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# MODERN AFFAIRS

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A Brief Course in Events of International Significance  
With special emphasis on the fall of Imajicka

*MNEMOSYNE AGATHA DERWENT  
DUCAL HISTORIOGRAPHER TO H.G. SEBASTIAN LLEDRITHCATH OF WARWICK  
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# Introduction

While it would be impossible to completely cover the full scope of world events in a single short presentation, here we aspire to recount noteworthy events of the past twenty to thirty years on Terra. Particular attention is paid to incidents with significant international ramifications or whose substance might be considered common knowledge for someone with a consciousness of world events.

The more connected events are to the lives of persons living in present-day Warwick, the more emphasis they receive in the weighting of what should or should not be included in this account, but it would be impossible to include everything. It is our hope that these events will help demonstrate the *feel* of events in given regions of the world sufficiently to create a comfortable competency.

For format, events are cataloged chronologically by year in this document. When this is unfurled as the tapestry of our understanding, we hope that the warp threads of chronology will gather in the weft threads of distant places and ideas so that together, the portrait can be seen.



# Contents

1975: Preamble to Dissolution .....	6
1978: The First Fracture .....	8
1979: A Cold Calculation.....	9
1980: The Pot Simmers .....	10
1981: International Pressures.....	11
1982: Revelation and Disgrace.....	14
1983: Bitter Homecoming .....	16
1984: The Illusion of Calm.....	17
1985: A Prince Ascendant .....	19
1986: Drenched in Glory .....	21
1987: Apprenticed to the Throne.....	23
1988: Coronation of King Richard III .....	24
1989: A Year of Milk and Honey.....	26
1990: A Near-Miss with Catastrophe .....	28
1991: Smooth Sailing.....	30
1992: Cat's Away.....	32
1993: We Shall fight on the Beaches.....	34
1994: We Shall Fight on the Landing Grounds .....	36
1995: We Shall Fight in the Fields and in the Streets .....	38
1996: We Shall Fight in the Hills .....	41

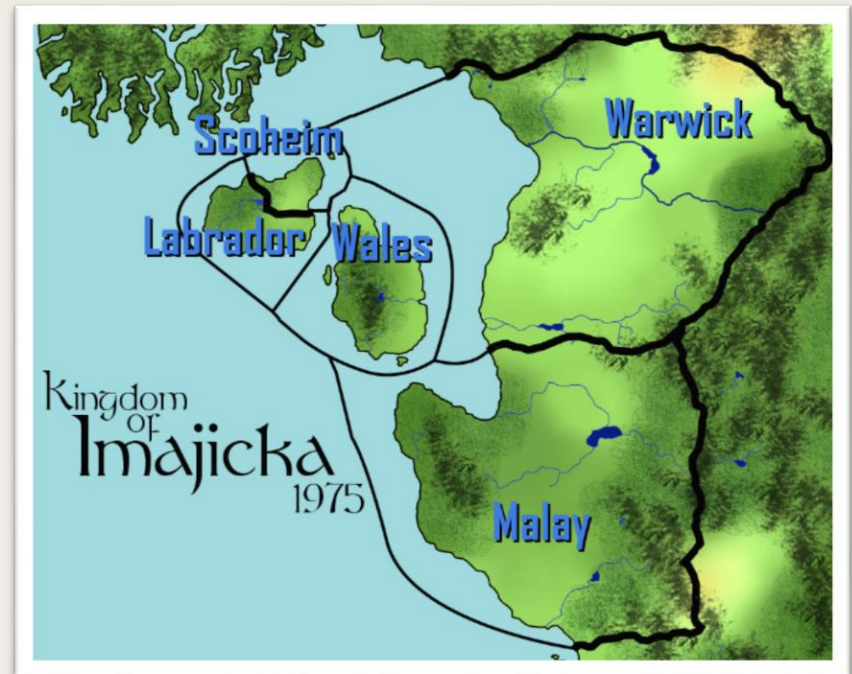
1997: We Shall Never Surrender .....	422
1998: Power Abhors .....	43
1999: A Held Breath .....	44
2000: Richard's Return.....	45
2001: The War of Succession .....	48
2002: Rogues and Remnants.....	50
2003: Michael .....	53
2004: Matteus Vacla Achieves Death-Long Goal of More Death.....	57
2005: A Secret in Briarmark .....	60
2006: A Greater Dying in Briarmark .....	66
2007: Proxied into Doomstadt .....	73
2008: A Nexus of Evil .....	80
2009: In Richard's Footsteps .....	88
2010: Fall of a Timeless Guardian.....	95
2011: Parables and Fables.....	108
2012: Death by a Thousand Cuts.....	120
2013: Poison .....	132
2014: Bigger Fish .....	147
2015: Rite of Ascension .....	157
2016: Surging Tide .....	166
2017: Reprise.....	172
2018: Artifact, Artifice .....	191

# 1975

## Preamble to Dissolution

At the height of its power, the vast Kingdom of Imajicka was large enough to have called itself an empire. Begun by the marriage of King William II of Wales and Queen Eleanor of Malay in 1166 after years of war, Imajicka had gradually grown to absorb the future lands of Inishmora, Alba, Malay, Doomstadt, and Warwick. In 1975, Imajicka was close to being as expansive as it would ever be. At the time it was composed of the Duchies of Scoheim and Labrador on the isle of Inishmora, the Duchy of Wales on the isle of Alba, the Duchy of Malay, and the Duchy of Warwick, which constituted all of modern day Doomstadt and extended north to the border with the Goblin Wastes.

At this point, the kingdom is ruled by King Henry VII, who has held the throne since 1952, and his wife Queen Mary. The pair had two sons, Richard, born in 1963, and John, born 1967. The Duchy of Warwick has been a contentious place for Imajicka ever since its invasion and conquest of the kingdom of Doomstadt in 1923. Doomstadt had seceded in 1925, been reconquered in 1932, attempted secession in 1934, and attempted to secure an Endrani in line for the Earldom and later Dukedom of Warwick, ultimately without success after much internal struggle.



In 1975 Warwick is governed by his grace the Duke Dorian Spencer, a human nobleman and nephew to the original Earl of Warwick, Ivan Spencer. At the same time, Duke Amos Mac Donald of Scoheim, Duke Eamon O'Halloran of Labrador, Duke Ambrose De Vane of Wales, and Duchesse Marie-Nichole Mont Clamont de Malay all rule in their own seats of power.

Much of the conflict around Warwick/Doomstadt had to do with the Endrani (sometimes calling themselves E'bon as a group to distinguish themselves from Endrani who might have another national origin) economy. Much of the spectacular wealth of Warwick is found in the mineral resources of the former nation of Doomstadt. Wood is in perennially short supply in that region, which has been strip-mining for so many centuries that it has burned entire forests just for the charcoal to process ore. The only major forest left was the Griefswald, a haunted demesne which actively resisted efforts to exploit it for lumber, peopled by strange creatures, Trandafir, and active Fae.

To leverage their mineral resources, the Endrani rely heavily on a harsh system of chattel slavery, one unlike any implementation of slavery anywhere else in the world and whose comparative harshness has been so repugnant to neighboring nations that the entire concept of slavery fell out of fashion in western Euris centuries before. Nevertheless, Doomstadt's form of slavery was neither ended nor even seriously altered after its conquest by Imajicka. Civil unrest and relentless infighting and political struggle mean that it was an extreme challenge to implement any effort at reform, and people who had previously been under the yoke of Endrani rule did not necessarily find their lives dramatically improved by the situation of constant discord that persisted throughout Imajickan rule of the region. Multiple minor rebellions and political brouhahas had to be attended to in the constant battle to control Warwick and its tremendous wealth.

In 1975, things seem to grow quiet. The infighting settles, the Endrani noblewomen publicly cease bickering. Things become calm and more orderly. The world is an optimistic place. King Henry VII of Imajicka is of the opinion that the firm hand and careful governing of his faithful Duke Dorian Spencer is setting a tone of a conciliation and growth that will profit the entire kingdom.

# 1978

## The First Fracture

In a campaign of massacre only a few weeks before Yule 1978, a cabal of Endrani, under the leadership of Midori Mauvis of house Dramikov, simultaneously assassinate every member of the Spencer family in Warwick and dozens of subsidiary lords, military commanders, and important officials. Control of government is seized by powerful women from the five leading families of Doomstadt; Houses Dramikov, Faustus, Motova, Raumi, and Dorogai. Independence is declared.

Those few Imajickan nobles, officers, and officials who survive the devastating purge flee north into the borderlands near the Goblin Wastes, territory that the Endrani have little interest in controlling and which had been under Imajickan rule for much longer than Doomstadt itself. They are pursued, hounded by militant Endrani separatists. Though some hold out for months, ultimately most of the Imajickan nobility is driven entirely from Warwick and either killed or sent back to Alba. The few nobles that remain bend the knee to Midori and swear never to oppose her. The wedge of land north of the Istros river is then essentially abandoned.

The land that we now call Warwick descends into feudal chaos, pressed up against the devastating boundary of the wastes with no centralized authority or support structure. Without a real army, the nearest thing remaining in Warwick is the Nights Watch, a military order founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Queen Anne of Imajicka to defend the land and common people from monstrous threats without political factionalism interfering. Without the proximate reinforcement of constant conscription from an organized government banishing its own condemned to service, the Watch in Warwick is likewise in a dire condition. Even under these constraints, none fight more hardily than the Watch to keep the people of Warwick safe from the danger posed by the wild lands of the north.



1979

## A Cold Calculation

Reinstating their old kingdom of Doomstadt, (the name means, essentially 'Land where everything about you is known and recorded') the Endrani are held under iron control by Midori Mauvis, who declares herself High Matriarch and Queen. Mauvis is a distinct subsidiary branch of house Dramikov, one that has in times past produced Queens of Doomstadt for generations. Except for a few independent outliers, the five most powerful families each control a fraction of the kingdom in a fashion similar to the arrangement during the conquest, but without any foreign interference.

Imajicka is stunned by the events of what will come to be celebrated in Doomstadt as the "Night of Long Knives." The rebellion was so total a rout and caused so much damage in the upper ranks of the military there that the kingdom was stunned into incapacity and barely able to retrieve its own fleeing nobles as the purge continued. Organizing a counter-offensive to retake the rebellious kingdom is an immediately contentious issue: Doomstadt had never been as profitable for Imajicka as had been hoped, the people difficult to rule, and short of wiping the Endrani houses out entirely how would one make fair redress for what had happened? Without the Endrani, the nation is a mass of the oppressed. To keep profit at all would mean installing Imajickan nobility in their places, but without the Endrani as a foil to perpetuate the abuses of slavery there, the Imajickans would have to sully themselves with it or abolish it and create a whole new set of problems.

There is little appetite amongst the court for genocide, and while reprisal is certainly called for its urgency is tempered by uncertainty. A jubilant Doomstadt revels in its own success while Imajicka disputes how best to cripple their adversary before attempting to take it back. Ultimately, an assessment of history becomes King Henry VII's policy. Without an aggressive counter-attack from Imajicka, Doomstadt will soon enough destroy itself from within.

It always had before.

And Imajicka will be waiting.

# 1980

## The Pot Simmers

Doomstadt immediately begins to reassert itself on the world stage. The high prices Doomstadt pays for imported lumber and their ability to cheaply export slaves, particularly goblinoids and barbarians harvested from the lands to the north, make for good economic backdrops to the primary stock in trade of iron, iron, and more iron. Precious metals, also abundant, pay for all the food they could desire imported extravagantly from Malay and farther afield. Imajicka grits its teeth and makes trade agreements with the resurgent nation, making such treaties contingent on a draconian fixation of the boundary between Doomstadt and Malay. This border is not to move an inch, nor will any military threat be tolerated.

Malay profits more by these arrangements with Doomstadt than the other duchies of Imajicka, leading to some resentments. For its own part, Malay is consistently a larger and more reliable source of tax revenue for Imajicka as a whole. Given what they perceive as a somewhat inequitable tax burden, Malays feel entitled to their own extravagance. Furthermore, the parliamentary system present beneath Duchesse Marie-Nichole Mont Clamont is an orderly and effective one which stifles rebelliousness through a mixture of gratification and bureaucracy.

The Duchy of Wales, home of Imajicka's capital city of Avalon, shows its strength in greater control of and support for the Royal Imajickan Army and Navy. The Duchy of Scoheim's strengths are a robust economy based on wool, beef, iron, and the warding-off of Barbarian invasion. The Duchy of Labrador, weakest of the lot, is a fractious amalgam of a variety of interests. With substantial dairy and whiskey production, it can support itself, but the economy has never fully recovered its agricultural power after a potato blight in the 19<sup>th</sup> century caused mass starvations.

In 1980, Labrador under Duke Eamon O'Halloran declines to pay its annuities on crown lands to King Henry VII. Not eager to see a real rebellion, this provokes economic reprisal with the throne dictating that the other Duchies must implement punitive internal "tariffs" on cheese and whiskey from Labrador. While Wales strictly follows the policy, neither Scoheim or Malay truly do, finding ways around the crown edict without violating it by laundering the purchases through foreign, often Abruzzese or Thracian, merchant interests. This undermines the real effective authority of the Imajickan throne over its subsidiary states.

1981

## International Pressures

While Duke Eamon of Labrador must contend with a local rebellion without crown assistance because of his continued refusal to pay annuities on crown lands, Imajicka at large must contend with some blooming international pressures. The nation of Uthmanli, still calling itself an empire, is begging to assert increasingly direct control over its former territory of Ghassania, what is seen as the homeland of the empire. Ghassania, in a strong trading position in its own right, recruits a number of allies to contest the point, including Hispalis, Sassania, and Vedia. Tensions rising all through the Beryllian gulf are bad for trade generally and Imajicka is being besought by the Uthmanli to come in to the question on their side. Helvetia, smelling a large scale conflict brewing, begins recruiting and building up forces.

Much of 1981 is spent in the slow and tortuous pursuit of diplomacy, with a lot of militaries slowly bulking up for what could be a large-scale and serious fight.

Imajicka does not want to be in the fight and doesn't think that Uthmanli has a reasonable claim to assert over Ghassania. Unfortunately, this perspective comes with an attendant analogy: if Uthmanli can't claim control of Ghassania on historical grounds, by what right would Imajicka claim a future imperialist interest in Doomstadt?

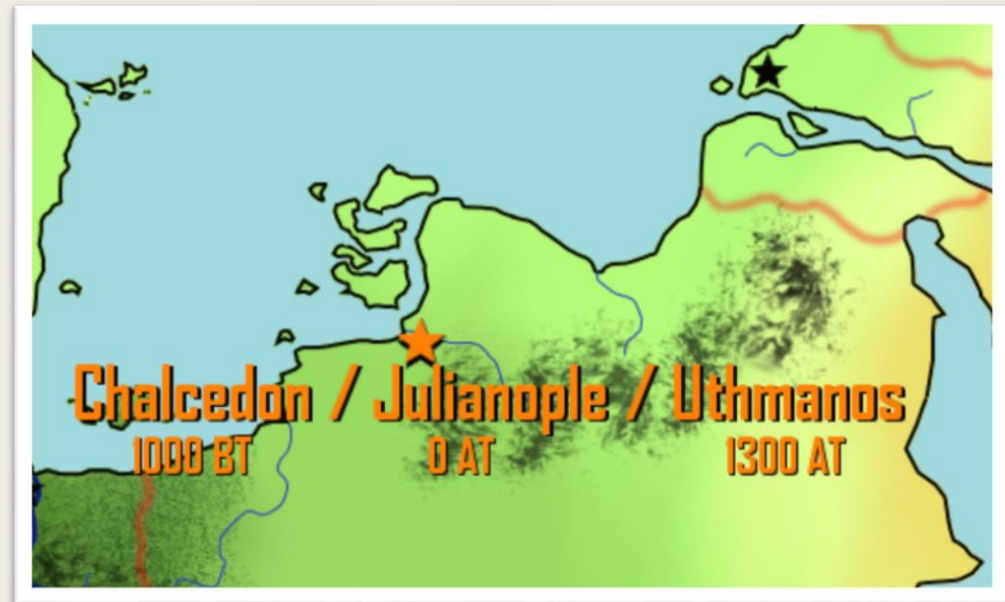
It is a year of gradually escalating tension.



Queen Mary of Imajicka, though only in her fifties, falls ill with what proves to be a stomach cancer. Cancer, like many systemic ailments and diseases of aging, is too native to the living body to be effectively treated by magic and alchemy, and her prognosis is clearly dire. Doctors and healers of all sorts from a variety of nations are brought to Avalon to try and save her, while the King struggles with the growing burden of dealing with rebellious Labrador.

Military intervention seems almost inevitable, but the crown prince, Richard III (now 19 years old), travels to Inishmora to attempt to secure a peace. He takes with him his devoted cousin, William Van Dance, and several other notable associates. The young prince builds relationships with Duke Eamon and particularly with the aid of his cousin William and William's staunch ally Nichole Rigal, gains a great deal of insight into the underlying conflicts. This information is taken home to Avalon, to try and broker an easing of tensions.

In Ghassania, armies have begun to gather, and diplomatic discussions are breaking down. Imajicka has diplomats on both sides of the conflict but seems to be more in the business of shopping for who to back in the coming war than seeking a resolution to it. Many Coda and West Eurus nations feel like this presents an opportunity to utterly destroy the Uthmanli once and for all, and much is made of vengeance for the devastation wrought when the Uthmanli rose up and conquered Julianople in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, bringing an end to the Chalcedony Empire, also called the Western Thracian Empire. This long-overdue vengeance has been attempted in the past, undertakings broadly categorized as "Crusades" and occurring particularly around the time of the conquest.



The term "Crusade," broadly meaning "to mark with a cross," is meant to convey the idea of waging a war from the heart, out of righteousness rather than politics or military motive. (Think of the convention of saying "cross your heart," or the

way in which “crux” is used to refer to the heart of a matter.) Using the veneer of a Crusade has the consequence of rousing public support in several nations considering allying with Ghassania in the imminent struggle, but is derided as transparent propaganda by those interested in either supporting Uthmanli or in preventing the war altogether.

Imajicka, because of its internal divisions, is deeply divided by the question of the coming crusade. Marie-Nichole Mont Clamont, Duchesse de Malay, presses at court for joining Abruzzo, Sassania, Vedia, and Hispalis in reconquering what she terms as “the heart of the Empire” in a direct and very pointed allusion to a Crusade mentality. Malay belonged to the Thracian and then Chalcedony empires for hundreds of years longer than either the Island of Alba or the Island of Inishmora (where the Duchies of Wales, Scoheim, and Labrador are respectively located). As a consequence, Malay has a stronger romantic association with the historical Thracian influence.

Wales is convinced this all represents nothing but a land grab, and Duke Ambrose De Vane consistently councils his cousin King Henry VII to rebuke Duchesse Marie-Nichole and support Uthmanli's sovereignty against the political maneuvering. Scoheim and Labrador both want no part of it at all. A lot of the debate is profoundly removed from the fact that Ghassania isn't trying to destroy or eliminate Uthmanli at all, just wanting to rebuke the larger nation's efforts to impose its will on its neighbor. Thus, the core aggrieved party in the entire dispute has no interest in waging holy war, they just want to be given respect for their own independence. Instead Ghassania is swiftly turning into a staging ground for a proxy war.

1982

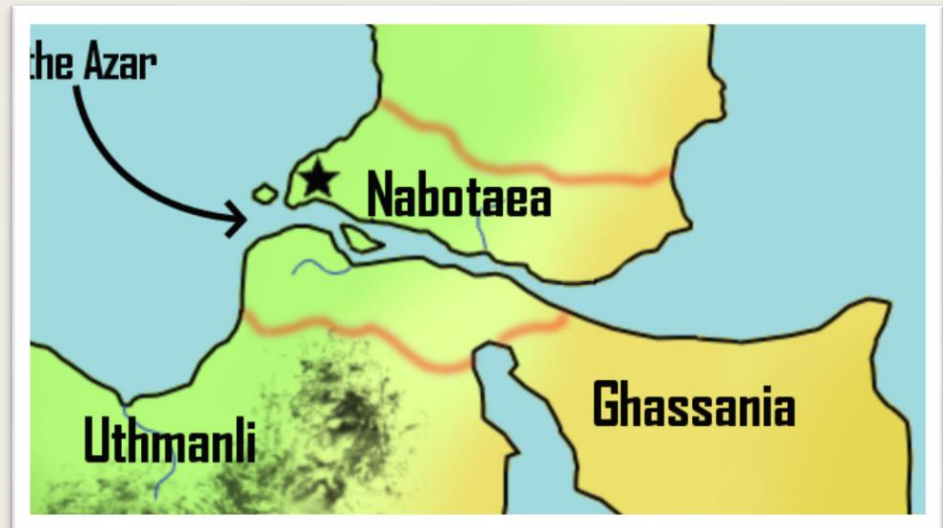
## Revelation and Disgrace

Leveraging the information, trust, and relationships gained by Crown Prince Richard, King Henry VII of Imajicka is able to calm matters in Labrador very swiftly. By making some overtures of generosity and reconciliation, the King is able to persuade Duke Eamon to resume more normal economic relations while feeling less hard-used by the monarchy. William Van Dance is knighted, and not long after so is his retainer Nichole Rigal. They become the core of Richard's advisors at this early stage.

Queen Mary spends much of the year in deteriorating health before passing away in the autumn. Midway through the summer, however, secret documents are brought to light by spies or infiltrators of unknown origin and released to the court of King Henry VII. These show that three Abruzzese city states and several nobles from Hispalis were making plans to seize Nabotaea as a part of their action to go on Crusade against Uthmanli.

Nabotaea's nominal independence was a hard-won agreement that put a stop to centuries of conflict and wrangling over control of the sea passage called "The Azar". Seizing that land would have huge economic ramifications for any east-west trading interest, and would reignite enormous, sweeping conflicts that had lain dormant for more than a century. The revelation of this conspiracy was utterly damning to the advocates for a Crusade on behalf of Ghassania, revealed to be a manifestation of pure greed with no regard to the cost in lives that would be paid to secure it or the threat to international order.

Imajicka leverages the secret papers to first eliminate most of Ghassania's backers and to then confront emissaries from Abruzzo and Hispalis with the evidence. At the same time, King Henry VII negotiates with Uthmanli and its ally Damascus to leave Ghassania



more alone under the premise that provocation would lead to Uthmanli's total destruction by this international collaboration against them, but without revealing the nature of the conspiracy to the Uthmanli.

Teetering on the brink of a war that would have engulfed half the world in an instant, Imajicka calls a council to be held on Melité, to be hosted by an august body of diplomats native to that island, where negotiations for settling the situation amicably could be made. The treaty that resulted from the 1982 Council of Vittoriosa acknowledged the boundaries of Ghassania as an independent state, and consequently defined the boundaries of Uthmanli and reaffirmed the sovereignty of Nabotaea as a byproduct of its language. It was formally agreed that the city of Julianople was long gone, the city of Uthmanos had supplanted it, and everyone at the council signed in agreement that it was so.

Sent to the Council of Vittoriosa by his father to act on behalf of Imajicka, Richard is not at home when his mother passes away. His younger brother John is present, now 15 years old, and the absence of Richard at this crucial, devastating event for the royal family will become the seed of a hardness between the princes.

# 1983

## Bitter Homecoming

Richard was unable to return from Melité until the spring of 1983 whereupon he learns of the passing of his mother. Though he is celebrated for the treaty that had resulted from his hard work at the Council of Vittoriosa, the young prince is trapped in a freshness of grief no longer shared by his father and younger brother John. King Henry VII, now past seventy years of age, has been struck hard by his Queen's passing and is letting advisors and counselors handle more of the work of running the kingdom. The King's health is not perfect, but neither is it failing.

Abroad, stirrings in Nórdehávn result in a hard summer's raiding season against Österland and Scoheim both. In the Dragonspine Mountains, Helvetia is experiencing something of a mercenary glut having gambled on the necessity of their intervention in the coming war, thwarted only by the sudden outbreak of a tremulous peace. This means that a great many more companies than usual are leased to various districts of Shalkara at something of a discount, leading to a sharp crackdown in rural brigandry in Shalkara, a matter that will turn out to have surprising long term consequences.

A major volcanic eruption in early summer occurs in the remote reaches of central Kategonia, a mountain without a regional name. Ashfall from this event spreads north enough to enter the headwaters of the Nikiria river, which provides not only an omen but an uncommonly rich flood season, as an enriching but not dangerously toxifying quantity of the ash is spread with the annual silts in the late summer. This, then, becomes a *Sayf Niemat Sakhia*, or "Summer of Generous Blessings" for Damascus, portending prosperity and wealth to come.



# 1984

## The Illusion of Calm

The sixth year after the Night of Long Knives and secession of Doomstadt, the nation seems to be holding itself together well under the stern influence of Queen Midori Mauvis. Inter-House wrangling being a constant facet of life in Doomstadt, it is nevertheless an indicator of stability that the politics of the dangerous kingdom have not yet undergone any sweeping transformations. Below the surface, there is always a current of intrigue and murder amongst the nobility of Doomstadt, but it seems to be more stable than the court of Imajicka would have hoped or expected. Midori clearly has a more ruthless hold on her people than anticipated, and there are those amongst the Imajickan court who begin to plot their own ways to interfere, driving the Endrani homeland closer to the internal turmoil required or Imajicka to strike back effectively for the massacre. The longer the state of affairs is a free and independent Doomstadt, the more it looks like Imajicka unilaterally lost the exchange, in no small part because Imajicka unilaterally lost the exchange.

One particular proponent of this scheme is Bartholomew, Earl of Cornwall. He maneuvers discretely within the court to garner interest in covert action and has a respectable array of backers and supporters. Duke Ambrose of Wales, however, is strongly opposed to the matter and keeps Earl Bartholomew at a distance. This is particularly frustrating to Bartholomew's efforts to pay court to the Duke's elder daughter Cecilia DeVane. As eighth and ninth in line for the throne of Imajicka, both Cecilia and her 6 year old sister Olanna are very appealing marriage prospects, but Duke Ambrose is strongly disapproving of Bartholomew Cornwall. Having lost the potential marriage into the royal family by way of the overtness of his political maneuvering, Bartholomew Cornwall instead marries a court countess from Lyonesse named Krista Covebridge.

Though matters in Labrador remain relatively calm, both it and Scoheim have a bad year in terms of intermittent raiding, bad weather, and something awry in the north sea salmon fisheries. None of this is devastating, but it is all a bit expensive and frustrating. Tensions remain, and are not aided by some sort of exotic Fae occurrence in the remote woodlands of central Labrador. Though the details are only understood by the Nuada Barbarians, there is something akin to a festival of violence in retribution for a serious slight against the Tuatha de Dannan (Fae the Nuada call the "Gentry") by a Human lord of the land who cut down sacred somethings and moved sacred other things. The conflict results in a swath of deaths and curious occurrences requiring a great deal of spiritual intervention by the Nuada people on behalf of the mortal realm to restore order.

This leaves the less wild folk of Labrador afraid of the dark, afraid of their own firewood, afraid of strangers, and eager to move to the cities.

In Warwick, 1984 is a year of bloodshed and hardship when an army of Orcs calling themselves the *Dead-Eye* assault and sack the city of Mourning and invade the central plains. The Dead-Eye are led by a powerful Dhampari Orc necromancer named Voze the Unstoppable. Dozens of miles of border stations of the Night's Watch are put to rout, and all the fallen are added to the army of the Dead-Eye. No help can be obtained from Doomstadt, and instead the invasion is opposed most vigorously by a very young upstart local Warlord named Ahren Marcher who brings together a coalition of Barbarian clans, wild folk, forest guardians, druids, and left-behind Imajickans. He then recruits the assistance of the Bad Rock Orcs, or *Kamieńzły*, a very large and dangerous clan from farther east. These allies are able to halt the intrusion into Warwick, but not to reverse the invasion before year's end.



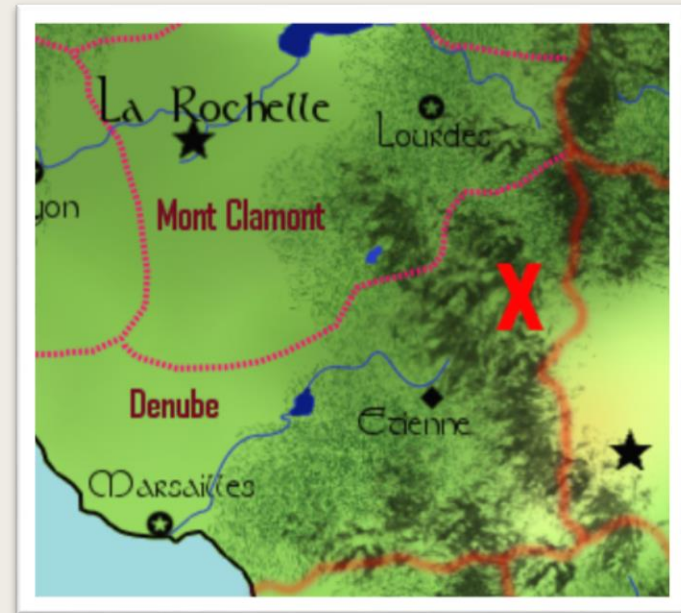
# 1985

## A Prince Ascendant

Crown Prince Richard of Imajicka's career has already featured a few important accomplishments for a 22 year old man, but he adds substantially to these in 1985 by personally leading a campaign against Norsk raiders along the northwestern coasts of Wales and Scoheim. Multiple agile fleets of Norsk longships led by ambitious raider Sigtryg Alreksson had thought to take advantage of a weakened defensive posture in Cumbria. Prince Richard was able to stop the assaults up and down the coast through careful deployment of limited mobile forces and would frequently enter conflict personally to assure success. The exploits of the campaign enter the public consciousness as particularly heroic, including the death of Duke Amos Mac Donald of Scoheim, which elevated his son Horace to the Ducal Seat. Richard earns the moniker "Lion-Heart" during these adventures.

Prince John is sent to Malay to study at the court of Duchesse Marie-Nichole Mont Clamont. Sir William Van Dance (cousin to the Prince and ally particularly of Richard) is sent along to guard him, but soon finds himself embroiled in excitement on the eastern border, where a raiding gang of exiled Shalkaran slavers are making raids into Imajickan lands. The gang, large enough to be considered an army, called itself "Liuwang Qing" and had been driven out of hiding places in the lowlands of southeast Shalkara by Helvetian mercenaries. The exiles then went on to claim and fortify strongholds in the Dragonspine Mountains and lead raids into Malay and Oguz both before selling the slaves they procured in this fashion to Doomstadt. With the aid of young Royal Army Lieutenant, Victoria Exeter (a niece of the Earl of Nofford,) Sir William led a remarkable campaign that stymied the Liuwang Qing raids and drove them high into the mountains before the end of the fighting season.

For part of the campaign, Sir William is joined by Bartholomew, Earl of Cornwall, and a raft of bannerman. The Earl is of substantial



assistance in the campaign, even though it is of little value or profit to him and nowhere near his own lands, and this is a well-lauded venture on his part. In his absence from Cornwall, his wife Krista is delivered of a daughter, Meridian.

Cecilia DeVane, daughter of Duke Ambrose DeVane of Wales, is wed to Lord Otto Westmoreland of Portsmouth.

Ahren Marcher and his coalition of miscellaneous Warwicker forces eventually destroy the Dead-Eye Orc invasion and slay Voze the Unstoppable by leading half of his forces into a nearly-impassible bog. This measure requires the sacrifice of a good portion of their own forces as well, which leads to mixed reviews as to the success of the effort in some quarters. It is, however, the only effort that was made, and it did work. Common folk are more likely to remain enthused.

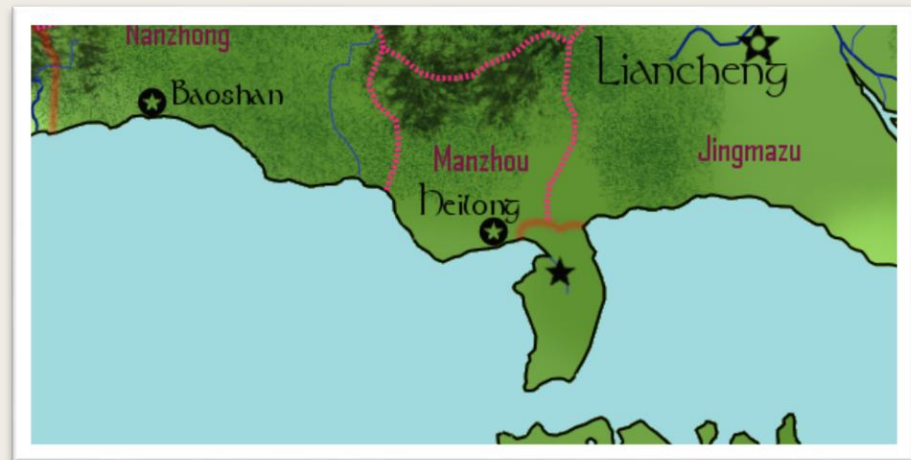
# 1986

## Drenched in Glory

By 1986 Crown Prince Richard had sorted the Norsk incursions well enough to join his cousin Sir William in the Duchy of Malay battling the Liuwang Qing incursions. Though it was unintentional, Richard's joining in the campaign against the little rogue micro-nation of slavers calls into stark contrast the fact that Prince John, now 19 years of age much like Richard had been when he first started distinguishing himself, has stayed in La Rochelle with the Duchesse for the entire duration. This breeds a certain amount of resentment apparent to those close to Prince John.

Richard engages in a hard-fought campaign of extreme strategic complexity to outmaneuver and eventually capture the last vestiges of the Liuwang Qing. He attributes much of his success to the constant efforts of his cousin Sir William and the tactical expertise of the remarkable Lieutenant Exeter of the Royal Army, who he endeavors to see promoted. An extravagant parade is held in La Rochelle to honor the Crown Prince and his retainers, whereupon John is obliged to provide a speech praising his brother as a role model.

The surviving Liuwang Qing captured by Richard are divided into three groups on the basis of their role in the organization. One set is tried locally for wrongs committed against Imajicka. Another is sent to Oguz, and the third is sent by sea all the way back to Shalkara. Sir William Van Dance escorts the Shalkaran party, taking another cousin of yet another Van Dance line, Michael, Count of Corbrie, with him for the expedition. Michael Van Dance, a boy of 12, is being sent to Shalkara to be fostered in an important noble family there with the goal of learning more about the Shalkaran and Nipponjin



cultures. A well-educated young man already, Michael is thought to have a future as a key ambassador. As he is part of the extended royal family, he is well positioned to build alliances that will profit Imajicka in the future. The trip is a tremendous educational success (unless you count the gruesome executions of the slavers), and young Michael is left in the care of the governor of Manzhou province.

1987

## Apprenticed to the Throne

Though he's had a great deal of martial success and gained tremendous popularity with the folk of Imajicka, Crown Prince Richard now has to spend a great deal more time at Avalon with his increasingly reclusive father, King Henry VII. The King is still an able governor and judge and able to fulfil his duties but has less and less of a connection to his own realm and people. Increasingly, Richard is called upon to fulfil ceremonial duties and there is some discussion of potential abdication within the next few years so that Henry can mourn his lost queen in peace. It is also increasingly evident that Richard should consider a profitable marriage. This requires a great deal of court maneuvering and ultimately yields a handful of potential contenders both domestic and coming from abroad.

A boat from Sylvanator arrives unannounced with a delivery of one noteworthy Gael'braugh noblewoman, though it's tough to tease out interrelationships in the reclusive Sidhe kingdom. Aviethense Estrelle Rowan of Muina Tol was apparently the pride of her people and sent with entourage much like a princess, so she was right up in the front of the queue along with Murietta Lupe Zaragosa of Hispalis, and Alexandriata Livia Augustina of Roma. Avalon is a mess of princesses for much of the year.

Sir William Van Dance returns from Shalkara, sans Michael Count Corbrie, and ends up in a dramatic scrape with Tiburónian buccaneers on the way home. During a dramatic game of cat-fish-and-mouse-fish, Sir William acquires a great friend and constant future companion in one of the escort party, Isaac Glenarthur. The pirate in question, Captain "Ruby Rodger" Mescarino of the notorious pirate schooner *Bonnie Slough*, is captured and brought back to Imajicka for trial and subsequently hung as a pirate. The *Bonnie Slough* is claimed as a prize and rechristened *HMS Redemption*.

Ollana DeVane, second cousin of King Henry VIII, is betrothed to Sir Anuil Llewellyn, heir to the Earl of Cymru.

# 1988

## Coronation of King Richard III

Imajicka's King Henry VII passes away after a brief winter illness early in 1988, leading to the coronation of Richard, third of his name. Though a sad event, it is not entirely unexpected, and the nation's grief is tempered by the enthusiasm inspired by the new monarch.

Prince John, having returned home from La Rochelle upon his father's illness, was present at court as well and was installed promptly as heir to the throne.

After much debate about what marriage would be most suitable, Richard and his counselors ultimately select Annette Spencer, niece of Duke Dorian Spencer of Warwick and last surviving member of his immediate family. This avoided antagonizing any one duchy by selecting a lady from a competing one, and avoids uncertain entanglements attached to the assortment of foreign princesses lingering in the court, though several of those did find promising Imajickan matches before departing after the wedding later the same year.

