustrating process. He has a few **badly made swords** in the smithy, which he hasn't melted down yet.

Gavin is somewhat **prejudiced** against non-humans, women, nobles and outsiders – not enough for him to be openly rude to the players, but certainly enough for him to be **suspicious**. He is sure to question them very closely before he is satisfied that they are really Lord Payne's representatives.

He briefly met **Altus** on the few occasions that Altus visited the village. He has often wondered what Altus gets up to, all by himself in the middle of the forest, and why he's so reclusive – he is convinced that he must be hiding something, and **doesn't trust him or his medicines**. If he is informed of Altus's mysterious death, he is likely to suggest that Altus brought some kind of trouble on himself.

Gavin is the person in the village least respectful towards the faith of the Two Gods, and the most likely to be rudely dismissive of it. This is a source of much contention between his family and the Mosleys.

Gavin and Anna believe that the **Red Teeth** have returned after a long and welcome absence and **abducted Algy Short** for some kind of ransom, and that perhaps their silence means that they botched the abduction and killed him by mistake. It seems like the most sensible explanation. They are terrified that David will meet the same fate, which is why he is forbidden to play outside alone – especially near the forest.

If asked about any of the **mysterious occurrences** the players are investigating, Grandpa Elm should offer about **one part insightful advice to two parts complete misinformation**. He may let the players know about the ways of demons and succubi, but not without mentioning goblin bandits, ghosts, werewolves, vampires, banshees, shapechangers, Larkbridge spies, marauding wolves and giant monster crows in the same breath. He also believes demons to be enormous, have hooves and horns, and breathe fire, and succubi to look like hideous wrinkled hags if one looks at their reflection in a mirror.

Mosley Farm

Inhabitants

- **Ben Mosley** (40): a sheep farmer. He became very pious when his wife died in childbirth, 18 years ago. He worships the Father with particular enthusiasm, and looks poorly on the rest of the village's lack of religious fervour.

He particularly disapproves of June Foster because of her adulterous relationships, and Gavin Elm because Gavin doesn't take his faith seriously.

- **Ben Mosley Jr** (18): his only son. He avoided being conscripted because he has a club foot. He is as much of a zealot as his father. He is in love with Susan Short, and is unhappy that he has seen so little of her since she stopped working on the farm.

Both father and son are **alienated from the other villagers** because of their uncompromising views. They think that the unmaintained state of the temple is disgraceful, and would like to do something about it, but they are kept constantly busy with work on their farm, which they have to do alone. Susan and Jenny Short used to help out on the farm, but since the war started they have too much to do at the Short farm.

Both Mosleys believe that **all the Mother's creatures deserve respect**, and attempt to be polite to all the players even though they have personal misgivings about **Tad**. Once it becomes known that **Sighthorn is a monk**, they are particularly friendly towards him, happy to find a kindred soul.

The Mosleys didn't know **Altus** well, but they have heard about the assistance that he has rendered to the village in the past, and are grateful for it.

The Mosleys are concerned that the **Red Teeth** may be back, and that it is they who have **abducted Algy Short**. They believe that they are the instrument of **the Father's judgement** upon the village, for their neglect of the temple, and their abandonment their faith, and that only repentance can bring Algy back. Ben Jr is somewhat **conflicted** about this, unable to understand why the Father would take away the son of the kind and hard-working Shorts, and not the son of the belligerent and irreverent Gavin Elm.

Short Farm

Inhabitants

- **Sam Short** (55): wheat farmer. He is a cheerful and friendly man, who loves his family. He is extremely worried about his missing son, and the hardships the farm will face because of the war and the blighted field, but tries to keep everyone's spirits up.
- **Mairie Short** (40): his wife. She is devastated by Algy's disappearance. She is Lea Argent's sister; Lea hasn't spoken to her in years, which upsets her. She believes that Jan Argent has been a terrible influence on her, and doesn't like him at all.
- **Susan Short** (18): eldest daughter. A very pretty girl; in love with Ben Mosley Jr.
- **Jenny Short** (16): middle daughter. She dreams of running away from the village and going to live in Blackwater, but she doesn't know anyone there and is afraid that she will end up living on the street.
- **Nelly Short** (12): youngest daughter. She's adventurous and tomboyish; recently her freedom has been curtailed because of her brother's disappearance. She knows about the places he liked to play with his friend, David Elm.

The Shorts have two older sons, Everard (22) and Alvin (20), who were conscripted. Their absence has shifted a lot of the farm's work onto the shoulders of Susan, Jenny and Nelly, which means that they can no longer help out on the Mosley farm.

The Shorts are **welcoming and friendly** people who try to be kind to everyone; they are not particularly prejudiced towards non-humans.

Mairie Short is the village **midwife** and what passes for a healer. She remembers **Altus** fondly; he helped her through Lily Foster's difficult birth three years ago, and often supplied the village with medicines when she asked.

Algy Short (10) **disappeared** a few days ago, and the Shorts fear that the **Red Teeth** have returned, and abducted him. They still hope that the bandits intend to hold him for ransom, and that there is a chance that he will be returned unharmed.

The Blighted Field

Also a few days ago, the Shorts discovered that one of their fields has been **stricken by blight** – all the wheat is shrivelled and dry. If the players investigate, a successful **knowledge of plants** check tells them that the affliction is **not natural**. If they noticed the regular circular shape of the affected area as they were entering the village, this further reinforces this suspicion. A successful **knowledge of magic** check suggests that the cause of the effect was located in the centre of the circle. A good success suggests that the **life force** of the plants was sucked out by something or someone.

A successful **perception** check near the centre allows someone to find a few **large black feathers**, like those found in Altus's house.