Sir William Van Dance is made commander of the king's personal guard, an elite group within the Knights of the Order of King George. These were not only intended to function as explicit bodyguards for the royal person but as guards and assistants for Sir William when acting as an emissary for his king. He brought with him Dame Nichole Rigal from the Inishmoran campaign, brought in now-Commander Victoria Exeter from the Liuwang Qing incursions, another promising young knight from the same battles, Sir Henri Valois, and the newly minted Sir Isaac Glenarthur from the chase of the *Bonnie Slough*.

To this number is added by personal recommendation of King Richard himself the 16-year-old son of Archidama Cherise de Gaul, Whitney, an extremely talented mage. Cherise de Gaul, also known as Cherise la Fay, is a member of the elite Royal Council of Mages that acts in an advisory capacity to the throne of Imajicka. The council, denoted by the titles Archidamus/Archidama, tends to be composed of the most supremely talented, respected, and trusted archons that can be found in kingdom.



By recommending the son of Archidama Cherise De Gaul to his Royal Guard, King Richard expresses a significant amount of respect and admiration for the young man, who quickly finds a secure and welcome place amongst the company of his cousin, Sir William. This additionally raises the already exalted status of the Archidama, who is renowned for her singular knowledge and intimacy with matters related to the Fae.

King Richard III is already a prominent and popular figure in Imajicka. His ascension is well timed to go with a brief period of relative calm in the large kingdom. 1988 is a prosperous year in a number of respects, including a banner growing season with excellent weather and robust crops throughout the kingdom. Also, a new trade agreement with the Kingdom of Ruslav brought optimism for future wealth.

Also this year, Bartholomew, Earl of Cornwall and his wife Krista are delivered of their second child Lucian.

# 1989

## A Year of Milk and Honey

A promising early spring turns somewhat sour with a campaign of ruthless raiders coming from Nórdehávn, in particular a coordinated band in near-legion strength called the Helmungar, returning under the leadership of veteran raider Sigtryg Alreksson. Unable to intervene personally this time, King Richard sends his trusted cousin, commander of the Royal Guard, Sir William Van Dance. Sir William deploys the Royal Army with expertise and cuts the early raiding season short before overmuch damage can be sustained, in so doing finding a handful of exceptional knights and allies to add to his own corps. Brothers Sirs Robert and Simon Graham, and Sir Marlon Hayward distinguished themselves in the conflict and were recruited to the company of the Royal Guard with Sir William.

Sadly, amongst other losses the campaign against Alreksson leads to the untimely death of Sir Anuil Llewellyn, heir to the Earl of Cymru and betrothed of Lady Ollana DeVane.

Much as the last Norsk campaign brought Richard the sobriquet "Lion-Hearted", the 1989 raids give rise to a name for Sir William as well, called "The Black Lion" – so called for being like a shadow of his cousin. This is popularly well received, and Sir William gains a great deal of public cachet from the adventure, not only for bravery and accomplishment but for being slightly roguish and deeply involved in his love for the Imajickan people.

With the Helmungar routed before summer has even fully arrived, King Richard leaves his younger brother John to manage Avalon and goes on a Royal Progress of Imajicka, traveling from city to city through each of the duchies and visiting the lands and people. With feasting, fetes, and local courts King Richard introduces himself to his kingdom and seeks to gain their trust while learning of their local concerns. In the king's absence, Prince John does an excellent and conservative job of administering those aspects of governance that cannot be moved out with the Progress. He is aided in this endeavor by the work of the popular young lord Bartholomew, Earl of Cornwall, who has a talent for politics and has to all appearances learned the lesson of avoiding any appearance of too utilitarian an approach to strategy.

1988's promising weather and exceptional growing season continue for another year, with bounty and wealth accumulating in a stable and comfortable Imajicka.

Abroad, a border conflict between Ruslav and Österland is inconclusive, while Österland is pressing against the shrinking borders of Nórdehávn in a fashion that likely contributed to the motivations of the Helmungar's raids. Shalkara experiences uncommonly serious flooding in the summer months that lead to severe loss of life in the central lowlands and damage to many farms. This leads to an increase in brigandage and severe labor shortages through a substantial grain-producing region, which then leads to potentially severe food shortages. Shalkara invests in buying a great deal of surplus food commodities from the exceptionally abundant Imajickan harvests, bringing even more wealth into Imajicka.

After a difficult season of conflict with subterranean threats, King Thidri Emberthane of the Dwarven Kingdom of Steelbright in the southern Dragonspine Mountains retires, bringing his daughter Queen Ulmaline Emberthane to the throne.

In the remote western regions of Thracia Unitas, particularly the city-state of Lycia, near the desert border of Damascus a local warlord named Abdulhamid begins amassing power and influence. A Damascene exile, Abdulhamid is of Dervish origin but has a blended force of Barbarian, Human, and Felinae forces under his command and creates localized troubles for Lycia.

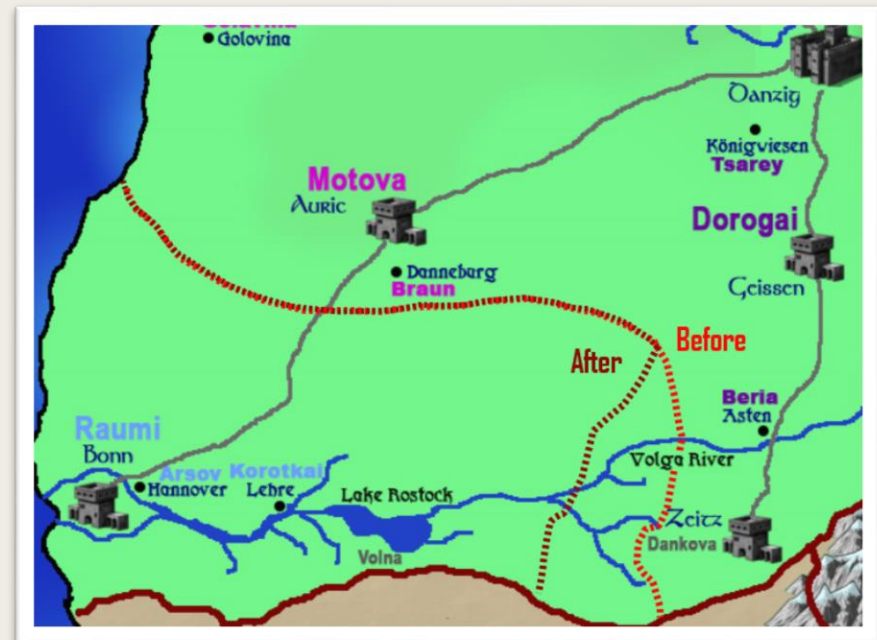
After years of low-grade conflict (arguably an entire history replete with low-grade conflict if we're being honest) outright civil war breaks out in unified Saimonia, leaving the country divided into three major factions by year's end.

# 1990

## A Near-Miss with Catastrophe

A ship called *Seriphos* full of Alexandrian merchants and a king's ransom in fine wares is mistakenly sunk by an armed Shalkaran vessel full of silver meant to buy Imajickan grain in Imajickan waters off the southern coast of the Duchy of Malay. On a ship conducting a research expedition of the inhabitants of small islands near Marsailles, Dame Nichole Rigal of the Royal Guard intervenes both directly and diplomatically, saving lives in the short term and politics in the long term. What becomes known as "The Serifos Affair" stretches out over months of acrimony and difficult negotiations, but ends without anyone declaring war on anyone else. During the immediate affair, while the *Seriphos* was actively sinking, one of Dame Nichole's assistants, Elaine Comstock, distinguished herself at great personal risk by diving in dangerous deep water amidst also-dangerous sinking wreckage and aggressive sea life to save drowning and injured sailors. As Elaine Comstock had entered Sir William and Dame Nichole's retinue for distinguished service as a courageous healer in previous campaigns, the young healer is knighted in the aftermath of the incident and joins the Royal Guard alongside them. As this brings Sir William's core of the guard to a total of 10, King Richard decrees that the group be ordained as its own subcategory of the Knights of King George, declaring them the Company of the Black Lion.

Doomstadt begins to show the signs of much-anticipated discord as Imajicka flourishes under a third year of exceptional harvests. A conspiracy within House Raumi leads to a substantial shakeup in leadership and costs the large southern power control of a wide eastern swath of their lands, taken up by both House Dorogai and



the smaller House Dankova. Discord is rapidly quenched by Queen Midori Mauvis, however.

Midori demonstrates the extent of her supreme control of Doomstadt by publicly acknowledging her foster children Dolosus and Dante, giving them both the Mauvis name in spite of the fact that neither is an Endrani (Dolosus being Canid and Dante being Mongrel-Wolverine). Public acknowledgement of non-natural children is already against the grain of Endrani nobility, but to do so with non-Endrani children should cause a complete uproar and absolute chaos in the political structures of the rogue nation. To all external appearances, it does not. Doing so is likely a large message not only flaunting Midori's power to her own underlings but directed at Imajicka and Richard to inform them that she is in absolute control of her country and that the new young King Richard ought not to set his sights on her lands.

1991

## Smooth Sailing

In Thracia Unitas, the upstart warlord Abdulhamid has claimed substantial land and causes increasing amounts of harm and destruction to the people of Lycia and across the border in Damascus. Local efforts to fight or interfere with his growth are hindered when those who go to battle against him seem to, as often as not, decide to join up with his cause. Abdulhamid declares himself "The Blood Sultan" and claims even larger lands than he controls.

Thracia sends diplomats to several other powers of the world looking for specialized assistance in dealing with the threat, concerned about what might occur if there is mind-controlling magic at work and if that magic were to take control of the major power inherent in a Pax Thracia Legion. After several months of discussion and debate, King Richard agrees to send his trusted Company of the Black Lion, because Dame Nichole has specialized expertise to apply and because Sir William Van Dance is so adamant in campaigning for the assignment.

Sir William and company take ship aboard a private vessel, *L'Esprit d'Audace*, in the spring to head for Atherens in order to unravel mysteries, solve problems, save lives, and strengthen ties. The journey is expected to require more than a year.

Public rumor begins to circulate throughout Imajicka, particularly in Wales, that the past three years of remarkably bountiful weather and fair harvests have come about as part of some sort of sophisticated compact made between any of a



variety of rumored persons and the Seelie Court of the Fae, also known as the Summer Court. The scale of such influence is too broad to be remotely credible as anything but a conspiracy theory.

As the rumors are spreading, Archidama Cherise De Gaul (also called Cherise La Fay) of the Royal Council of Mages falls ill and vanishes from public sight. She is reputed to be at death's door, which fuels further rumors. It is within the known boundaries of Fae compacts that something like public awareness of a bargain can in some circumstances subvert the terms of the bargain. The Archidama's cements the rumor into the public consciousness that the Cherise was responsible for the three years of fair seasons after Richard's coronation. Furthermore, rough storms batter the Cornish coast for much of the summer, not an uncommon occurrence but one that had been absent for the past few years. The truth of the matter is never publicly confirmed or denied and the Archidama recovers around the autumn equinox enough to be seen in public once again.

In Saimonia, the ongoing civil war worsens as the country is divided into a total of seven segments briefly before settling back to a stable four regions.

# 1992

## Cat's Away

With Sir William and the Company of the Black Lion in Thracia unraveling the mystery of the Blood Sultan of Lycia, King Richard III of Imajicka is less well-armed than in previous years when Sigtryg Alreksson and the Helmungar come once again for the northern coast of Wales, Scoheim, and Labrador. Though King Richard dispatches a substantial contingent of the Royal Army to the defense of the north, the conventional forces demonstrate less agility than Sir William and the defense ends up requiring a very large commitment of forces and expense. Furthermore, damage is not entirely prevented. At the end of the raiding season, forces assaulting Labrador evade conflict with exhausted army forces, sack a series of temples on the western side of the Duchy, and ultimately carry off an entire Nuada clan down to the last babe in arms.

The assault is devastating to the people of Labrador. The King dispatches immediate aid and strives to help put right the losses. The Nuada, already a reclusive Barbarian people dwindling in number and now having lost a sizable clan, remain devastated. The King sends outraged diplomats to every Norsk kingdom he has even remotely polite relations with, only to find that none will claim the Helmungar at all, let alone agree to pressure them for the return of rightly taken thralls.

It is determined that the Helmungar are sailing from an isolated fortress deep in the fjord lands near Bjørvika but getting to it would require violating the territorial waters of two other major Norsk kingdoms. While the Imajickan navy is the pride of the northern seas, it cannot reach into the shallower waters of the fjords far enough to be of use. King Richard instead gains assistance from a cadre of Österfolk merchants who agree to keep watch at Laninkoping for sign of any Nuada made available for exchanges in the largest market town/city of Nórdehávn.





While the explicit sale of thralls is uncommon in Norsk practice, it is not unheard of for exchanges to occur and the Österfolk were sufficiently versed in such maneuvers to be able to reclaim some of the missing, but the number is small. Of the dozen acquired in this fashion to be redeemed by King Richard, only 7 are truly Nuada, with the other 5 being persons disguised as Nuada to lure the Österfolk astray once it was reasoned what they were doing. The Österfolk leave Laninkoping urgently once patches of leather decorated with Nuada tattoos start appearing for sale strategically to frighten them. Evaluation of the handful of these articles brought back yields a mix of actual Barbarian hide and pig hide tattooed for effect. Nuada tattoos are distinctive enough that the particular individuals involved can be identified by kin.

Sir William Van Dance, the Black Lion, and his cohort return from their expedition to Thracia triumphant after a challenging and exhausting campaign against the forces of the Blood Sultan of Lycia, much richer in both allies and information, if heartsore after a year's hardship and witness to the catastrophic effects of mass-scale blood magic wrought on the remote regions of Thracia Unitas and Damascus involved. The Blood Sultan was defeated and executed, his forces dispersed and, where possible, cured of their afflictions.

Arriving home, Sir William finds the full extent of Sigtryg Alreksson's ravages on the lands of Imajicka in his absence. Tortured by guilt and regrets, he has to be commanded repeatedly by his cousin the King to not immediately set sail again, this time for Nórdehávn, where he would have assuredly started a war.

# 1993

## We Shall Fight on the Beaches

Unable to pursue Sigtryg Alreksson to ground in Nórdehávn, the Imajickan Military must instead undertake to fortify its coastlines in anticipation of another raiding season. Forces are divided into three major divisions. The forces in Wales are led by Colonel Anathema Device of the Royal Army and Lord Edward Wilson of Manchester. Colonel Device is a rare example of a Colonel promoted through merit, as a former Constable from the City of Dover commissioned to the Royal Army after years of excellence. She is noted for the skill and adroitness of her leadership.

The Scoheim forces are led by Lord Sir Gerald Hightower, who will go on in later years to become the Lord Commander of the Knights of Queen Anne's Watch. The forces in Labrador are commanded by Sir William Van Dance, the Black Lion. The Orkney Islands receive a fleet of volunteer longboats from Lord Inverness (normally a localized special rescue) to reinforce the fortifications on Ballentree and Wist. Additionally, Captain Dame Amelia Van Dance, another cousin from another branch of the royal family and 12<sup>th</sup> in line to the throne of Imajicka, takes time away from her primary occupation of cleansing the Alban Channel of pirates to accept a temporary position of admiralty. She commands the Royal Navy second fleet (of 3) to patrol the North Seas as scrupulously as can be achieved from flagship *HMS Trafalgar*.

The scale of operations has to be measured against the threat posed by the potential loss of a few coastal villages or a few hundred civilian lives, seasoned with the insult posed by Alreksson's ongoing impunity. The response is deliberately a measured one rather than a full-scale mobilization. It represents as harsh a hand as can be played with discretion and without damaging the national defense against the huge variety of trivial threats, brigandage, goblinoid adventurism, minor border assaults, and other difficulties that a large and busy kingdom most perpetually fend off.

When the Helmungar arrive in the spring it is to begin their assaults along the southern coastline of Labrador. Without the twisty mind of Dame Victoria Exeter, this would have taken the Labradorean defenses entirely off guard. Instead, there are watchfires and regional volunteers on the lookout and mobile companies positioned with the expectation that Sigtryg would strike along that shore. This begins a six-month long chess game all across the northern lands of Imajicka between the notorious

brigand-king and Dame Victoria, maneuvering resources to counter the unbeatable mobility of the Norsk raiders and to fend off the worst of the assaults.

After an exhausting spring and summer's campaigning, damages to Imajickan shores are kept to a fair minimum, and more than a quarter of the Helmungar longships are captured or sunk. Alreksson escapes without coming into direct conflict with any of the substantial forces arrayed against him but did lead several small and fruitful raids amongst the stymied ones. The inconclusive outcome was lauded as a successful defense by King Richard and the population generally but was inadequate as a benchmark to some in Labrador and, of course, to Sir William Van Dance.

In September of 1993 it is announced that Queen Annette is pregnant with a first child, to be expected in February of the next year. This is met with substantial enthusiasm.

Prince John, now 26 years of age, is betrothed to Carlotta Zaragosa of Hispalis.

Warwick experiences a particular surge year in activity out of the Wastes including several varieties of vicious Mongrel clans and a serious magic-resistant disease which seems to spread rapidly, causing everything from minor discomfort to paralysis and death. While not frequently fatal, this does leave behind a decent number of persons with partially crippled limbs, particularly those who were under the age of 10 in 1993. The illness abruptly ceases spreading or causing trouble as soon as winter arrives in Warwick. Popular wisdom holds the culprit to be an endemic parasite called a Drop Tick or Scrub Tick, but in an unusual Wastes-altered form.

# 1994

## We Shall Fight on the Landing Grounds

Determined to make an end to the Helmungar invasion once and for all, Sir William Van Dance and a variety of associates including his own Company of the Black Lion undertake a new defensive stratagem for 1994. In this plan, a great deal more is gambled on Dame Victoria Exeter's strategic foresight, and deployments are concentrated on the northwest coast of Wales. Arrangements are made to be able to react quickly while retreating in holding actions, no matter where Sigtryg strikes.

When the Helmungar land south of the Tyne river in Cumbria, it is with a far more concentrated force than expected, but the forces are able to react. Notable in the defense of the region in particular is the defense of Bannings Bridge near Tynewall, where the Company of the Black Lion was caught out alone during a major strategic pivot. While evacuating locals to account for the oversized landing party, the Company realizes the civilian evacuation is moving slowly and will be at some risk in the original planned drawing action. It is concluded that the Norsk could theoretically be stymied at Bannings Bridge to create enough time for the reserves to cut them off from the sea entirely while still giving the citizens of Tynewall time to get safely away.

This plan is not necessarily a wise one, but Sir William's company is becoming known for a certain extravagance of temperament. They make rudimentary fortifications to the bridge, and then the ten of them, alone, are able to temporarily hold off, drive back, and theatrically interfere with the progress of an assaulting force of several hundred Norsk for long enough that the mobile reserves could isolate the group from the sea. Thereafter a vice is closed on the majority of the invaders. Sigtryg Alreksson is personally wounded by Sir William Van Dance who removes one leg at the knee and nearly slices his eye in half in a melee.

Alreksson is captured along with the remains of his forces. His boats are captured. Despite loud and furious calls for his execution, the much-hated Barbarian raider (well, most of him) is ransomed for the lives of the surviving Nuada captives, which proves to be more than half of those abducted. The Helmungar are essentially disbanded and their assets absorbed by nearby

clans. Sigtryg will go on to become Earl of Sigtuna in later years, having taken on the name "White-Eye". He does not sail to Imajickan lands ever again.

Princess Carlotta of Hispalis is lost at sea when her ship goes down with all hands in a storm on its way to Imajicka where she was to meet Prince John, her fiancé, for the first time. This is at first thought to be a result of piracy, and a ransom is awaited with anger, but within a few months of the disappearance wreckage distinctive to the missing vessel washes up on the shores of Melité.

Captain Amelia Van Dance obtains a letter of marque (privateering license) and sails to Islas del Sol to, as it is generally described "punish the ocean for stealing the princess." It is thought that Amelia was romantically attached to the Princess, whom she had personally met. This seems to drive a wedge between Amelia and Prince John as well, whose own grief at the loss of his betrothed is the perfunctory grief of a well-schooled statesman. Amelia sets about ruining business for different pirates, a task she will remain engaged in for more than two years.

Queen Annette is delivered of a son, Charles, in March of 1994. His health is not exemplary, but the nation is delighted about the infant in the way that only a nation truly enthused about its royal family can be.

In central and eastern Warwick a local Human brigand lord calling himself King Kazimir rises up into a substantial and increasingly brutal tyrant. Taking Bitterfield, a formerly Endrani-held walled town in a harsh siege, he begins by driving Endrani slaving parties out of the area, which is initially met with favor. Unfortunately, he soon gives the lie to any perceived benevolence by implementing a ferocious conscription program and making heavy demands for taxation after 'rescuing' the local population. In the course of a single year King Kazimir spreads through much of southern Daneholt and into Freeholt, calling the conquered area Delmarva, after an hundreds-of-years gone kingdom in the region to which he claims without plausible evidence to be the rightful heir.

Some in Warwick think to ask Queen Midori of Doomstadt to correct the situation, as in theory it would be her responsibility to do so. She responds by setting terms with King Kazimir to effectively limit any slaving in "his" lands. Others seek to help themselves leading to a series of bloody and disastrous defeats. Ahren Jarvik, Lord of the Marches, is solicited to make an attempt at King Kazimir, but is staunchly unwilling to do so both in terms of where Kazimir is located and how unlikely he is to succeed, even with assistance. The Nights Watch is besought for aid but is both very busy and staunchly apolitical, meaning that it might be awful but it's not their job to deal with it. Kazimir takes to public impalings as a method of enforcing his will.

1995

## We Shall Fight in the Fields and in the Streets

The situation in Warwick continues to degenerate. Port Blackwater, a notoriously independent city, is largely unaffected by the rampages of King Kazimir in the interior and is ruled erratically by a succession of “Lords” who were little better than organized criminals. Meanwhile all along the northern borders of Warwick an already weakened Nights Watch is increasingly overwhelmed by an expanding and opulently dangerous ‘season’ of creatures from the wastes and the goblinoid tribes driven before them. Northern towns, if they survive, rapidly become islands under siege by the very land they reside in. Dangerous magical weather events flourish in a series of devastating blizzards.

King Kazimir does nothing beyond the scope of his own boundaries and rejects refugees who do not pay ferocious taxes to enter his lands.

Seeing quite clearly the complex scope of the problem, Lord Sigurd Habreadth of Farwatch Point (in Warwick) sends a messenger by way of an actual captured Norsk longship to his cousin, Lord Allenby Habreadth of Farpoint (Cumbria, Wales), rowed by local volunteers with no expertise at this method of seafaring and his personal physician, who had an academic knowledge of stellar navigation. The journey of more than 600 miles by sea, in winter, by dead reckoning is a remarkable feat of seamanship.

The messenger brings the first real word better than rumors of the plight of Warwick to the attention of the crown of Imajicka. Because of the urgency of the situation and the determination that Queen Midori would not act unless soon or philanthropically if at all, King Richard III decides to take the distinct risk of outraging Queen Midori by intervening.



A substantial amount of supplies and personnel are donated to the Nights Watch in Wales, who are then loaned Royal Navy ships to carry their prizes to Warwick. Thus the “apolitical” action of the Nights Watch is in full force, used as discreet cover to rush support to the embattled territory by way of Farwatch Point. Separately, the Company of the Black Lion is dispatched with a small force of Alban Army Irregulars for the less diplomatically sound task of sneaking into the interior of Warwick by way of Port Blackwater and overthrowing King Kazimir before he gets to be any larger an issue.

After several months of hard campaigning in the rough and alien frontier territory, disguised as local insurgents to avoid explicitly antagonizing Doomstadt, the covert action successfully destroys the brigand-and-conscript army of King Kazimir. Sir Henri Valois dramatically battles Kazimir up a stairway at the fortress of Bitterfield and inadvertently defenestrates the despot, resulting in Kazimir’s death by impaling on his own spikes below. Bitterfield is restored to the local lord Kazimir displaced, Eadred Hawkes, who had fought with the Company the whole way. Everyone agrees this had nothing to do with Imajicka, obviously, and order is approximately restored.

Queen Midori Mauvis, informed politely of the deception she was expected to agree to, does not object to it. Thus, Richard III flexes his own power covertly rather than overtly. Midori’s most recent international message had been entirely overt, as she had flexed her own power by acknowledging her foster children. In Endrani politicking terms, this meant the point was ceded to Richard even if only the highest echelons of either court were aware of it.

Sir William Van Dance, the Black Lion, returns to King Richard III in the summer and reports not only the difficulty of their success but the wealth of information discovered about Warwick, the Goblin Wastes, and the hardships therein. Richard, in turn, had become quite fixed on the Wastes themselves as a source of hardship and desolation, and had set scholars to researching its history and behavior while his cousin was away. Richard confides to his cousin that he’s begun experiencing what could only be described as holy visions suggesting that it was possible to put a stop to the eons of horror and destruction caused by the Goblin Wastes, believing there to be a core deep in the north of unspeakable evil that could be vanquished by a combination of armies and righteousness.

Richard wanted to undertake a Crusade.

Securing the unswerving support of his cousin Sir William first, King Richard outlines a strategy and by harvest was sending messengers all through the realm of Imajicka: *gather in Avalon, ye who wish to carry the firebrand of Imajickan virtue into the heart of darkness and bring dawn to an endless night in the service of your King!* (and similar) His wildly popular cousin, Sir

William, would help bring the message to the people of the kingdom, to rouse support, enthusiasm, and, above all, recruits for this quest. The particular assistance of Sir William's gifted herald, Sir Marlon Hayward, would be invaluable to this pursuit.

In a brief diversion from this core message, September sees a brief flurry of Norsk raids on the east coast of Wales. Lady Victoria, by now an old hand at thwarting the Norsk, leads a portion of the Company of the Black Lion to intervene and stumbles upon information leading to the understanding that the entire past three years raiding and adventurism of the Helmungar under Sigtryg Alreksson was underwritten and scripted by unknown masterminds from Cornwall. The Cornish Plot remains unknown to the public until years later, because of the events which would follow upon King Richard's Crusade.

In December of 1995, the infant Prince George takes ill with a severe pneumonia and does not recover, passing away near yule much to the sorrow of King Richard and Queen Anette. He was 19 months old.



# 1996

## We Shall Fight in the Hills

Later the same winter, Duchesse Marie-Nichole of Malay passes away, elevating her son Jean-Michelle Mont Clamont to the ducal seat. Duchesse Marie-Nichole's passing is not unexpected and, though young, Jean-Michelle is well trained to serve in his role as Duc de Malay.

With a certain amount of persuasion, the grandiosity of King Richard's desire to put an end to the Wastes once and for all becomes a contagion for the people of Imajicka. The redemption of Warwick, salvation of the Warwickers long abandoned, certainty for future generations. It takes a lot of convincing, but King Richard has excellent public standing and extremely talented surrogates to plead his case. The King, already popular, becomes all but mythically heroic in his fervor for the adventure. He pulls together funding and investments, leveraging years of prosperity and plenty as well as all but liquidating the personal wealth he has at his disposal. He studies, lectures, and travels all in the service of this ambition. Popular sentiment grows even as the plan itself begins to take shape. A large army will be raised, equipped, and trained. It will depart in the autumn of 1997, landing along the west coast of Warwick, and will winter over in the half-tamed lands of the near wastes before pressing north with an ambition not seen since the days of Thracian conquest.

All of the planning is interrupted by a sudden and violent rebellion in the Labradoran lowlands in September. Clan Canaill rises up violently against Duke Eamon O'Halloran on a blended issue of privation and antiquarian honor. The dispute grows heated and beyond O'Halloran's control, so he beseeches royal aid. Richard arrives on the Isle of Inishmora shortly thereafter as part of the Royal Progress he was conducting in support of his Crusade and brought with him the Company of the Black Lion, of course. Negotiations are begun, but without much of the Royal Army to hand the situation somewhat degenerates amongst local militias and Labradoran purists. When the nephew of the clan head, (The Mac Canaill, as he was called) is killed in battle with a neighboring loyalist faction it looks like the entire matter will descend into bloody feuding, but all is saved by diplomacy at the last moment, winning Clan Canaill back to the crown and eventually to the enthusiastic support of King Richard.

# 1997

## We Shall Never Surrender



JANUARY 1997

LEGACIES LARP FOUNDED

Events from this point forward take place in real time, live gameplay, or player volunteer retrograde development.

After more than a year of study and preparation, not to mention the tremendous effort of rousing a large and sometimes cynical population to the virtue of a holy war, King Richard assembles his forces on the plains outside Avalon. Much of the year is consumed in their equipage and preparation, but by August of 1997 he is ready to depart.

Prince John is to be left in charge as Regent in the absence of his brother. So many of the nobility will travel with Richard that the remaining land was in a state of essential disorder. The preparation and effort involved in launching the crusade becomes so expensive in the final months that it drags badly at the Imajickan economy, but it has become a leviathan. The momentum is enough to assure it will go forward.

King Richard III of Imajicka and 80,000 loyal men and women, knights and ladies, lords and the humblest of servants, march to Dover and set sailed for Warwick. The fruit of an entire generation, often entire families worth of sons and daughters, enchanted by their lord King and his vision, ready to become heroes.

They leave behind a nation struggling to bring in its own harvests, a fragmented military reduced to the barest minimum. Captain Amelia Van Dance returns from Islas del Sol to take some charge of the navy, depleted of its officers by pure adventurism. A great deal of maneuvering carries on.

As the mighty army of King Richard, attended as always by his cousin Sir William, settles in to winter over and prepare for its march north, the people of Imajicka gradually begin to realize that they may have been sold a bill of goods with Prince John. While before he was always a pleasant and capable enough administrator, it doesn't take long for the remaining nobility to take note that he shows signs of being venal, bitter, and ruthlessly ambitious. It will not be long before Imajicka wishes for its king back.

# 1998

## Power Abhors

With King Richard's army gone, and with it a huge portion of the combat-capable youth of an entire nation, Prince John lets slide most principles of good governance and usurps his brother's throne, declaring himself King John II before the end of the year. He asserts the authority to do so by declaring that his brother has died on his Crusade, based on the evidence that the army disappears into the Goblin Wastes marching north in March and almost immediately ceases sending any messages back.

Bartholomew Cornwall, previously a closely trusted advisor of the Prince, abandons the privy council of the newly declared King John and leaves the usurper with only his cronies to help govern. Governance itself rapidly falls by the wayside.

Within the year, Labrador and Scoheim are united in the opinion that the island of Inishmora should unite and rise up against the crown of Imajicka if it is going to be mistreated in this way, but they are hindered in the effort to launch and immediate rebellion by the pure lack of fighting force available with which to do it and the lingering occupation of what little remains of the Royal Army.

Jean-Michelle Mont Clamont, Duc de Malay, seems content to try and manage his own lands effectively and tries to ignore the usurper king as much as he can get away with. Nobles with lands in Malay begin to drift in that direction and away from the increasingly tumultuous situation in Wales.

Declaring King Richard to be dead means that John is declaring the entire army dead with him, which does not instill public confidence. With much of the nobility fled from around Avalon, the lands between Avalon and York swiftly become more wild and ungovernable. King John hands over 'abandoned' lands to his friends and rapidly sets the entire government of Imajicka into a retrograde tailspin en route to a throwback to the sixteenth century.

Several of the De Vane cousins in line for the throne after John start trying to send messages or gain information about the fate of Richard and his Army but are only able to obtain scattered reports from the Nights Watch or nothing at all, with messengers lost in the wilderness of the trampled wake left behind 80,000 souls marching north.

# 1999

## A Held Breath

With a small amount of practice King John begins to regain a semblance of control over his government. He is assisted in this by some of his relations amongst the Van Dance cousins, and with reluctant assistance from an impatient Duc de Malay. Scoheim and Labrador remain indignant and barely speaking to the crown. The army begins to reform and take a certain amount of reasonable shape with some careful leadership.

Colonel Anathema Device, renowned for her assistance in the defeat of the Helmungar invasions, is promoted to General and provided with more seasoned assistance. The Nights Watch reluctantly volunteers a modicum of training resources if only to enable the army to assist in the general defense of the lands from monstrous threats. The continuing lack of any word from King Richard and his army leads the common folk to gradually begin to feel frightened for their family and possibly betrayed by their love of their King.

Abroad, Österland has been engaged in gradually pushing against Nórdehávn even as it was more fully engaged with Imajicka. 1999 sees the full fruition of this gradual process when Österland drives Nórdehávn entirely off the Boreas side of the Norsk Sound, and ultimately seizes and claims Svalbard Island, a site of critical cultural and political importance to Nórdehávn as a vaguely cohesive entity.

This conquest by Österland plants a seed of resentment that will take 11 years to flower.

# 2000

## Richard's Return

The long-awaited return of King Richard III from his crusade occurs in late winter, 2000. Confusion immediately reigns. Reports fly ahead of the army that he is returning home but with only a fraction of the army he took to the Wastes, sending waves of shock and grief through the countryside. Soon after, however, it becomes evident that the situation is in fact much worse than only this.

Richard reappears in Dover at the head of an army of nearly 7,000 powerful undead, all that remained of his Crusade, and himself possessed by the spirit of a great and powerful lich. Some say he had become a "Dracolich," or was possessed by a dragon. Some say that Richard himself had taken power to become a lich. Whatever the exact play of circumstances, the consequence was that the beloved Lion-hearted king of Imajicka was now, himself, a devastatingly powerful undead controlling a vast army of similarly powerful undead. Many were uncommonly powerful, many were uncommonly intelligent, and worst of all each and every one of them was the known son or daughter of a grieving Imajickan family.

Six months are spent battling to destroy Richard.

John is slain, along with entire swaths of the nobility. Queen Anette takes her own life. Ambrose DeVane is slain, along with most members of the extended DeVane family. The Royal Army is roused by General Device and labors against the encroaching lich king with the aid of every hand that can be brought to bear against him. With so many lost to the Crusade, and every fallen giving rise to more soldiers for the enemy, it is a lightning conquest that almost certainly would have succeeded but for extremes of heroism and tremendous labor.

It is a very near thing.

Ultimately, King Richard the Returned is destroyed. And with him the last remains of the generation lost to his ambitions.

So many were slain or lost in the devastation following the King's return that the next in line for the throne is Lady Olanna DeVane, formerly 6<sup>th</sup> in succession after John. The country lies in ruins.

Queen Olanna, first of her name, declares it dead. In claiming the throne she declares that she will take only the throne of Wales, and she will claim only the island of Alba, that Imajicka is too large to govern and too broken to succeed as a unified territory. She is not wrong.

Inishmora borders on revolt anyway and gladly seizes its independence.

Malay feels hard used by the last several years and furthermore by some of the terms of this separation, but ultimately Duc Jean-Michelle claims the throne of his own country without incident. A system is implemented whereby nobles with lands in more than one of the new countries will be able to select their new nation of residence and sell properties in the others to a system of exchanges, a plan that seems sensible but will never be properly implemented.

The new nations as they were apportioned became Inishmora, composed of what was formerly Socheim and Labrador together; Alba, the island formerly known as the duchy of Wales; and Malay. Political rearrangements within Inishmora and Alba were swift and chaotic. Malay, by contrast, remained economically stable and thus was able to sustain stability in a more general sense. Furthermore, they were more closely linked by trade to the Gulf where from new wealth could be built up.

Much of what remained of the standing army of Imajicka, along with its remaining heroes and generals and war colleges and infrastructure, found themselves in the new nation of Alba. Likewise the navy, now under Admiral Amelia Van Dance, was mostly retained by Alba. Believing in less of a standing national military for itself, the new nation of Malay did not complain about being spared the expense. The new nation of Inishmora wanted as little as possible to do with either and had begun to consider the Imajickan military as occupiers rather than countrymen in recent years, in any case.

From almost the moment that Olanna ascends to the throne, a challenger arises from the Isle of Wight to assert her own claim. The claimant, Helena de Seiwan, at first seems to have no claim at all. Calling herself Helena



de Wight, she makes it a bald assertion and rises up from the remote island stronghold where she had previously held the position of Countess.

It does not take long for the understanding to spread that Helena de Wight is an undead creature, kept disguised on her island for possibly as much as a hundred years. Helena de Seiwan was, in fact, a previous usurping claimant to the throne of Imajicka whose previous coup attempt had ended with her death and creation as undead, since which time she had been concealing herself on Wight and gradually accumulating forces for her next opportunity to strike. She appears to have been poised to strike while King John was weak, even going so far as to import mercenaries to assist her army of the undead, only to be pre-empted by the return of Richard. Rather than reveal herself to Richard and thus potentially become enslaved to his undead will herself, Helena remained hidden until the nation was desperately weakened by the battle to preserve itself from the returned King.

Helena's claim arises explicitly from a position of strength, not legitimacy. Additionally, her condition is not one considered acceptable to anyone in any semblance of power. She strikes from the island and sets about attempting to conquer the weakened kingdom in a regicidal campaign against Olanna accompanied by a diverse accumulation of lieutenants and devoted allies, living and dead.

One of the first armies to face her was what remained of the forces of General Anathema Device, still gallantly fighting for her kingdom. She is captured and converted to vampirism by Catherine Lockheart, a vampire created by her father, Sudokai Lockhart, who was in times long past a mage-adviser to a previous Earl of Nottford, Caleb Exeter. The existence of Anathema Device as a servant of Helena is a devastating and immediate blow to the morale of an already dispirited and exhausted nation. It seems inevitable that the new-minted nation of Alba cannot possibly survive the torments it is enduring.