Tracking in the centre area may reveal more information:

- there are many sets of old footprints around the field; men, women and children – probably the Short family going about their business.
- there are more recent prints of bare feet which don't exactly match the others. Some of the child-sized footprints are also more recent.
- it appears that the child approached the barefoot person, and then turned and ran. The barefoot person chased the child and caught up with it. Then there was a struggle – and then both sets of footprints disappear.

Foster Farm

See **Figure 3** for a map (which may be useful during the goblin raid).

Inhabitants

- **Glen Foster** (60): the cattle farmer. He knows that his young wife is cuckolding him, but he turns a blind eye. He cares for her and her child, and is ashamed that he cannot give them a better life, because of his poverty and age. He has little left but the remains of his dignity, and is reluctant to ask anyone for help.
- **June Foster** (20): his young wife. She works as a maid for the Argents. They abuse and mistreat her, but she doesn't leave because the job gives her security that she doesn't want to give up. She is terrified that when Glen dies, she and her child will be left alone with no means of support.
- **Lily Foster** (3): June's young daughter. One of the Argents is her father.

Glen Foster also has two sons, Gerard (30) and Albert (25), from a previous marriage. They were conscripted into the army. In their absence, there is no-one to maintain the Foster farm's buildings, as Glen is getting too old and frail to do the repairs himself. They are becoming **quite dilapidated**, and have leaking roofs, rotting floorboards, broken shutters, peeling paint and numerous other problems.

Years of living in isolation and listening to the village's jibes have made Glen a **bitter and fatalistic** man. He questions the players about their credentials if they ask to speak to him, but eventually gives in and lets them inside. He is sullen and unhelpful – answering questions briefly or vaguely, and volunteering no information.

If the players have seen Jan or Darius Argent before, a **good perception** check will let them notice the family resemblance in little Lily Foster.

June Foster obeys the Argents out of fear. If she is confronted with some of the **black feathers**, she recognises them, having

found some in the house while cleaning, but is too afraid to admit it – with a successful **perception** check, the players notice her reaction.

With a **very good persuasion** check, and some kind of offer of assistance, the players could coax some information out of her. She knows that the Argents have a **mysterious woman** as a house guest, and she has seen them carrying a **large, heavy sack** downstairs to the cellar.

June is one of the villagers who remembers **Altus** well; Lily's birth was difficult, and he came down to the village to help the midwife, Mairie Short, with the delivery.

Glen is quite **protective** of his wife, and already fed up with the village's cruel gossip about their marriage. He won't let the players bully her, and may well threaten to throw them out of his house if their questioning starts to upset her.

The Foster farm is **ripe for attack** by bandits, since it is practically undefended, and the cattle enclosures are as poorly maintained as the buildings. Grathnar is planning to raid it when it gets dark, hoping to steal one of the cows.

Argent Manor

See **Figure 6** for the DM's map, and **Figure 7** for the players' map.

First Impressions

The fortifications of the Argent Manor are obvious and impressive – the walls are thick and the ground floor windows heavily barred. The large double doors are solid oak and bound with iron. The second floor is less fortified and the stained glass in the windows displays the family's opulence. A **good perception** check will allow someone to notice a figure observing them through the right window on the second storey (Lea).

Hammering on the large doors will eventually result in **Wigmar** being dispatched to open them. **Jan** will greet his visitors cordially but is **not inclined to invite them inside**. A **very good persuasion** check may move him to grudgingly admit **Adalard** and **Verna** into the dining room for refreshments. Jan simply cannot countenance an orc or a dwarf entering the premises. He will most probably rudely ignore **Sigthorn** and **Tad** entirely, as if their presence on his doorstep is some kind of appalling misunderstanding.

Should **Verna** and **Adalard** gain admittance, Jan will ask June to serve the family (**Lea** and **Darius**) and its guests a light snack. The family will downplay the recent disappearance as the work of those pesky orc bandits. If lodging is requested, Jan will politely explain that they simply have no room and suggest that they and their companions seek shelter with one of the other families.

A **good perception** check will reveal that June's subservience is born of fear and mistreatment.

Family

- **Jan Argent** (50): Head of the household. Jan has made his fortune by **controlling trade** between Red Creek and the outside world. It is not a prosperous town and merchants visit it seldom, usually at Jan's request. He meets his family's daily needs by taxing the produce the other families give him to sell and makes a small but consistent profit by taking a percentage of the money they eventually receive and of any purchases they make.
- **Lea Argent** (38): Jan's wife. Although she bears no affection for her husband, she would never leave him since the alternative is living with one of the other families whom she despises for their poverty. She has not deigned to speak with her **sister, Marie Short**, in years.
- **Darius Argent** (21): Jan and Lea's son. A petulant young man, brought up to regard the other villagers as lesser folk. With little to do, he whiles away his days practising

swordfighting (d12) and thinking up inventive ways to abuse the servants.

Servants

- **Wigmar (25): Mute, burly** servant. The Argents acquired him when he was a young boy, selecting him because he could not easily interact with the other villagers. Serving the Argents is the only life he knows, and he is very **loyal** to them, despite their faults. Wigmar carries goods and performs heavy labour. He has a **room in the cellar**. Wigmar is **not as thoroughly rotten** as the Argents, and it is possible – although very difficult – for the players to persuade him to change sides later. If anyone makes the effort to be nice to him, he will remember it – nobody is ever nice to him.
- **June Foster (20):** serving girl and **Glen Foster's wife**. She cooks and cleans and does whatever else the Argents ask of her – this extends to satisfying both Jan's and Darius's carnal desires. Lea beats her for these indiscretions. Glen asks her no questions and she volunteers no information. The other villagers regard her as a loose and sinful woman. She **stays on the Foster farm**.

Recent Events

When Lilitu arrived in the Argents' home, dazzling them with her beauty and offering them power and immortality, they greedily took the bait. Since then, she has secretly been staying in their guest bedroom, and using them as her servants. She sent one of them to the temple to desecrate it, and will do so again if it is cleansed.

Lilitu has been preparing for a ritual which she has told them will grant them magical powers. It will actually free her from the collar which is limiting her powers. She has abducted Algy Short for a blood sacrifice, and brought him to the house – he is tied up in the cellar.

Future Plans

Lilitu plans to conduct the ritual in the open air. There is a secret passage out of the manor, which leads from the cellar towards an exit near the river. When Lilitu has the second child, she will lead the whole family outside through the passage, and begin the ritual.

Goblin Raid

Events at the farm

At some appropriate moment during the night, Grathnar and his bandits will raid the Foster farm, and attempt to make off with one of the cows. They are expecting no more than feeble resistance from the peasants, knowing that anyone even remotely capable of fighting them has been conscripted already.

Tad has been in enough different mercenary companies that he will probably **recognise** some of the bandits, and they him. He may even recognise Grathnar himself. It is up to you whether they recognise each other as friends, vague acquaintances, or enemies with a grudge.

Whether Tad and Grathnar recognise each other or not, they should recognise each other's formidable combat skills. Grathnar will certainly single out Tad for special attention – as a skilled orc, who deigns to work for a human master, Tad will be of particular interest to Grathnar.

The bandits will not fight to the last man.

- If it becomes apparent to Grathnar that he is **facing a capable foe**, he will not needlessly risk his life. If the players kill or injure a handful of his men, especially the more competent among them, Grathnar will sound a retreat.

- In addition to this, some of the other bandits may decide that they're more terrified of the players than they are of Grathnar, and will run away no matter what he does.
- If Grathnar is captured or killed, the other bandits will definitely flee in a mad panic.

If Grathnar or any of the other bandits are captured and **questioned**, or just interrogated at a distance while they run away, they will deny having killed Altus, and express complete ignorance of any missing children.

If the bandits have been badly beaten, they will agree to leave with nothing but their lives; if they're still feeling confident, they may demand one of the cows as payment for going away.

Elsewhere in the village

During the raid, if June Foster has not yet turned on the Argents, she will **flee in terror** to the Argent manor, and bang on the door to be let in. No-one will come – all the lights remain out, and there appears to be no sound coming from the house.

Alternatively, she will let herself in through the servants' entrance, and begin to search the house frantically.

At this point, it will be a lot easier for the players to **persuade** June to tell them what she knows about the Argents' secrets (**basic success**).

If anyone checks the temple, they may discover that it has been **desecrated** again – this time more brazenly and severely.

Another child has **gone missing**. It could be David Elm, Nelly Short or little Lily Foster, depending on who was the worst-guarded, and which child the players have become most fond of.

Ritual

The Argent Manor

The manor is securely locked, and showing no signs of life. It will require a **very good strength** check to break through the door; if many people co-operate, it will be easier. It is also easier to break in through a window. June also has the **key to the kitchen entrance**.

The Argents are wealthy people, and all their wealth has been left unguarded. If **Verna** surreptitiously looks for **small, expensive things to steal**, she can find plenty: silver inkwells and little statuettes in the drawing room, silverware in the dining room, small items of jewellery in Jan and Darius's bedrooms, and Lea's substantial jewellery collection in her bedroom. Her pockets do have limited capacity, and if she takes *everything*, she may become conspicuously bulky, or begin to jingle as she walks.

In the library, a successful **perception** check lets the players notice a few **books** which are out of place. Unlike the other books, which are neat, tidy and impressively bound volumes of significant mundane literature, these books are grubby, muddy and dog-eared; possibly even bloodstained. They are books about magic. Anyone who has visited Altus before can make a **knowledge check**; if they succeed, they remember seeing them in his house. Otherwise, a successful **magical theory** check can identify them as books that a herbalist is likely to possess.

Many **big black feathers** can be found in the house, especially up in the guest bedroom and in the storage room in the cellar. The floor in the storage room may also have traces of blood if either of the children has been injured.

The smaller of the two rooms in the cellar is where **Wigmar** sleeps. It is disturbingly spartan and unfurnished; it contains only a small bed, a chest with Wigmar's clothing – which has been folded with obsessive neatness – and a small shelf with a candle.

It requires a **good perception** check to find the entrance to the secret passage – it is hidden behind a tall shelf.

By the river

Lilitu is standing on a tiny island in the middle of the river, drawing the circle and magical symbols required for the ritual on the ground with her captives' blood. The children are tied up at her feet. They may be unconscious.

This is probably the first time that the players see Lilitu. She is currently taking the form of a slightly-built, beautiful woman. If she needs to be able to fly, or wishes to awe the players, she will take on her natural, winged form.

At first, Lilitu tries to **persuade** the players not to oppose her, by appealing creatively to their deepest desires. They may make **contested checks**, using whatever skill or trait seems most relevant and appropriate, to try to resist.

- She tells Verna that her father really was a nobleman, and offers to provide her with the indisputable proof that will legitimise her and allow her to claim her rightful heritage.
- She offers Adalard magical secrets which no other mage has yet discovered, swearing that they will make his name remembered for eternity.
- She offers to make Tad a great general, respected and idolised by his peers, and provide him with a noble title and any other honours to which he might possibly aspire.
- She attempts to rekindle Sigthorn's youthful zealotry, offering him the power to heal the wounded and inspire faith, suggesting that he can lead the entire region to profess their love for the Mother and Father once again.
- She offers all the players a chance to end the war and save hundreds of lives at the cost of a few, promising to go to Larkbridge and eliminate its six key officers if she is freed. This is actually a completely genuine offer. She is intending to kill her former master anyway, to claim revenge for the years of humiliating bondage and servitude, and his five compatriots are not too far out of her way.
- She offers to allow them to save one child in exchange for the sacrifice of the other.

If fighting is inevitable, Lilitu instructs the **Argent**s to attack them. Jan and Lea are armed with **daggers** and **rather ineffectual (d30)**, but Darius has **some skill with the sword (d12)** and Wigmar is a **strong man (d8)** and **good with his fists (d10)**.