## 2001

### The War of Succession

With wars breaking like waves on Alba's shores, Olanna sends her closest advisors to Malay to shelter in the court of new-minted King Jean-Michelle. There they become what is called the Regency Council in Exile, attempting to rule and manage what can be managed of Alba's affairs with the rest of former Imajicka and internationally from safe haven in Malay, while Olanna engages in the desperate struggle to gain, not even regain, control of her throne and her island.

The Regency Council formalizes the matters involved in the dissolution of Imajicka and attempts to solicit various forms of assistance for Olanna in any way it can. There is not a great deal of leverage that can be exerted, unfortunately, as even Malay was severely hit by the expenses of the Crusade and the further devastating expenses of defending against King Richard's return. Both money and fighting power are at an absolute premium, and foreign nations are reluctant to involve themselves when Alba has almost nothing to offer as collateral for the assistance and would instead become a parasitic state even should Olanna succeed and overthrow Helena's efforts to conquer the island.

By mid-2001, heartbreak strikes again as Queen Olanna is assassinated when Helena de Wight sacks and destroys the capital city of Avalon. Helena continues to attempt to conquer the island but finds herself hindered in some quarters by loyalist resistance, in others by localized warlords popping up like weeds throughout the kingdom. Helena declares herself the Queen of Alba, but as there is no longer a centralized government, the capital is sacked, and nothing is under effective control as yet there can be no coronation. The Regency Council, now regents for the very concept of legitimate authority of any kind, are trapped in Malay with even less to offer.

Helena's campaign relies heavily on some imported Shalkaran mercenaries claiming to be Bridaini, (an elite force within the Shalkaran Imperial Guard). The mercenaries are not, in truth, Bridaini. Instead, they are composite companies formed by the pressures placed on rural brigandage in the Shalkaran lowlands in the 1980s, not unlike the forces driving the Liuwang Qing incursions of 1985. The confusion about the issue of what exactly it means to be Bridaini lingers in the public consciousness for years.



Rearrangement of territory and restructuring of the landscape in Alba is going on in an active way, but the Regency Council is barely able to communicate with anyone on the island, leading to a lot of unverifiable claims of lordship or lands. Alba is functionally broken into three new Duchies corresponding to the old 3 primary Earldoms of the island named Cornwall, Cymru, and Notford, but Notford is redefined as the duchy of Wales in a nod to continuity of governance, with Notford being made the title of a large barony within the larger Duchy of Wales.

Noteworthy amongst the upstart warlords of Alba are Llewellyn ap Grufid, a Cymry calling himself the "Protector of York" (no relation to Gwydion ap Llewellyn, Earl of Cymru,) Mohamad Al'sim, a Damascene opportunist seizing lands in Cornwall, and Matteus Vaclav, a servant of Helena seeking to seize the eastern coastline.

Meanwhile in Inishmora, independence causes an immediate revival of old clan systems, and a dominant Labrador decrees a revival of the old Keltoi ritual of Lia Fáil. This is an ancient stone artifact in a circle of standing stones that will 'sing' in the presence of the true High King. Dukes of Labrador for centuries had gone through a version of the ritual in order to back their own ascension to the position of dukedom and legitimize their authority but it hadn't been used to actually select a true High King since before Wales conquered the island more than a thousand years past. Those of Scoheim are mostly satisfied by the process, all having some degree of Keltoi ancestry, and the Lia Fáil sings for High King John Beliol. Inishmora has a great deal of reconstruction to do including consolidation of power by High King John Beliol and is unable to offer much aid to war-ravaged Alba.

Elsewhere, Ruslav, declaring Österland to be a secessionist state and not a rightful one, conquers part of Österland, in the foothills of Kymi. Österland is able to rebuff the invasion after losing a chunk of land, and the border stabilizes.



2002

## Rogues and Remnants

In Doomstadt, Queen Midori Mauvis knows that whether or not Imajicka remains a solid entity, her enemies are lurking and waiting for the Endrani nation to tear itself apart from within before pouncing to conquer them once more. She recognizes this as the long tried and true history of her people, struggling to unite without an external foe to oppose. She perceives this as a weakness, and is not fond of weaknesses her enemies can exploit. She determines that Doomstadt could use some radical new thinking, and opts to declare her foster daughter Dolosus her heir. The young woman is quietly transmuted to the Dragoon race so as to be able to connect with both her Endrani and canid cultural antecedents. Dolosus Mauvis is someone who appreciates and loves Doomstadt but like Midori is disgusted by aspects of their current culture and desires change.

Once the succession becomes established in the minds of the Great Houses as an inevitability to be worked with rather than an opportunity for protest and self-destruction, Midori does something fairly unique for a Queen of Doomstadt. Aging and concerned about assassination, she abdicates. Dolosus is crowned Queen Dolosus Mauvis and with the potent backing of House Dramikov and all its subsidiaries to use as her strong right arm, Dolosus begins an immediate campaign of social change. She aspires to ban the practice of slavery, to bring to a close the ageless feud with the Trandafir that has haunted the Endrani since time out of mind, and she seeks to implement reforms in land usage to better serve the kingdom.

These changes cannot occur quickly.

In Alba, meanwhile, discord reigns supreme amongst warring factions of Helena de Wight's armies. Two straight years have gone without any remote semblance of a proper harvest, starvation and illness threaten the desperate countryside. Warlords fight for land and compete for either the approval or submission of the those they would rule.

A terrible plague begins running through the nation rapidly, apparently starting in the port city of Dover. Its effects are devastating and far reaching. At approximately the same time, a peculiar cult calling themselves the Kommedra arrive on the island amidst the chaos and begin enforcing their will absolutely under a much more militarized structure than any competing interest can muster. The Kommedra seem to be somewhere between a legion a cult. Of Thracian origin and commanded by a

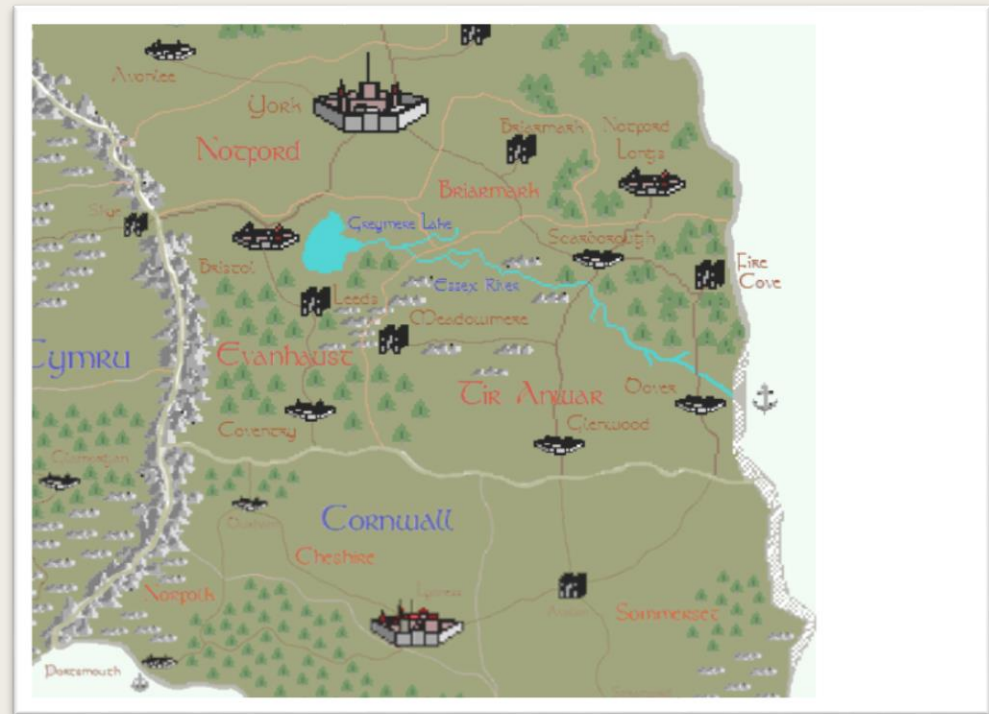
Thracian Human named Arcturus Kommedra at first appear to have taken the name of their Order from the last Thracian commander to hold out fortifications on the Isle of Alba before the fall of the Empire centuries ago.

More study, however, finds that the Kommedra in fact **are** the remains of that very legion, left behind in the decline of the Empire in the fifth century. The Tir Anwar town of Scarborough had been destroyed in a fire, and a misguided effort to deploy high magic instead of manual labor to repair it resulted in calling a host back from beyond the grave well past the expectation of possibility for such a misadventure. The out-of-time legionnaires had be abandoned by the retreating empire and formed their own short-lived civil society which fell into decline not long after. Placed unexpectedly in the war torn ruin of a modern nation, the Kommedra had simply set about establishing order as they understood it.

Rumors speculate whether the Kommedra are themselves the source of the disease as they do not become ill with it, but other rumors accuse the Scarborians of deliberately spreading the illness in an effort to attack the invaders they had themselves conjured. By and large, the people of Alba, particularly the lands from Tir Anwar to York where they are enforcing their will, are heartily sick of warlords and conquerors.

John Exeter, heir to Nottford, distinguishes himself in helping the people of Tir Anwar to ultimately slay Arcturus and drive the Kommedra from their shores. Additionally, educated refugees from the larger cities of what was once a realm are able to come together in Tir Anwar and concoct treatments and solutions for the plague before it wipes Dover from the map.

The locations of Tir Anwar and the town within it of Scarborough are strategically critical, being approximately equidistant between the large city of York in the north and the capital city of Avalon, in the south, Scarborough is an eddy in the current of



evacuation and relocation that catches many who are either seeking to escape the violence or find a strategic point from which to wage it. The port city of Dover on the Barony's eastern shore is guaranteed to become the avenue by which any semblance of order in Alba will ever be restored and furthers both of the above conditions.

In the greater world beyond the wreckage of former Imajicka, time marches on.

A brigand band of more than a hundred Abruzzese bravos and adventurers calling themselves "Conquistori Ruggente" spends most of the year sweeping through the jungles of Nzadi o Nzere engaging in wasteful hunting, wanton destruction, even hunting local peoples for sport, sacking villages, and stealing relics. Though pursued aggressively both by the apoplectic locals and Hispalians terrified of having their relations with the river destroyed, the band evades or gives actual battle to their pursuers. The aggression and destruction finally come to an end when the shamans of several kingdoms unite to perform sacred invocations begging for the aid of the river itself. The ritual details are secret, but Hispalian observers insist it includes the willing sacrifice of several shamans' lives, striding into the river to be devoured by ferocious creatures. Afterwards, some manner of disaster befalls the rampaging Abruzzese. Wreckage drifts downstream of their river boats, along with many partially eaten corpses, but no further terrorism is reported, nor any survivors found to be interrogated about it.

On the nearby island kingdom of Cynos, Endrani Queen Panagiotta abdicates in the same year as Midori Mauvis, possibly even in unison. The new Matriarch is of House Dionuso and thus queen of Cynos is Xanthippi III. There is no way to know if communication between Cynos and Doomstadt had any influence over Queens Midori or Dolosus, and the simultaneity could be entirely coincidence.

Far in the northern wilderness of Boreas, Ruslav continues to surreptitiously steal incremental bites of land in Kymi, Österland, inching outward until crossing some threshold of Österfolk tolerance. King Gustav of Österland is ultimately fed up with the provocation and launches a major offensive, citing the breaking of the previous year's armistice. Subsequently driving Ruslav halfway out of Kymi entirely. During the distraction, Ruslav gathers up a much larger piece of land in the neighboring province of Virron. The fighting season is ended without effective resolution.

# 2003

## Michael

The desperate Regency Council in Exile attempts to persuade Malay to conquer Alba and restore the bond that founded Imajicka, but without success. Malay cannot afford the scale of operations that would be required and the appetite for opting in to the insanity overrunning the island is low. King Jean-Michelle is willing to send aid, but not to hire his own army, and both houses of the Malayan parliament are adamant on the same grounds.

The Regency Council then determines that the best solution will be to find a way to secure the throne with a rightful claimant who can rally what legitimate lords remain under one banner. A great many of the true nobility of Imajicka do remain in Alba but factionalism and dire regional conflicts prevent any central authority from developing, even in somewhere like Tir Anwar with easy access to the sea.

Combing through records, the Regency Council quickly realizes that the minions of Helena de Wight went to extreme effort to exterminate the DeVane family, root and branch. A scattering of very distant relations remain, but nothing even remotely close to the throne. Desperate for the kind of public hero the population once had in Sir William Van Dance puts them on the track of searching records on the Van Dance as well. The line of Van Dance was a heritage of Imajickan Kings and Queens going back centuries and had stayed closely related to the DeVane dynasty throughout its tenure. In point of fact, a handful of Van Dance cousins were quite closely related to the DeVanes, Sir William having been a prime example. Helena was less successful in eradicating those lines, leaving two viable branches of the Van Dance family tree to pursue.

One was Admiral Amelia Van Dance, but the other slightly more proximal relation to the throne of Richard was Michael, Count Corbrie, the young man sent off to Shalkara as a youth so many years ago. All but forgotten in the days of chaos that had consumed Imajicka, there was every possibility that Michael Van Dance, now 29 years old, lingered in the east as yet unaware of the catastrophes.

By exchanging information with King Jean-Michelle's intelligence services, the Regency Council was able to run down where to find the man they would have as their king, who had moved to Nippon and was serving technically (and to the surprise of the council) as Imajicka's ambassador to the profoundly isolationist Empire even now. Michael was sent to with

urgent pleas that he return home, with the hope that what was once a promising and astute young boy would be the right person to save Alba from destruction.

Several iterations of the message are sent, which is fortunate because at this time there is a substantial uptick in coastal Piracy afflicting Alba, Malay, Inishmora, Melité, Hispalis, Thracia, and Aruzzo. Piracy on this scale typically arises from Islas del Sol and it is likely that the return of Dame Amelia Van Dance from her assaults upon the islands left a power vacuum into which a minor pirate empire grew. This force identifies itself as the Black Tide and is as aggressive to southern coastlines as the Norsk are typically to the northerly ones. Inishmora is particularly hard-hit.

One noteworthy casualty of the Black Tide in Inishmora is the newly crowned High King, John Beliol. In the wake of the death of the High King, a lord named Logan O'Roarke distinguishes himself in combating the Black Tide and consolidates his own claim to the crown of Inishmora. A pseudo-populist, O'Roarke insists the old tradition of the Lia Fáil is antiquated and arbitrary, a hallmark only of allegiance to ancient Fae religion and not to personal worth. He refuses to attempt the ritual and speaks out against the value of the Clan system, as well. Instead, O'Roarke relies on support from more urban, settled Inishmorans to get himself a crown and keep it.

Across the narrow straights in Alba, the disintegration of usurper Helena de Wight's armies seems to be proven complete when the creature herself seeks allies amongst the mortal loyalists remaining in Tir Anwar to defend her against the depravities of her former servant, Matteus Vaclav, who has suborned many of her strongest loyal subjects and servants. More is learned of her history, but in a context that is clearly designed to shift blame from herself to Matteus, who has become greater force to be reckoned with in the land. She offers additional insight in exchange for assistance and protection, but is unable to find succor amongst the living. Fleeing Matteus, Helena de Wight is never seen again, and it is common belief that Matteus Vaclav ultimately slays her with his own hand.

Leftover mercenaries from Helena's attempted conquest, the "Bridaini," attempt to carve out a kingdom of their own after benefiting from belated reinforcements from their larger organization in Shalkara. These work at least to some degree in service to the warlord lich Matteus, along with a wide array of other persons and creatures in a chaotic seeming web of command. A deeply conflicted figure, Matteus attempts to eliminate rival influences in the area, but the politics remain unstable and the Briadini are insufficient to eliminating the ever-increasing number of contenders for power particularly in eastern Wales. It becomes increasingly clear that Matteus is the devoted worshipper of a personification of entropy that he calls "The Dark" and believes himself to be on a righteous mission. This objective is, in many ways, King Richard's own Crusade

seen back through the mirror, darkly. To bring chaos and annihilation to somewhere that would otherwise be made of order and life.

While the politics of Alba increasingly resemble the politics of a school of sharks, across the channel in Doomstadt things are getting more Endrani by the moment. The young new Queen Dolosus Mauvis has been exerting pressure to enact reforms but meeting with steadily increasing resistance. Ultimately, this leads to her sudden assassination, presumably by conservative factions. Her foster brother, Dante Mauvis, undertakes to seize power for himself, which will prove to be a bridge too far for even the most flexible-minded of Endrani. Not only was Dante not Endrani, he was male. Males do not *have* power amongst the Endrani, they are *wielded by* power.

Midori Mauvis, having abdicated, lacks the instantaneous backing of three of the five major houses which would be required to reassert herself and regain control. The only instantly unifying motive that could be ascribed to the great Houses of Doomstadt in the immediate aftermath of Dolosus's assassination is that Dante needed to likewise be slain before he could manage a way to consolidate power.

A fair amount of maneuvering follows in the effort to be best positioned for a swift ascent to power after Dante's demise, meaning that cross currents of intrigue kept him alive and gave the "king" room to maneuver, but only briefly. Before he can consolidate power in Doomstadt, Dante is also slain. In the scrum that followed for control of the country, Midori Mauvis was also a casualty of the political machine.

In Boreas, the border dispute between Österland and Ruslav is tentatively settled after several years of incremental maneuverings. Österland imports a collection of mercenary fighters from (or at least found in) Islas del Sol to bolster their own forces, enabling them to drive Ruslav entirely out and back to beyond their previous boundary.

Meanwhile, in the south of Eurus, stirrings in Oguz lead to territorial squabbles with neighbors, most notably when a border dispute arises with Vedia over land in the highland province of Hastina. The aging Maharaja Vaasudeva Repaundraka is perceived by Oguz to be weak and ineffectual, making diplomacy with the hard-bitten kingdom difficult. The conflict is inconclusive but demonstrative of the seeds of future issues.



In November, Michael Van Dance arrives in Marsailles, the southernmost port city in Malay. He is met by the Regency Council in Exile and given a full debriefing on everything they know of the last 17 years in Imajicka that he might have missed in his distant land. They solicit Michael's opinions and assistance, attempting to determine if he would even be a good choice, though they are hard enough pressed that it may have impacted their innate hopefulness.

The Regency Council in Exile is stunned to be introduced to Mimoto Fumiko Naishinno Dainana, seventh daughter of the Yasuhito-Tenno, Mimoto Emperor of Nippon. Or, as she is now named... Fumiko Van Dance. Michael, while abroad, had become betrothed to and married a prominent daughter of the imperial house of Nippon.

Michael Van Dance, it also happens, is a sober, earnest, and charismatic young man. He is firm and sincere in his love of country, scholarly without being bookish, and quick to assess the realities both strategic and political as they are revealed to him. The time in transit from Nippon had given him a great deal of opportunity to perform some of the difficult emotional work of coping with the basic destruction of Imajicka as a union, but as a Van Dance he has always had the closest ties to Wales and thus to Alba now. Michael believes in the sense of Olanna's choices given the extremes of circumstance to which she was subjected.

In short, Michael is a very promising sort of person to have the conversation "Technically, you are next in line to be King" with. As an additional feature, while they had perhaps hoped to leverage Michael's marriageability in some fashion, the council finds themselves far better off having the gift of Fumiko Van Dance to work with. Fumiko proves to be a quick-minded polyglot with an ability to read nuance from any given situation so quickly and accurately that she seems to be reading minds. A consummate diplomat and politician, the young Nipponjin woman is transparently more qualified to advise a king than anyone on the Regency Council could regard themselves to be. Yet she is able to demonstrate this without consuming the pride of the regents.

The interview and selection process being far more gratifying than they had dared hope, the Regency Council in Exile endorses Michael's claim to the throne as being the just and rightful. He and his imperial wife are discretely and unceremoniously coronated within days of setting foot in Marsailles, and the council becomes the base of the new King's Privy Council (still in exile). King Michael, first of his name, and the council set about planning for how to take back the throne he suddenly finds thrust upon him.



2004

## Matteus Vaclav Achieves Death-long Goal of More Death

King Michael reaches out immediately to as many loyalist lords as possible in advance of landing at Dover with a message predominantly of hope and allegiance. He moves to rally lords to himself while moving swiftly north to York, where he will base his operations to reclaim the kingdom.

Queen Fumiko is left behind temporarily in La Rochelle to maneuver Malayan lords for additional material support while keeping pressure against Doomstadt during its own era of disorder, to make the ongoing argument that nothing will be so good for Malay as to add resources to Michael's campaign.

With the hope restored by having a potential rightful and anointed king taking action for the good of the country, enthusiasm sluggishly mounts for defense against some of the forces at work particularly in the central Alban lands surrounding Greymere Lake. A major locus of resistance develops particularly around the Tir Anwar town of Scarborough with regard to the warlord Mohamad Al'sim, who is reaching northward from Cornwall. At first seeming sympathetic and potentially someone to recruit into the service of King Michael against Matteus Vaclav, it instead rapidly develops that Al'sim owes as much fealty to Matteus as any of several other major figures and is using Bridaini as the backbone of his own force projection.

In addition to controlling the Trandafir Damascene Al'sim, Mateus has under his control Catherine Lockhart, a powerful vampire, her father Sudokai Lockhart, and the war-hero General Anathema Device's primary magical counselor Miroslav Gustavsson from the days of the battle against Richard Returned. Lastly on his lists of potent subordinates is Anathema Device herself, now a vampire enslaved by Catherine Lockhart.

Popular mythology leads a wide coalition of Albans to believe that if they can destroy the vampire Catherine Lockhart that the beloved General Device will be restored to Humanity with the death of her vampire 'parent.'

This is ruinously false, and the pursuit of the rumor costs time, effort, and morale only to leave the loyalists in Tir Anwar fighting against General Device as a vampire anyway. Ultimately the minions of Matteus are found and overcome by painful

degrees. Bartholomew Cornwall resurfaces to bring reserves gathered from his own lands and the Llewellyn forces of Cymru to the east. These he drives northward with the intent to fight through to Michael in York.

King Logan O'Roarke persuades multiple Scoheimer clans to cross the straights to Cumbria and offer reinforcements to King Michael from the north when Dame Amelia Van Dance offers to purge his shores of the Black Tide in exchange. Queen Fumiko arrives in Dover with a division of Helvetian mercenaries whose hire was extracted from King Jean-Michelle through dazzling diplomatic efforts. A Gael'Braugh nobleman named Basil Moonrunner descends from a mountain holdfast to bring in pressure from the east around Coventry. Pressure from all sides drives Mattheus Vaclav and the last of his subordinates into a trap made of the increasingly armed and ready citizens of the crossroads town of Scarborough in Tir Anwar between York and Dover, who are able to hold the lich in place while his armies are ruined. Thereafter, the agile-minded citizen investigators leverage artifacts gathered to act as counter-influences to Mattheus' peculiar religion in order to render him vulnerable enough to be at long last destroyed.

While Alba fought a desperate last stand for its own survival, Doomstadt remains engaged in a heated debate about what its future is going to look like. Some of the smaller noble houses, particularly in the northern part of the kingdom, give her economic reforms further thought in terms of what a sustainable economy will need to look like. A lot of what Dolosus had intended to do involved opening Doomstadt up to broader trade with the world, something difficult to do as the most reviled and repugnant user of brutal slavery in the known world. Self-exile and auto-cannibalism begins to look less and less like the right course for the future of their nation, and alignments shift in the early part of 2004.

Abruptly, Dolosus Mauvis is reincarnated and, very controversially, put right back on the throne in a major power play by Dramikov with the hard-hitting backing of its two major subsidiary houses, Borisova and Saitov, along with political cover from Faustus and a swarm of lesser houses ready to try some progressive politics.

The purpose of bringing Dolosus back is perhaps less an act of noble idealism than a ploy perfectly designed to unite the southern Great Houses of Doomstadt against her. A number of northern houses profit by harvesting slaves from Warwick and the Goblin Wastes and then selling them to the southern houses for a profit, but that's hardly the backbone of their economy. Improving methods will bring more profit more quickly to the agile smaller houses while monolithic enterprises like Dorogai, Raumi, and Motova will take too long to adapt. Unifying southern houses against Dolosus's reforms all but guarantees short-

and mid-term advantages for the economy of northern Doomstadt that can be turned into real political capital in the mid- to long-term.

Plus, she means what she says about basic rights for sentient beings, which matters to some of the people involved.

Much farther south, Maharaja Vaasudeva Repaundraka of Vedia dies in 2004, a very old and well-regarded leader, to be replaced by his wife Maharani Devakani Marinveda who had acted as consort and co-ruler for many years. This transition is smoothly formal and non-controversial, although some rural antiquarians and luddites dislike her style of indulging all religious practices including those that allow for harm to come to animals. This is not a new dispute, instead being a very old issue in the country but one avenue from which launch criticism of the new monarch. Additionally, the distraction of her ascension provides little assistance to the Hastina province border conflict with Oguz, which holds steady in a kind of stalemate of grab and grab-back.

And in the farthest North, in the Kingdom of Skollar beyond Nórdehávn, King Ulf Magnusson is slain by crown prince Andrei Ulfsson in response to what was seen as a dangerous creeping madness in the old king. Andrei fled the country and took on a pseudonym, leaving his wife Signe and two daughters behind. The elder daughter, an adult, pursued her father in an effort to regain honor lost in the assassination, leaving only the younger daughter, Princess Illiana, to ascend to the throne of Skollar. Her ascension began a period of slow decentralization as Jarls (local lords) gained more autonomy and independence.

In nearby Österland, the time arrives to pay the mercenaries brought from Islas del Sol to drive away Ruslavian aggression. The mercenaries demand more than they originally agreed upon in pay, which Österland refuses. The mercenaries occupy and sack the city of Anjela in order to 'get what they are due'. Österland ends up fighting with their own mercenary army at length.

## 2005

### A Secret in Briarmark

The Kingdom of Alba, reclaimed at last by a rightful king, begins to take shape at long last. It is ordered into the recognizable modern allocation of lands. Lost nobles are found, relatives unearthed, tasks and assignments shifted, rewards delivered.

Fundamentally the Kingdom of Alba begins comes into proper being composed of the Duchies of Cymru, Cornwall, and Wales. Each of these is subdivided into Baronies and within the Baronies lordships and so on. The rank of Earl is eliminated entirely as a holdover from Barbarian ancestry and unnecessary to the infrastructure of a smaller, more modest kingdom. The former Earl of Cymru, Gwydion ap Llewellyn, is raised to the Ducal seat of the same name. Much of his lands were badly damaged by a goblin warlord in conflict with the Bridaini during the past few years as well as a slavers consortium by the name of The Obsidian Hand, but Duke Gwydion was still able to bring out some of his people to rise to the support of his new king.

Bartholomew Cornwall is affirmed as Duke of Cornwall, a predictable outcome. His daughter, Meridian, turns out to have been betrothed to Connor ap Llewellyn, son of the duke of Cymru, possibly as a part of negotiations to bring Cymry forces across the mountains to fight.

Basil Moonrunner, instrumental quarter of the pincer forces that trapped Vaclav in Tir Anwar, is elevated to Duke of Wales, likely a reflection of his better than average military position after the deprivations of the lost generation. It is also possible that King Michael overcompensated for a childhood friendship with John (and consequently Victoria) Exeter and elevated Moonrunner above Exeter to avoid starting his reign under the pall of nepotism.

John Exeter, heroic partisan to the rightful succession through each stage of the previous four wars, is instead made Baron of Notford, the potent barony created around York, though his family lands would previously have described all of what is now wales as the Earldom of Notford. This appointment is made by the King directly along with the selection of General William Kyle, a loyalist leader and survivor of the Warwick debacle, to be Baron of Northumbria (which was once Cumbria). Other appointments or confirmations are made by his new Dukes.

Duke Moonrunner manages the reappointment of Baron Hieroneous of Evanhaust and the elevation of Baron Fenton Hadrian Xavier of Briarmark, each of distinguished lineage. He selects Lord Harrison Derwent for Baron of Surrey but faces difficulties in who to appoint Baron of Tir Anwar, a critical region in central Wales responsible for Alba's largest port city of Dover.

Ultimately, Duke Moonrunner draws from a pool of those who distinguished themselves against Matteus Vaclav and currently reside in Tir Anwar. The plague in Dover and its conquest by the Kommedra leave him little to choose from there, and instead he finds among the residents of the town of Scarborough a minor Cymru nobleman named Sebastian Lledrithcath, locally known as "Jinx." Explaining the decision as one driven by the need for a local leader to be elevated without introducing someone not already of the peerage, Moonrunner abruptly appoints a reluctant Jinx to the position of Baron of Tir Anwar.

Military forces are gradually reorganized and collected from where they had become dispersed throughout the ravaged kingdom. A great deal of mopping up occurs in the wake of the lengthy conflict with Helena de Wight and Matteus. York is affirmed as the new capital of the Kingdom of Alba, as Avalon will take years to rebuild from its damaged condition after being sacked in what is now called The Fall of Avalon during Helena's war for the crown.

Government bureaucracies and institutions are re-forged and amended. A new order of knighthood is created, the Order of the White Rose, to explicitly honor non-martial service above and beyond any expectation of a citizen.

As things begin to resemble calm above the ground, rumors of modest political turmoil in the Subtellurium capital city of Elysian begin to manifest by way of a handful of Praeletorius Noctem and miscellaneous rumors filtering very gradually out of the reclusive Taelgranis kingdom. Elysian is proximal enough to Alba, as such things go, to have felt some of the effects of the several years of war. It is possible that some manner of honest concern for a neighbor drives the Taelgranis to engage in debates about their own foreign policy, but it is perhaps more likely that the Prime of Elysian is concerned for the safety and security of his realm and whether or not the chaotic ignorance of surface-dwelling kingdoms might prove to be a particular threat to it.

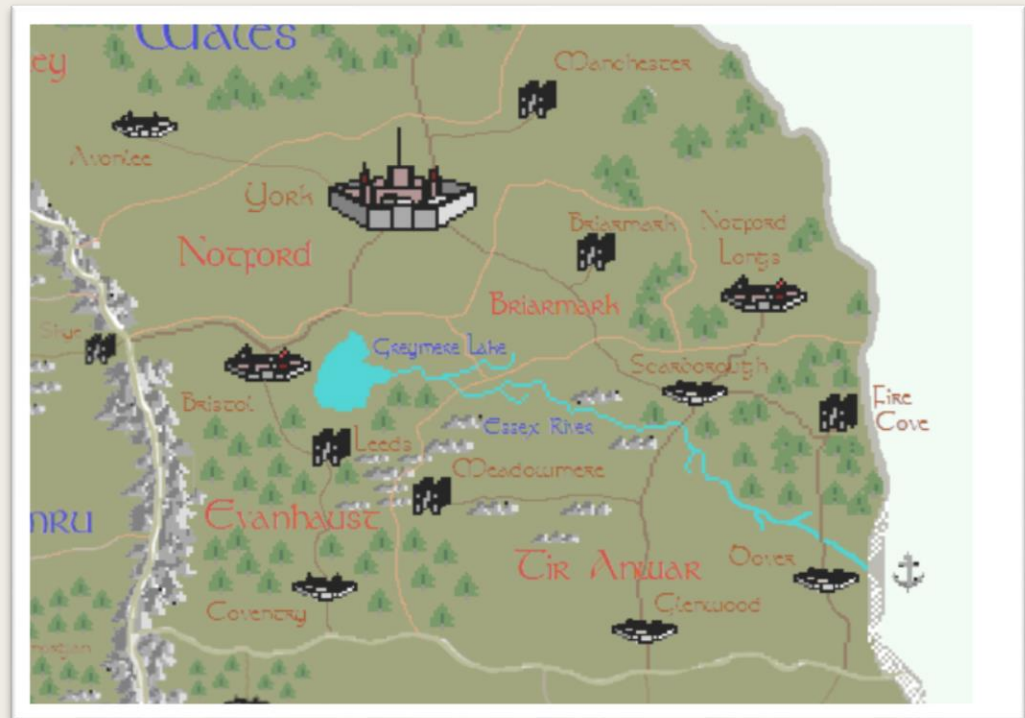
The substance of what emerges from the Subtellurium is not entirely dissimilar from political debates happening in similar timescales amongst the Endrani and Gael'Braugh. Is it worth engaging more fully with the rest of the world? Is our particular chosen method of isolation the right course for our civilization?

As in Sylvanator and Doomstadt, this issue divides public opinion in the Subtellurium contentiously. Of the three Sidhe races, the Taelgranis are the most reclusive and secretive, making the Gael' Braugh seem merely standoffish and the Endrani positively gregarious by comparison. The debate, as a consequence, is one held very quietly and very gradually, but which expatriates and exiles can gradually begin to learn of.

In Doomstadt, however, this debate boils to the surface as an outright, full blown, violent and confrontational civil war. Not the low-key constant state of intrigue and peril, but genuine ongoing aggression. As this was the essential goal of reincarnating Dolosus Mauvis to re-assert herself on the throne, things seem to be going according to plan in Doomstadt. It should be noted that Doomstadt has not had to fend off a single meaningful horde of rapacious undead in the last 6 years and could, under a government with more equilibrium, likely have conquered Malay by now if it were trying. Instead, it is having a heated internal conversation about emancipation, national ethics, and economics.

Back in Alba, King Michael must try to nurture a period of calm to begin rebuilding. He sets a Knight of his newly created Order of the White Rose, Sir Percy Corbray, to undertake a full and accurate census of the realm in order to find out what is left.

There is hardly any time for a sense of normalcy or calm to become well instituted before a conflict of personality seems to arise between the Barons of Evanhaust and Briarmark. Evanhaust had been a lord of his lands since long before the Crusade, while Xavier had been only newly appointed after distinguished service during the recent wars. Their personal conflict begins to steadily escalate until it becomes apparent that violence was not only inevitable, it is already occurring.



A flurry of discovery is undertaken before facts are assembled that the Baron Fenton Hadrian Xavier is in fact a former minion of Matteus Vaclav who had been executed by citizens of the town of Scarborough during the last conflict only to later be resurrected by a well-meaning local soon after. The man now Baron of Briarmark, who was actively moving towards war with his neighbor Evanhaust, is in actuality a necromancer who went by the sobriquet "Ecks." While his genealogy supports his position as the Baron of Briarmark, in doing so he skipped over a cousin with a better claim to the position. That cousin is now missing, or in hiding. However it was that he manipulated Duke Basil Moonrunner to achieve his station, he is now building up yet another army of undead on Alban Soil.

Questions are immediately asked as to what failure of vetting or management by the barely re-assembled army or any persons at the court that could overlook the insinuation of a servant of Vaclav into the greater context of the Alban peerage, but a series of questions of that sort would have to wait. By the time the plot is uncovered, it is because of actual shipments of Shalkaran corpses being brought up the river to Graymere Lake on barges in order to be animated by Baron Hadrian and used as seed stock for his army. The corpses were almost certainly accumulations of fallen "Bridaini" mercenaries intended to be scuttled at sea rather than lose even more ground to mass graves. Instead the barges found their way to the town of Monmouth in Briarmark and their cargo into the armies of the undead.

Even with questions being asked, reaction time remains desperately slow. The Nights Watch, rallying in Fire Cove on the east coast of Tir Anwar, is even more badly depleted than the regular Army by six years of battle with the undead on home soil. Resources and reinforcements requested from Doomstadt and Malay, other outposts of plausible Nights Watch strength, are slow in arriving. Further delays and disruption of forces are created by nightmarish creatures creating havoc and distrust amongst Hadrian's opposition. The best studied examples of such influences include a doppelganger-like creature, a worshipper of Beshaba, calling herself the Sandman, and a demonic entity called the Oderkhest. Both of these creatures had the ability to mimic others and manipulate minds. Both would leverage this ability to create discord and uncertainty, though with difference nuances. Neither was under the direct control of Hadrian, being instead the scattered leavings of those things that rallied to or were conjured forth by Matteus during his tenure attempting to destroy Alba. The ongoing presence of disruptive influences loosely faithful to Matteus' entropic concept of "The Dark" is an advantage for Hadrian, but not something under his control.

Jinx Lledrithcath, Baron of Tir Anwar, calls his banners in November of 2005 to march wholesale on the border between Evanhaust and Briarmark in an effort to put Hadrian down.



Meridian Cornwall, adult daughter of Duke Bartholomew, rejects her impending marriage to the heir to the Duchy of Cymru and flees her father to run away with her lover, Valen. Meridian's beloved is a Scarborough farmer whose brother (a member of the Nights Watch) abuses his political autonomy to help the couple flee the country. Though pursued aggressively by her father, neither Meridian nor Valen is found, but the half-brother, Haven, is discovered and executed by Cornwall for violating his sword oath to the Nights Watch.

Meridian is disinherited in favor of her brother, Lucian Cornwall.

Across the straits, Inishmora is experiencing the increasingly heavy hand of King Logan O'Roarke. While initially garnering some disgruntlement for his rejection of the ancient rite of the Lia Fàil, King Logan has continued to increase pressure against all manner of historical veneration of the Fae on the island, and to begin driving out local priests and druids associated with faith of the old ways. His particular vendetta against all things Fae-Adjacent seems to stem from youth and to persist to the point of paranoid hatred. He even begins driving out more 'respectable' Thracian sects that he considers to be potential covers for Faean or Gentry-related beliefs and practices.

As the Inish are a very spiritual people, by and large, the paranoid decrees of the King take him from unpopular to reviled and feared, but Inishmora knows that it is lucky to have a king at all under the current political circumstances and struggles with avoiding a rebellion and further bloodshed. One potential mechanism to deal with the problem in the future is proposed when it becomes widely rumored that a young child hidden away in some remote orphanage is in fact the "True King" of Inishmora. That is to say; a true-born secret heir to High King John Beliol, slain in the Black Tide. It is suggested that this child will be known by a birthmark, a crescent moon of Gwynna on one palm, to be the true king.

King Logan, naturally, spends some time looking for infants that might match that description. When a child rumored to be of suitable features turns up in Scarborough, Tir Anwar, King Logan dispatches his personal seneschal to get to the bottom of it, but no such child is located in the immediate term, and the search continues in the background of larger events unfolding.

The self-exiled former crown prince of Skollar, Andrel Ulfsson, in hiding in Alba and calling himself "Lasorian," is slain accidentally by magical backlash when a reincarnation ritual detonates in failure nearby where he was living in hiding. This causes great disruption amongst the expatriate Skollarian loyalists living with and around him, who had as yet failed to persuade him to return home and claim his crown. The conceptual status of heir-in-exile then falls to Andrel's elder daughter Nylessia, though the throne is factually held by his younger daughter, Queen Illiana.



In other news of the larger world, Maharani Devakani Marinveda launches an aggressive counter campaign against Oguz that quickly quells the border issue, then makes a gracious compromise which strengthens their international relationship.



Out in the middle of the Mari Magno, a massive, slow moving typhoon all but obliterates half the settlements on the islands of Antillia and Dennery of Islas del Sol, as well as some of the smaller islands north of Antilla. This storm is referred to as the Key Carolan Typhoon.

And in Islas del Sol-adjacent developments, the ongoing mercenary problem in Österland continues. In order to deal with the Islan mercenaries that have sacked their city of Anjela, Österland imports additional mercenaries, this time good Helvetian ones, to fight the first set of stateless scoundrels they'd hired. While very expensive this investment is worth it and the old mercenaries are rounded up and all their leaders executed while the rest are set to hard labor in the mountains. The country struggles economically under the tax burden from the hire of the Helvetians and the losses from recent campaigns.

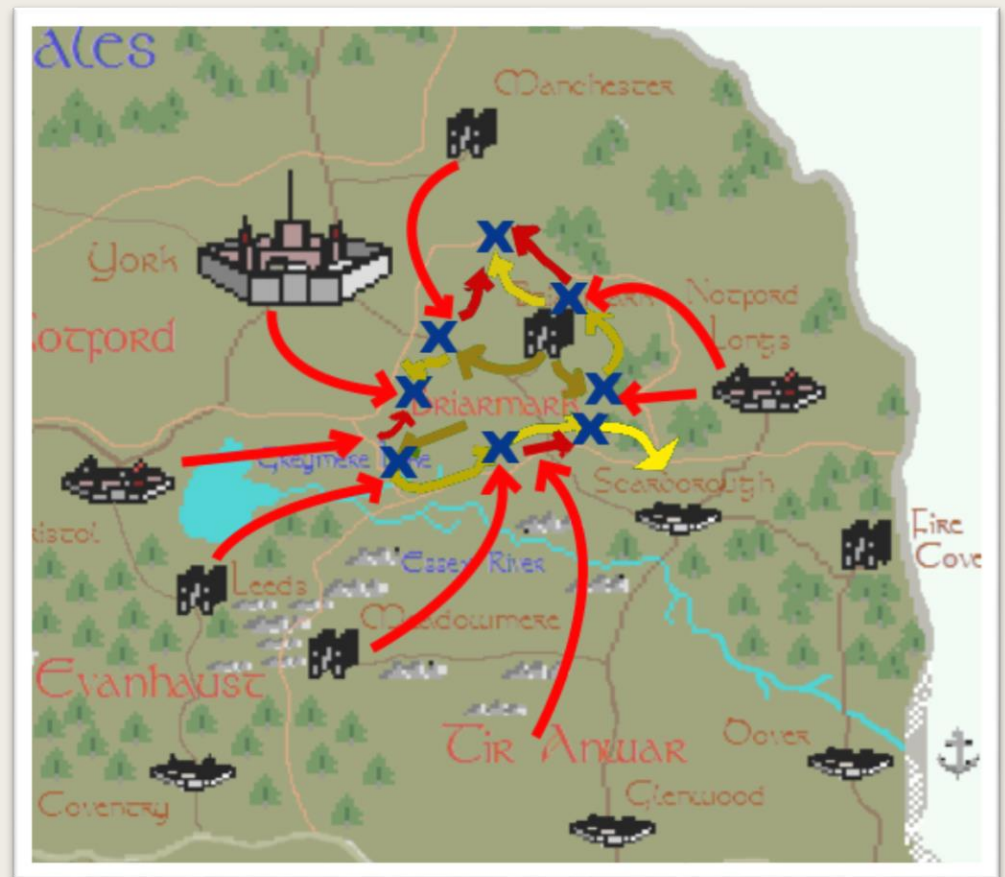
In the lands of Warwick, the outbreak of concerted civil war in Doomstadt alleviates pressure on the southern border as slaving raid ventures dwindle to nothing almost overnight. Pressure continues to be serious from the Goblin Wastes to the north, however. This is composed of a blend of outflowing creatures, magical weather, and chaotic circumstances that steadily continue an escalation that began in the mid-1990s. Rural Druids, in particular, speculate about the faltering of ancient mythical guardians that had been limiting Wastes expansion, and many pursue spiritual or magical solutions to what is perceived as a larger potential problem.

2006

## A Greater Dying in Briarmark

Conflict rages in Briarmark between the forces of Baron Fenton Hadrian Xavier, also known by his sobriquet "Necromancer Ecks," and his neighbor Baron Hieroneous Evanhaust. Initial assaults against Evanhaust have been turned back upon Hadrian, but his forces have swelled to a catastrophic degree and begun to include vast swaths of the civilian population of Briarmark. After an untoward degree of delay and maneuvering, the Royal Army is at last sufficiently organized to respond and drives into Briarmark from the north.

Baron Evanhaust is slain in combat, but his adult daughter and heir, Delia Evanhaust, takes up the banners of her fallen sire and throws pressure into Briarmark both over land and by boat down the Essex river from Graymere Lake. Nights Watch forces concentrated in Fire Cove, Tir Anwar, maneuver with Lord Sirius Arbourcourt of Fire Cove to bring pressure along with Field Marshall Lord Calvin Hayworth leading the Alban 1st Cavalry division out of Notford Longs. Baron Jinx Lledrithcath's bannermen, assembled north of Meadowmere and Glenwood, throw their weight into Briarmark from the south. Noted amongst Lledrithcath's banners are those of Lord Joseph Heath, Lord of John's Bay, to the south of Dover; Lord Aloysius Valain, Lord of Highgate, west of Dover; and Lady Esther Berant, Lady of Tidewater, south of Dover.



The armies of Briarmark are comprised predominantly of the undead raised by Baron Hadrian, but also feature an assortment of recombined shreds from the mortal servants of Matteus Vaclav, a small number of mortal mercenaries, and a very large clan of Orcs called the Black Goats, brought in from the Carneddau Mountains west of Evanhaust under the command of Thalian Evanhaust, the estranged half-orc stepson of Baron Hieroneous.

A series of devastating battles gradually compress and begin to eliminate Hadrian's forces, though at serious cost. Late in the process, when it is becoming apparent he will lose, Hadrian is pressed into a confined territory of southeastern Briarmark and finds a small gap to exploit in the pressure against him between Tir Anwar forces and the Nights Watch. The narrow corridor offers him an opportunity to break for Dover and attempt to escape the situation alive. Taking what little remains of his army, Hadrian drives for the coastline, a route which is forced to pass through and around the crossroads town of Scarborough.

In Scarborough, the contingency of a maneuver of this sort was anticipated and prepared for by Baron Jinx Lledrithcath and his retainers. The Baron had placed himself in the position to take advantage of exactly the scenario they ended up facing. Though the town of Scarborough was almost destroyed entirely by the rampaging Hadrian on his way to the coast, they were able to rally and destroy the last remaining parts of the army before Baron Jinx personally slew Baron Hadrian in battle, ending his rebellion for once and all.

Baron Jinx Lledrithcath's tactical cunning in anticipating Hadrian's movements and preparing for them is lauded at court, and he is favorably compared by those with long memory to the brilliance of Dame Victoria Exeter. The King meets personally with his young Baron in order to resolve several extant issues arising from the campaign. Particularly, it is discovered that there was interference and sabotage preventing the military's swift and certain involvement in the conflict. Had the Royal Army not had vital intelligence obscured from their discovery, the entire matter could have been solved before many lives were lost.

First and foremost of the conspirators proves to be Basil Moonrunner, Duke of Wales. This is desperately unfortunate for a number of reasons including that he is responsible for several other appointments as well, now suspect. Lledrithcath, however, has proven himself above suspicion. Moonrunner had collaborated with Desmarais de Guyenne, écuyer, seigneur de Valois, Chevalier de Lis d'Or, a Malayan envoy in York who had some motive to undermine the newly-cemented crown. Also involved in the conspiracy was Major Sir Alan Fortsworth, KOKG, Chief of Staff to the 3rd Regiment Afoot, in York.

By interfering with the flow of information to and from the Royal Army and others at court, the three co-conspirators (and several minor players also involved) had aided the Necromancer Ecks, Baron Fenton Hadrian Xavier, giving him time to consolidate before the military could become involved. Furthermore, Moonrunner had appointed Hadrian in the first place, accepting evidence of his lineage and due inheritance.

Instead, both Moonrunner and Ecks had been long-term servants of Matteus Vaclav as far back as when Matteus had been a servant of Helena de Wight and thus had ties going almost all the way back to the fracture of the kingdom. They had suborned the loyalty of Sir Alan Fortsworth, who became their connection to controlling the Army.

Moonrunner needs prompt replacement as Duke of Wales, and it is abundantly clear that the only suitable person for the task is John Exeter, Baron of Notford. The Barony is passed into the hands of Lord Winston Coleridge of Manchester, whose old post is then given to Brigadier General Sir Edward Wilson. New procedures are created to protect military information. Baron Jinx is reaffirmed in his position and personally thanked by King Michael. Delia Evanhaust is elevated to Baroness in her Father's place, and lastly, it is revealed that the rightful heir to Briarmark, a cousin of Hadrian, has been a dragoon hiding in the retinue of Baron Jinx the entire course of the campaign. Ty'el is revealed, scrutinized, and after satisfying the elements of being both legitimate and worthy, is elevated to Baroness of Briarmark where she will be hard pressed to rebuild after the near-total destruction wrought by her illegitimate predecessor.

Sir Alan Fortsworth is stripped of his knighthood, disinherited, whipped, branded, and cast out of the Army in disgrace before being hung for treason. Desmarais de Guyenne, a relative of the potent Valois family in Malay which had produced the late Sir Henri Valois of the Company of the Black Lion, is controversially beheaded in York rather than being deported to Malay to stand trial there. As King Jean-Michelle also desired to try him for treason, this becomes a bone of contention between the two new kings, though not a grievous breach.

Duke Basil Moonrunner attempts escape on several occasions, involving subordinates and by their efforts revealing more threads of the conspiracy. He is kept imprisoned for several months after the execution of the other two prime conspirators while the entire dimensions of the conspiracy are discovered. He is notably interrogated by Queen Fumiko herself, whose keen eye for intrigue helps to dismantle all of the rugged former duke's resistance to confession. With information gleaned from Basil Moonrunner, other lingering elements of the destructive influences of Matteus and Helena are discovered and apprehended, making the realm safer.

For his cooperation, Moonrunner is given agency in the manner of his own execution. Ultimately, he selects to be subjected to ritual sunder in private. Though his remains are displayed publicly under guard in order to thwart conspiracy theories about his death, King Michael stands in the circle personally over the strenuous objection of his privy council.

By driving out so many lingering threads of the old necromantic nightmares and conspiracies, King Michael begins to earn the gratitude, admiration, and respect of his people. By the end of 2006 he has been given the common moniker of "King Michael the Good."

Even with as much as was happening in Briarmark, other events of significance were occurring all through the lands of former Imajicka.

In Alba itself, there is an ominous blue comet seen in the western sky for nearly two months (January to February). This comet is not one known to astronomers and its patterns are not understood, but it appeared to be very 'close' as such things go. As it was dwindling from sight, a meteorite struck earth in rural Tir Anwar emitting a similar coloration as it fell, leading some to conclude it was somehow a piece of the comet itself. The meteorite is small, metallic, and its impact not geologically significant, but it does temporarily contribute to bizarre meta-magical disruptions for a short period of a few days after striking the earth.

A dangerous but not necessarily fatal illness called the Grey Thrush spreads rapidly through port cities particularly in the Spring of 2006. It is associated with places that were impacted by Baron Hadrian's corpse barges and thought to be related contamination of some sort. Healers in Alba struggle to find treatments for the disease.

Servants of King Logan of Inishmora remain on the hunt for the elusive child claimed by some Inish to be the "True King of Inishmora." More reliable intelligence places the child in an Alban orphanage near Glenwood, resulting in the destruction of the orphanage by assassins likely serving the Inish Crown, but the arsonists are never caught. The orphanage is rebuilt, but no evidence of the particular child is found or perpetuated.

To their credit, those seeking the True King child did not produce or manufacture their own version of this solution by declaring a child they **were** able to find to be the correct one. Instead, as King Logan continues to turn up the pressure to change the religious practices of Inishmora, the people of the island begin to turn to religious solutions. A cabal begins to

orchestrate some manner of resistance involving prayer and invocations in an effort to summon the will of the Gods to unseat the harsh and dictatorial King. This, unfortunately, creates a negative feedback loop of reprisal and suppression to an increasingly broad number of religious practices. Diplomatic efforts taken by Alba and Malay to soothe King Logan's treatment of faith are met with stony paranoia and little progress is made.

The civil war occurring in Doomstadt is messy and grim. A flurry of assassinations and assassination attempts disrupt alliances that form and disintegrate swiftly amongst the lesser houses, while the larger ones consolidate and fortify their strongholds. The capital of Danzig is all but evacuated as the five Great Houses withdraw almost entirely into their own regional capitals. Spies abound.

A war amongst the Endrani of Doomstadt is slightly different from a war in other nations. Slaves make poor soldiers and the nobility have no concern about rallying the popular support of the smallfolk living in the kingdom. Battles themselves are often fought as small- to medium-sized skirmishes carried out by forces composed of Endrani Shurukai (house guards) loyal to one matron or another. Mercenary recruitment is a gradual process that features a lot of misdirection and competitive hiring practices, and sabotaging other houses ability to hire mercenaries is part and parcel of development. Once mercenaries of sufficient battle strength are recruited, these forces are levied at one another in earnest. When two predominantly mercenary forces encounter one another in combat, however, if the forces are not well-matched then the side with the notable disadvantage will usually surrender immediately rather than bother with a battle. This preserves forces for future confrontations, which makes the field battles into something that more resembles a repetitive chess game of placement and maneuver. Real large-scale field battles only occur when two large forces are brought together with there being a real question about the certainty of the outcome. This means that the battles are only fought as tie-breakers and never as devoted defense of land and country.

And all the while the relentless politicking continues.

An Ambassador of House Motova, one of the great slave-holding houses, sends an ambassador to York to try and negotiate with the new King of Alba near the end of the conflict in Briarmark. An assassination attempt on her person on the way to the capital is met with pure outrage and immediately creates a diplomatic incident when the assassins are traced through layers of misdirection back to house Borisova, which is a subject house of the ruling Dramikov. Further research, however, unravels that the Borisova who arranged for the assassination attempt was lured into doing so by information leaked to a Borisova spy in house Raumi, a different one of the southern Great Houses. The shape of the strategy is ultimately

determined to be an effort to garner sympathy and indebtedness between Alba and the southern houses by the attempted or actual assassination of the southern diplomat, Clarissa, 3<sup>rd</sup> Matron of Motova.

Clarissa was not a part of that particular scheme and generally insists it has nothing to do with her petition but overall the diplomatic relationship between Alba and slave-holding southern Doomstadt is not promising. What negotiations are being made with the northern, emancipation Houses is kept secret and out of public view entirely except to acknowledge that letters have been exchanged.

A substantial earthquake occurs near Auric, Doomstadt, in July 2006. This being the home city of Motova, the Endrani ambassador promptly recalls herself home. The earthquake provokes modest tidal waves which do minor damage to some beaches in eastern Northumbria, but the irregular sequence of waves that strikes Doomstadt's port city of Bonn does considerably more damage. Large numbers of slaves and freemen peasants are killed on or around the port because of the methods of construction in the city and the way the wave had propagated. A number of pier-built warehouses in the shallow, silt-and-sandbar area of the city take the brunt of the incident and are battered apart, then the debris and victims drug out to sea by the river current. Additionally, docks are badly damaged that will cause interference with some of Bonn's international trade until they can be repaired.

In other Sidhe-related machinations, the head Librarian of the city library in the Subtellurium capital of Elysian, who by tradition serves as one of the 27 *Praetores* on Elysian's Council, is gradually going senile. This information is ruthlessly protected by political forces in the city who wish to retain the head librarian, a conservative, rather than allow him to be replaced by his most senior deputy, who leans more progressive. This means maneuverings must occur before the librarian retires to make sure he is replaced by an appropriately conservative subordinate. Leaks or rumors about the mental state of the head librarian become priceless and deadly. *Praeletorius Noctem* (the sanctioned caste of hardy scouts who venture to the surface on behalf of their kingdom) are seen moving around York in and Nottford pursuit of some unidentified criminal. The secret is retained by the conservatives for the time being.

Simultaneously, a disturbance drives several Morgoth members of peculiar Morgoth societies into both the Subtellurium and the surface world. This disruption is explained by researchers to relate to a type of Morgoth-created abomination in their home territories called "Gith." These creatures have a heated relationship with Morgoths, as most creatures do, but are not



friendly to anyone else, either. The two types of being hunt one another in remote regions. Claims by investigators suggest the presence in the mortal surface world of a Morgoth-related entity called an "Elder Brain," which is theorized to exist somewhere between Notford Longs and the capital. Researchers, particularly Taelgranis *exturni* with an interest in Subtellurium architecture and hierarchy, investigate surreptitiously. Representatives from Elysian, however, are unwilling to discuss Gith at all.

To the west of all this, in Islas del Sol, the disorder caused by the Key Carolan Typhoon and the large amount of shipping involved in efforts to rebuild the communities that were damaged creates an opportunity for two warring clans or alliances of pirates to fight for control of the trade routes bringing in reconstruction materials. The naval power of the free port city of Tiburón is unable to compete effectively with the large and organized enterprises, though it does lose several ships trying out of pride to preserve its status as capital and heart of the islands. Luckily for Tiburón, the pirate factions in question are primarily focused on one another and not interested in harming the capital, but they do cause a great deal of harm to ordinary lives with their squabbling and theft. The disinterest and lack of threat to Tiburón causes efforts to solicit assistance to proceed sluggishly, and the groups antagonize one another and hinder rebuilding for most of the year. Thankfully, there is not a repeat performance of anything like the Key Carolan storm in 2006.



# 2007

## Proxied into Doomstadt

After the setback posed by the war in Briarmark, Alba again progresses towards a more steady and stable state. While the battles in Briarmark were devastating, much of the rest of the country got a needed reprieve from violence allowing for crops to grow and people to rebuild. The population remains depleted after so much violence, and there is particularly a gap in adults aged thirty to forty, reflecting the "Lost Generation."

A Royal Couriers Service is founded. Government bureaucracies begin to reassert order, and particularly wild sections of countryside are calmed somewhat by the return of soldiers called away for fighting in the last decade of war. The Royal Army is able to begin recruiting, gradually, and immigration from several other nations is encouraged by a certain amount of pandering to foreign businesses. King Michael develops a tax policy, more or less, and fleshes out the ranks of the privy counselors in order to manage to royal borrowing of money and wrangling of arguments. It gradually becomes apparent that the structures King Michael is implementing are not identical to the Imajickan systems they are replacing, but instead have things in common with Shalkaran and Nipponjin management, creating a certain amount of xenophobic tension amongst various members of the court.

An important structure from Imajicka that is reintroduced immediately is the Royal Council of Mages, advisors to the king on matters arcane and mystical, composed of the best minds Alba has to offer on magical theory and research. This elite group is to some degree self-selecting, as it is the case that the most elite wizards tend to be more or less aware of one another. The council size is somewhat reduced, however. Archidama Cherise De Gaul has not been seen since the loss of her son, Sir Whitney, when Richard's Crusade disappeared into the Goblin Wastes, while Archidamus Euan Westmorland perished in the battle against Richard Returned. Others have become lost as well, though a few new members have risen to join the ranks.

Early in the year, the barony of Tir Anwar is subject to an escalating series of magical anomalies ultimately yielding a substantial conflict between localized rival factions of demonic beings. While the consequences of this do not go far beyond the increasingly notorious town of Scarborough, it does raise a substantial question about that very notoriety and the implication that there might be something specifically about the land itself in that location that lends itself to interactions with

the mystical or murderous. Members of the Royal Council of Mages correspond with statisticians, taxonomists, and arcane experts at the Royal University in Lyonesse in pursuit of answers to the academic question of what causes can drive metaphysical interaction trends and how that might apply to a place like a crossroads trading village halfway to Dover.

After quiet and extended negotiations, Queen Dolosus of Doomstadt, engaged in an intense civil war in her own lands, signs the Treaty of Warwick with King Michael of Alba. This treaty cedes to Alba all ostensibly Doomstadter land north of a boundary line stretching from the mouth of the Vandalus river to the Dvergen kingdom of Ironbeard's trading outpost at The End. This allows Dolosus to leverage historical boundaries to hand over land she didn't want or use anyway. In exchange for this land grant, Alba agrees to become involved in Doomstadt's civil war on behalf of the northern Great Houses loyal to Queen Dolosus Mauvis. Additionally, by occupying the land of Warwick, Alba is essentially agreeing to allow itself to be used as a buffer between Doomstadt itself and an increasingly agitated and dangerous border with the Goblin Wastes.

The terms of the Treaty of Warwick also include various front-loaded financial incentives for Alba, as well as policy guarantees on behalf of Doomstadt. As the foremost example of this, while Queen Dolosus had officially banned the practice of slavery in the portions of her kingdom that she controlled, during the ongoing strain of the civil war this policy had not been formally implemented and carried with it no criminality. In the Treaty of Warwick, the ban is made more explicit and immediate, and includes broader provisions to overcome tactical evasions of slavery-in-all-but-name that had become the practical immediate outcome amongst loyalists unwilling to change immediately. Furthermore, the act of enslaving any sentient being, purchasing or selling any enslaved sentient being, transporting an enslaved sentient being, or contributing through proxies to the purchase, sale, or transport of any enslaved sentient being was declared by both parties to be criminal and to carry penalties as high as execution. Special carve-outs are made for the practice of purchasing enslaved persons for the exclusive purpose of freeing them.

Another valuable provision to the Treaty of Warwick was a broad and straightforward statement declaring Trandafir residents of Doomstadt to be citizens of Doomstadt, should they so choose, to be entitled to all rights and provisions due any citizen of Doomstadt. While bland, this statement was a vast improvement of theoretical status, at least, for those Trandafir suffering persecution on account of their heritage in the Endrani-ruled nation.

In instituting the acquisition of Warwick, King Michael divides the land into the baronies of Drackenvelt, Estermont, Daneholt, and Freeholt. The capital of the new Duchy is placed at Newcastle, a modest city in the central grainlands of Estermont. Implementing the beginnings of the transition takes much of the summer and parceling out appointments and

elevations to manage the lands is a slow and carefully undertaken process. The determination of who to appoint as the Duke of Warwick is a contentious one, and power struggles emerge in the Alban court as those who feel entitled to the position begin to jockey for advantage in anticipation of the announcement.

As spiritual successor to the Kingdom of Imajicka, Albans coming back into the region is a psychological catastrophe. Many Warwick residents felt entirely abandoned by Imajicka when, after the Night of Long Knives in 1978, the nobles and military of Warwick were driven from the region. With Alba coming in, it had the distinct feel of a miniature Imajicka simply trying to rebuild its old empire, only to abandon them again at the first sign of future trouble.

Lives were lost or ruined when the leadership abandoned the province, though abandonment is not the universal perception. Others see the villains of the N.O.L.K. as the Endrani alone, and hold them responsible for the devastation and misfortune that followed. An additional complication is that while most nobles and all of the military ended up driven out of Warwick, there were a scattering of local lords who opted to stay, risking the Endrani death-squads and incursions to go it alone without any feudal structure backing them. Some such lords were indeed killed, others managed to negotiate for or stubbornly retain some of their autonomy under the tatterdemalion governance Doomstadt has exerted in the intervening thirty years.

A noble who had stayed behind might be regarded as a determined colonial oppressor or might be regarded as a populist superhero.

The common folk had almost no choice whatsoever about escaping and were left to be ruled or not ruled by whatever petty tyrant or passing Endrani slaver decreed their actions in any given year. Transformed by generations of grit and obstinacy into a motley assembly of hardened frontiersmen, citizens of Warwick simply cannot be absorbed into Alba like any other territory. While some greet the return of order and rule with jubilation, others find only resentment, and the only way to avoid turning that resentment into revolution is to handle the population with a soft touch, granting liberties and systems that would otherwise be unacceptable inside a rigid monarchy.

King Michael and Queen Fumiko are not insensitive to the complaints that the people of Warwick have. Michael wasn't ever planning on being a king, having been quite far down in the line of succession as a young man and never regarded royal status as his due. Having lived a comparatively modest youth in blended and foreign households without an enormous amount of his own status, Michael didn't think he was owed anything, let alone owed a crown. The crown is, instead, a task he

undertakes out of love for his people, and by including Warwick in that number the King sees his obligation as being to repair the bridges burned by Imajicka's departure and to earn the trust and fealty of Warwick rather than simply decree it.

Ultimately, the person chosen for the role of Duke of Warwick is the Baron of Tir Anwar, Sebastian "Jinx" Lledrithcath. To arrive at this conclusion meant overruling the substantial and reasonably-delivered objections of Lord Bartholomew Cornwall, who may have wanted the position for himself or his son Lucian. Baron Jinx's exemplary service and lateral thinking were, however, exactly what was required to deal with the specialized challenges required by leadership in Warwick.

Duke Jinx Lledrithcath promotes his trusted marshal Anasazi of Scarborough to the position of Baron of Tir Anwar, moves to Newcastle with his wife Olivia, and installs his household there. This has the immediate impact of causing the city to begin to grow. Daring pioneers begin to stake out places in the wild and frequently uncharted lands of Warwick as it stood at the time.

Newcastle rapidly trebles in size, along with other towns in Estermont. The capital has the advantage of being in the most generous farmland in Warwick, traversed by the swift-running Vandalus river and the most well-maintained road in the region. It is centrally accessible, and very importantly it is not Port Blackwater.

The free-wheeling free-thinking libertarian nightmare that is Port Blackwater also grows, but it is not a place of order or administration and managing it at all immediately becomes an obvious challenge for Duke Jinx. He appoints a moderately acceptable mercantile banker named Rupert Locke to the position of Lord of Blackwater in an effort to bring some semblance of proper structure to the city.

Duke Jinx manages appointments of a number of other figures as well, selecting a well-regarded local lord named Logan Craigavon to the position of Baron of Estermont. For Daneholt, the Duke selects the second son of Major General Chadwick, so recently appointed Baron of Notford, with whom he had worked extensively during the Briarmark campaign. This is the most controversial selection, being an outsider elevated to such status, but it was always transparently clear that not all the peerage of Warwick could possibly be selected from within the territory itself. For Freehold, a local lord named Anthony Talbot was well regarded and suitable for elevation to the Baron's chain, and for Drakenvelt, one of the local lords who had been of great assistance during the transition, Cedric Onoway.

Baron Onoway swiftly proves to have oversold his own virtue and usefulness, and needs urgently to be replaced. Some suggestions are made that Jinx deal with a local independent warlord named Ahren Jarvik, but the Duke is reluctant to deal with someone whose reputation is so mixed and verges on brigandry. Jarvik is known in some places as Ahren Marcher or the

Lord of the Marches, has a history as the consort of a high ranking Endrani woman in Doomstadt to contend with, and seems like too unstable a figure to put in charge. Ultimately, Duke Jinx places Lord Sulya Kovic of Lidna, Drakenvelt, in charge of the barony temporarily until a permanent appointment can be made. Lord Sulya is content with temporary authority and not remotely interested in permanent status as Baron of Drackenvelt, but is a demonstrated and capable administrator and comes without the baggage of much rivalry.

Cedric Onoway, once dismissed as Baron of Drakenvelt, tries to flee the country rather than deal with the anger of the duke. After being caught before he could leave Port Blackwater, the Duke has him arrested, fined, and sentenced to several years serving as the administrator of public sanitation for Lord Rupert Locke in Port Blackwater itself.

While the vast dangers inherent to living in the "Near Wastes" frontier lands of Warwick are readily apparent, the influx of pioneers and economic development, particularly along the Vandalus river valley, helps to blunt the force of the transition. Additionally, the rich supply of new locals helps to take the sting out of being placed under new leadership, as it would be a very rare thing indeed to find a Warwicker that objected to an increase in population density.

The growth is not particularly military, but there is a great deal of construction. Additionally, room is needed to house armies in the near future, as the second portion of the Treaty of Warwick comes into full effect: Alba has voluntarily gotten into the war in Doomstadt.

And by 2008, they will be expected to be ready to march.

Elsewhere, a fleet of ships from Melité arrives in Islas del Sol to answer petitions for assistance from multiple cities in the islands. Tactical assistance is provided, leveraging the celebrated genius of leading figures from the Vittoriosa Naval Academy, and the Melitan fleet drenches the islands in the blood of pirates for most of the year. The point is illustrated effectively. Aid to Antillia and Dennery is no longer molested, and recovery on those islands proceeds without interruption. Additional assistance from experts in Melité is critical in providing architectural improvements for the new development.

After an uncommonly wet spring provides for exceptional growth, a long and unusually hot, dry summer settles in over Hispalis. The heat wave leads to a great deal of hardship and unusually destructive wildfire in the mountains. This creates burdensome economic challenges for the flourishing kingdom.

In the north, a civil war is narrowly averted in Österland. Efforts to pay the expensive mercenaries imported from Helvetia in answer to the violent disruption of the less-expensive mercenaries from Islas de Sol had required severe austerity measures and harsh taxes. The taxes were unequally distributed, and unrest about the penalties being leveled against the peasantry reaches a boiling point with riots, small uprising, and massive public outcry. Rather than react harshly or with additional violence, the King Gustav undertakes some deep and punishing soul-searching. The king expends a great deal of political capital gathering support from substantial portions of the nobility and clan heads for a reform strategy, and then after a penitent and conciliatory series of public declarations, sweeping changes are made. The foremost of these is the implementation of a parliamentary system echoing that of the Kingdom of Malay. Additionally, austerity provisions are withdrawn entirely and instead Österland arranges to borrow sums from allied trading interests out of Uthmanli with a plan of investment.

Upper class resistance to the reform strategy is potent and aggressive, but enough groundwork has been laid to make it difficult to upend immediately. Though portions of the lower classes were displeased with the concept of becoming some sort of mimic-Eurusian monarchy, or of creating a catastrophe of indebtedness to a foreign power and thus essentially yielding autonomy to it, it could not be denied that the beginning of funds returning to the economy helped soothe some of the ruffled feathers. Österland is a wilder, more uncivilized land than Malay has been in centuries, but it is arguably the most seamlessly blended diverse society in the world. Many nations blend Human and Barbarian, but Österland adds to this blend large integrated minorities of Orc, Goblin, and the rugged Ursine Mongrels (sometimes called Grawn) of the Caledon Massif. Culturally, it combines a history that takes the Lap and Slavic influences of the west with the fierce Norsk out of the east after centuries of being alternately conquered by each. To this is blended the traditions of one of the largest effective and durable goblin/orc kingdoms to have ever existed, which has its own unique capacity for integration.



All of this means that there's no way an Österfolk parliamentary system is going to look very much like the one in Malay, but it is at least going to a bicameral partially elected governing body that works with, rather than exclusively for, the monarch. One run out of a mead-hall rather than a palace, but it's still a similar idea.



In the depths of the Subtellurium, a spasm of violence overtakes the capital city of Elysian in a swift series of riots when information about the deteriorating mental condition of the city's chief Librarian becomes public knowledge. Hundreds are killed, belonging to both the conservative and progressive factions, in three days of outrage and pent-up frustration. The political underpinnings of the conspiracy cost the conservative faction a tremendous amount of political capital when the city at large is made aware that for the sake of their goals conservatives were willing to let an aging, increasingly incompetent administrator not only serve as a *Praetor* for the city's council, but be the guardian of the nation's most prized and beloved resource: the accumulated knowledge of centuries.

Order is restored to the city by heavy-handed deployment of Elysian *Excubitors*, which is in part responsible for the severity of the casualties. Even with the violence over and the damage to the city contained, however, the population remained in outrage.

Prime Naristhel Zaphrinath had for more than a decade evaded committing to either faction, serving as a steady centrist influence to avoid the politics of Elysian drifting too far in either direction. As the Prime of Elysian, with its hegemony over the other two cities of the Subtellurium, his moderating influence had preserved the status quo for the entirety of his primacy. Confronted with profound evidence of corruption, however, Prime Naristhel was obliged to remove almost a third of the Council in disgrace, using one of the few elite powers of the Prime with regards to the substance of Council affairs.

The resulting disparity in opinion amongst the Council yields replacements of the 8 disgraced *Praetores* not with a flotilla of desperate progressives but with a predictable blend of experts and elite ranging around the political spectrum. As the ousted *Praetores* had been the most hardened of the conservatives, this has the effect of dragging the entire Council's discourse to the left.

(*Left* in this instance is a term of art referring to the location of the wings of the Malayan parliament, where the deeply conservative and wealthy elite nobles who were members of the *Chambre des Pairs* had their assembly hall on the right side of the building, as seen from the square, while the more populist elected bourgeoisie of the *Assemblée Nationale* have their own hall on the left side of the building. While the Subtelluriums city Councils function as a unicameral legislature, the implicit divide of progressivism and conservatism is conventionally described in those same terms.)



## 2008

### A Nexus of Evil

Alba enters the civil war in Doomstadt in 2008, sending its newly formed 4<sup>th</sup> army under the command of Major General Sir Roderick Stanbridge, KOKG. The organization of Alba's military is a close descendant of how matters were arranged in Imajicka, albeit on a smaller scale. The whole of the military is handled for the King by the Field Marshall, in this case Lord Sir George Calvin, KOKG, and represented on the Privy Council by the First Lord of the Army, now Lord Charles "Black Charlie" Hammond. Four distinct armies are each quartered one in each Duchy of the realm under the command of a Major General, who in turn commands three brigades of up to ten thousand soldiers, one for each of the branches of the service; infantry, cavalry, and special services. The "Up to" is a critical part of the description, however, as cavalry brigades are universally smaller than infantry and special Services. The extreme depletion of force capabilities meant that the three armies it had managed to claw together in the wake of the Regency Period were already badly under strength when compared to their predecessors. The 4<sup>th</sup>, being new, is even more so.

Sir Roderick Stanbridge commands an infantry brigade roughly 3,000 soldiers strong, a cavalry brigade of 800, and special services personnel numbering 2,500. The army is also somewhat unfortunately rich in superfluous colonels, an unavoidable consequence of enthusiasm amongst the peerage. Divisions of infantry and special services are left behind in Warwick to help as they can with securing the safety of the land under the command of a predictable excess of colonels, and Stanbridge marches to Brandenburg on the border between Doomstadt and Warwick with a force a bit over four thousand strong. Still a substantial army, especially considering the circumstances, it is hardly to be compared to the vast forces of five times the strength that were once fielded by a fit and flourishing Imajicka.

His Majesty's Royal Army finds itself embroiled in a very unusual set of circumstances in Doomstadt, something akin to a large old hound wandering into an active dispute between a large number of cats. The dog would march into the middle and try to get at an enemy and, strictly speaking, no one element of the dispute is remotely fit to take it on, but the confusion itself is sufficient to make the slow, methodical beast unable to get its teeth around any one foe.



Furthermore, tension and disputes arose between the commanders of Doomstadter loyalist Matrons in command of their own forces and the regimented, methodical minds controlling those of Alba. A story popularly disseminated in Warwick references a private letter between an unnamed Brigadier General and his or her equal in the Third army, Wales.

*They do all their thinking sideways, and I have to rely on it entirely. If I tell a soldier to drop eggs off a building, I know they're going to break. In Doomstadt the ground, the soldier, and the building are all moving in ways I can't fathom and the only way to know if that egg is going to break is by asking another bloody egg what it expects.*

Despite these challenges the presence and support of the Alban Army is of immediate assistance to the loyalist forces of Queen Dolosus Mauvis. Sabotage and disorder vastly decrease in the regions controlled by the Great Houses of Dramikov and Faustus with the presence of the stolid army in their midst, and lines begin to develop that partially resemble the expected boundary relationships in a war.