It is possible for the players to **persuade Wigmar** to help them, or at least to stop fighting, but it is difficult to break through many years' worth of conditioning. If any of them have been nice to him earlier, this may help.

If Lilitu fights the players personally, she will use her **bare hands** – she is inhumanly strong, but has never felt the need to become proficient in the use of weapons. She can inflict considerable damage using only her fingers.

She could try to strangle the players, break their necks or crush their throats; these simple and expeditious methods of killing have served her well in the past. However, as long as any of her other opponents remain a threat, she will be **tempted** to suck **life force** out of anyone she gets in her clutches to replenish her magic, and

reluctant to waste it by killing them quickly. She may attempt to break her opponents' limbs, in order to **disable** them and leave them for later.

Any **holy items** that the players have in their possession help them; Lilitu recoils from them in revulsion. **Sigthorn's pendant** protects him from her; she is unable to touch him as long as he is wearing it. The **holy dagger** can harm her more than other weapons. **Sigthorn's faith** should have a subtle beneficial effect on the combat, if he uses it in a creative and appropriate way – if he prays to the Mother and asks her to protect his companions, for example, it should actually work; perhaps by giving them a small bonus to defensive checks against Lilitu.

If the players strike **Lilitu's collar** enough times during the battle, they may accidentally remove it through brute force, thus freeing her.

Lilitu's magic becomes weaker the more she uses it. If she begins to exhaust her power, she may try to **drink the life force** of someone convenient in order to replenish it. She will not use the children – she needs them for the ritual – but may sacrifice one of the Argent's if she has no success with the players. She can also suck the life from all the **plants** within a large radius of the area, but only once.

The End

If Lilitu is freed, what she does next depends on how well the battle has gone for her, and whether any of the players have agreed to some kind of deal:

- If there was no deal, and she is seriously injured, she flees.
- If there was no deal, and she is in good shape, she attacks.
- If the players agreed to the Larkbridge assassination deal, she will fulfil it, as agreed.
- If the players agreed to any of the personal deals she offered, she will fulfil their technical conditions to the best of her ability – but there's a catch.

Verna isn't really a nobleman's daughter, but Lilitu can easily persuade a weak-minded nobleman to testify that she is. She can obtain some undiscovered magical secrets for Adalard – by seducing other mages in distant lands, stealing their research, and killing them. She can persuade several highly ranked military men that they should promote Tad to an important position, and perhaps confound them enough that they will consider granting him a title. All of this will take considerable effort, and so comes with a price: Lilitu will visit her new friends regularly, and expect to be paid with their life force. If they choose to end the relationship at any point, she will gladly oblige – and leave them surrounded by angry people who are slowly coming to their senses.

Sigthorn is the most problematic – of course, Lilitu can't really grant anyone magical powers. What she can do is find a vampire who will agree to make Sigthorn into a vampire. Then he will be able to "inspire" all kinds of emotions through mind control, "heal" the wounded by making them into vampires or ghouls, and he may well cause many peasants to worship the Two Gods with renewed vigour – praying for salvation from his reign of terror.

NPCs

Lilitu

Lilitu is a succubus. She is able to take the form – male or female – which her victim finds the most desirable. She can perceive thoughts and manipulate minds, but can only focus on one person at a time. She needs to feed on the life force of living things in order to use her magic.

Lilitu's natural form is that of a beautiful, androgynous humanoid with large black feathery wings.

Lilitu has...

- Superhuman **strength** (d4)
- Very good **agility** (d8)
- Good **health** (d10)
- Below-average **knowledge of the world** (d20)
- Very good **perception** (d8)

Lilitu is...

- Unnaturally **persuasive** (d6)
- Uncannily talented at **detecting humans' deepest desires** (d6)
- Able to **drink the life force** of living things she touches (d10)
- Able to fly well, when in her natural form (d10)

It is assumed that Lilitu successfully detects the desires of the player characters and any NPCs when she meets them.

Lilitu is **vulnerable to holy objects**. If she is stabbed with Altus's **holy dagger**, she automatically drops down **one health level** – without a health check.

Every time Lilitu uses her **persuasion** ability successfully, it **drops by a rank**. In order to replenish it, she needs to drink someone's life force.

Lilitu can attempt to **drink someone's life force** if she is touching them. They can attempt to resist with their **health** (this means that people who are already injured are particularly vulnerable to this attack). If she succeeds, they lose a level of health, and she gains one level of her **persuasion** ability, up to the maximum that she started with. She can also do this with plants, but it must be a very large amount of plant matter – one person's one health level is equivalent to an entire field of wheat.

Lilitu's collar limits her power. Before it was damaged, it also made her absolutely obedient to her master.

If Lilitu succeeds in removing her collar, she will become nigh-unstoppable – her three magical abilities (**persuasion**, **mind-reading** and **drinking life force**) will rise to **d4**.

The Red Teeth

This group of about 20 bandits is made up of deserters; mostly mercenaries from companies that were almost entirely wiped out. Most of them are orcs and goblins, but there are a couple of humans. They lurk in the forest near Blackwater, occasionally raiding villages for supplies. They had stopped doing this recently because of their deal with Altus, but now that he's dead, the deal is off.

The leader of the band is the orc **Grathnar**. Fed up with being used as cannon fodder, he has sworn never to have another human master, and looks with disdain upon any orc who still serves one. He is exasperated by the incompetence of most of his men, and has tried to use his tactical experience to turn them into something resembling an effective unit.

Grathnar is a **competent soldier (d10)**, who can **terrify his underlings into obedience (d10)**.

He has

- **five** lieutenants of **average fighting skill (d12)**,
- **ten** grunts who are **not very good fighters at all (d20)**, and
- **five** useless idiots who can **barely manage not to stab themselves in the foot (d30)**.