With Alba throwing its strength behind northern Doomstadt, economic concerns lead Malay to begin contributing materially, but not militarily, to the efforts of the southern Houses of Raumi, Dorogai, and Motova. This creates anger and resentment between Alba and Malay, and a great deal of ambassadorial wrangling ensues that can only truly sort out that in the end, Alba would probably have reacted the same way to the same economic pressures and its moral high ground about slavery in this conflict is more or less a happy coincidence. Malay is as unwilling to face down the problem of slavery in Doomstadt as Imajicka ever was but knows its own finances.

Another fruit of the dispute between Alba and Malay that arises from their support of opposing factions in the Doomstadt civil war is that Malay stops paying the debts associated with land exchanges arranged for in the aftermath of the fall of Imajicka. Ships of the Alban and Malayan navy begin to become surly with one another, and trade relations degenerate as they begin placing punitive tariffs on one another.

Alba also begins issuing some letters of marque to ambitious privateers 'in the furtherance of the war effort' to interfere particularly with shipping coming to and from the southern Doomstadt port of Bonn. Since Alba is not willing to pick too many fights with other major trading nations, ships from a broad array of nations are exempt, meaning that in essence the privateers who take up the letters of marque are almost exclusively targeting Malayan vessels. All of this resentment and dispute remains below the level of direct conflict, however.

Malay had retained only a small portion of Imajicka's military strength when the countries split apart and had no interest in a large permanent standing army. By scrupulously never sending one soldier into Doomstadt, not even their mercenary support forces, instead simply continuing mutually profitable trade arrangements, Malay manages to avoid letting the argument with Alba breaking out into a real war.

In Tir Anwar, Wales, rumor and speculation continued to mount about the potential for something being metaphysically curious or out of order in or around the town of Scarborough, there. Though located at a geographical and political crossroads in Wales, it nevertheless seemed to have more than its fair share of curious or unusual circumstances.

Research conducted by the Royal Council of Mages on the topic seems to have died on the vine, and ultimately the matter is at least partially resolved with information derived from an unusual source; the Fae. Normally disinterested in most of mortal affairs, the Fae nevertheless involved themselves in Alba sufficiently to inform citizens of the town of Scarborough that their town was built upon the burial site of an ancient and fel creature, what they described as a "Great Dragon General" of ages past, rumored to be as old as the fabled Dragon Wars themselves, and that in some fashion this creature emanated a certain amount of energy creating a kind of well or nexus drawing peculiar or energetic events towards itself.

Additional information is gathered gradually revealing this to be a very serious and immediate concern, not just a matter of academic interest, with particular assistance from a Fae emissary named Dreyfuss. While not precisely alive in its current state, the gradual cumulative effect of the energies being drawn into it would cause it to awaken. If it is awoken and let loose upon the land, it represents a catastrophe so vast as to render all the decade before a pale shadow of misfortune. The Fae's interest likely stands in that an extinct Human population can have no interest in the Fae and the existence of the Fae is fundamentally intertwined with the existence of the people who are not Fae. Therefore, a sufficiently apocalyptic circumstance appears sufficient to invoke their interest and participation.

The creature, the Great Dragon, is called Fire-Eye. As it stands, it is entirely unkillable. If it is not killed, it is likely to destroy the entire island and likely a great deal more besides. The other facet of Fae involvement becomes clear when it is discovered that the Fae had in the past made a weapon capable of slaying the creature. This weapon was designed explicitly to use against Fire-Eye, as part of a bargain surrounding the context of the Dragon Wars, a period of time in which even the Fae were so remote from the mortal world that their understanding of affairs in it remains compromised. The essence of the bargain was that in exchange for drawing the realm of Faery closer to the mortal world through attention and involvement, the mortals would receive a weapon capable of challenging a great and terrible Dragon General who was destroying mortal forces, or so

it is understood and rendered by the Fae. This weapon, a spear called **Bionnbhaic**, had been broken into several component parts and hidden away in a variety of locations. It required a great deal of hard work and diligence to find and reassemble the magical weapon, work that was by and large conducted by the citizens of the town of Scarborough personally.

“A Great Dragon of Ancient Times is coming to kill us, this Fae told me so” is a tough sell to the average citizen, after all. The court, which one might expect to become involved immediately, does not. Something is demonstrably awry with both public opinion and official action on the subject, which is ultimately revealed to be a set of flaws in the Council of Mages advising King Michael on matters of this sort.

One of their number is in fact a servant of the being Fire-Eye, having become fully aware of it during previous investigations on the subject and choosing to side with it for personal power rather than seek its destruction. This counselor eventually falls under the dragon's potent mental influence, even mostly dormant. This Archidamus is also, as it happens, a lich. It was part of a hidden group within the council that was dubbed the *Black Circle*. The other members of the Black Circle are not only aware of the lich, they conceal it from the public and have no compunction about working with it. They act not only to subvert any effort by the Royal Council of Mages to function effectively, they also subtly direct certain types of events in ways that furthered the goal of Fire-Eye to be awoken, under the guidance of the lich which had fallen under its control. The Black Circle knew also of the spear **Bionnbhaic** and aspired to obtain it for themselves; not to destroy Fire-Eye but out of a futile wish to control it.

With all these influences working against him, the King is not aware of the issues at stake, and messages to him are intercepted or altered to keep him in ignorance. Those with the knowledge lack the access to reach the crown.

The Archidamus enslaved by the dragon Fire-Eye has one of the critical spear pieces in his personal possession. This means that the Scarborians have to get information about the deceitful and dangerous Archidami to the Privy Council while also taking on the Archidamus personally, as they are under time constraints.

A contingent of folk from the town of Scarborough led in particular by one Dr. Jonathan Goodspeed of the Royal College of Physicians undertake to emulate a Fae approach to politics and parlayed a series of favors and correspondence into a rapid escalation of their issues until they were able to get an audience with the Privy Council in York. In so doing, the group manages to foil an in-progress assassination plot directed at King Michael himself. This confrontation ultimately results in

the death of multiple members of this Black Circle, all of them complicit in the necromancy and misdirection of their peers. Included amongst the fallen was Archidamus Horatio Cornwall, younger brother to Bartholomew, Duke of Cornwall.

The sordid corruption from within the Royal Council of Mages results in a firm endpoint in the existence of that body as a political unit. Thereafter, magical and related affairs are brokered by report from the Royal Order of Mages, Scribes, and Apothecaries working in a capacity subordinate to the Privy Council rather than providing so much power and autonomy to such potentially dangerous individuals. This is representative of a very early stage in the slow, gradual development of a distrust and suspicion directed towards mages generally, in court as it has been elsewhere at various times throughout history. The fine line between brilliance and insanity is a boundary difficult to police for the uninitiated, and there is little educational value in the second kick of a mule.

A great deal of maneuvering, much of it involving further interaction with potent Fae creatures, is required for the Scarborough adventurers, led by their Baroness Anasazi (or Lady Ana to her people) of Tir Anwar. To assemble the components of and ultimately remanufacture the legendary Spear requires ventures into the realm of Faery, conflict or negotiation with powerful beings including The Ankou (the Fae personification of immortal death), and a great deal of other effort. Of crucial importance throughout the process was the ongoing assistance of the Fae being named Dreyfuss. The undertakings were of a kind that only a town so thoroughly steeped in the bizarre by their proximity to that selfsame threat could have broached, let alone achieved.

When the spear **Bionnbhaic** is nearly completed, the cumulative aggregation of energies that had been gradually awakening the great dragon, continuing by force of inertia even without further contribution from the slain Archidamus, is completed. The dragon Fire-Eye awakes, breaks loose of his burial place, and destroys half the town of Scarborough in hardly a moment. In order to complete **Bionnbhaic**, Dreyfuss sacrifices his own immortality and passes it into the spear. This is a very high cost for a being of his kind, sacrificing all of his power and access to the immortal land of Faery in order to be of service to his friends in Scarborough.

The Scarboroughians and their Baroness assault the cavern dwelling-place of the ancient dragon Fire-Eye. At great cost, they dungeoneer through its many subterranean defenses and ultimately defeat the fearsome dragon. This once and for all will result in the dismantling of the curious nexus of metaphysical energies that had made their home so increasingly unlivable in recent years, as every conflict of any consequence was drawn towards them like a lodestone. Baroness Anasazi is sundered in

the assault by the breath of the ferocious Fire-Eye. Due to the devotion of her people, she is swiftly reincarnated by a local, fanatically loyal lunatic Skollarian wizard named Fyolayn.

The courage and valor demonstrated by the people of Scarborough is personally rewarded by King Michael in a special ceremony. Though many of the kingdom of Alba never become aware of the degree to which their fate rested in the hands of these few, their King at least recognizes and applauds their exceptionalism. Additionally, Dr. Jonathan Goodspeed is knighted to the Order of the White Rose for his direct interventions and assistance in disrupting the Black Circle. Dreyfuss, now a mortal, is rewarded by his own people when Fae arrive to declare him still of their number in spite of his mortality, taking the honored hero back to their realm with distinction.

It is in the course of these events that the Baroness Anasazi receives a personal request from Duke Jinx Lledrithcath of Warwick, her predecessor as Baron of Tir Anwar and personal friend, requesting that she leave some other worthy person in charge of the now becalmed barony and relocate to the Barony of Drackenvelt in Warwick, where he is in dire need of her steadiness and blunt expertise as a subordinate.

Answering this call, Baroness Anasazi unleashes an assortment of lieu appointments and promptly sets sail for Port Blackwater to answer Jinx's summons, joined by a retinue including a broad assortment of others from the region around Scarborough. The Baroness sets up her primary residence in the historical village of Fortnight, centrally located within Drackenvelt and convenient to her Baronial seat at Duskgate.

While Warwick launches into Doomstadt's war and the Welsh midlands fought to subdue a literal dragon, much of the rest of Alba was able to take a small breath of relief and move forward in the painstakingly gradual process of economic recovery. Some wise economic investors bring in large quantities of cattle to Cymru to develop a stronger and rapidly thriving beef and dairy industry. Wales invents a new breed of sheep with distinctive wool by crossing in some imported Vedian varieties, and the concept takes off like a wildfire. Cornwall refurbishes and vastly expands the shipyards of Portsmouth. Growth happens. Governance happens. It begins to seem possible that the concept of Alba is around to stay.

Meanwhile, overseas, plenty is happening to keep the world a busy place.

Maharani Devakani Marinveda of Vedia undertakes to pressure her government into developing some of the transportation infrastructure of the kingdom, perhaps drawing inspiration from the old Thracian practice of road construction and its obvious advantages. Startlingly, this leads to anger and frustration in the western provinces, particularly Kuru on the border with Abruzzo, where they expressly prefer isolationism. The Kurites feel like her roads and bridges are intruding on their lands, an overreach of a tyrannical queen. A number of communities see it as a threat that the military can be among them at any time. Multiple small factions threaten a revolution but, with an inevitable flamboyance of dramatic irony, are swiftly quashed by an aggressive military that can, as it happens, be among them any time. Thanks to the improved roads.

The brutality of the swift counterstroke on behalf of Maharani Devakani leaves behind it more dissatisfaction in the west, not less. There is almost immediately a nuanced and well planned attempt at assassination which only fails because of the heroic sacrifice of several of Maharani Devakani's personal bodyguards. More military reprisals are taken against Kuru, where the plot and assassin both originated. The Maharani struggles to find a way to make peace with the province of Kuru and regain the respect of its people.

Not far away, a sea battle occurs near the mouth of the Azar on the Beryllian gulf side between a merchant fleet from Arlent in Abruzzo and another from Uthmanli, both with armed escorts. Both blame the other for the fight, which was provoked by a collision between a disabled Abruzzese ship rammed accidentally (?) by an Uthmanli vessel in a fog in the middle of the night. Sailors from the Uthmanli fleet insist the Abruzzese ship had no lights on and was lying in wait. The Abruzzese sailors assert that the disabled ship did have lanterns lit and that they were deliberately assaulted by the Uthmanli. In the moment, everyone assumes everyone else is pirates and an enormous fight ensues, sinking multiple vessels and destroying a fortune in cargo.

The truth is likely that both are correct in their own assessments and entirely wrong about their assessment of the motive of the others, as is almost always the case. The most likely circumstance is clearly that there were lights, but those lights were not seen in time, and that everyone shares a certain amount of responsibility. A finding of this nature, however, would require the assistance of a third party to calm the outrage of both parties involved. The captains of the aggrieved vessels and the merchant interests that own the ships are so adamant about the malign intent of one another that they come within a hair of provoking a war between Arlent (with as many of its neighbor city-states as it can coerce) and Uthmanli. Melité intervenes, calling a summit in Vittoriosa to calm the dispute and narrowly threads the needle to avoid a war, with each nation paying the merchant interest of the other nation for the losses incurred.

To the west, even as repairs are well in hand for typhoon-wrecked islands of Antillia and Dennerly in Islas del Sol, a new storm strikes with particular ferocity, damaging Antillia again though to a substantially lesser degree. This demonstrates which of the improvements made in recent rebuilding efforts was most efficacious. It does not create the same scale of catastrophe as the Key Carolan Typhoon.

The storm does do other damage, however, when it slams into the southern coast of Ruslav causing major coastal flooding, dangerous seas, and extreme damage to coastal communities.

Even farther west, political disagreements become unusually prominent in Sylvanator as factions of the population set on more extreme isolationism are met with a growing pushback from those who want to engage more with the rest of the world. A series of substantial public debates are held around various important locations in the countryside as well as in Myn'Traval. These prove inconclusive, except insofar as it is the case that information about the debates becomes more widely known, which indicates to a certain extent that the anti-isolationists are advancing slightly in agenda.

2009

## In Richard's Footsteps

Alba's contribution to the war in Doomstadt slows to a crawl as the rebellious Great Houses of the south pull back to reevaluate the methodology of their conflict. A certain amount of diplomacy is undertaken simultaneous to a round of erratic lightning skirmishes and suspicious misfortune amongst the loyalist and Alban armies. Proposals are made and rejected for potential solutions that involve dividing the country into two or more pieces, a time-tested solution to Doomstadt's relentless internal divisions, but this is rightly perceived as simply a way of establishing an endless condition of war between the two factions rather than a way to bring about a cessation of hostilities.

As diplomatic maneuvering begins to break down, it is replaced by a flurry of assassinations and assassination attempts. A handful of Alban officers are killed, along with a handful of minor leaders in the forces of Queen Dolosus, but several such undertakings are uncovered or fended off successfully, including three separate attempts on Dolosus and two on Major General Stanbridge. The Major General struggles to contain his subordinate officers desire for a destructive counter-campaign in response to the assassinations, recognizing that the bulk of the hardship would fall unfairly on the oppressed citizenry and slaves of the southern Houses rather than impacting the Endrani directly, but forces are deployed to undertake a mass-emancipation campaign through the central lowlands around Danzig. If enough labor is deprived the southern Houses, it could choke their economic stability.

Unfortunately, the economic stability of the southern Houses is underwritten by a steady supply of funds from Malay, which itself profits off the situation in a way that Albans on the campaign, in Warwick, and back home regard with increasing amounts of disdain and offense.

This gives rise to a new manifestation of asymmetric warfare, as small 'mercenary' bands form up in Warwick and, entirely unsupervised by any actual military commanders, take it upon themselves to adventure around the theater of combat. These bands, usually less than thirty in number and composed largely of former slaves, idealistic noblemen, and military veterans, take it upon themselves to harry Endrani businesses, free slaves, disrupt travel, and generally make life a nuisance for any rebel sympathizers they can find. Apparently compelled by a blend of profiteering and abolitionist sentiment, these small



bands fund themselves through a mixture of judicious plunder, outside secret funding, and ransoms for any prominent persons they can lay hands on, particularly foreigners.

Such bands are generally referred to as “Freebooters” in discussion but are dismissed by the Royal Alban Army as “mere brigands.” The army does nothing to participate in the miscreancy of freebooter companies, but neither does it exert any effort whatsoever to contain or control them. The profession is a catastrophically dangerous one, and many such bands are slaughtered entirely while engaged in their guerilla tactics. Others are more successful, even turning a profit on judiciously applied destruction, and as a whole the freebooters liberate as many if not more slaves than the armies themselves over the course of 2009.

One criticism leveled at the freebooters' tactics is that through ransom of foreign nobles they deprive the military of potential evidence of collusion between southern Doomstadt and other countries (with heavy emphasis on how dearly the army would like direct evidence of Malayan interference). By ransoming their prizes, freebooters retain for their ransomees both discretion and deniability, and there is reason to believe that in so doing the freebooters may have helped to prolong the war.

Malay continues to insist that it provides no military or tactical assistance to the rebellious southern houses and instead is merely maintaining normative trade relationships with their neighbors without taking any particular stance on the issues of the civil war. The argument, essentially, is that it's a coincidence Bonn is both nearby and rebellious and that they've always sold grain to Doomstadt so why not keep doing so? They would certainly sell just as much grain to the northern houses if they had a good sea port, after all.

King Jean-Michelle Mont Clamont and King Michael Van Dance publicly correspond multiple times in 2009 over the subject of the civil war in Doomstadt. The two monarchs retain a familiar and even congenial manner towards one another that overall conveys a sense that they're both a bit hamstrung by the pressures of their courts on the subject of how to deal with one another.

North of Doomstadt, Warwick is gradually and reluctantly acclimating to the new state of affairs under Alban management. Resentments linger on, and much of the duchy is far too independent-minded for ordinary governance. A series of compromises are made to combine the reassurance of the feudal authority with the flexibility necessary for frontier communities. Charters are issued to incorporated townships describing hybrid systems that enshrine a certain amount of self-governance as part of the structure, as well as generous autonomy in their own defense that would not be granted people

living in more settled lands. In essence, King Michael, on advice from his faithful Duke Jinx, proposes to allow towns to determine for themselves how best to tax themselves, so long as the taxes make it to the appropriate coffers, and how best to defend their own lands, provided those defenders acknowledge the authority of their lords. This kind of compact between the highest of authorities and the lowest of citizens is controversial at court and politically deviant, but proves to be a positive move in promoting the Alban presence as a benefit to the locals rather than an oppressive burden.

The city of Port Blackwater is a special case requiring a great deal of complex oversight. A lot of the money that flows into Warwick does so by way of the free port city. This means that the financial stability of the Duchy is now contingent on a port whose primary attraction to foreign investment is an absolute minimum of regulation or control. Though the port's slave markets were shut down forcefully in 2006, it still remains a hazardous place to live or do business and a hotbed of smuggling and disreputable business.

Duke Jinx opts to employ the strategy of attempting to make honest, reputable businesses more objectively profitable so that they can outcompete the questionable and distasteful ones. This will require a long-term series of investments, and cannot be rapidly implemented. The short term systems he begins to implement focus on investing in businesses that support and supply émigrés to Warwick, whether personally or by encouraging others to invest. Subsidies help particularly with the manufacture of farm implements and building supplies.

This is immediately exploited by local criminal enterprises who begin laundering ill-gotten funds through smithies and granges and such, influenced by hefty protection rackets. The policy and its instant abuse are referred to by Blackwatrians as the **"Hammer and Tongs Parade."** This appellation will stick around and be used to describe well-meaning ideas that are or will be immediately subverted by the essential shittiness of profiteers.

The city of Newcastle continues to grow and develop. The growth is somewhat chaotic but is overseen with sufficient scrutiny to avoid too much development of slums or major failings of sanitation. The city is well positioned to support a population increase, and there is a great deal of money flowing in with the new arrivals to the duchy along with abundant manual labor work to be had. It rapidly develops into a place easily described as flourishing and prosperous. Its safety is protected by the large standing presence of the Ducal Guard, Baronial Guard, City Watch, headquarters for the Nights Watch, and regional headquarters for His Royal Majesty's 4<sup>th</sup> Army.

Criminality is not a popular profession in Newcastle, as the new Duke has strong opinions about making public examples to discourage behavior he doesn't approve of. While not considered entirely ruthless, Duke Jinx does obtain a reputation for being harsh, decisive, and at times aggressive. While petitioners might then think it natural to seek out his wife, the Duchess Olivia, for a softer touch, it does not take long for the folk of Newcastle to gather that she not the more sympathetic of the pair, merely the more mildly spoken. If, for example, a petition for clemency were set before the ducal court on a day when Jinx was attending directly to such affairs, the odds of a verbal evisceration were high and the odds of mercy were modest. If Jinx were on a progress in the country, leaving Olivia in charge of court, then the odds of both of those circumstances plummet.

The city of Brunswick, in Daneholt on Ullswater Lake, experiences less growth than the other two major cities in Warwick. It is farther inland, in less generous farmland, but has been a stable and consistent city for longer than either of the others. It is also the most effectively walled of the three, with strict rules about building outside those walls, which means it's difficult to make the city grow until the city itself decides to do so. Instead, a number of smaller towns begin popping up around the lake but run into frequent conflict with local Barbarian peoples or simple circumstances of living in the Near Wastes. Development around the Ullswater is sporadic and difficult to sustain.

Drackenvelt, being on the western coastline, experiences a tremendous influx of ambitious farmers and pioneers as the support structures to promote homesteading fall into place. Even though the land is fundamentally less safe than the midlands around Newcastle, there is a profound psychological element in its popularity as a destination for new arrivals. One of the most horrifying aspects of the loss of Warwick and withdrawal by Imajicka to common folk is that people became trapped in the interior who profoundly wished they could have fled back to Alba. Many died, others were forced to adapt severely to incredibly harsh circumstances. Drackenvelt's access to the sea means that on some level, a person struggling to survive there could still make the choice to leave, if need be, and not be trapped by circumstances beyond their control in the heart of a wild and dangerous land.

This is not particularly accurate. The seas off the coast of Drackenvelt are deeply unfriendly to sailing and, the desperate voyage of Sig Habreadth notwithstanding, the only reasonable route of travel is to maneuver south along the coastline to the Alban channel. Living along the Vandalus river or the Thracian-era high road that bisects the duchy west to east is more likely to provide access to escape. Furthermore, the basic instinct to maintain access to escape is part and parcel with the mirrored psychological wounds of the Warwickers themselves. Albans feel the need to be ready to flee in an emergency, Warwickers fear that Albans, in an emergency, will try to flee. The two groups do not yet feel like they are all of the same ilk.

Drackenvelt, having a higher rural Alban population percentage than the other baronies and no major cities at all, experiences a particularly tumultuous transition. As with other regions of the duchy, the Alban homesteaders must learn to adapt to the specialized homegrown dangers of living in Warwick such as Defilers (a dangerous creature transformation similar to the concept of Wendigo but vastly more commonplace,) Flock (fragmentary destructive spiritual creatures directly associated with the creation of Defilers), and Wastes-warped animal hybrids. But in addition to this, new Drackenvelters are confronted with problematic factional divisions that are regionally distinct. Newcomers have to prove their good intentions to the mild but territorial Druidic influences in the region while simultaneously quelling violent assaults by a rampaging ogre incursion, a delicate enough procedure without taking into account the influence of Ahren Jarvik.

Ahren Jarvik, also called Ahren Marcher, an Endrani man and local leader with a long history in Warwick, is outraged by the reappearance of Imajickan influence in the region after the destruction wrought by its departure. Alba is unwelcome and perceived by Ahren and his followers as a conquering invader to be resisted, particularly now that so many new settlers are coming in. Violent conflict and uprisings follow, which take time to attribute to the reclusive warlord that the locals call "Lord of the Marches."

Baroness Anasazi, formerly of Tir Anwar, decides against crushing the Lord of the Marches' revolution. Instead, while violence is not tolerated, she pursues a course of diplomatic negotiations in keeping with the broader program being implemented by Duke Jinx and King Michael. Efforts are exerted to demonstrate to prominent local figures like Jarvik that Alba is here for the good of Warwick and will be of benefit to it. More importantly, she seeks to demonstrate that Alba can be relied upon to stand beside Warwick by demonstrating that Fortnight, her chosen country residence and a growing town composed mostly of new immigrants, would stand beside its own neighbors. This approach proves to be strategically significant throughout the region in the years ahead.

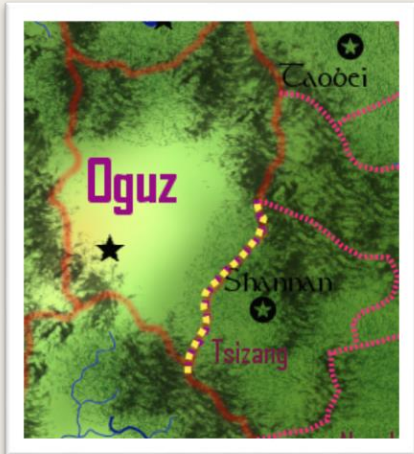
Troubles develop between the aforementioned Druidic community and the new Alban emigres when native locals begin to complain of children going missing, a situation that is gradually connected to blood sacrifices. The practice of blood sacrifice is not alien to Druidic faith, but one that is more usually understood to be extremely uncommon, specialized, and voluntary. None of those conditions seem to apply to the current circumstance. Albans are instantly and violently outraged by

the discovery, while locals are displeased but slightly more pragmatic, highlighting the division in perception between the soft, idealistic newcomers and the hardened, stoic locals. Fortunately for the future of civic harmony, if not for public safety, is the emergence of further detail which indicates a widespread corrupting illness afflicting the Druids and driving the increasingly unacceptable behavior.

Back on the Isle of Alba, Queen Fumiko Van Dance achieves positive outcomes after a long-term but quietly executed influence campaign wielded on King Logan O'Roarke of Inishmora. The King of Inishmora's increasing hostility to religion has been creating ongoing tension and violence for years. In 2009, Queen Fumiko persuades King Logan to revoke some of the more hostile prohibitions, and to free a number of religious political prisoners. She provides advice on moderating measures he can take to reduce the perception of him as a tyrant, and extracts from the recalcitrant monarch a public promise to stop seeking the death of the young child born in 2002 whom Inishmoran revolutionaries refer to as their true king. This last is an arbitrary point, given that the child has never been located and may not even actually exist. With no seven-year-old figurehead affixed to the front of a revolution, the only reason to pursue such a child would be weakness and fear regarding his own legitimacy. Queen Fumiko can see to the heart of this and persuades him to quit doing it.

King Logan lacks a certain amount of polish when it comes to politicking, and consequently his public statements alleviating the tyrannical mistreatment of religion under his rule make it abundantly clear that Queen Fumiko is the cause and creator of this reform. This makes King Logan look very weak internationally, but he's neither adept enough at politics nor popular enough with his own people to realize the error.

Nórdehávn spends much of the summer raiding along the Inishmoran coastlines, though not penetrating deeply into the interior or taking substantial risks. The episode seems to be very methodical and profit driven, including a few new tactical choices such as shorter, stealthier raids perpetrated in a rapid staccato down the line of a coastal stretch, and misdirection raiding to provide cover for those going after juicier targets. Response from Inishmora is sluggish but effective, and the raiding stops by the end of summer before the effective end of what is normally considered raiding season.



In the other direction, after a series of diplomatic disputes, Oguz launches an offensive into the Tsizang province of Shalkara, which is an old and persistent adversary. The two have disputed lands currently belonging to one another for centuries, and it is likely that the failed and lackluster engagement with Vedia of recent past provoked a domestic need for a more aggressive and meaningful conflict to cut teeth on.

An expedition of more than 50 Thracians under the leadership of experienced Etruscan explorer Caecilius Turbo disappears trying to reach the Inko ruins of Cozauhititlan which are thought to be about 100 miles from the Thracian border inside the boundaries of Cuauhtla/Kategonia. The venture was undertaken with notable and public

overconfidence, considering the well-known impenetrability of the Kategonian interior. The name Turbo enters some vernacular parlance as a derisive mark of foolishness, for example: "Way to go, Turbo."

The beginning moves of a trade war are inaugurated between Thracian and Sassanian olive oil manufacturers and exporters. The prices plummet. Cynos buys a great deal of olive oil from Thracia while the prices are dropping. By the end of the year, many farms in both places are in danger or in the process of going out of business.



# 2010

## Fall of a Timeless Guardian

Around midwinter, a group of envoys arrive in Drackenvelt, Warwick, from the Kingdom of Skollar with a plan to undertake a complex magical working in collaboration with counterparts working in Nórdehávn and Skollar. This group describes a much older project, now defunct, that took the form of a set of five menhirs (standing stones) interconnected magically by what they described as ley-lines. The intention of the original project and inspiration for its revival was to create a resonant barrier which would assist in arresting the spread of corruption and corrupting influences out of the vast regions of the Goblin Wastes, which extend all the way to their own borders. One of the menhirs, which they call Runestones, is located in the approximate vicinity of the ruins of a seventeenth century Imajickan Fortress, "Fort Night," from which the modern town draws its name. The object is located, excavated, and studied.

The corrupting influence that was previously discovered to be behind the increasingly antisocial actions of Druids in both Drackenvelt and Estermont spreads and worsens substantially. The rationale underpinning the behavior appears to be that in centuries past, a Druid of substantial power and ability wished to go further to protect the lands of Warwick (and further south) from encroachment by a consistently growing and worsening Goblin Wastes in his own era. It is likely that the efforts of this Druid coincide temporally with the aforementioned efforts of Skollarian mages to address the same problem. A lengthy and serious ritual was undertaken enabling him to be transformed into or fused with a guardian tree, becoming a permanent sentinel that could act as a breakwater against the worst of the corrupting influences exuding from the Wastes. This creature then became identifiable as Hickory, likely in reference to the original name of the Druid, as Druids often have floral use-names.

While this system would have been providing a measure of protective assistance over a long period of time, it was foundationally inadequate to the scale of the task undertaken. The Wastes, which seem to go through various states of expanding and retreating over the centuries, eventually overtook and moved well south of the location where Hickory had placed itself. Additionally, the corruption it was attempting to guard against gradually overtook its internal defenses as well, meaning that the guardian against corruption became, itself, corrupted.



In much the same manner as some trees have interconnected root systems throughout a grove, Hickory was connected by energetic or metaphysical 'roots' to many groves in other parts of western Warwick as part of the ritual arrangement allowing it to perpetuate itself and fuel the energetic cost of its function. Whether or not the sacrifice of children on the roots of such groves by other living Druids was always or only recently a part of that system is unclear but no matter what, the sacrifices accelerated rapidly in 2009.

Druids associated with these practices are themselves becoming corrupted to the point where it is visible on their skin where corrupted roots are working its way through their body beneath the skin, evidence that is difficult to conceal. Druidic experts disavow the entire sect responsible. The corrupted energies become so pervasive in Drackenvelt and Estermont that it provokes a rash of motile flora maneuvering southward out of the wastes. More simply put, in Near-Wastes terms this means "Plant monsters."

As attacks escalate, the weaknesses of the young defense infrastructure of Warwick become abundantly clear. Most of the Royal Alban 4<sup>th</sup> Army is in Doomstadt, and regional guards are more suited and inclined to regional protectionism. While this is substantially effective in protecting the safety of Estermont in general and Newcastle in particular, the higher risk population of Drackenvelt has far fewer defenders. Attacks by motile plant creatures are widespread and frequently devastating, as civilians are strangled, entangled, entrapped, impaled, and/or consumed by corrupted plants.

Baroness Ana of Drackenvelt collaborates with veterans of the town of Scarborough and a mixed assortment of advisors and associates in and around her chosen country seat of Fortnight in order to strategize how to dismantle the cause of the attacks and end the motivation that causes the corruption to spread through both plants and plant-worshipping peoples. Ultimately an assault plan is devised to move a large group of arcane experts protected by a contingent of two to three score able fighters up and into a segment of the Goblin Wastes where it is best understood that the static location of Hickory can be found.

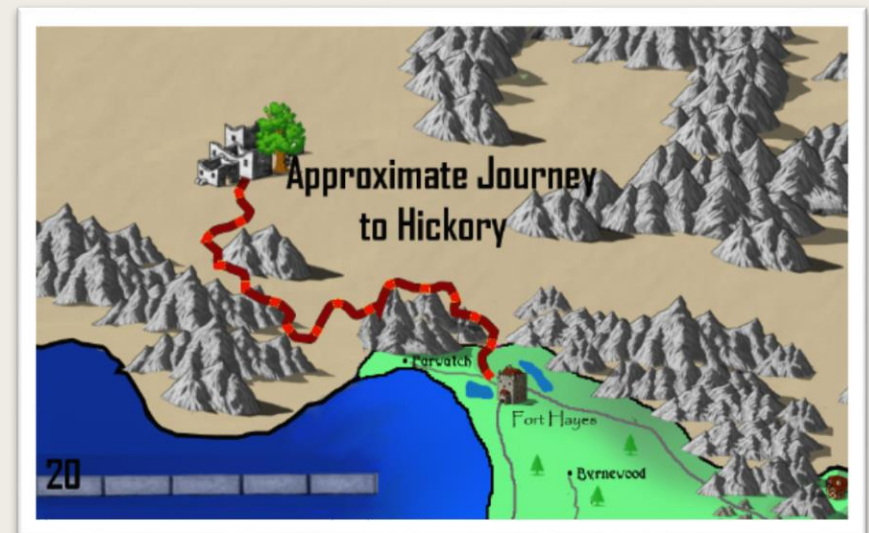
As this directly mimics what caused the demise of 80,000 Imajickan soldiers barely a decade previously, the plan is controversial, but deemed immediately and absolutely necessary. Strategies are devised to maneuver the party through the extremely inhospitable territory through a circuitous route that would attempt to avoid explicitly identified hazards, such few as those are, and to adapt to the doubtless abundant new problems discovered by avoiding them whenever possible. People with experience venturing some small distance into the Wastes are consulted and recruited. Assurances are made that the



route in question is absolutely nowhere near the starting point of where Richard's Crusade ventured north. Without conclusive certainty about how to overcome their target, the Baroness and her Fortnighters plan for adaptability, agility, and speed.

Prior to departing, Fortnighters assist the Skollarian envoys in collaboration with Skollarian expatriates living in their community to enact the correct rituals to activate the Fort Night runestone, in the hopes that should the overall system function properly it will mitigate the harms that Hickory itself is, even in a corrupted state, serving to arrest at present.

Heading north, the Hickory Expedition finds and documents a variety of hazards and challenges before arriving at a very old ruin believed to be in the approximate location they were aiming for and consistent with the theory of what they were trying to find. This appears to have been an institute of magical learning and to contain ghosts or the echoes of ghosts that lead some in the group to believe the minimal ruin might be fragments of a pre-Dragon-Wars era structure, a subject of ongoing historical dispute. They also discover the vast creature/being Hickory inside multiple layers of protective magical construct or barrier which requires all the ingenuity they had brought and then some to understand and dismantle.



After overcoming the servants of Hickory and dismantling its protections (which events cause the sunder of Sir Plazz Imo Il'ldyss, a Paleteth knight of the Baroness's household, when he selflessly steps into the path of a ritual intended for her destruction at the hands of an enemy) key problem solvers meld with the consciousness of the Hickory being in such a fashion as to be temporarily transported into a magical sub-construct or isolated pocket of reality in which part of Hickory's existence connects to a larger arcane context. By traversing the gap between these two conceptual structures the expedition mages are able to deconstruct Hickory and do what is commonly described as "casting it into the void." This implies a spiritual as well as practical annihilation that has some suppositions about planar theory baked into it.

The expedition returns home without further casualties, after which the Baroness herself successfully undertakes to reincarnate her fallen knight, Sir Plazz.

This brings about the end of the motile plant creature incursions into Drackenvelt and Estermont and does a great deal to improve the relations between newcomers to Warwick and long term residents of the region. As she was known for concealing subtle thinking beneath the appearance of a lack thereof, it is presumed that this side effect was intentional on the part of the Baroness.

Shortly after the Hickory Expedition returns from their uncannily successful venture into the Deep Wastes, a number of large swarming insects begin to make appearances, particularly in Drackenvelt and western Estermont. Very large groups of this creature begin to seize and dominate entire swaths of countryside in the northwest portions of Warwick, and the walled fortress town of Mourning is entirely cut off and besieged. Analysis leads this to be a known creature of the wastes, usually subterranean. Critical information regarding these creatures is provided to the Baroness of Drackenvelt personally by a delegation from a goblin clan calling itself "Black-Ears' Band."

Black-Ears himself proves to be a half-Endrani half-Goblin who had been raised in Imajicka by adoptive Human parents before returning to his maternal family in the Goblin Wastes, where their clan resided in a large salt-flat and kept well abreast of local wildlife. Black-Ears, being very well educated in Imajicka, was able to bring technological innovations to his people and eventually rose to be their leader. When Alba took over administration of Warwick, Black Ears began to prepare his people to immigrate into Warwick, believing that alliance and citizenship with Alba was the best path to a thriving future for the clan. Once his people were persuaded and prepared, they made the move south in the wake of the plant-based disruptions of the Hickory affair.

Being from the Deep Wastes originally, these goblins are able to furnish a great deal of information about the giant humanoid and Human-esque giant insectoids, a multi-formed species called Chirruk. Their behavior is extremely out of the ordinary, however, and deeply damaging to the countryside with particular damage done to newly arrived Albans. While at first this was blamed on a lack of preparedness for the rigors of living in the Near-Wastes, it begins to become clear that the Albans are being particularly targeted by the Chirruk forces.

Formally having declared their desire to reside within Alba and become productive citizens, the hard-bitten goblins of Black-Ears' Band commit completely to the task of helping defend their new neighbors from the encroachment of the Chirruk. They understand the creatures well in terms of capability and tactics and commit dozens of their fighters to the difficult task of warding the large swarms away from more vulnerable communities in Drackenvelt.

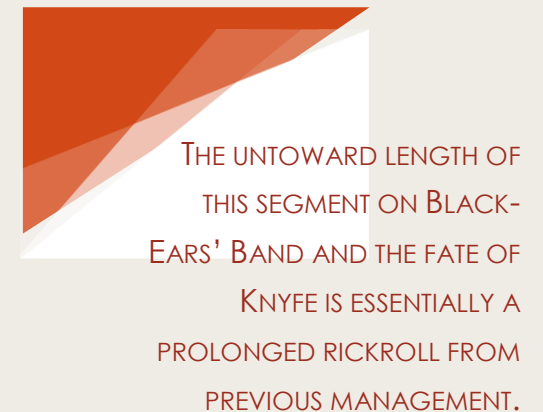
Locals are at first poorly disposed to trust the goblin interlopers. Goblins, Orcs, and Ogres have long been a serious and frequently fatal threat to the people of Warwick, descending from the Goblin Wastes or emerging from remote rural regions to sack, burn, destroy, steal, enslave, and periodically eat the local residents. The history of the region is replete with massive invasive attacks on the part of armies containing one or more of the Goblinoid races, and Goblins are particularly distrusted and hated.

Orcs, the most civilized of the Goblinoid peoples, have occasionally found a way to integrate a clan into the normal way of life of the people of Warwick. Ogres in large numbers are very organized and extremely dangerous, but in the sense that they subjugate the others with impunity they are granted a degree of respect to blend with general hatred. Goblins, however, tend to be entirely despised. They are known to be avaricious and deceitful creatures, powerfully dangerous and wily, utterly uncivilized and incapable of truth. Part of this derision has ties to the deep and pervasive racism of the Endrani people who would routinely enslave Goblins when they could be captured, and who had a laundry list of preconceptions about their qualities as sentient beings, but none of these characterizations are made from whole cloth: Goblins are dangerous, culturally predisposed to an extremely alien ethos that doesn't put any particular stock in personal loyalty, and are ferocious in the pursuit of their own survival.

Having Goblins volunteer to defend their homes and livelihoods seems to the people of Drackenvelt to be one half of an obvious ploy to ingratiate themselves only to take advantage later. Blackears' Band, however, while still odd, foreign, and uncivilized, has come to sincerely believe in the idea of Alban citizenship as a strong move for their people. In order to make the best choice for their own individual survival, then, the Goblins must undertake an experiment in conceptual collectivism.

Gradually, it becomes clear to even some of the more recalcitrant people of Drackenvelt that the band is worth not only tolerance but acceptance, in much the same way that a scattering of Orc tribes have found a limited place of acceptance amongst the people of Warwick. Several members of the clan even become well liked in the region, developing reputations for something almost akin to gallantry in their defense of rural farms and villages.

Goblin brothers Tuktuk and Fukfuk become renowned for their ambushes and fieldcraft, eventually earning themselves jobs with the Barony acting as couriers for missives in the northern portions of Drackenvelt. Senior hunters Rocksand and her husband Knyfe



train local young folk in the particular strategies of both avoiding and confronting small groups of Chirruk. Others acquire notoriety as well for the almost endearing degree of culture shock which creates bizarre interactions on the regular. Blackears is skilled in the arts of Divination and uses these abilities to the strategic advantage of his people and serves as the needed bridge between the bizarre ways of the Goblins and the Warwickers. The ancient, grizzled Shaman who is ultimately co-leader of his people with Blackears remains a figure of alarm and fear, particularly due to his unrepentant invocations of Beshaba, Sordos, and Ziphane, but remains largely out of public view.

Disaster strikes for Blackears Band when their most seasoned war party finds itself trapped between a veritable horde of Chirruk, including several much-feared fire beetle forms, and the pork-farming hamlet of Desmerand near the crossroads north of Fortnight. Rather than cutting their losses and escaping the trap, the war party fought the Chirruk to a bloody standstill, saving the tiny village and its dozen occupants from slaughter. Veteran member of the band, Knyfe, was slain.

The increased pressure and resistance in Drackenvelt forces the Chirruk to redeploy sufficiently that the Nights Watch is able to lift the siege of the city of Mourning, which had endured its isolation well on account of thorough preparation. Though there were deaths from the violent attacks, particularly of airborne wasp-like Chirruk scouts, the city was well stocked and its citizenry prepared to avoid catastrophes of privation.

Ultimately it is determined that the reason the Chirruk are particularly assaulting Alban settlements, rather than adhering to their more passive gathering and defense-oriented mode of existence, is because they are under the thrall of an artifact of magical compulsion. The Chirruk are a broad representative of a very common theme in the history of Warwick, where a strong negative event occurring magically in the Wastes has repercussions that echo out into the populated lands to the south. These take the form of fleeing Wastes peoples or creatures trying to stay ahead of tides of worse trouble, but they also take the form of more abstract magical interactions that force effects southward like an overflowing bathtub.

In a very real sense, then, the lands of Warwick have a profound conceptual similarity to the distribution of force and problems created by the presence of the buried dragon Fire-Eye in Scarborough, Tir Anwar, through previous decades. But instead of an energetic void that draws things toward it, the wastes themselves could be considered a constant outward pressure, and regional events are like people dropping rocks into the bathtub.

Another example that reflects this same principle is that of the Lifeless. An ancient construct-type race or creature, very limited in number, the Lifeless are a profoundly entropic hunter-seeker sort of being with the ability to cause a great deal of

damage to people and places both. Originally made perhaps as a weapon, these things had been imprisoned a long time ago in a region now covered by the Goblin Wastes. Their prison was broken or ruined in some fashion by the chaotic energies consequent to the destruction of Hickory.

A number of the strange, icy, dangerous creatures called "Lifeless" is thus released into the wilderness of Warwick where even today a handful may persist somewhere. This situation is managed directly by the people of the town of Fortnight who slew Hickory, particularly a significant mage with ties back to Scarborough and the Baroness named Raven Lunatic. By capitalizing on and manipulating distorted waste energies, Raven is able to devise a specialized magical solution to re-imprison most of the creatures, which mitigates the damage they are able to cause substantially. Without direct and constant intervention to counter the dangerous tidal forces that drive danger out of the wastes, the lands of Warwick would rapidly become entirely uninhabitable.

The artifact that controls the invading Chirruk creatures is wielded by a teenage Human local named Circe (also known as Cera) with extreme Anti-Alban opinions resulting from the loss of her family. After a particularly violent confrontation including the presence of the Chirruk "queen" (in much the same sense as a queen bee) the artifact is taken from her and the young woman was admonished for her behavior and recommended to the care of a religious sect worshipping Aya that had a particular avocation for attending to mental illness.

Without the compulsion driving attacks, it becomes possible to negotiate with the Chirruk queen and settle upon a withdrawal that avoids the annihilation of her hive swarm. Chirruk are invited to colonize part of a remote region in the north known as the Valley of First and Last Chances. This location, reputed to be impossible to locate except by accident or desperate need, is secluded and supernaturally isolated in ways that are difficult to understand. Rumors associate it with a site of a disruptive influence as old as the Lifeless themselves, which is to say speculatively pre-Dragon Wars. When rumors arise of something having to do with before the Dragon Wars, those rumors often integrate the fanciful concept of "Airships." These are



imagined to be magically-powered craft that could sail the sky as ships do the sea, in the forgotten history before the fall of what came before. The arcanology involved in such a creation is entirely induplicable and not remotely understood by historians or mages, so these fantastical contraptions are emblematic of the mysterious and bygone. When rumor spreads about the Valley of First and Last Chances, it takes the form of suggestions that an ancient airship crashed there, leaving behind some now-buried secret power that somehow influences fate and luck itself. Others would simply suggest the site is holy to Valerian.

The Valley of First and Last Chances is a particularly good choice of settlement for Chirruk, as their presence in or near it would contribute to its seclusion and isolation and help keep unfriendly interactions with the insect creatures to a minimum. Furthermore, they are an able defender of their own territory, meaning that their presence will assist the lands speculatively south of that valley from dangers in the Wastes.

In addition to resettling the Chirruk helpfully, the goblins that helped provide information regarding the Chirruk are welcomed to settle in a community they call Knyfe Rock, in honor of their fallen hero. (The site for the settlement sits in the lee of a vast boulder that, in the opinion of Black-Ears' Band, resembles a contemplatively seated Knyfe.) Both of these outcomes demonstrate early examples of the principle of cooperative buffer-alliances with dangerous or uncivilized creatures which mirror previous collaborations with the Bad Rock clan of Orcs in Daneholt.

This example further demonstrates the merit of cooperation to try and heal the wounds of distrust between newly arrived citizens of Warwick and those who have dwelled there for generations. These divisions persist, in Drackenvelt nearly as much as anywhere else in the duchy, but each illustration of a potential counter-theory is perceived as a positive.

In Port Blackwater, the challenges are particularly acute when it comes to integration. While the city has a very racially diverse population, it has existed in a state of rampant lawlessness for so long that it is only distinguishable from ports like Tiburón (Islas del Sol) and Galvenlik (Saimonia) by virtue of the taxidermized Wastes fauna adorning tavern mantles instead of swordfish or mountain goats. Instead of having to teach new arrivals to get along with long-timers in the face of mutual dangers, Port Blackwater must find a way for law abiding citizens to get along at all while being continuously preyed upon by those long-timers, but to do so without bankrupting the duchy in the process.

The first major strides are an outgrowth of dilution. So many people move to Port Blackwater that criminality is fundamentally less commonplace. The new Lord of the city, Rupert Locke, leverages connections with incoming aristocracy



and powerful merchants to create a social pressure in the direction of at least the appearance of respectability, while using Crown funds to hire a much larger number of constables for the Blackwater Watch. The larger constabulary is given incentives to avoid bribery and expected to focus a great deal on basic public safety. Perhaps most importantly, Locke distinguishes himself for having a specialized ability to threaten the large, organized criminal gangs with the long reach of the Duke's justice. With only a few demonstrations required, Locke gives the impression that he is willing to go much further to obliterate the appearance of criminality in the city than he actually is. This confidence scheme works well enough that he is gradually able to isolate the worst and most egregious criminal gangs to some degree in a designated neighborhood called the Rookery of Kings, where it is agreed that no Blackwater Watch will ever set foot.

An unfortunate consequence of this dilution and then condensation of the criminal elements of the city is that the Rookery of Kings becomes entirely opaque to Lord Rupert. When a Nipponjin exile and longtime resident of Blackwater calling himself Nozomu establishes himself in the Rookery and begins accumulating power and influence, this goes completely without notice by the city. It isn't until regional couriers working for the Royal Courier Service find themselves embroiled in a kidnapping plot and all but at war with a strange new gang that the true horror, a plot to assassinate Queen Fumiko Van Dance, comes to light.

Takatsuji no Nozomu is a disgraced former Kuze (noble) from Nippon who had a history of sexual impropriety and corruption that led to the downfall of his entire family. A self-indulgent and avaricious man, his corruption had begun to take on a supernatural character even before his departure from his home kingdom, gradually beginning his transformation into a kind of Nipponjin demi-fae creature called an Oni, one who is possessed by a spirit of hunger. When Alba took over Warwick, Nozomu found an outlet for the bitterness and resentment he holds toward the imperial clan of Nippon, and began plotting with the assistance of a small number of co-conspirators to assassinate the Nipponjin-born Queen of Alba.

The discovery and, thankfully, foiling of the plot by Nozomu highlight a new iteration of the problem with Port Blackwater. By being included in the control of Alba, the city can now extend its own influence outward as well, with potentially devastating political consequences. This is a problem that lacks any immediate solution, and there is little that Lord Locke can do to make amends to his Duke but swear to be more vigilant and to try more assiduously to quell such serious matters before they arise.

Far to the north, the simmering anger at Österland's conquest of the Norsk's beloved Svalbard Island came to a head in the wake of several years scheming when Earl Gudrød "the Black" Svensson of Nordestrand calls an *Allthing*, a sort of democratic summit between leaders and worthy individuals of the many petty kingdoms. Normally one of the rare mass councils would be held at the standing stones of Svalbard, but because of its deprivation, the council is held at Laninkoping, the vast market city of the north. Gudrød the Black calls on his people to unite under a war-king, purposing ultimately to take back Svalbard from the Österfolk.

Debates are lengthy and full of fulsome speeches at an Allthing, but this one ultimately consents to the Gudrød's plan, and in the end agrees he is the most correct to lead them. He is crowned High King Gudrød, a deliberately temporary position of unity.

The project is not as simple as seizing a single island. High King Gudrød's purposes are far more expansive than that, and also more calculating. Several years of siphoning resources from Inishmora, Ruslav, and Alba had culminated in the previous year's lightning raids of Inishmora to give the coffers one last inrush of coin and goods without invoking counter-strikes in vengeance for burned temples or captured thralls.

Österland has an ever-more sturdy alliance and pact of mutual assistance with the kingdom of Skollar, one which had helped it to secure its own boundaries and pave the way for the capture of Svalbard, the most sacred site in the northland where the Norsk people had laid out the creed of their alliance. Skollar, with an ever-developing ability to build longships of its own and a stout, fairly centralized monarchy, would be a difficult enemy to have on their flank if they went directly for Österland.

Instead, the Gudrød the Black declares his intention to first break the spine of Skollar. He has already spent the years since the death of the Mad King Ulf Magnusson there seeding uncertainty amongst the northernmost kingdom's divisive Jarls. Now, as the forces of the Norsk gather and arm themselves for the fight to come, High King Gudrød lets loose a last volley of whispers and waits to see how the bones will fall.

In Skollar, Queen Illiania Andreisdóttir rules competently but with reserve. Having come to her crown at a very young age, the Queen is astute but not seasoned, and relies firmly on the collaboration of her Jarls to effectively govern. The inclination towards independence of the Jarls and her own inclination to compromise had made for a gradual siphoning of



power away from the heart of power in the city of Nordster, and out into the large lands held by the competitive and at-times truculent lords of her land.

Certain of her lords have a more combative year than is customary, as old grudges and new disputes bubble to the surface in hot spots around the realm. The Queen is kept thoroughly engaged mediating arguments and working on a program of economic development, and does not focus as much of her attention to defense. The alliance with Österland has kept the Norsk off her shoulders for years, and though she sees their massing forces for a campaign season, an attack on her own lands seems a low order of probability when fragile targets are abundant afield and when her relations with the neighboring Earls of the petty kingdoms remain steady. Queen Illiania envisions a future where battle is less a part of everyday living in the northland, though it would require a great deal of cooperation from the grotesque expanses of the Wastes and the wild creatures of the icy north.

To this end, she has accepted into her court a group of foreign mages led by a Thracian archon named Horace who had presented a case for utilizing an ancient, mysterious "road" to open up a trade route through the Wastes and connect Skollar more with new opportunities for commerce and foreign relationships. The plan seems ambitious and alien, and many of the Jarls think it is either unwise or unholy. Illiania is convinced it could be the future of Skollar.

Her Grey Witches do not agree, but they speak in riddles. Divisions within the kingdom are the foremost threat, they assure her, and Illiania labors to quell the discord.

Far to the southwest of these brewing conflicts, the Maelstrom, also called the Terra Ore, enters a phase of particularly potent activity. The continual storms that sweep around the vast whirlpool barring exit from the Mari Magno increase in intensity and scale, and the seas around it become more aggressive. All of it seems to the seasoned eyes of sailors keeping the appropriate distance from it to be spinning just ever so slightly faster. This begins a cycle of substantial impact, making gradual climate changes to the regions near it.

The first signs of this are heavier than usual rains in Sylvanator and Scythia. More frequent storms spin off from the maelstrom and carry a great deal of water to Islas del Sol as well. The squalls make deep-sea sailing more treacherous, and some critical trading currents meander in a way that is predictable and known to the merchant fleets, but which bodes ill for

the near future. All that water is being stolen—in the grand balance of things—from Meridia, and hundreds of miles of the northern coastal lands suffer under punishing heat.

Thracia is not entirely immune from the drier, hotter weather afflicting northern Meridia, though it is less stricken than the lands to the west. Even so, it is sufficient to deepen the difficulties posed by the ongoing trade war with Sassania over the world's market for fine olive oil.

With many producers having gone out of business, various land being sold to foreign interests, and outright industrial sabotage, the price of olive oil begins to creep up again with the stalled production. Both Thracia and Sassania are dealing with similar competitive struggles after the ill-advised opening salvos in the conflict last year. One particularly aggressive consortium bought up groves in both countries, a great many of them, and starts producing. This group, run primarily out of Thracia but owned collectively by merchants from several countries, has not previously been an olive oil producer. Both the production and distribution infrastructure is fragile. Supply being constrained, the price of olive oil begins to climb aggressively by the end of the harvest season.

The Cynosian merchants who had been stockpiling the oil with a weather eye to just such circumstances start to make a great deal of money. Queen Xanthippi III, wise to potentially angering entire countries she has to trade with and live with, is careful to regulate her merchants to avoid spoiling the soup, and uses a bit of her lavish profits from the new revenue stream to make gifts and polite gestures to her frustrated competitors. With Doomstadt embroiled in an obviously catastrophic civil war, Xanthippi III regards herself as the preeminent Endrani personage in the entire world, and lives under the sort of circumstances where she is unlikely to encounter disagreement on that subject.

Farther south still, in the wild and uncivilized lands of southern Meridia, there is a major and destructive earthquake in the Sun'a'do mountains that stand between Chenooet and Lakamha. Both regions suffer serious damage to alpine communities. Rivers change their courses and animals change their patterns. The disruption caused by the event is severe, but little known about beyond the seas. Hispalian merchants at Puerto Cedrela find themselves the beneficiaries of unexpected windfall in terms of available lumber, thanks to destruction wrought by the earthquake. Determined to not anger the communities that are essentially the "hosts" permitting Puerto Cedrela to exist at all, the governor of the little colony goes to great lengths to provide supply and support to damaged communities, but the more cutthroat of the merchant interests gobble up all the fine "Hispalian Cedar" they can lay hands on.



# 2011

## Parables and Fables

A crucial part of understanding the Fae, the lands of the Fae, and the interactions between the mortal world and the lands of Faery is getting accustomed to the idea that they are in many ways a reflection not of the mortal world directly but of the ideas mortals have about their own world. To make a very simple analogy, consider your home as a clearly defined place in the mortal realm, and all the people who live there to be the mortal residents of that world. The part of Faery that is most closely connected to your realm is going to have things in common with your realm. It will be house-like, being inside it will feel like being in your own home. Up and down will be up and down, the drapes and rugs may remind you of home. It's going to mimic things you didn't realize were important to you like the workflow of a kitchen, or the degree of importance you place on controlling mice. And if you were to travel to that Faery realm looking for who is in charge of the place, what you'd find isn't going to just be some similar-looking copy of *who you are*, but instead a reflection of what people who live in your house think *a person in charge of a house like yours* ought to be.

This is all background to set up the notion that with a critical change like Alba's acquisition of Warwick, there is certain to be an adjustment period for the lands of Faery adjacent to the lands of Warwick. A number of locations around the duchy begin to experience examples of this as the Albans settle in and become a familiar part of the world of Warwick. In Drackenvelt, this manifests as a dispute between two potent local Fae figures who each believe they should be inheriting command of the surrounding area and who choose not to conquer it, but instead to ask the people of Drackenvelt to get involved in the debate themselves, to "elect their own" Fae neighbor, so to speak. The dispute takes a certain amount of time and energy to resolve but is broadly reflective of the way that self-determination seeps into the absolute bedrock of Warwick in a way that is almost entirely unique.

The ultimate victor in this conflict between Fae powers is a figured named Black Anise, who as a consequence becomes a prominent arbiter of certain kinds of Fae activity in the general region of central Drackenvelt, particularly the midland Crossroads.

Warwick at this time also finds itself briefly involved in international affairs. In Damascus, the longtime nomarch of Bahariya Nome in the Sultanate of Damascus is an ancient lich named Ibrahim Zoldana. Necromancy is a less serious affair to the people of Damascus generally, and Zoldana is a skilled leader and isolationist in a remote area and thus goes largely unchallenged. A descendant of his found her way to Warwick without Ibrahim's permission, however, and so the old monster sends a nephew, Saadi Zoldana, to abduct and retrieve her. As Saadi Zoldana is also a lich, this created a number of domestic issues in Warwick, and represents the first major undead incursion encountered by Alba after taking control in Warwick.

Warwick has a long and tumultuous relationship with the undead, being a remote and poorly governed region for most of its existence. A constant fear of and loathing for the undead is richly present in most cultures that exist there, which leads to a great many practices amongst modern peoples of burning the dead rather than any form of burial. This, however, is not even remotely the case for much of its history nor universally the case in modern Warwick, and it has been the site of many battles, epidemics, invasions, and hardships leading to mass graves. This means it is fertile territory for the undead.

Beyond even that, the Wastes themselves provide a functionally limitless supply of corpse for use by necromancers, in ways that are poorly understood and difficult to catalog. Entire Thracian legions were lost into the wastes in the time of the conquest, and Richard III of Imajicka was not the first leader in history to attempt to conquer the territory by mass force, by any stretch of the imagination. Entire small civilizations have risen and fallen near the borders of the Wastes, and vast numbers of Orcs, Ogres, Goblins, and Barbarians live along its fringes to this day. It is not exaggeration to say that even considering only the better-known portions of history, the Wastes is in some ways a mass grave unto itself, with a population that **must** number in the actual millions. The losses attributed to it in the last twenty years alone number easily over 100,000.

Saadi Zoldana arrives in Drackenvelt in an effort to discover and collect his niece, Beatrice, to return her to the family holdings in Damascus, whether she wishes to go or not. He raises a small collection of the undead for his personal use and protection. He uses this force to brutally assault and capture a tiny mining town called Aetherstone hidden in the high valley between the triple peaks of the Drakenburg in central Drackenvelt. Using Aetherstone as his base of operations, the lich tracks down his niece and abducts her. Unfortunately, she was residing at the time in the country seat of the Lady Anasazi, Baroness of Drackenvelt, who takes personally a neighborly responsibility to defend her citizens.

The Baroness and her household, along with a strike force from her increasingly veteran town of Fortnight, lay siege to Aetherstone themselves in order to find and retrieve Beatrice and destroy the lich Saadi. This is a confidence building exercise for Warwickers who often are exposed to roving undead as a matter of course. The surety of the counterstrike from the

Baroness instills an improved morale in some residents and provides a model that is duplicated by lords in other regions of the duchy.

The loss of the unfortunate citizens of Aetherstone in Drackenvelt to the Zoldana lich and his servants is deeply felt, however, and mourned. Recalcitrants and liberationists argue that both the threat and the true target of that threat were imported from elsewhere and the problem would never have struck without Alba's occupation, thus refusing to see it as a benefit to their lives.

A reconstruction of the village and re-opening of its mithril mining operation is undertaken by a local Warwicker businessman named Heinrich Sturges, who has a reputation as a harsh and unscrupulous but practical administrator. Sturges is already known for bringing a good deal of profit into the region with his other enterprises, as well as employment opportunities to drive more homesteading and immigration, a fundamental part of the Duke's larger strategy for Warwick.

There is, as ever, a conflict of opinion on the subject of Alba's presence and the value it is providing to the independent-minded Warwickers, many of whom are deeply committed to the cherished resentments of Imajicka. While some serve as strong advocates for the occupation, counter-arguments are rampant, and the Duke is not of a mind to exert himself in an effort to quell dissident speech. Some believe this is because he likes to know from which direction a knife might be arriving, but others perceive this as a libertarian ideology supporting a concept approximating a "freedom to speak."

Because the Duke does not clamp down on dissident speech, only dissident action, the dissident speech continues to flourish and propagate, but a look at the long game shows that the window of acceptance is gradually drifting towards Alba's favor in any truly large sampling of opinion. Ideological resistance is concentrated in pockets here and there throughout the Duchy.

Duke Jinx, while paying close attention to the ongoing affairs of the 4<sup>th</sup> army in Doomstadt, spends a good part of this year on a local campaign to eliminate brigandage in the countryside of Estermont. The increase of population and wealth has led to an increase in opportunity for the unscrupulous, and Jinx makes a point to render this as unprofitable as possible; at least in his immediate vicinity.

In mid-spring, a young lord named Eadred Hawks is made Baron of Daneholt in the Duchy of Warwick after the unexpected but not suspicious death of his predecessor, Alban transplant Daniel Chadwick, who was not entirely prepared for the rigors of his position and was slain battling a localized incursion of a kind of really disastrous venomous earth-elemental lizard

creatures under the control of rampaging ogre magi. While he did solve the problem before he died, Chadwick wasn't popular or very well regarded. The promotion of Eadred was a substantial exaltation of a local lord and concession to local interests by the Duke.

During the early portion of the year, Queen Fumiko of Alba is quietly sent on an embassy to the island kingdom of Melité. This allows her space and security to recover from the stress of the assassination plot, but also serves an important function. In Melité, Queen Fumiko engages in a very exclusive series of private symposia with the faculty of the Vittoriosa Naval Academy. This is in essence a diplomatic master class with a sharing of strategy and technique as well as consultation on world affairs *par excellence*. The Naval Academy is already a well-regarded institution for learning the diplomatic craft, and Melité is well known for its successes as a mediator almost since its inception.

While there, the Queen also recruits a handful of promising graduates to take with her back to Alba. These will be trained in her direct retinue in the hopes of amplifying and multiplying the diplomatic corps of Alba's foreign offices. As it stands, the young country has moderately acceptable international relationships with a number of countries, but hardly any skilled diplomats to leverage as permanent ambassadors. This slows down interactions rather badly, requiring more micromanagement and correspondence directly from the Queen. On the other hand, it does also mean that there is a very tightly contained and ideologically consistent foreign policy at work.

This is likely also an excellent opportunity for the covert recruitment of a certain caliber of intelligence assets, but such acquisitions are entirely and effectively circumspect if they do occur.

In the far north, catastrophe overtakes the kingdom of Skollar.

The Kingdom is ruled by Queen Illiania, second daughter of the deceased Crown Prince Andrei Ulfsson. In March, the nation is stunned by the arrival of Nylessa, elder daughter of Andrei, in the company of a group of Frostwolves deeply loyal to the deceased prince. Included amongst these is the devoted ally of Andrei, a man named Jogorhon whose life's work of devoted public service made him a deeply respected figure on both sides of the argument and who had been instrumental in

arranging for Nylessa's return. Favored, in theory, by her father for the crown of the kingdom after his departure and favored by the principle of primogeniture, Nylessa boldly asserts her own claim to the throne, in effect attempting a bold-faced coup.

The justification for this is partly based on the notion that she has the right to the crown according to law and tradition, and partly because the elder sister profoundly believes that her young sibling is leading the country in a destructive direction. Illiania, on the other hand, has the fact of her current rule. She contends that Nylessa's prolonged absence from the kingdom was a de facto abdication. Both have plausible legalistic arguments, but it is a matter of persuading Illiania to agree to abdicate or embracing an outright civil war in the Kingdom. A particularly tense point of dispute between the sisters, torn as they are by differing visions of the future of their country and how best to serve the memory of their father, is the Thracian mage and his plan to open a 'road' through the Goblin Wastes.

Nylessa's cohort had been involved in discovering similar plans on the Warwick side of the wastes. At first interested in the scheme, it was discovered by Scythael, a self-exiled Skollarian Jarl living in Drackenvelt, that the plan required the capture, torment, and permanent enslavement of Fae creatures in order for each stopping point on this 'road' to magically function. Aghast at the possibilities, the danger of this plan being undertaken was a major factor driving the Warwicker Skollarians to find Nylessa and fly for home.

Further, Illiania and Nylessa have a basic debate about principles of federalism versus statism in terms of power distribution within the Kingdom.

The dispute is brutal and bitter but conducted with words. Illiania is willing to concede the point on the Fae Road and give up her dream of free trade with Warwick by land passage. She is not willing to give up her crown. Using the skills for politics and persuasion she has honed for the better part of a decade in power, Illiania is able to diffuse the situation, cede valuable ground without abandoning her own principle, and earn the fealty of her older sister at last. Nylessa's retainers follow her will on the subject.

Nylessa is made Jarl of family lands in the south of Skollar and retires to them. The Thracian mage Horace is stripped of his privileges and thrown out of the kingdom. Illiania retains her rule.

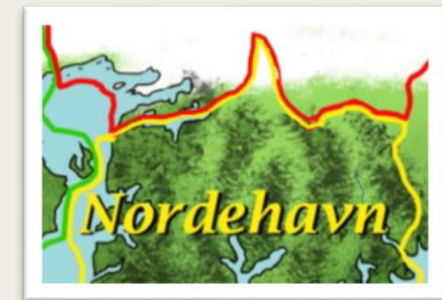
At which fragile point High King Gudrød the Black of Nórdehávn unleashes his assault.





He has persuaded a number of the Jarls of Skollar, even ones present at the council just past, to abandon their Queen and stand idle in the face of Norsk invasion. Of particular importance are several in key geographic positions through the midline of the kingdom. A very small number agree to join in the High King's forces. With the forces of Skollar dispersed and hampered in coordination by the abstaining or rebellious Jarls, Gudrød the Black drives a ferocious opening assault to all but split the country in half with a massive army of Norsk well prepared for their undertaking.

The impact is devastating. Those who stand aside or surrender are guaranteed to keep their lands and rule them independently as any Earl of Nórdehávn would, so long as they foreswear any allegiance to the throne of Skollar. Many of these are granted additional lands from loyalist neighbors as additional incentive. Those who refuse are subject to brutal sackings and relentless pressures. Within months, Nordster has to be abandoned and the Queen and her sister both flee to the Grey Coast, bastion of the Grey Witches. By the end of summer, Skollar is broken.



All that remains of the kingdom is the tightly packed refugees overflowing the corner of the realm once controlled by the elite and secretive cult of Collen that serves as diviners and advisors to the crown. What was once a sweeping kingdom has become a scattering of petty Earls, hardly distinguishable from Nórdehávn itself except for the lingering soot of burned holdings belonging to the slain recalcitrants. The Norsk would struggle to mount a proper assault on a realm densely peopled by acute seers who can predict their every move, so the Grey Coast of Skollar is simply isolated from the surrounding countryside and watched carefully. Otherwise, it is left alone – though desperate circumstances will soon follow in the overpopulated fjord.



Skollarian loyalists scheme counter-rebellions and desperate reprisals, and they plot how to survive the winter.

In spite of such threats, however, Gudrød the Black now feels unconstrained in his plans to drive Österland out of the lands to the west. Parts of Skollar are cruelly looted, particularly the capital, as the armies of Nórdehávn settle in to wait through their own winter, readying for a spring campaign.

Back in Western Warwick, stirrings of discontent are profoundly obscured when a substantial portion of the Barony of Drackenvelt seems to become embroiled in a rapid series of truly fantastical crises. A number of persons, ranging from local residents to invading ogres to representatives of the Fae themselves, become drawn into some kind of mass disruption or mind-altering magical catastrophe that causes them to act entirely unlike themselves and to seem to play out facets of familiar folk legend, literature, or even children's stories.

While actual destruction from these events is not severe, Albans take circumstances that in any way resemble mind control very seriously, and the very fact that whatever has done it has done so to Fae as well as mortals means that the scale of the problem is extremely severe and holds the potential for truly appalling development.

Addressing the peculiar magical circumstances requires effort on the part of a host of researchers drawn particularly from the experts in the orbit of the Baroness. Efforts are hindered, however, by the abrupt and entirely unrelated eruption of a truly terrifying plague. Arising from parasites on wolves driven down from the deep wastes, the disease is highly infectious, rapid moving, and extremely dangerous. It is not the dreaded Nul Magicus but something new, and still very dangerous.

The disease is dubbed the Red Plague, and features prominent red sores that develop after an initial bout of fever and malaise. It kills many of those it afflicts, and those fortunate enough to be resurrected after such an incident are not cured of the disease but remain afflicted, continuing to suffer unless subjected to that most extreme of measures, burning of the body and splintered resurrection. Treatment is chancy and takes a long time to recover even with aggressive alchemical and magical intervention.

Spreading like wildfire south through Drackenvelt, the disease strikes Port Blackwater like a rogue elephant on the rampage. As much as 70% of the city becomes infected before the disease has run its course, and many, many of those afflicted die of it. With the risk of international spread so catastrophic, efforts are made to close ports and seal borders while physicians and healers alike valiantly battle the disease.

Blackwatrians ravaged by the disease try to flee into the countryside only to find themselves faced with a harsh quarantine at the hands of an apologetic Duke Jinx Lledrithcath. As much is done for the city as is possible, and it is impossible to entirely isolate it, but conditions within are desperate and the whole city spends months smelling of the funeral fires. Upwards of six thousand people are killed by the Red Plague, accounting for as much as 10% of the city's population. The economic cost to Warwick of closing the port for months on end is catastrophic, and the Duke requires financial assistance from the crown to try and recover from the catastrophe.

A breakthrough is discovered by a Fortnight, Drackenvelt healer named Vervain Coppermoon. A Gael'Braugh healer with a particular interest in the practice of medicine but little formal training, Coppermoon makes a remarkable intuitive leap based on immunity discovered amongst some Orcs. With the intensive cooperation of neighbors and assistants, Vervain develops a theory of the disease and a theory of inoculation that flies in direct contradiction to the principle to the Milkmaid's Blessing. (Milk maids are immune to certain ravenous poxes on account of regularly being afflicted by a lesser pox that only troubles cattle.) Instead of attempting to find a lesser but related ailment with which to prevent the spread of the disease, Vervain uses alchemy to devise a way of propagating the immunity found in orcs which she determines to be found in their blood.

With blood from the local Brassclaw Orcs of Drackenvelt, hard work, and ingenuity on her own part and that of many others, Coppermoon is able to extract the immunity from blood and transform it into large batches of a draught that can be drunk to confer immunity to the spread of the disease.

The next great undertaking is the mass distribution of information about and ingredients for the alchemical inoculation to as many hands, far and wide, as can benefit from it. One consequence of the desperate spread of the Red Plague was an extreme arresting of hostilities in Doomstadt for several critical months of the combat season. Many are laid low by the disease on both sides of the conflict and its severity is such that most of the fighting season is lackluster and guarded, punctuated by no substantial change in the balance of power. Not near so many die in Doomstadt, however, as the disease had just barely begun to fester there when the inoculation was developed in Warwick and distributed rapidly.

By the end of the outbreak, it is without question that the efforts of Vervain Coppermoon and her peers was instrumental in saving tens of thousands of lives. She is honored by Alba with a medal and an invitation to attend the Royal College of Physicians for formal study, so as to earn their coveted certification as a Doctor.

Meanwhile, the bizarre mind-twisting affliction of Drackenvelt itself had continued throughout the spread of the disease. A great deal of research and ultimately a great deal of high magical investigation eventually brings about a better understanding of the circumstances sufficient to allow the citizens of Fortnight (by virtue of proximity to Coppermoon and her cadre they were among the earliest to be cured of the Red Plague and thus best able to address the issues) to try and remedy the situation.

It proves to be the case that there are two substantially different mental afflictions at work. The first represents the contents of an accursed artifact (a box) belonging to the Order of Vaeltran. This had, due to the misfortune of a thief, been opened by mistake releasing entrapped entities representative of a philosophical taxonomy of the concept of Sins. These warped the mind of victims and emphasized each sin in the afflicted person creating dangerous circumstances and not infrequent death (not by accident is there an epigram which states that 'the wages of sin are death') before moving on to new victims.

While the afflicted are eventually purged of these conditions, the problem is not fundamentally solved as there is the larger issue of the mass-hysteria-like second affliction. This is found to be the consequence of a dangerous chain reaction between unstable energies associated with a powerful but lovelorn mage and the disruptive and catastrophic energies of the Goblin Wastes during a period of extremely energetic disturbance.

In the same fashion that a mage, when casting a spell, is creating reality out of a mental construct that manifests itself as a physical effect, this affliction was being created as a manifestation of the will of the mage. Unfortunately, what that will was creating, fueled by the energies of the wastes, was not a localized magical effect like a ball of fire or burst of healing energies, but was instead a reality in which stories written down to please the memory of a lost love literally became reality.

Fortunately, the effect was not a deliberate attack, nor evidence of an incoming threat. Unfortunately, it both demonstrated the scale of how Wastes energies could distort and amplify magical problems (a frightening proposition) and definitely needed to be put to an end. Beings afflicted by the forced alteration of their self-identity were deeply harmed by the complexity of the compulsion.

In the end, the mage whose own madness was the ultimate source of the maddening effects is tracked down to a refuge not far from Fort Hayes in northern Drackenvelt. Once found, the mage responsible was slain when interrupted while

attempting the ritual sunder of a rival for his deceased beloved's affections. This brought about a straightforward, if disheartening, solution to the issue.

The Baroness Anasazi was with the Fortnighters who were pursuing the culprit of the fairy-tale madness outbreak, and the expedition stayed in extra barracks made available to them at Fort Hayes. On the second evening of their brief stay at Hayes, an assassin attempts, apparently out of nowhere, the abrupt ritual sunder of the Baroness. The attacker is a neighbor and apparent ally from Fortnight, but had fostered ambition and envy of the powerful Half-Fae Baroness. The effort is catastrophically ill advised and incorrectly performed, resulting in the immediate death of the assassin rather than his intended victim. The incident gravely troubled Baroness Ana, particularly as the murderous impulse is found to have been entirely internal for her attacker, not the result of corruption from outside or manipulation by others, like the actions of those caught up in the far more expansive mayhem Fortnighters had been at Hayes to untangle.