They can all be assumed to be of **average health (d12)**.

Absent NPCs

Lord Payne

Lord Payne is a middle-aged Blackwater nobleman. He isn't very important or influential among Blackwater's nobility, but he has a respectable amount of land. There are three villages in his lands, and Red Creek is the furthest away from his estate.

His wife died of a fever many years ago, and he has one son, Roderick. He is a conscientious man who takes his responsibilities very seriously. He tries to make sure that all his vassals are looked after.

He is friendly with Sighorn, a wise monk who has worked for his family for generations. He fondly remembers watching Adalard's performances as a young boy, and personally offered him a position, out of both compassion and nostalgia, when Adalard lost the patronage of Lord Cedric.

He can't stand Verna, whom he correctly believes to be a common gold-digger.

Roderick Payne

Roderick is a foolish young man who has spent most of his life enjoying himself in Blackwater, to his father's great displeasure. He has fallen in love with Verna, a young woman from the city who claims (fraudulently) to be of noble birth. His father has used Roderick's infatuation as leverage, forcing him to return to his duties. Roderick is currently away at the front.

Altus the herbalist (deceased)

Altus was a herbalist who lived alone in the forest and researched his magic. His skills lay in the brewing of potions – usable for healing, and other things. He experimented with forest animals and plants. The bulk of his successful products was sent to Lord Payne, and Lord Payne paid him for his efforts.

Altus didn't much like the company of people, and only ventured down to the village when he absolutely needed some supplies, or when someone came to fetch him during a medical emergency.

He was not particularly prejudiced towards non-humans – he knew from personal experience that everyone looks much the same on the inside – and was on relatively good terms with Tad and Sighorn, who were often included in the parties sent to retrieve his goods. He regularly corresponded with Sighorn about their shared interest in plants.

He was also pragmatic enough to make a secret deal with the local group of bandits – steering them away from their raids on Red Creek by offering them easy money (and free medicine) in exchange for animals and plants from the forest.

In the end, his kindness and his self-imposed solitude were his undoing. When the wounded succubus Lilitu came across his house, she couldn't believe her luck – a skilled medic in the middle of the forest, and one so pliable! He let her into his home and nursed her back to health – by the time he realised his mistake, it was too late.

Adalard

Mediocre wizard, reluctant entertainer, and scholar of magical theory. 67 years old.

Looks not a day over 20, and has fine elven features. He tends to wear a mage's robes.

Adalard has...

- Below-average **strength** (d20)
- Above-average **agility** (d10)
- Average **health** (d12)
- Extensive **knowledge of the world** (d8)
- Average powers of **perception** (d12)
- Poor **magical ability** (d20)

Adalard is...

- A skilled **showman** (d8)
- Highly knowledgeable about **magical theory** (d8)
- **Charming** when he wants to be (d10)
- Competent at **sleight-of-hand** (d10)
- Reasonably well-versed in **local politics** (d12)

Adalard has learned...

- Filibert's Fantastic Flames (d8): *colourful **flames**, which can actually burn*
- Leila's Lovely Luminous Lamps (d8): *bright, coloured dancing **lights**, which can be made brighter*
- Theodore's Terrific Transporter (d10): *"**manipulate small objects** at a distance"*
- Balthazar's Bountiful Bouquet (d12): *"**summon real flowers** from a nearby source. Works on any kind of flower, including cauliflower – and, for some reason, cabbage."*

You never knew your elven mother, and your father, a village blacksmith, never spoke of her. Your magical talent was discovered early by a wandering wizard, Geoffrey the Red, who took you away with him as his apprentice. By the time it occurred to you to revisit the town of your childhood, and ask your father about your birth, it was too late – in your absence he had grown old and died, as humans are wont to do, and you could ask him nothing more.

By this time, it had become apparent to Geoffrey that your talent was weak, and would never improve. He cursed the years he had wasted training you, and left you to fend for yourself in Blackwater, where he found himself a new apprentice – a boy named Osuald; a nobleman's child who had already surpassed you in power.

You were left with nothing but the clothes on your back and a small collection of books Geoffrey considered a waste of space and was equally happy to ditch.

At first you performed tricks on street corners in order to survive. You realised that to the common man, any magic at all was astonishing and delightful, especially if it was dressed up with enough flair and misdirection. You refined and improved your techniques until you were good enough for inns – later you attracted the attention of wealthy merchants and nobles, and eventually became the personal court wizard of Lady Winifred, the Countess of Blackwater.

It was a comfortable life. When your services were not required by your patron, you could spend all your time on your studies, and your generous allowance allowed you to purchase many books. You corresponded with distant mages who, like you, were far more

interested in unravelling the complex history and theory of magic than in applying it in practice.

You served the lady for decades, and her son, Lord Cedric, after her. Then, five years ago, Osuald returned. Not content with having ruined your life once before, he seemed determined to usurp your new position as well. The two of you continued a bitter rivalry which escalated in viciousness, culminating in a public duel in front of most of the important personages of the city. Osuald humiliated you utterly. You lost your patronage, and were once again left on the street with a sack of books.

You were rescued by Lord Payne, a relatively unimportant nobleman who fondly remembered your performances from his childhood. He offered you a position on his staff at his country estate – his elderly jester had recently died, and he was left with no dinnertime entertainment. It was a pathetically inadequate substitute for the lifestyle to which you had become accustomed, but it was better than nothing. Your name was mud in Blackwater, and any work you could find in the city was likely to be far worse.

Lord Payne seldom needs to be entertained, which suits you well – although you have become very good at performing, you don't enjoy it. You can buy few books with your meagre funds, but you have a lot of time for research. Someday soon, you will make a breakthrough that will be recognised and admired by the entire magical community for years to come – then you will have your revenge on Osuald. You only hope that you can have the satisfaction of returning triumphantly to Blackwater before he dies of old age.

You are irritated to have been pulled away from your studies to investigate the disappearance of some hedge wizard. You are neither a woodsman nor a warrior, you dislike leaving your books and the comforts of civilisation, and you doubt that you'll be of much use on this trip. Lord Payne is concerned that the villagers of Red Creek will be mistrustful of his other emissaries, the dwarf and the orc, and thinks that your presence will reassure them. Personally, you doubt that they'll be any better-disposed towards a half-elf. You think that Verna will do a much better job of providing a friendly human face, now that she's volunteered to go – but of course Lord Payne can't stand her, and doesn't trust her to handle the job on her own, so you're stuck.

Your companions

Sigthorn: the dwarven caretaker. He is a rather strange dwarf; most dwarves you have met are more interested in minerals than in plants. You seldom venture into his domain – the outdoors – and he does not enter the castle often, so you have not had much opportunity to speak. You've heard from the guards that he's very pious, and worships at the little shrine in the garden twice a day. The servants say that he has secret discussions with Lord Payne.

Tad: an orc. He seems to be one of the guards here. You can't imagine why Lord Payne hired him, apart from desperation. He's been here for years, so he probably isn't too much of a troublemaker.

Verna: a young woman from Blackwater, who claims to be some sort of disinherited noblewoman. You are as skeptical about this as Lord Payne, but unlike Lord Payne you don't particularly hold Verna's pretence against her – you also deceive people for a living. She obviously misses the city as much as you do, and has tried a few times to strike up a conversation with you – but you have no time for smalltalk.

Sigthorn

Dwarven monk; long-time caretaker of the Payne estate's gardens. 107 years old.

Has a shaved head, and a full beard. He is still hale and hearty, and has a weathered, somewhat ageless appearance.

Sigthorn has...

- Above-average **strength** (d10)
- Average **agility** (d12)
- Average **health** (d12)
- Above-average **knowledge of the world** (d10)
- Average powers of **perception** (d12)

Sigthorn is...

- A **faithful follower** of the Two Gods (d8)
- A talented **gardener** (d8)
- Still quite skilled with a **quarterstaff** (d10)
- Fluent in several **languages**, and literate in several alphabets (d10)
- A competent **medic** (d10)
- Knowledgeable about **animals** (d12)
- Able to **survive** off the land (d12)

Sigthorn is carrying...

- A small pendant with the holy symbol of the Mother, which he wears around his neck
- A quarterstaff

Dwarves are stereotypically wealthy. Your family was not. The income from your parents' small tin mine was barely enough to support them and your four elder brothers and sisters. As soon as you were weaned, you were given into the care of the local temple of the Two Gods.

The mostly human monks were stern, but not unkind. You performed your chores, studied the religious texts and got to see your family once a week. On your sixteenth birthday, you were made an acolyte. Life as an acolyte was not that different to life as a novice, except that you occasionally accompanied monks on their travels to other temples.

The busy highway towns and inns you encountered abroad were a shock. You saw men killed over a pint of ale, young boys kidnapped by mercenary companies, and lesser crimes too numerous to count. You're somewhat embarrassed to admit it now, but by the time you became a full monk, the world had made you a zealot.

You strode along the highways with your quarterstaff ready, dispensing justice in the name of the Father wherever you went. You were not blind to the injuries endured by the weak, but far too often you sought out and punished the sinners rather than tending to those wronged.

It was perhaps inevitable that your vigilante justice would attract the wrong sort of attention. One night, as you were making your way back to your inn through the dark streets of an unfriendly city, you were confronted by a group of twenty thugs hired by the local syndicate. As you lost consciousness beneath the blows of their cudgels, you thought you were done for – and so did the thugs, who got bored and left you for dead shortly afterwards.

But the Mother, in her wisdom and mercy, saved your life. An elderly couple, faithful and humble followers of the Two, hauled

your unconscious body off the street and concealed you in their tiny home. For weeks they nursed you back to health, although they could barely afford to support themselves. Once you were well enough to travel, you bid them farewell, left town quietly and resolved to remember the lesson they had taught you.

Upon your return to the monastery, lacking faith in your own wisdom, you sought the council of the old abbot. He gave you a small bag of seeds and a book on the care of plants, and sent you out into the countryside to assist those in need. The long journeys along rural paths gave you time to contemplate life. You read the book the Abbot had given you, many times over.

After some years, you found yourself at the estate of the then-young Lord Payne. The folk of the surrounding lands were good people, but not particularly religious, and you had resolved to spend some time in the area. Needing a place to stay, you took on the part-time job of assistant gardener at the estate in exchange for board and lodging.

As the years passed, you became familiar with the estate and its immediate surrounds. There is a small shrine in the gardens which was sadly neglected when you arrived – you cleaned and restored it, and now you visit it almost every day for a moment of quite meditation.

Lord Payne grew old, married, had a son and lost his wife to a fever. You are no longer *assistant* gardener. In addition to your duties as groundskeeper you have become Lord Payne's unofficial spiritual advisor. Like his vassals, he is not religious – but he is a good enough man not to completely trust his own judgement.

You have come to know the herbalist Altus quite well. He supplies you with seedlings for the grounds and his medicines have eased the lives of countless people. Although you do not meet often, you correspond by pigeon regularly, and you consider him your friend. You still hope that you will find him alive, but you fear the worst.

You have been to Red Creek before, but you remember little about its inhabitants – you mostly visited the small temple in the middle of the village.

Your companions

Tad: the orc-at-arms, recruited by Lord Payne along with a number of other men-at-arms a few years ago. Although he appears to be a dumb barbarian, the meticulous care he takes of his weapons and armour borders on devotion. You find that you implicitly trust any man (or orc) who knows how to fight but avoids having to do so. You're glad to have him along since you can't remember when you last used your quarterstaff in a real fight.