That larger madness had been caused by one solitary individual's arrogance and misfortune. It acts as a kind of wake-up call for those Albans who had come to Warwick thinking themselves strong enough to stand up to living in a dangerous land surrounded by dangerous creatures. The scale of difficulty present in Warwick goes far beyond the physical and far beyond the easily comprehensible. All of it was but one pulsing convulsion of harmful energy from the vast and limitless well of corruption and chaos that is the Goblin Wastes. Even those living within Warwick for generations are startled by the severity of it as a strictly magical problem.

It is likely that some causation could be drawn back to the absence of the corrupted monstrous former druid Hickory as a tainted but resilient bulwark against all the worst the Wastes have to offer. While it was impossible to allow Hickory to continue, it is also likely that harder times are ahead.

In other less chaotic parts of the world, events proceed in a more orderly and predictable fashion.

Far south of Warwick on the border of Oguz, the Shalkaran province of Tsizang rebuffs a substantial invasion of their mountainous homeland that has been going on for a bit more than a year. In rebuttal to the attacks, Tsizang then invades Oguz in return, making the not unreasonable assertion that they must drive the kingdom farther out of the mountains if they are to account for their own defense. This effort is undertaken by Tsizang province alone and without much assistance from the Imperial Army of Shalkara. The province has long had deeply separatist leanings and resents being a part of the empire. It has,

however, learned that attempting to remain independent costs too many lives and too many futures, and tolerates the association with ill grace. Since the Empire of Shalkara and its own province of Tsizang province cooperate without actually liking one another or getting along particularly well, this means that Tsizang seldom asks for military help and even more seldom receives it. They are expected to manage their own border on behalf of the Empire, in exchange for which the Empire does not trouble them with excesses of oppression or force them to accept outside governors.

In consequence of this relationship, Oguz is not summarily crushed by the overwhelming power of Shalkara's mighty army, but is pushed back away from the previous border effectively enough.

Farther south and west, the Thracian/Sassanian olive oil trade war continues.

The Thracian consortium producing oil in both countries is subject to scrutiny for possibly manipulating and provoking the conflict in the first place. Long before any conclusions can be drawn about whether or not such allegations have merit, olive orchards belonging to the group are outright attacked and vandalized. This causes more damage to olive trees, including some very old groves with rich historical roots and importance to the people of their respective regions. Perhaps more importantly in the short term, this makes for lots of angry people who have lost lots of money.

Guilds in Thracia lays blame on a counter-interest in Sassania that is now profiting off the impending downfall of the Thracian consortium. The political arguing has interesting philosophical implications about the relationship between governments and businesses but that is of less interest than that it fails to stabilize the prices. In response, Nabotaeon farmers begin to export their oil in greater volume and switch out some decision-making to make more oil of more olives.

Cyros, beginning to run low on its stockpile of Thracian olive oil, starts investing in Nabotaeon olive orchards and thus continues profiting. This is a pattern for Cyros, which is something the fierce island nation is very proud of itself about.

In the Barbarian land of Hiraaca there is a brief but decisive war between the Toaribi, Pegtabina, and Wichiya people on one side, and the Skahaun and Moanante on the other. The Moanante are dissolved and dispersed among other peoples by the end of the conflict, when accord was struck between the remaining combatants. Incidents of this sort do not normally rise to the level of international awareness, but became somewhat known as a result of interested parties from Cyros and

Hispalis negotiating with the Toaribi people regarding a potential arrangement to permit hunting of the plains bison of the region by outsiders.

The hunting arrangement falls through spectacularly as the Cynosian and Hispalian merchants are hopelessly foreign and woefully unequipped to negotiate with the Barbarians. They do, however, get a very good view of the means and methods of serious disputes amongst the clans of Hiraaca, something which is very seldom seen on such a scale.

# 2012

## Death by a Thousand Cuts

Not long after the assassination attempt on the Baroness of Tir Anwar, Duke Jinx calls for her aid in the political sphere. The Duke plans to take the field personally in the civil war in Doomstadt and is concerned about the atmosphere at court. The expenses of maintaining Warwick, particularly in the wake of the Red Plague, are driving concern and frustration with the Treaty of Warwick and the sense of maintaining a presence there. Needing a staunch and trustworthy advocate at court, Jinx decides to send Anasazi. The Half-Djinn former Canid Baroness has a strong, heroic record of personal accomplishments, an unusual race, and a proven administrative history. She is committed to the well-being of the people of Warwick, and Jinx can trust her judgment.

Duke Jinx reappoints Ana to post of Baroness of Tir Anwar, putting her close to York and able to be active and vocal against developing factions that are determined to argue the wisdom of any action that benefits Warwick. Before leaving, Baroness Ana delegates her Sheriff, Ryllian Flynn, to manage the town of Fortnight once she has gone. As a Sheriff, the Felinae administrator is an appointee and not a lord of the land, subject to appointment and dismissal. He is a trusted insider of the Baroness' household and is intended to continue helping to facilitate improved relationships between the largely immigrant town where she had established her household and its long-time resident neighbors.

To replace Ana as Baron of Drackenvelt, however, Duke Jinx is in somewhat of a bind. He is reluctant to appoint another imported Alban to the position, but is also reluctant to place 100% confidence in any one of the small-holding Lords of the region that they can manage the whole Barony effectively. Additionally, resistance to the presence of Alba in Warwick flutters around the edges of political discourse, and by going on campaign he will be removing the largest deterrent to rebellious action with his absence.

Duke Jinx decides to walk a political tightrope and appoints Ahren Jarvik, the extremely controversial "Lord of the Marches" as his new Baron of Drakenvelt. This reaches out to the peasantry and rural folk, shows respect for their choices of leaders, and assures the buy-in of Ahren's loyalists to the concept of Alba's presence. If he did not give Ahren power, there was



the severe possibility that he might claim it, if the Duke were gone for long enough, and would likely be a popular resistance figure very quickly if so.

Ahren Jarvik accepts the position, installs himself and his men in Duskgate, and sets about going on a progress of his new lands. He has a difficult path, attempting to make some manner of amends with the lords now under his purview but with whom he has at times had serious conflict.

Duke Jinx Lledrithcath leaves with his ducal guard to join the 4<sup>th</sup> Army in the field while winter still has its teeth sunk into Warwick. At about the same time, King Michael departs from York on an abbreviated Royal Progress. This progress is to be conducted with far less fanfare than the last one, with entire segments of the journey undertaken in as much stealth as can be applied to a party of the size mandated by his presence. Speculation runs through court and countryside that there are discreet motives at work or hidden meaning to be found in the locations chosen for this Progress, but the king is adept at maintaining opacity with regard to any motive beyond the obvious; a need to personally evaluate his lands.

An important part of the Progress will include venturing to Warwick, which is possibly an explanation for why the Progress was not made with more theatrics. Not only would theatrics be unwelcome in most parts of Warwick, but going there at all would be the sort of thing that would have serious social ramifications and put him at unacceptable risk of assassination. No one outside the king's traveling party was even aware a trip to Warwick was in the plan until he was actually taking ship from Dover to do so, arriving in Port Blackwater completely unannounced and functionally incognito.

It is also very possible that Michael was undertaking some specific project on behalf of the Duke of Warwick, something to which only the king could personally attend. Details are frustratingly unclear about what machinations or curious events might have occurred in the course of the 2012 Royal Progress.

One event is incontrovertible, however. While the King is away from court, a ship arrives in Dover harbor laden with a cargo of explosives and a hold packed with the undead. It detonates near the docks, causing severe damage and loosing a swarm of ghouls upon the port. These are put down with great difficulty by the Dover city watch, who also faced a catastrophe of fire tearing through the harbor. The results are devastating, nearly a third of the port being damaged unto uselessness, with many lives lost and uncountable financial damage both in the immediate losses and for longer term trade.

The ship belongs to the fleet of a Malayan vice-admiral Latouche Villaneuve, who ostensibly commands a third of all Malay's naval forces, such as they are. Outraged inquiry follows in which Malay asserts that Admiral Villaneuve has gone rogue

with 3 ships and is pursuing a vendetta against Alba of his own design. They promise his arrest or capture, while simultaneously decrying him as, in essence, a stateless pirate, subject to be killed or captured by any law-abiding vessel at sail. Many in the Alban court lay blame squarely on Malay for these events, considering it to be a deliberate effort to sabotage reinforcements of the 4<sup>th</sup> army now moving through Warwick. Anger and frustration mount.

Newly created Baron Ahren Jarvik of Drackenvelt unfortunately encounters a very serious problem almost immediately. In the vicinity of Fort Hayes, in northern Drackenvelt, a series of Sunder rituals had been recently set off in rapid succession, two of them exploding dramatically. This created a lot of negative and disruptive ritual energies lurking around an already vulnerable location. Fort Hayes is a Night's Watch outpost first and foremost, and already sees a great deal of action from negative influences coming down from the Goblin Wastes. To have a banquet of necromantic energy in the area is sure to draw in more necromantic issues all on its own, even without necessarily having a necromancer explicitly trying to make an army and conquer things.

Sure enough, Drackenvelt begins to experience outbursts of necromantic activity. While Ahren is well acquainted with defending against things like the undead, he is less experienced in the art of decoding and dismantling magical anomalies, and requests help from the residents of the town of Fortnight which by now include several notable or renowned Mages, acting as a lodestone for magical talent.

Commander Thomas Bradley of the Night's Watch, the commander of Fort Hayes, exerts himself and the efforts of talented subordinates to find additional information for those looking into the necromantic anomalies to pull from, but is soon overtaken by the immediate issue of an army of Orcs and Goblins led by a charismatic Orc leader named Tharnak. This horde had taken shape in the wilds north of Estermont and was moving west to press down and into Drackenvelt through Hayes, and it is ruinously well-coordinated, far outstripping the efforts of previous hordes in recent years.

Tharnak's armies have a potent desire to rid Warwick of Alba's presence, seeing the large modern nation as a direct and existential threat. The Nights Watch, under the combined efforts of Bradley and Commander Sherman Halford, District Commander of the Nights Watch for Warwick, is forced to immediately respond with maximum force. Coordinating with what could be roused of Alba's 4<sup>th</sup> Army still remaining in Warwick, commanded by Colonel Lady Catherine Jiles of Woodbury, the Nights Watch all but empties Fort Hayes and the post at Mourning to take on Tharnak's horde. Additional support was to be

had in the house guards of Lords Walther Hulse of Mountain Vigil, Lord Roy Habreadth of Mountain Vigil, Lady Desiree Keane of Mourning, Lord Latharn Stewart of Tarrow's Down, Lord Niall Corbet of Lakedeep, Lady Magdaline Osterfeld of Weatherly, Lord Joseph Barnes of Brighton, Lord Himth Broadknuckle of Hovis, Lady Annelise Lubar of Opalenica, Baron Anthony Talbot of Freeholt, and Lord Colin Vasnivek of Signal Hill. Last on the list of support, though naturally not least, was a strong contingent of Mythril Shields from the Dvergen Kingdom of Ironbeard commanded by Adalheida Windguard, the grizzled and venerable aunt of King Argorlim.

The fortified town of Mourning once again finds itself under siege, though this time by a horde instead of a swarm. Coming so soon on the heels of the last such incident, the town does not fare as well as it did against the Chirruk, but still is stoic and methodical in the face of the assault. The siege will last three months, this time.

Command of Fort Hayes was left to Deputy Commander Solana Rohriam, an Archon well suited to continuing the efforts to coordinate with researchers working to eliminate the necromantic threat. Meanwhile armies clashed on the plains north of lake Ripple, inconsistently pacified territory well known to the Nights Watch.

A key piece of information for the ongoing investigation is discovered in the archives at Fort Hayes, detailing some historical information about a kingdom in western Warwick in the 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> centuries shortly after the departure of the Thracian Legions from the area. This kingdom, Wolfenbüttel, had a strong cult of Nul as a critical part of their national theology and a series of traditions and practices in keeping with a sweeping rejection of undeath and an emphasis on very specific burial traditions. One substantial accomplishment of the Wolfenbüttel cult of Nul was the creation of a series of broad, altar-like stones placed at intervals approximately a day's travel apart extending along the course of an old Thracian road (not the sophisticated high roads built in kingdoms longer occupied, just a regular road that was coincidentally laid down by Thracians) that tracked the coastline from south of Blackwater all the way to lands north and west of Fort Hayes. Each such altar-stone, called "Corpse Stones" with reverence in their own writings, was enchanted using esoteric rituals to be completely inimical to undeath such that any corpse placed upon it would be preserved from such a condition. By utilizing this causeway of waystones, the corpse of a deceased person could be moved all the way from the southern extent of Wolfenbüttel to the cult of Nul's stronghold, a hill fort in the wild lands north of Fort Hayes, where it would be attended to and buried in complex catacombs built into large hill mounds.

The enchantments that kept the Corpse Stones capable of their specialized function had dwindled and faded over the centuries, naturally enough, but the objects retained a good deal of the underlying magical properties and principles involved

that were part of what made it possible for them to be thus enchanted in the first place. Incidentally, one such stone was located fairly close to Fort Hayes. And when a rapid sequence of sunder rituals was cast or detonated at Hayes in succession over a short period of time, it created an outpouring of massive amounts of discordant, malfunctioning, but death-attuned magical energies. An interaction only barely comprehensible even to Archons of the art took place and, apparently, had activated the Fort Hayes Corpse Stone, but it was activated incorrectly and suffused with these deathly and pseudo-necromantic energies. Its function was, essentially, inverted. Instead of making it impossible for a body laid upon it to be raised as an undead, the stone was now a relentless manufactory for undeath.

One of the things this did was create a great deal of lesser undead. Another thing the Corpse Stone did was to begin building, with the level of pseudo-consciousness one expects from catastrophically over-infused object, a mosaic creature combining attributes from many greater undead. That creature was very smart, could control greater undead, and started recruiting allies and slaves.

The citizens of Fortnight dub this thing the Chimera.

Fortnighters spend substantial amounts of time working both in their home territory and in the area of Fort Hayes, doing everything they can to protect it from threats both foreign and necromantic, in the near-absence of the Nights Watch. Positioned as it is on an isthmus between two very substantial lakes, the Fort is an enhancement of a natural choke point and is the ideal place to attempt to stop mass incursions into Drackenvelt. Assistance is given to the remaining Watchmen to handle small units from Tharnak's army attempting to maneuver around the Watch and Royal Alban Army forces working to crush the incursion, and experts on the subject of undeath and/or death related magic strategize a way to destroy the Chimera and its servants, then deactivate the corpse stone.

Lord Sulya Kovic of Lidna offers assistance in the project, which is unusually outgoing for the laconic Endrani gentleman, only to have it revealed that he had been transformed into a vampire by the work of Corpse Stone and Chimera and was seeking to undermine their efforts. Sadly, Lord Sulya has to be slain. Without a clear successor, Ahren Jarvik appoints a Sheriff to replace Lord Sulya. He chooses the ferociously competent Jen Weaver, formerly the captain of Sulya's militia. She likewise offers assistance and this time is neither a ruse nor a vampire.



ISTHMUS: (N) A NARROW PIECE OF LAND CONNECTING TWO LARGER AREAS ACROSS AN EXPANSE OF WATER BY WHICH THEY ARE OTHERWISE SEPARATED.

~Editor

A strategy is hit upon that involves a sophisticated magical binding that will suspend the action of the Corpse Stone and allow it to be safely destroyed, though it's clear that the Chimera itself will need to be overcome by pure force. A number of noteworthy mages collaborate on elements of the project, including Raven Lunatic of Fortnight, Imish Stonecrow (a Barbarian hermit originally from Nórdehávn) and Sister Solana of the Nights Watch.

In the early stages of implementing the plan, a lich under the direct control of the Chimera is sent to Fortnight to assassinate any of several targets that were a threat to the creature. The Lich, named Taggart, fails to kill one of the prime targets and instead slays only a Fortnight militia member named Grugmuk and the militia's captain, Jane Hawthorne. This leaves a cadre of extremely angry wizards who are able to find and kill him, sending the lich back to his phylactery. He leaves behind a notebook that provides insight into a lifelong pursuit of power and knowledge, a profound set of cognitive biases, and a collection of useful details about the Chimera. Also of particular note is that the lich Taggart despises the creature that controls it.

Raven of Fortnight and Sherriff Ryllian Flynn find a way to meet with the lich Taggart in order to recruit his complicity in destroying the Chimera in exchange for a temporary stay of execution by the Fortnighters. These negotiations are complicated by ongoing problems with breakaway pieces of the horde of Tharnak, not yet defeated by Halford and Bradley in the north. With the siege of Mourning lifted and the exhausted forces of Warwick's defenders rounding up the remains of Tharnak's army, the entire affair has gotten far more unpredictable.

Coordination is ultimately achieved between the representatives of Fortnight and the lich creature Taggart, and in time for Fortnight to intercept a fleeing Tharnak and kill him along with the last of his guards.

King Michael of Alba arrives entirely unexpectedly at Fort Hayes with only a swift honor guard of fifty knights and a demand to meet with Commander Bradley, who is sent for in the field. While he is present at Hayes, King Michael takes the opportunity—treated as though it were a fortuitous coincidence of timing and not a stratagem—to issue thanks and honors to some Fortnighters then present at the Fort preparing to destroy the vastly powerful necromantic abomination currently less than 10 miles from the actual flesh and blood of the actual King of Alba.

For her dedicated service in defense of the realm, courage, and ingenuity in devising a way to use the reckless magics of the Goblin Wastes themselves as a tool to recapture and entrap the dreaded Lifeless in their ancient prison once again, Raven Lunatic of Fortnight is knighted to the Order of the White Rose.

Not long after the solemn presentations given to a stunned Nights Watch mess hall of over-awed Fortnighters, the actual flesh and blood of the actual King of Alba goes to a private meeting with Commander Bradley before leaving the area entirely, accompanied once more by his sparse retinue of fifty knights.

An assault is waged against the catacombs beneath a burial mound in the ruins of the Wolfenbüttel cult of Nul compound northwest of Hayes, where the Corpse Stone and Chimera are both located. A brutal battle follows, claiming the life of Jogorhan of Skollar, the heroic figure responsible for saving many lives during the Norsk conquest of those lands. The Chimera is destroyed, and shortly thereafter the Corpse Stone is secured with the complex physical and metaphysical bindings arranged for it so that it, too, can be destroyed.

Traditional Skollarian religion expressly forbids Reincarnation, so the newly created knight Dame Raven works to implement a theoretical work-around that will allow her and other allies of the fallen Skollarian to retrieve the soul of Jogorhan before it can get too well situated in the sundered lands. The exact methods are unknown, but were ultimately successful in restoring the Barbarian to life. After a brief stay in Fortnight to show his gratitude and fraternity with chosen kin and countrymen, Jogorhan opts to depart back for what remains of Skollar to be of additional service there to his lady, Princess Nylesa Andreldottir, and her sister the Queen Illiania.

In the lands beyond Skollar, Gudrød the Black campaigns into Österland, seizing back a great deal of northern territory first, shoving them far south. Österland resists this invasion firmly but does not call upon foreign mercenary assistance as it did in the last major border dispute it had. A number of concerted efforts are made to assassinate High King Gudrød of the Norsk, but he is gratuitously well-protected.

One of the major tasks undertaken by Jogorhan in his return to the homeland is to manage the movement of substantial numbers of refugees from the over-crowded lands of the Grey Coast, helping to smuggle them safely out of the region by way of Laninkoping and the Scoheim end of Inishmora. He is instrumental in developing the town of Zielona in Drackenvelt as a destination for these refugees. It is well suited to accepting refugees, and there is eagerness to add to the population of Warwick generally. The several hundred Skollarians that opt to move beyond Scoheim and its perilous proximity to Nórdehávn found a stable enclave in Warwick, substantially changing the power balance around Wastefed Lake.

Near the end of the year, Jogorhan marries Princess Nylesa of Skollar and settles in (what remains of) Skollar on a more permanent basis.

Several months of effort are required to eradicate the substantial remains of the undead and Orc forces still plaguing Estermont and Drackenvelt after the downfall of the Chimera. Serious damage had been done to the lingering Royal Alban Army forces in the Duchy, requiring reinforcements from Wales and a recruiting drive in Warwick. The Nights Watch also experienced some substantial losses, particularly amongst newer recruits that had been coming in since the occupation of Warwick by Alba. There are the beginnings of debates about the power dynamics of the Nights Watch as an independent organization arising out of a now-defunct kingdom and attempting to act regionally with regard to multiple new kingdoms while remaining apolitical.

In Drakenvelt, the easing of pressure from the undead does not amount to a long reprieve from challenges. Late in the summer, the entire town of Lidna is all but wiped off the map by an assault from demonic forces that had begun operating in the shadow of the undead assaults earlier in the year. While some of the town was able to evacuate, a great many residents are killed. Those that survive do so by the effort, almost single handed, of Sherriff Jen Weaver, who distinguishes herself in fighting as a relentless rear guard to protect evacuees attempting to flee towards the Fortnight crossroads.

Fortnight reacts swiftly to the plight of its neighboring township and assaults the town of Lidna to drive the demonic presence out of it, discovering that they are dealing not with "ordinary" demons but instead the coordinated forces of a particular demon aggressively engaged in experiments that attempted to graft aspects of Fae creatures together with aspects of Demon creatures, in service to a larger scheme. The demon in question, identified by locals as "Quielzebub," "Quizelnebub," "Quizzlebub," or other, more disparaging nicknames, was a powerful force with a great deal of resources, leveraged against the people of the region in a dizzying array of frightening experiments and dangerous encounters. (Demonic *Names* are potent and powerful emblems involved in their summoning and power over one another, so the true *Name* of the creature is unknown but may be close to or related to any of these. For purposes of discussing it effectively it will be described as Qz.)

Ultimately, this creature is concluded to be aiming towards consuming the essence of a particularly potent Fae entity in order to make itself more powerful. Specifically, its target is the Fae being known as Gruagagh, manifest expression of the fear immortals have of their own destruction, as well as being a terrifying figure to mortals themselves. This creature is one that has the specialized ability to 'kill' or destroy Fae entities almost with impunity, and so the demon aspires to gain that particular ability for itself by fusing with the being. It is theorized that this has significant implications to the utterly opaque state of intra-demonic politics, but that remains speculation.

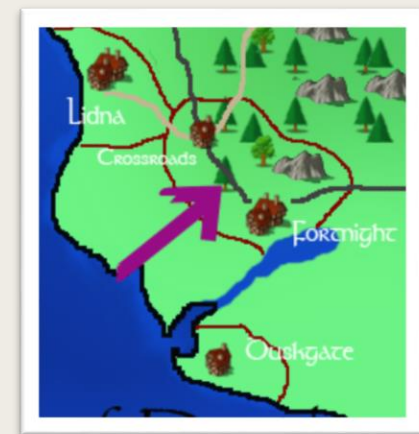


Efforts to interfere with the scheme of the demon lord Qz meet with only limited success. Many demons are destroyed and/or banished but represent only experimental fodder and simple labor to the lord itself. It remains unclear to even the most educated of observers whether the actual fusion thought to be at the core of the scheme is actually possible or will work as intended, but the threat is severe enough to warrant action regardless. Details are discovered about components demon lord Qz will require in order to attempt the transformation/consumption of the Gruagagh, and enough of these are damaged or destroyed to create interference in the large ritual. Not enough is done to prevent the ritual entirely, however, and so while Qz fails to devour the Gruagagh and is forced to flee in a depleted state, the Gruagagh creature itself is temporarily unleashed upon the mortal realm with briefly disastrous, if localized, consequences.

Sheriff Jen Weaver of Lidna, assisting in the efforts against Qz, is devoured by the Gruagagh before it can be violently banished. This loss is devastating to her allies, and she is swiftly reincarnated by Fortnight local hospitalier Brother William of Leeford. While the collaborative efforts of a variety of mages and experts is able to foil this specific plan by the demon lord Qz, the demon itself escapes. This brings a halt to the immediate danger posed by demons in central Drackenvelt but does not address the larger issue that a potent and dangerous demon with personal knowledge and information about the area exists and is certain to continue scheming.

In the midst of this unrest, a tactical assault by Norsk raiders rushes inland to the Fortnight crossroads in a brutal assault designed to trap and kill a notorious Skollarian expatriate named Peregrine Solvfalle. The raid consists of 4 longships, a force of nearly two hundred raiders, more than half of whom bypass places like Duskgate and the slowly-being-reconstructed Lidna entirely to strike inland directly at their target. Dozens of civilians—already in harrowing conditions because of the demonic infestations around Lidna—in the line of march are killed.

The Norsk attacking Drackenvelt believe Peregrine Solvfalle to be an assassin who made an attempt on the life of High King Gudrød the Black right after the fall of Skollar. Rather than seek to negotiate politically with Alba, a rogue band of those left behind to guard the fjords decides they will have vengeance and glory even if they haven't been chosen for the assault of Österland and opt to go a-viking on their own to destroy the Skollarian assassin. The raiders try repeatedly to kill Peregrine, but find him to be living now in the town of Fortnight, which is on its way to developing an international reputation for





the high concentration of dangerous mages living there. Fortnight throws back the assault without assistance (or need of assistance) from the Baron, which Ahren regards as success.

In Doomstadt, Duke Jinx's direct involvement has a substantial change on the situation almost immediately. The Duke, taking direct command of the King's forces and maneuvering Queen Dolosus's generals into support for his plan, begins an aggressive campaign southward, sweeping major forces out of the way without attempting to solidify or maintain the territory as it is seized. Instead, the substantial combined army is thrust southward like a thrown javelin, driving to and through Danzig while hardly stopping to assault the city. The army continues onward towards the city of Geissen, seat of House Dorogai. The Dorogai had been the authors of a number of particularly brutal altercations over the first few years of the conflict and are particularly aggressive in terms of combat maneuvers in the ongoing conflict. The aggression and boldness of the Dorogai help to maintain their power as a Great House despite being not quite as ancient as the other Great Houses amongst the rebellious faction, the Motova and Raumi.

On the way to Geissen down the Ebon Road from Danzig, Duke Jinx sets about liberating slaves in massive numbers from entire swathes of countryside around where the army is travelling. Any who wish to join in the forces of the Alban Army for the assault are welcomed to the army in auxiliary units, provided food and shelter and what arms can be spared or seized on the way – an unprecedented action. Liberated slave volunteers do not make for orderly or disciplined troops, do not follow orders well, and cannot be sustained as an effective army over any real period of time.

The juggernaut of Alban force is clearly not a sustainable long-term territorial claim but is all but unstoppable in terms of forward progress. It is abundantly clear from the aggregate evidence that Duke Jinx has no intention of waging a sustained campaign with his army, and it is believed he is engaging in a scything effort to create mass disruption which will conclude by arcing west along the course of the river Volga and possibly assaulting Bonn itself on the southern coastline. Bonn had been proposed as the southern capital if the country were to settle for a divided kingdom as a solution to the state of civil war and remains the hub of all economic activity for southern Doomstadt.

If the directed force of angry liberated slaves can be contained for that long, supply would immediately become a serious issue for the encroaching Alban army. To maximize its resilience against such a strategy, House Raumi begins aggressively drawing resources up inside the city of Bonn and preparing to isolate itself on the island if need be by preparing to

destroy their own bridges across the north fork of the Volga. An Alban force positioned thus would be able to exert little force against the city while being stranded in the land between all 3 of the major Southern Houses.

It becomes common knowledge in the city of Bonn that intelligence gathering has found detailed information on Duke Jinx's plans for the Alban lightning assault of Bonn including maps, diagrams, requisitions, even conversations between the Duke and his officers. The strategy was regarded as serviceable but not innovative, and relying too much on its liberated slaves and the ability to swiftly secure control of the Bonn port so as to receive resupply from Alba.

Jinx does not go to Bonn. He stops at Geissen.

Once at Geissen, Duke Jinx has the recruited slave forces work with engineers and sappers in the Special Services to begin digging tunnels. Desultory attacks are made on the city itself, which locks itself up tight and resists the encroaching army despite a gross disparity of forces. After a three-week span of what seems to be an ineffective and half-hearted siege, Duke Jinx informs the city that all present will be permitted to evacuate without harm provided they did so within the next 48 hours, as he is about to destroy the city.

This is not regarded seriously by the Dorogai, but it does leave an impression on the civilian population of Geissen who do not feel a great deal of personal devotion to the great House. Dorogai and its retainers hole up in their citadel along with servants and slaves. Wall defenses for the city at large are reduced to doubly fortify the stronghold of the Dorogai, which also contributes to civilian dissatisfaction. A substantial portion of the city's population evacuates, though certainly not all of it, leaving in a trickle that became a flood down the southern road as it becomes clear that the departing people are not being harassed or even interacted with by the army on their way.

After 48 hours, Duke Jinx destroys the city.

The tunnels that have been dug and reinforced for the last several weeks underneath the walls of the city and particularly under and around the base of the citadel according to schema devised by the Jinx's sappers and engineers are filled with hay and straw. Into the tunnel system, captured livestock is driven – particularly as many hogs and sheep as could be had but mostly swine. Then the tunnels are fired.

The heat from the burning straw and fat concentrated in the tunnels is as extreme as a kiln. It is so hot that it literally melts the stones of the city wall on the western side, and with it the base of the Dorogai fortress. Everything that can burn at all, does.

The destruction is appalling. No Dorogai in the city of Geissen live through the destruction. Few who remained in the city at all survive. The wreckage looks as if it were burned down by by dragon fire, with stone walls running like wax and courtyards fallen into blasted pits.

Duke Jinx collects some volunteers who had approached the army after fleeing the city and dispatches them as messengers to Auric and Bonn, demanding a meeting in Danzig. He turns his army around, and marches back to the capital.

A treaty follows soon after ending the war in Doomstadt with unconditional surrender to the rightful queen Dolosus Mauvis of House Dramikov.

In less appalling news of the world, the vitriolic trade dispute between Thracia and Sassania continues with a bit of escalation. Tensions are so enflamed that citizens of Sassania are evicted from Thracian city states and vice versa, diplomats fired, and it looks like armed conflict is all but inevitable. Nabotaea builds its olive oil industry more, carefully, and tries to stabilize the prices, while government in Nabotaea guards groves with actual soldiers to avoid getting sucked into the dispute. Cynosian representatives to Nabotaea provide advice on how best to ply the right amount of price manipulation to gradually assert control over the market, and Cynos continues to steadily invest in Nabotaeian groves.

The international impact is less dramatic than the direct impact on Thracian and Sassanian economies. Most notably, a substantial increase in the value of rapeseed oil from Malay and Abruzzo is basically a windfall for some farmers in those countries which causes them to overcommit to producing more canola. If they overplay that hand they will eventually be stuck with a harvest that can't be sold, but the land use is very easy to convert back to legumes, so it's not like getting stuck with too many or too few olive groves, which trees require years to develop and can last for millennia.

## 2013

### Poison

Word of the vitrification of Geissen and the end to the war within Doomstadt spreads sluggishly back to Warwick after hostilities conclude. The details emerge only gradually, as frightening rumor and wild speculation to be followed by the sobering and still frightening truth. The end of the war is a welcome arrangement but there is a small amount of shade on the exultant victory in the unglamorous pragmatism of the final conflict. Thousands, possibly tens of thousands, of lives were spared by the destruction of Geissen as it was conducted but the harshness and brutality of the moment really peels back the curtain on the glamour of war in way people are not accustomed to hearing. It feels less satisfying to gloat about the end of the war when the end came in a way that doesn't make a heroic ballad.

Amongst those who know already the real cost of war, the heroism of the narrative is not impeded by its harshness. But though all the people of Warwick and Alba have a taste of the true flavor of war, the ugliness and ghastliness is something they tend to associate with monstrous outside influences such as the undead, demons, rampaging Ogre cannibals, and so on. In a mortal vs mortal conflict, Duke Jinx is frighteningly close to demonstrating that nobody who really goes to war comes home in shining armor.

In the city of Port Blackwater, news of the end of the war is met with mixed enthusiasm for slightly different reasons. Tensions with Malay and the gradual implementation of a limited number of letters of marque for interfering with Malayan shipping had meant a great deal of profit for shipping backers. It is rare to get pirate-quality profits without the attendant risk to investment posed by the threat of hanging. Investing in scoundrels had been providing very good returns in the messiest little city in the world. An end to the war in Doomstadt was positive for an increase in legitimate trade with Malayan business, but bad for the illegitimate trade around embargoed Malayan goods and bad for the quasi-legitimate privateering.

All of this precipitates a sea change in the Rookery of Kings, seediest of criminal underbellies within the larger seediness of Port Blackwater as a whole. New powers draw to the fore amongst the organizations operating within, and new schemes begin to emerge to the rest of the city. One gang, of uncertain origin, begins to rise to prominence in an unexpectedly rapid way due to its ability to manufacture an addictive and invigorating new narcotic. The drug, which is dubbed "Red Zip" by

those peddling it, provides a sense of energy, enthusiasm, and speed while lacking immediately apparent side effects other than addiction. It is as though a more extreme and life-changing version of coffee has suddenly manifested within the city, and use of it spreads rapidly.

As might be anticipated by a broader view of addictive substances generally, there proves to be no free lunch. The drug is manufactured according to a recipe obtained from a power-hungry Rakshasa-type demon called, approximately, “Jagnatha,” “Jagannath” or “Jaggan Aptha”. The recipe includes blood taken from another demon, a Rabisu-type demon called “Shar Ku,” “Sharro Kunu,” or “Sharikuno”, a rival of demon Ja which is being held prisoner, weakened by the constant blood drained from it. (Recall that the true names of demonic entities are difficult to obtain, keep, pronounce, or remember, and that names listed for the purposes of describing the events are unlikely to be accurate).

Demon Ja is collaborating with and arguably controlling a faction of gangsters within the Rookery of kings. Demon Sh is a long term local boogeyman of the Port Blackwater slums that has been captured and enslaved by demon Ja. This information is slow to emerge due to the aggressiveness of criminal protection, but factors heavily into the way that Red Zip is manufactured, distributed very inexpensively, and sent forth into the countryside. After consuming enough of the substance, the mind of the victim becomes pliable and subject to the impulses and will of demon Sh, whose blood is contained in the serum. This power grows ever more potent over the addict as more is consumed. The user craves magic, becomes aggressive, and is desperate for more Red Zip, ultimately descending into a state of implacable, biddable madness whether the need is satisfied or not. This leads to unrest and even riots in the city as more and more people become subject to the demonic elixir.



Simultaneous to this epidemic of addiction, in the shadow of the end of the civil war in Doomstadt come citizens with existential questions about what is to become of Warwick now that the proximal cause of its occupation by Alba is fulfilled. Separatists believe that Warwick should be a free and independent nation under its own control. This differs slightly from the more self-determination-oriented anarchist resistance to early Alban occupation and has innately more power to persuade. Port Blackwater is not the only place such ideas arise, but is ripe for small organizations to begin to mature.

A limit is arrived at when demon Sh manages to break free of its confinement and cut a bloody swath out of the Rookery of Kings while fleeing the city. The discovery of the demonic blood content of the elixir worsens the unrest in the city even more, which is being fed into and upon by the gradually growing separatist movement. In the Rookery of Kings, the petty squabbles of warring bands are causing enough suspicion that it becomes a real concern that the Blackwater Watch may feel compelled to violate the terms of Lord Rupert Locke of Blackwater's understanding with the older gangs. One such, a moderating influence of the depraved slum, is the owner of a prosperous inn and gambling den inside the neighborhood called "The Dragon's Den." The leader is called "Papa Midnight" by his servants.

Papa Midnight begins to assert more and more localized control inside the Rookery to reduce the level of existential threat the neighborhood is representing to the well-being of the city. To restore balance, consolidation is required. To consolidate, the gang spreading Red Zip must be quelled or consumed. It is theorized that Papa Midnight has tacit authorization from Lord Rupert to accomplish exactly this.

While the Red Zip addiction made inroads north of the city, it was primarily being pushed out by the gang who now found themselves constrained in how much more they would be able to produce without re-securing demon Sh. It additionally finds itself increasingly subject to a less anarchist home ground and in danger of owing fealty to Papa Midnight for its own survival. For what are surely reasons entirely unrelated to pressure by the potent gang leader, demon Ja chooses to pursue demon Sh personally, following the weakened creature north.

Demon Sh holes up in the ruins of the old prison complex of Fort Night, located near the modern township called Fortnight, to attempt to recover its strength, unaware of the proximity to a dangerous population center. When demon Sh attempts to feed on the local populace, it is discovered and driven farther north before demon Ja can capture it.

Fleeing both mortal outrage and a demonic rival, demon Sh finds a seclude lair not far from Fort Hayes, possibly chosen to be close to the happenings of an Orcish cult lingering off and on in the region from the times of Tharnak's invasion, called



the Rusty Nail. The intruding Orcish cult was causing enough localized discord to lure a subset of the Fortnighters north to assist the watch with intervention, as its own numbers are badly depleted. By lingering nearby, demon Sh has a potential source of additional recruits for its ever-increasing swarm of Rabid Lurkers, the colloquial name given to those too far gone in the influence of the Red Zip, that have followed it blindly to the new lair. With this force around it, the demon will be able to whittle away at the more potent figures of Fortnight while they are engaged in what it regards as petty distractions, dealing with occult rituals involving captive souls, stolen knowledge, and bizarre transformations.