Adalard: the half-elven wizard. His performances are certainly flashy, and have brightened up social events at the estate considerably, but you can't help feeling that he spends too much time cooped up in his tower. You sense that he is driven by some all-consuming goal. The long walk and fresh air will probably do him good – it's just a pity about the circumstances.

Verna: Roderick's paramour. You share Lord Payne's skepticism that she's really a disinherited noblewoman – she lacks the inner confidence of those born to rule. Although she has no doubt played Roderick for a fool, you do not think that she is truly a bad person. Perhaps she has fled to the countryside to escape her past in the city, much as you once did.

Tad

Surprisingly competent orc-at-arms, 26 years old.

Is tall, wide and muscular; wears very large shirts. He has filed his small tusks into some semblance of human teeth.

Tad has...

- High **strength** (d8)
- Above-average **agility** (d10)
- Above-average **health** (d10)
- Below-average **knowledge of the world** (d20)
- Average powers of **perception** (d12)

Tad is...

- An expert **soldier** (d8)
- A skilled **tactician** (d10)
- Good at **acting stupid** to put people at ease (d10)
- Proficient in various **goblin dialects** (d10)
- Familiar with **local geography** (d12)
- Knowledgeable about **local mercenary outfits** (d12)
- A competent **hunter** and tracker (d12)
- Aware of the basics of **field medicine** (d20)
- An awful **cook** (d30)
- Completely **tone-deaf** (d30)

Tad is carrying...

- A shortsword
- Decent armour (d12)
- A short spear, for hunting

You were born in a small orc village, far away from here. When you were a young boy, you observed during your tribe's numerous skirmishes with human settlements that human soldiers were a lot better equipped and more skilled at fighting than your relatives. In the interests of self-preservation, you thought it wise to change sides at the nearest opportunity.

It's not unheard-of for mercenary companies out in the sticks to hire goblins, orcs and half-goblins to make up numbers, and you soon found one that didn't care what you were as long as you wouldn't steal from them or run away in the middle of battle. Thus began your military education.

You were a quick learner, rapidly outpacing your enlisted comrades – and shortly afterwards, the officers who taught you. The next time you were in a town, you found a more competent company, and persuaded them to hire you after showing off your skill. Thereafter, you spent a few years moving from company to company – rising in the ranks, learning what you could of their battle tactics and fighting styles, and leaving.

You soon learned something unfortunate: humans don't like orcs who are too smart. Smart orcs have aspirations above their station. Smart orcs are suspected of being up to no good. Smart orcs frequently get sent into danger, in the hopes that they will not return alive.

Big dumb orcs, on the other hand, are cheerfully tolerated – especially if they display their incompetence in humorous ways which make humans feel better about themselves.

After being sent on a large number of surprise suicide missions, being at the receiving end of dirty camp politics, and being attacked in back alleys by random thugs, you decided that it would be prudent not to be so ostentatiously good at your job. The next time you changed companies, you performed barely well enough to get in – and you stayed at the lowest rung for a long, long time.

Your company was visiting Blackwater six years ago when you got word that Lord Payne was looking to hire a few men-at-arms

for his country estate. Some of the lads were eager to try out, and you went with them – partially because it amused you to see what would happen, and partially because you knew it amused the rest of them even more.

The old sergeant who did the hiring for Lord Payne was quite perceptive, and although you took great care not to outperform your companions, he must have recognised some of your talent, because you were one of the handful of men he selected.

You are quite pleased with your new job. It is far less stressful to pretend to be a lousy fighter when you don't have to do much actual fighting. Lord Payne isn't very wealthy – you suspect that's why he had to resort to hiring people as dubious as you – but away from the temptations of the city, you have less opportunity to waste your money.

When Lord Payne was deciding whom to send off to the war with his son, you made sure that you would not be picked, by displaying a complete failure to understand complex instructions. And so here you are, guarding an area with no strategic value whatsoever. You enjoy the relaxing view from the top of the battlements.

You have occasionally been sent on patrols to the nearby villages. Sometimes the peasants are terrified of you, and sometimes they're hostile and rude. Sporadic raids by deserters, many of whom are goblins, have done nothing to improve the local reputation of your kind. You generally let others do the talking, and try not to be too conspicuous.

You are a little concerned how the people of Red Creek will react when you arrive there with a dwarf and a half-elf. At least you have Verna, your token human – and Adalard is good at entertaining crowds.

You fear that Altus is already dead, or will be by the time you reach him. It's a pity – he was one of the few humans you've met who treated you decently. If there are bandits responsible for whatever has happened to him, you will make them pay – with blood.

Keeping up your constant charade of stupidity is frustrating. You often have to bite your tongue when you know that you have something insightful to say, or endure mockery for a deliberate error when you know well that you could have performed flawlessly. You are glad to be away from the estate for a while, in a place where you don't have dozens of people watching you all the time.

You suspect that Verna and Sighthorn are not entirely convinced by your act, and Adalard is so wrapped up in his own affairs that you doubt he pays much attention to you. Perhaps you won't have to ham it up so much, when it's just the four of you in the forest.

Your companions

Sighthorn: the dwarven caretaker. He obviously really cares about the state of the gardens, and is always hard at work pruning and planting. He's very pious, and regularly visits the estate's small shrine to the Mother and Father.

Adalard: the half-elven wizard. You don't think you've ever seen him leave the castle. You've been fortunate enough to be on guard duty indoors during one of his performances, and you were rather impressed – he knows how to captivate an audience.

Verna: Roderick's paramour. She's a tricky one. She claims to be some kind of disinherited foreign noblewoman; Lord Payne is very skeptical. You've certainly heard her use some very unladylike language to men who have made inappropriate remarks within her hearing. If she's played young Roderick for a fool, she's probably not the first; he's really not very bright.

Verna

A resourceful young lady with a mysterious past; 20 years old. Is pretty, but not as slightly built as a noble lady. Only wears sensible shoes, and dresses that are practical enough to run in.

Verna has...

- Below-average **strength** (d20)
- Above-average **agility** (d10)
- Average **health** (d12)
- Average **knowledge of the world** (d12)
- Very good powers of **perception** (d8)

Verna is...

- An outrageous **liar** (d8)
- Devastatingly **charming** (d8)
- A fast **runner** (d10)
- Good at **climbing** in and out of windows (d10)
- Good at **sneaking** around (d10)
- Reasonably well-versed in **local politics** (d12)
- A little rusty at **picking pockets** (d12)
- Aware of the basics of **dirty fighting** (d20)
- A terrible **mathematician** (d30)

Verna is carrying...

- A small knife – good for peeling potatoes, or stabbing city thugs.

You were born in a dingy cathouse in Blackwater. You have no idea who your father was, but you like to believe that he was of noble birth. Then you can pretend that you aren't *really* lying when you tell your marks that you're a young countess tragically deprived of her inheritance by scheming relatives – or the secret illegitimate daughter of a fabulously wealthy baron, or the lost heir of a noble house destroyed by war. There are so many mysterious pasts to choose from!

You realised from an early age that you were smart, and most people around you were not. You felt that it was most unfair that you had been born into such an ignoble station while so many fools were born into wealth and comfort, and sought to rectify this injustice by creatively redistributing the wealth of fools.

At first you snatched purses and picked pockets, but eventually you moved onto better things. It is far more rewarding to persuade people to give you money freely – and you have always had such an honest, trustworthy face.

For the past few years, you have been able to support quite a comfortable lifestyle by befriending wealthy people and having them take care of your expenses. You seduced young men, reminded dotty old duchesses of their granddaughters, and flattered upwardly mobile merchants with your company.

Unfortunately, after a recent flirtation with gambling, you were left deeply in debt to the orc Uthnarg – a base criminal who prefers breaking legs to collecting interest – and your latest friend was asking to start some inconvenient questions.

Fortunately, you had already begun to groom a new patron – Roderick Payne, a gormless young nobleman who kept asking you to run away with him to his country estate. You had previously discouraged these invitations, being rather fond of the anonymity that a big city provided, but after a narrow escape from some of Uthnarg's thugs you decided that an extended vacation in the country was an excellent idea.

Unfortunately, when you actually arrived at Payne Castle, several things became apparent. The estate was a lot less grand, and a lot more full of sheep and cabbage, than you had previously

been led to believe. More importantly, it was not in fact Roderick's estate, but the estate of his father. The present Lord Payne was in excellent health, and Roderick was unlikely to inherit his title and lands in the foreseeable future. Unlike his son, Lord Payne was not an idiot, and he didn't like you at all – he saw through your vague tale of woe from the start, and made it clear what he thought about his heir consorting with a city girl of dubious lineage.

Fortunately, Lord Payne realised that he finally had some leverage over his disobedient wastrel son. He permitted you to stay, on the condition that Roderick would thenceforth obey his instructions to the letter. One of the first tasks he set Roderick was the resumption of his long-abandoned military training – and when it had been completed to his satisfaction a few months ago, he sent him off to the war.

At first you were relieved – you didn't actually like spending time with Roderick very much – but you have started to worry. You have serious doubts about Roderick's competence in battle, and fear that he may be killed at the front – whereupon Lord Payne will unceremoniously toss you out on your ear. You have of course had little opportunity to collect enough money to repay Uthnarg – you could hardly rob Lord Payne's dinner guests – and you don't relish the thought of spending the rest of your life wandering around grotty villages and begging for food.

This is why, when you found out that Lord Payne was sending some of his remaining retainers to investigate the fate of his herbalist, you volunteered to assist them. You don't think you can ever make the man like you, but you can make yourself useful to him. If you perform some valuable service, he will find it more difficult to get rid of you – although you wonder whether he agreed to let you go in the hopes that you would get yourself killed.

Although you have no love for camping or peasants, you will be glad to get away from the estate for a while. You were beginning to get really sick of Lord Payne, the lamb and cabbage stew, the gossiping chambermaids and especially the lewd glances of the guards – you had to discourage several of them with your colourful Blackwater vocabulary, and in one case a swift kick to the groin. The forest will be a pleasant change of scenery.

You have another ulterior motive. This Altus fellow may have some valuables stashed somewhere in his forest retreat, and if he has met with some fatal misfortune, he won't be needing them anymore. It sounds like the man didn't have any friends, so you doubt anyone will notice if anything goes missing. And if you pay a visit to Red Creek afterwards, perhaps there will be further opportunity to lessen your debt while nobody is looking – although by all accounts the village is tiny and poor, you have nothing to lose by checking.

Your companions:

Sigthorn: the old dwarven caretaker. He is a kind and friendly dwarf, except when someone disturbs his beloved gardens. To the best of your knowledge, his interest in gardening is not a typical dwarven pursuit. He observes the rituals of the Two Gods; you have seen him visiting the small temple on the grounds, and he wears the symbol of the Mother. You think he faintly disapproves of you; he almost makes you feel guilty about your multitude of sins.

Adalard: the half-elven wizard. You understand each other to some extent – both of you departed Blackwater rather hurriedly under unpleasant circumstances. Adalard left after a magical duel with a rival ended in his humiliating public defeat. You wish

you could reminisce with him about your favourite city haunts, but when Adalard isn't called upon to provide entertainment he generally avoids company, bright light and going outside. He can't be very happy about this trip.

Tad: the orc-at-arms. He likes to play the dumb barbarian,

but you know he's a lot smarter than he pretends to be. Smart enough to avoid getting sent to the front, for a start. He's had a chequered past as a mercenary, and you think he's quite competent with the sword. You're glad that he's coming with you – you're not sure how useful the others will be if you run into bandits.

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...

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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...

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.

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