Fortnighters move north to intervene in the dangerous Orcish cult as expected, but come in greater power and potency than expected by demon Sh. It adapts to the increased level of potential threat by poisoning food at Hayes with its own blood, hoping to acquire more mindless cannon fodder and ablative civilian casualties, something of a known weakness of Fortnight.

The citizens of Fortnight present at Fort Hayes unravel the scheming of the vengeful demon Sh as well as its pursuit by its dangerous former jailor, the demon Ja. After a series of strategic engagements, Sh is defeated in his lair, and Ja is battled on open ground thereafter and likewise defeated.

In other parts of Drackenvelt, the separatist movement is beginning to spread like a stealthy pestilence. Conflict with undead associated with the Chimera the previous year had done serious damage to Drake Prairie's crops, and the new year is seeing weak soils and poor yields in vegetables bringing in the leading edge of a famine. Food prices increase, and Baron Ahren is too new to his post to fully appreciate the necessary structures of guarding the well-being of everyone not just loyalists in a contrary countryside. As such he is insufficiently diplomatic with those requesting aid, though doing his level best to alleviate their hardships. Unfortunately, he is also obliged to begin increasing taxes.

Corruption in his small port town of Duskgate begins to make the matter worse for imported food prices, but Ahren will tolerate none of it and publicly executes an assortment of local officials. This is good for food prices and bad for local contentment in Duskgate.

A separatist leader named Nate Mayfield becomes increasingly important in Drackenvelt, acting as a firebrand and moving discretely throughout the barony seeking allies and recruits with the aid of his lieutenants and spies. Mayfield is devoted to the ideal of Warwick independence and willing to go to any lengths to achieve his ends. He comes to view Ahren as a

traitor to the people of Drackenvelt, having allowed himself to be coopted by the enemy (as opposed to seeing it as a motion towards a desirable peace.)

While Mayfield is charismatic and good at gaining recruits, he is unable to push the common people generally to a state where they are ready to contemplate rising up against Alba as an oppressor. Many locals have been aided by Albans—or people brought to Warwick by Alba's occupation of it—and regard the potential for a cooperative future as something no longer too pie-in-the-sky to hope for. There is not enough overt oppression to truly move the local population to act. Mayfield settles on a tried and true stratagem of terrorists throughout history. Capitalizing on Ahren's reputation for harshness, Mayfield begins executing false-flag attacks against civilians, having his separatists wear stolen Baronial Guard uniforms and act as though they are seeking the separatists generally and Mayfield in particular.

These attacks are brutal and harsh, and the outrage Mayfield desires begins to accumulate. Rumors are spread by the separatists to imply that Ahren is a weak and ineffective leader who only respects violence. An example of such slander includes reference to the Norsk assault on central Drackenvelt the previous year, when nearly two hundred raiders rampaged inland only to be annihilated by the town of Fortnight. The propaganda version of the narrative is that Baron Ahren colluded with the Norsk and provided the raiders with information to avoid damage to his own lands, then betrayed them immediately to Fortnight to avoid risking his own forces in conflict with 'real warriors.'

The Norsk are a highly respected culture of Barbarians in Warwick, while also being deeply hated by the refugee Skollarians in the interior, so portraying the Endrani Baron as simultaneously prejudiced and fearful pays dividends in public opinion. News is gradually trickling in from the northlands, where High King Gudrød the Black himself is busily taking the sacred island of Svalbard back from Österland.

Rapidly, Österland cedes the land by extensive evacuation after the early conflicts, leaving behind only those willing to live under Norsk rule. The Österfolk petition Gudrød the Black for an end to the conflict, expressing a desire for friendship with the Norsk and regret for taking Svalbard in the first place. A treaty sort of smooths this over. The new boundaries are affirmed, and tributary agreements made with multiple Norsk Earls—Nordestrand, and the new Earls of Skane and Trelleborg—to try and prevent future raiding.



It is possible to mingle the tidbits of news from the north with shades of meaning that imply variously that Alba cannot ever be trusted, and that strong resistance can earn Warwick the respect it deserves. Portraying Norsk reconquest as a resistance is a bit problematic, but possible with the aid of skilled propagandists.

The Baron of Drackenvelt is increasingly in a political and military bind. The harder he tries to find the separatists, the more he reinforces their narratives about his brutality, but the devastating false flag attacks on the civilians reinforce that narrative anyway. Multiple attempts are made on the life of the Baron, and not even all of those are the result of Mayfield's machinations.

Sheila Heffner, captain of the Baronial Guard, is a devout loyalist to Lord Ahren. She has been with him for a decade, a complete believer in his power and authority, and is frustrated by how many of those who used to be with him in the cause of the Drackenvelters are drifting away to the resistance that has so vilified him. She begins to aggressively pursue information to find and put a stop to the false flag strikes by Nate Mayfield's men and possibly find the firebrand himself.

Mayfield, to protect his venture and feeling very confident, puts a bounty on the heads of Baronial Guardsmen and stops his own attacks immediately. This means that the only Baronial Guard out and about in Drackenvelt will be the real ones, and that anyone outraged by the attacks will now assume they are directly connected and not buy into the false flag story at all. The bounty he places is substantial.

The town of Fortnight has gone to some lengths to stay out of the politics of Baron Ahren's legitimacy or the separatist leanings of the countryside. There exists amongst the Fortnighters a general unease with committing firmly to outright treason, but they are nevertheless sympathetic to people's desire for self-determination and not entirely enamored of Lord Ahren. The sympathy for the separatist cause means Fortnighters don't want to back the Baron as firmly as they might otherwise have done.

That entirely aside, several Fortnighter scoundrels decide to take it upon themselves to collect the bounty on Baronial Guards when Sheila Heffner comes through seeking more information about the false flag assaults. She is killed and even nearly beheaded to claim the prize before desultory intervention drives the scoundrels off their mark, but they are not formally punished or arrested by a harried and badly overworked Sheriff Ryllian Flynn, who lacked sufficient resources to actually effect such an arrest.

When confronted by the Baron about both the attack and the failure to detain the criminals, Flynn pleads an inability to control such people. This is, unfortunately, accurate. The Baron reads this as a summary admission of unfitness for office and promptly strips Ryllian of all rank and forbids him or several of his associates from every holding office of any importance in the barony again. The disgraced Sheriff is plainly more annoyed and relieved than penitent about it. The affair, in spite of the sharp rebuke of Flynn, does not speak well of the control Baron Ahren Jarvik/Marcher has over the work of his duchy.

Fortnighters discover relevant details about the designs of demon Ja, and despite the time it had taken to prepare they were able to assault and overcome it, ending then the threat of the Red Zip drug. Or, at least, nearly. The unrest in Blackwater that had led already to riots, and which was being leveraged by separatist elements in the city to ignite a public rage, come to a head in late summer.

A convulsion of riots and public anger are let loose against Alba, against the aristocracy, and particularly against the administration of Lord Rupert Locke, appointed as he was by the authority of Alban Duke Jinx Lledrithcath. Aristocrats flee the city for country estates. Lord Locke does the same, leaving almost all power in the city back in the hands of the Harbormaster, a relic of Blackwatrian independence. Parts of the manor of the lord of Blackwater are burned along with other buildings on Lords Hill, and the city declares itself free and independent of Alba. Willing, to be sure, to deal with Alba as any other, but free.

In the Rookery of Kings, Papa Midnight disappears abruptly, leaving his lieutenants and associates gravely concerned about his whereabouts. Senior subordinates take over his organization "in his absence" and attempt to continue leveraging control over the Rookery, but the wildness of the city makes the task difficult.

Duke Jinx is cautious about assaulting his own city, wary of stifling one fire only to ignite a dozen others. His actions are further informed by information from his allies at court, particularly the Baroness Anasazi of Tir Anwar, that rumblings at court have risen to the point of a number of lords and ladies saying openly that Warwick might as well be allowed to go its own way, as it is too expensive and fractious to bother with and is no longer a required strategic asset now that the war in Doomstadt is resolved. The arguments are reasonable and pragmatic, even framed as though sympathetic to the desires of the Warwicks themselves. This faction is led, discretely, by the tireless efforts of Bartholomew Cornwall.

King Michael seems to be very opposed to these notions. He declaims the duty and obligation to protect the interests of the people of Warwick, the debt owed them by Imajicka for its departure, the faith needing to be kept for their defense. He

also is adamant that the separatists are not a reflection of the true will of Warwick, asserting instead that they are treasonous collaborators working for enemies of Alba to destabilize the region.

But like his representative Duke Jinx, King Michael does not want to crush the rebellion. In a speech to the court in the autumn, the king makes this very clear.

*How can our answer to accusations of faithlessness be to fulfill their worst expectations of our inconstancy? Do we raise our fist in response to the suggestion that it is clenched? Warwick is to Alba the bride, won from her mother's household and brought to our door. She was married once to our elder brother, and before he died, he betrayed her. She worries now that we will do likewise. Shall we cast her aside? Shall we strike her in anger? When her cousins say in secret to her 'that husband will never treat you justly' do we condemn her for their indiscretion? Shall we complain of her that her imperfect health wounds our treasury, and abandon her for it? Or did we marry her, making promises before all our people and the Gods themselves, to care for one another?*

*I say nay, my lords. Nay.*

*Our lady needs our care and our devotion, or how should we ever be worthy of hers?*

Duke Jinx is cautioned to walk a narrow path in seeking to restore harmony in Warwick, and to find evidence, if he can, of whether the suspicions of King Michael about foreign interference are true.

The state of affairs between Malay and Alba after the cessation of hostilities in Doomstadt has not improved and remains darkly tense. Throughout the conflict, Malay kept trading rigorously with the southern houses and providing what might be considered generous funding for their ongoing conflict. It is very likely that a withdrawal or the threat of withdrawal of financing played a significant part in pushing rebellious Houses Motova and Raumi to concede to the demands of Queen Dolosus, the Malayans as persuaded by Geissen as the Doomstaders themselves that continuing the fight would prove disastrous.

Additionally, Malay had long since ceased paying for the land exchanges as made between Imajjickan nobles who chose to remain in one country or the other, forfeiting lands in the course of the original breakup of the nation under Ollana DeVane. The end of the war in Doomstadt did not trigger a resumption of those payments, only obstinate silence on the

subject. Recently, a Malayan admiral had 'gone rogue' and launched a devastating and costly assault on Dover, only to be swiftly disavowed by Malay and hunted by privateers. And lastly, in 2011 a plot had emerged to assassinate Queen Fumiko Van Dance, carried out largely by a Nipponjin exile in the city of Port Blackwater. But Nozomu had resources and assistance from outside, and with expert sleuthing by secretive efforts of those in the command of the Privy Council, two names had arisen in connection to those crimes.

Vicomte Leon de Valois, Marquis de Toire, and Vicomte Pierre DeVane.

A distant cousin of the crown, DeVane may technically have had a better claim than King Michael to the assumption of the crown of Alba after Imajicka dissolved, had not his family chosen very firmly the Malayan side of matters at the end. The technicality is very thin and relies on at least two violation of primogeniture preferences (via bastardy) that were assuredly under consideration by the Regency Council in Exile, but this is not the narrative that Pierre DeVane prefers. Believing he was passed over in rightful succession for the dynastic flair of reviving the Van Dance name, Pierre has been bitterly acrimonious towards King Michael ever since his return in 2003. With this personal vendetta against Michael, DeVane is accused of being keenly interested in the machinations of one who moves against the queen.

Further, Pierre DeVane is said to have embroiled his childhood friend and ally, the Vicomte Leon de Valois, Marquis de Toire. Leon is a first cousin of the much esteemed and departed member of the Company of the Black Lion, Sir Henri Valois. He was personally offended by Sir William Van Dance's rejection of his own aspirations to serve in that company, spurned on grounds of vice and moral turpitude for a youth spent in dissolute abandon. Valois is bitter towards the Van Dance family in much the same way as his friend DeVane, and both are accused of instrumentally supporting the plot of Takatsuji no Nozomu.

Before Nozomu had been confronted and his plots unraveled, both gentlemen had fled to Malay, where they continued to stay on in the household of Duc Olivier Monette de Denube. With the war in Doomstadt over, requests for their arrest and extradition go from strong implication to overt demand. These men were complicit in a plot to assassinate the Queen of Alba and King Michael is increasingly frustrated by the refusal of his peer King Jean-Michele to surrender the two to Alban justice.

In particular, King Jean-Michelle declines to invoke his authority to override the decisions of his parliament, who demonstrate repeatedly the opinion that the two accused noblemen cannot simply be handed over like common criminals. In the Assembly, this is on the grounds that they will not be given fair trial or hearing and instead executed on suspicion. Such

assertions increasingly are associated with depictions of the Alban people as a ruthless mob, half Barbarian and without any sense of real justice. In the House of Peers, it is clearly a more classist argument.

Alba, not using any sort of parliament at all, sees this as all sophistry, wrangling, and excuses. The court holds King Jean-Michele responsible for the refusal to intervene. Diplomats, envoys, letters, gifts, and recriminations are exchanged. And all the while, there are Malayan agents maneuvering around the duchy of Warwick, just as King Michael suspects, starting the fires of domestic outrage in what might be an effort by someone high in the councils of the king of Malay to keep Alba too distracted to take action against it.

Too many pieces fit too closely together in the pattern of dispute between Alba and Malay. King Michael declares war, and sets his Royal Navy to the task of opening remarks.

In November a blessed event interrupts the grim tension of York when Queen Fumiko Van Dance is delivered of not just an heir (displacing a much-relieved Lady Amelia Van Dance), but twins. The elder of the two boys, soon named Henry Arthur Hideyoshi Van Dance, was born just before midnight on October 31, 2013. His younger brother, Thomas Frederick Takahiro Van Dance was born only a few minutes later just AFTER midnight, on November 1.

The Kingdom is astonished. No one had known the queen was pregnant.

Queen Fumiko, already targeted by assassins and rumored to have been subject to past difficulties in the matter of her fecundity, had made absolutely certain that no one but the king, her most intimate servants, Yojimbo, and royal doctors were aware of her pregnancy until its happy outcome. This was accomplished first through the easy matter of a concealing manner of dress made possible by her extremely fashionable traditional kimonos. When her girth exceeded the ready concealment of her attire, she simply used one of her maidservants as a body double for public appearances and managed most of her diplomatic affairs by letter. Many of the queens personal servants were chosen with exactly this subterfuge in mind, in any case, to be substitutes in case of assassins or necessary misdirection. The close physical resemblance and intimately practiced impersonation made the ruse fundamentally seamless.

Even though a dozen or more persons privy to the conspiracy swear dutifully to the Queen's having been pregnant and having personally delivered the children of her own body, there are a few perhaps inevitable unsavory rumors. These include

that she had never been pregnant and that the children were those of one of her maids, that she was pregnant but not by the King and thus was a traitor, that she gave birth to a stillborn child and replaced it with stolen children, that she is not a real person and instead is an aggregate crowd of similar-looking Nipponjin women with whom the king disports himself, and other variations on the themes of salacious distrust, treachery, and dark foreign magic. Mostly wine-shop whispers and outrageous gossip, these statements are discarded by the court and most serious persons but do meander across the water to Warwick where they can be tucked neatly into the ongoing state of disruption.

A knight of the White Rose gathering information in the city of Blackwater, possibly related to the Nozomu affair, is found dead in the channel of the Vandalus river, in a place not uncommon for finding the bodies of those cast from the bridges of the city for murderous ends. This victim, however, has suffered the additional indignity of having had his heart removed from his chest. The high-profile murder leads to an assessment of others found in the city, dead in gutters or back alleys, victims of crime or robberies or fights, but many, many of them with the heart removed.

A prioritized investigation quickly uncovers the culprit for these desecrations; an Alban dragoon named Entaru, residing in the town of Fortnight, associate of unsavory figures up and down the coast of Drackenvelt, and one of many who had pushed the Red Zip drug on people in rural areas of the duchy. Now, he is accused of defiling the corpse of a Knight of the White Rose. When found, Entaru is visibly and seriously ill, possibly as the result of consuming also the heart of a desperately dangerous Black Unicorn (a once spiritually pure creature corrupted by Wastes magic and striking out in dangerously chaotic ways until put down by the people of Fortnight of whom the dragoon was one.)

The criminal is arrested and has his thumbs cut off by the Baron, being temporarily spared an execution after heartfelt letters requesting clemency on the grounds that he was foolish and corrupt but not in fact a murderer himself. Not long after this, the dragoon disappears entirely.

The Baron, in what could be considered pique or paranoia, bans the use of Krecian Fire alchemy in Drackenvelt, as it was used in one of several assassination attempts made on him over the course of the year. This immediately causes protest among mining interests and an outrageously vigorous black market. It does not further the Duke's interests in promoting peace and reconciliation, for certain. Neither do the increasingly punitive taxes being leveled against the people of Drackenvelt, matters that the Baron claims are not truly under his control.

Sheila Heffner, after the indignity of her near-assassination which led to the dismissal of Sherriff Ryllian Flynn, was dismissed by Ahren Marcher from her position as head of the Baronial Guard when her vigor in the pursuit of the separatist conspiracies grew to exceed the boundaries of what he considered acceptable. Sheila Heffner promptly travels to Newcastle to seek audience with the Duke and lay out the problems she has recently been embroiled in. Though pursuit of an audience with the Duke is a challenge for a disgraced and dismissed baronial guard, she is ultimately able to get herself into his hearing, to explain the ongoing difficulties as she understands them, and to reveal a critical piece of information she had uncovered in her own investigations of the separatist cause. Sheila had evidence implicating Malayan spies in fomenting the discord.

A possibly exculpatory explanation for these findings turns up a cousin of the King of Malay who had been sent to the Nights Watch in the manner no few indolent third sons are disposed of. The Watch is a firmly apolitical body, with members surrendering lands, titles, and family ties upon swearing to serve the organization. But remaining apolitical has taken a great deal more politics over the past couple of years, and that is abundantly clear when attempts are made to retrieve this dispossessed cousin of Mont Clamont by elements of the Lightning Guard who want to use him politically in an effort to get rid of Malay's King and replace him with an ascendant Valois.

This provides a certain amount of explanation for why King Jean-Michelle has been so thwarted by and discontented with his own parliament lately, and the introduction of a Valois name into the running suggests even further connection or conspiracy with the larger earlier plot to assassinate Queen Fumiko. Threads might run deep through many parts of the Malayan nobility, it will be difficult to unravel, particularly while the two nations are at war.

Confronted with elite chevaliers of the Lightning Guard, the Nights Watch is placed in a hopelessly awkward situation. They plainly cannot surrender the sworn brother to these politically motivated operatives come to claim him away from the Watch, even if dispensation were given (as it is occasionally done) for him to depart. But denying them the right to do so is also an overt political choice with a different pile of awkward consequences.

Commander Bradley uses a little lateral thinking to extract them from the difficulty. He calls on friends and allies amongst the citizen of the town of Fortnight and apprises them of the circumstances in a manner that does not suggest any particular course of action. The commander also mentions in passing the presence of some dangerous creatures creating some challenges for his limited assembly of Rangers and wonders if Fortnighters might be willing to lend a hand with that minor difficulty, since they have been so good as to help defend Hayes in the past. And then Commander Bradley leaves Fort Hayes

in the command of his deputy and goes to Mourning to confer with other officers of the Nights Watch about ongoing difficulties with goblins and such ordinary matters.

Thus informed, citizens of Fortnight do indeed go to Fort Hayes where they are able to address some issues with captive creatures and local fauna that, while perhaps not desperately requiring outside assistance, are resolved more quickly with it. The Watch is politely grateful for the assistance with the matter.

In unrelated news, a cousin of the King of Malay is returned home from a stay abroad and becomes promptly embroiled in internal politics.

Drackenvelt, meanwhile, has been experiencing a series of abductions and disappearances being orchestrated by exotic Fae under unusual constraint and working for an unfamiliar Fae figure dubbed The Collector. Not too many deaths are immediately laid at the feet of this creature early on, but it is clearly a matter for concern and investigation. Pursued by mages and experts on the Fae, this creature is eventually tracked to a Faery-adjacent magically constructed demesne where it has spent a great deal of time collecting and curating interesting persons and artifacts. Particularly, it gathers up fragments of souls and keeps them for its own archival interests, a procedure that can be entirely fatal for the unlucky person so afflicted.

An essential principle involved in what the Collector is doing and has been doing for a long time is that what it takes is held in stasis, and by being held in stasis creates a kind of metaphysical inertia. Researchers analyzing circumstances after the fact explain that magic is, in the world, in a constant state of drifting fluctuation, with aspects of its interaction with mortals and their abilities to cast magic spells or invoke rituals representing formulae that have, at various times, subtly shifted or altered in keeping with the need to adapt to the ongoing trends and currents in the nature of magic itself.

The Collector, by creating a point of severe inertia in her pocket demesne, was in a minor but meaningful way disrupting the natural pace at which subtle changes in magical trends occur. Additionally and more substantially the Collector gathered in a number of potent entities, particularly Fae, into her service and likewise froze their function and person in the static state of her collection, again shielding the normal progress of magical development at that point of inertia in and around the border of the Goblin Wastes. This project was something the Fae creature had been undertaking for a very long time in response to its own trauma associated with loss and transformation. It desired that things remain the same and exerted itself to keep that true of things under its own control, but the connections between its small but potent demesne and the normal mortal world were



far more and more densely accumulated than other such places, connecting the little pocket realm like a ship held by a thousand anchor chains instead of one, holding still a small but important piece of the sea floor by so doing.

The rapid progress of major energetic disruptions inaugurated by the destruction of the corrupted guardian being Hickory had led to some of the Collectors "anchors" shaking loose, so to speak, and to an urgent increase in her gathering of what she perceived to be an effective sampling of reality-as-it-is for her collection. The tiny realm she governed would soon break loose entirely, and so she was lashing out to try and preserve it, casting forth more chains.

Fortnighters concerned for the lives of their neighbors address this quite directly, finding a way to travel to the Collector's realm and with a fair amount of careful attention dismantle its contents and reclaim the fragments of souls accumulated there. Effort is directed to make sure that the tidal shifts in regional magical energies caused by its dissolution will have the least severe rippling effects when the magical inertia it represented is corrected for.

Regionally, and gradually farther than that, magical systems undergo a bit of structural adjustment. Such adjustments occur periodically in any case and many such alterations to, for example, the precise methodology required to use ritual enchantments, were a matter of long and careful research and debate in the years leading up to this point, but the adjustment when it occurs is enough to pass the threshold where the existing methods would no longer function correctly. This prompts widespread implementation of newer methods to replace the old. Mages, particularly archons, experience this progress over time of subtle and sometimes larger shifts in the exact manipulations of magic with much less confusion and dismay than those who rely on mages but don't know much about magic. A certain amount of predictable discord and concern arise as a result.

This, as one expects, contributes in some areas to a distrust of mages that periodically manifests itself throughout history.

Meanwhile in Doomstadt, adapting to the declared peace is a slow and grim process. The nation struggles to heal itself while dealing with the economic and political turmoil created by the mass and unilateral emancipation of all slaves. Alban advisors remain in the country to offer assistance and council in implementing good governance according to their own standards, but doing much on the recommendation of Albans is not necessarily to the advantage of Queen Dolosus Mauvis of Dramikov. Fortunately, the Queen was selected by her foster mother Midori for the crown not by chance or accident, and she begins to aggressively thread the needles required to steer Doomstadt towards a condition of future prosperity.

In the running for ascension to the lands and importance of the Dorogai, House Beria is in the early lead, contesting particularly with Dankova who also stood a good chance. The country limps by on 4 Great Houses while the dispute rages. Dolosus does not dissolve the rebellious houses of Raumi and Motova, but symbolic executions required by the surrender lead to internal jostling for control in the aftermath.

In gratitude for Alba's assistance in her own war, Dolosus grants certain conditions for Alba with regard to its own war with Malay but will not commit join in the conflict. This is for the best, as holding a firm southern border is about all that Doomstadt can reasonably handle at this point.

Further south in the Dragonspine Mountains, Tszang and Oguz reach a peace treaty to end their dispute after several years of harsh back-and-forth. The new boundary is similar but not exactly the same to the starting point.

And with regards to the acrimonious olive oil war between Thracia and Sassania: A series of tense exchanges and more violence leads to some involved business owners fleeing their respective countries awhile others are being arrested for sabotage. Some parties entangled in the affair gain political offices. It's a steadily expanding mess. Ultimately the two nations agree that an independent third party must investigate the entire situation in order to have an impartial observer agreeable to both to broker the dispute to a conclusion before either nation suffers further economic disharmony.

Emissaries from Thracia and Sassania both reach out to Melité. Melité swiftly agrees to supply both investigators and diplomats to ease the situation.

## 2014

### Bigger Fish

Revelations early in the year identify a Dragoon named Thybalt as the primary Malayan infiltrator of the separatist movement in Warwick when he attempts to recruit the wrong miscreants by soliciting allies from Fortnight while plotting to destroy Fort Hayes. The separatists were dealing with a frustrated plot to use mining explosives to destroy Duskgate Harbor. The Baron's quick thinking and preparation made the plot untenable, and resources were moved to an effort to attack the Nights Watch instead. The thinking is explained that the absence of Hayes will overwhelm the Alban newcomers and persuade them to duplicate Imajicka's flight. This relies on a peculiar villainization of Imajicka distinct from the usual one, as Imajicka was driven out rather than just leaving because life was difficult. The side cost to the locals is also an unappetizing aspect, and Fortnighters leverage this against much of the Hayes cell to try and break apart the more violent impulses of the movement.

A few of the most extreme nevertheless assault structures at Hayes and destroy some of them with explosives that had been destined for Duskgate Harbor, causing severe damage particularly to the mess hall and kitchens. Most of the cell, however, was ready enough to be talked back to a position of marginal patience, which helps to diffuse the level of danger in other parts of Drackenvelt.

Duke Jinx finds the right way to negotiate with the Harbormaster in Blackwater, which is to say that the Harbormaster of Blackwater disappears and is abruptly replaced as Harbormaster by his most senior assistant, a Zenovan named Eliazar Salvicci, who is more interested in negotiating with Jinx than his predecessor. A combination of extreme threat and delicate enticement serves to persuade this new Harbormaster to concede upon taking office that the city had never really been independent, really, it was just making a political play for 'more freedom' with strong language.

The maneuvering is intense but yields the Harbormaster the confidence that no one in cahoots with Jinx to re-take the city could possibly have done the list of rapid maneuvers he undertakes to secure his own place, power, and safety. While naturally there are those who suspect the Duke had the Harbormaster removed, most determined observers believe that Salvicci moved of his own initiative upon receiving information that suggested the Duke would not mind talking to someone

else, nor be inclined to deeply investigate the death of a predecessor. The harbor coup is referred to with a mixture of amusement and fear as the “Dinner Party for Sharks” which is swiftly condensed to “Dinner Party” as a euphemism for a power grab.

Lord Rupert Locke rematerializes in Newcastle and promptly loses his rank, lands, and title for being an ineffective coward who utterly failed to control the city. He flees to Dover to go work for a family business interest there, thoroughly disgraced. To replace him, Duke Jinx takes the route of elevating a relative unknown to the post of Lord Blackwater, neither Alban noble nor local figure.

His choice is a miscreant confidence artist and alleged thief, originally from Labrador, named Marten Crowsea. Duke Jinx had become acquainted with the crook over the course of many years dealing with his scheming in places like Scarborough, Tir Anwar. Marten, notable for his ability to avoid getting caught or punished, also managed to be obscurely civic minded for someone of his profession and had recently moved his enterprising self to Drackenvelt. The appointment is as much a punishment for Marten Crowsea as it is a method of management for the city of Blackwater. It came at least in part as a consequence of the heated report from former Drackenvelt Baronial Guard captain Sheila Heffner, who had provided information to the Duke about her abuse by residents of Fortnight, Marten among them.

The Fortnighter profiteers' excuses for their attempted assassination of Sheila Heffner revolved around not knowing that the guard was not in fact responsible for the abuse of the countryside that had been perpetrated in their name by rebels, and thus their attack was in the spirit of protecting the people. Half-true at best this nevertheless reflected a consistent effort to serve the best interests of common folk against the interests of the powerful. With personal knowledge of Marten Crowsea, leverage against him, and a personal connection to facilitate avoiding niceties, Jinx forces him to take up the unenviable job of Lord Blackwater. The new Lord Marten is assigned the task of rebalancing local power, restoring order, and bringing the criminal elements of the free port more or less to heel. Without any social connections but the Duke, he is under direct and almost malevolent observation and Jinx can ask for the moon because he knows he can make Marten do almost anything.

Criticism of the appointment is at first widespread before the Duke eventually drives home that no one in their right mind wants the position nor would they afflict a favored subordinate with it, which is unfortunately true enough for Lord Marten's role to be regarded by the peerage as more sentence than boon.

Heffner, meanwhile, is appointed to a position in quartermastery with the Ducal Guard where she may be able to demonstrate judgement and skill sufficient to serve in a more active capacity there. This avoids direct insult to Baron Ahren Jarvik, who had dismissed her, but still affords an opportunity for her to continue work that she valued.

During the winter, quiet discussions amongst the senior leadership of the Nights Watch about its future as an organization culminate in a formal Progress by Knight Commander Lord Sherman Halford and Duke Jinx Lledrithcath to announce major changes.

In order to better serve their purpose as it was originally intended when the order was founded by Queen Anne of Imajicka in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the order is re-instantiated as an international order of knighthood, to be recognized by all the former kingdoms of Imajicka as valid within their bounds.

The Knights of Queen Anne's Watch make significant practical changes which address long-standing issues created by the abuse of its original principles. As an example, the Nights Watch was originally created to allow an opportunity for condemned criminals to redeem themselves through service but became abused as a dumping ground for undesirables and de facto discount penal system over the centuries. The Nights Watch was also created as way to provide a meaningful occupation for the troublesome supernumerary children of the elite, which was enabled by the order forswearing all claim to land and title. This had always had an effect of instilling a camaraderie and egalitarian ethos amongst those of the order but had served to again create an opportunity for using the order as a dumping ground, in this case for pressuring disfavored children into joining rather than simply those who were already an embarrassment to their families.

Third and most immediately problematic avenue of abusive treatment given the Watch at large was that since the fall of Imajicka the ostensible apolitical nature of the organization was almost continually leveraged by malign actors to try and shield explicitly political actions with a veneer of deniability. Previous efforts had involved allowing for five-year terms of commitment, which ended up simply facilitating an elaborate system of debt indenture which wasn't a real improvement, and a host of other policy adjustments that simply drug the good name of the hard-working defenders further and further into consistent disgrace.

In the Knights of Queen Anne, these problems are potentially remedied by several critical changes while the transition is advertised and advocated largely as a way that the honor and dignity of service can be restored. Leadership in the organization is promptly knighted, new oaths taken to modify the form if not the substance of service, and agreements signed

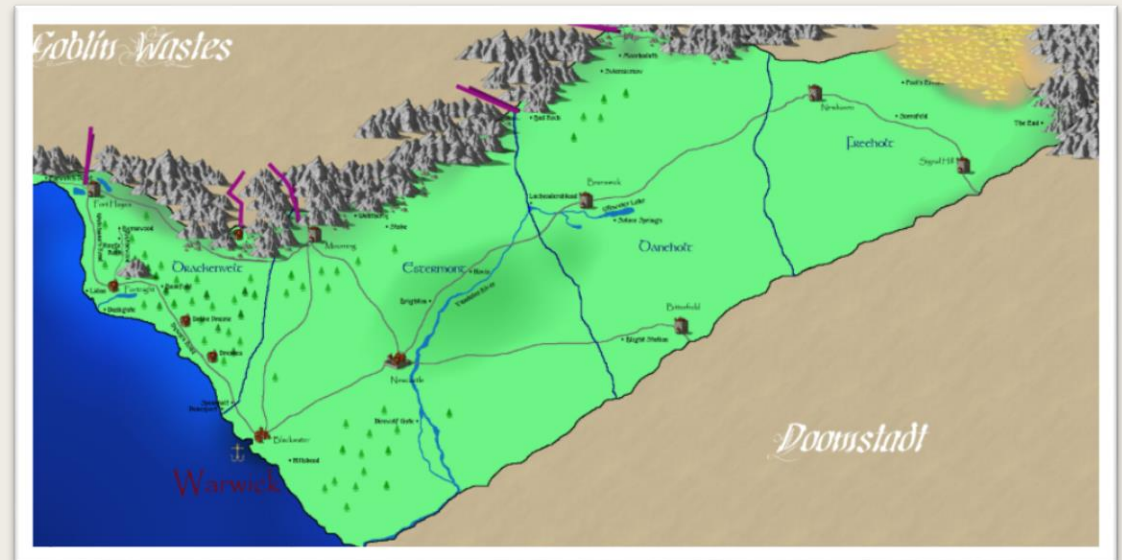
by as many nations as can be persuaded to recognize the order. In the immediate term that means Inishmora, Doomstadt, and Alba, as the war with Malay is putting intense pressure on the organization.

During the progress of Warwick to announce the changes to the Knights of Queen Anne's Watch, Duke Jinx also takes the opportunity to praise the courage and diligence of Sherriff Jen Weaver of Lidna, whose hard work and sacrifice had so ably protected her people. A knight in the Duke's service, Sir Balin Clancy, esquires Sherriff Weaver to his own service. After a series of consultations, notably with the Habreadth clan of Farwatch Point, Jinx recommends that Baron Ahren appoint local businesswoman Heather Caldwell to the position of Sherriff in Lidna, which he does.

After a short period of calm following the dwindling of separatist uprisings in Warwick, there begins to be a new round of raids pressing south from the Goblin Wastes. Unlike recent years, this incursion is not perpetrated by a majority-goblinoid force, but instead represents a less commonly represented faction of wastes dwellers which comes to be referred to as the "Beast-Man Army."

As is often the case because of the landscape, the incursion is focused on the west end of the boundary between Warwick and the Wastes. The central boundary is partially shielded by the exotic and toxic region surrounding the ancient settlement of Moorhadath, as well as the guarding influence of the Bad Rock orcs. The Easternmost region has a severe desert that provides a fair amount of border security in its own right, but Estermont and Drackenvelt are both slightly more accessible and serve as bellwether for major issues in the Wastes.

The Beast-Man Army is composed of an assortment of exotic mongrels, some of them of uncommonly large size sufficient to lead to rumor of Giants assaulting communities in the northern parts of Drackenvelt. Some entire small towns were all but obliterated, particularly in the vicinity of the large township of Byrnewood, which soon finds itself



under siege. Survivors soon find themselves afflicted by a contagious disease that causes strange growths on their bodies; horns, ears, limbs, eyes, and other parts emerging suddenly and aggressively on the victims. These prove fatal in many circumstances and cause a great deal of alarm and urgent research in an effort to treat the ailments and understand their source. Byrnewood and the surrounding area are particularly hard-hit.

The disorder of Blackwater immediately prior to Duke Jinx's reassertion of control yields dividends in terms of a resurgence of, specifically, slaving interests. While efforts are instantly undertaken to clamp down on the practice, a conspiracy continues to develop and spread through Estermont particularly of small gangs of raiders hunting and kidnapping people for a criminal organization that aims to supply boutique and specialized slaves to discrete overseas buyers. The conspirators demonstrate a slavish and almost cult-like devotion to the organization they work for, inhibiting investigations to shut them down, though efforts to suppress their activities are moderately successful.

In a rare collaboration, certain investigators looking into the consequences of the bestial incursion and an escalating series of magical, energetic disturbances are approached by representatives of a group of Morgoths looking to parlay information for their own safety. Through this controversial meeting the Morgoths provide important data that would have been difficult to assemble without the assistance of the treacherous Subtellurium predators.

Morgoths are at times associated in legend and practice with massive hive-mind entities that control large numbers of the creatures in their homelands of the Subtellurium. These hive-mind entities are called Elder Brains and act as ordering and coordinating influences over enslaved Morgoths, allowing for the solitary creatures to work together in numbers. Their influence takes an isolated, solitary danger and transforms it into an existential threat for targeted areas.

According to the Morgoths in this situation, a particularly large and dangerous Elder Brain had emerged from the Subtellurium in a region deep in the Goblin Wastes to the north. It had become infused with massive amounts of corrupting, chaotic energy, leading it to embark on enterprise even more fundamentally megalomaniacal than the usual order of business. In its hiding place in the wastes, this creature also has access to huge amounts of corrupted energy and influence, and is using it to create a series of interrelated problems. They refer to the creature as "The Manipulator."

With its mental magical potency, the Manipulator is able to interfere with efforts at divination and ritual scrying. Additionally, it has obtained the ability to influence and afflict the minds of people who attempt to scry or divine on it as



though it had them directly in its vision. This represents a specialized accomplishment of particularly virulent potential, meaning anyone working to thwart it could quickly become vulnerable to its influence.

The mental influence of the Manipulator is also able to recruit and control the forces of the Beast-Man Army very directly, spreading violence, disease, and disorder amongst target groups in Warwick. This disorder is capitalized on by the Manipulator to conceal efforts to harness sources of magical energy throughout the region and redirect those towards itself, to make it stronger and more capable of the same.

With its uncommon density of powerful mages, the town of Fortnight becomes the de facto research leader in terms of finding a way to deal with and shut down the influence of the Manipulator. Some elements of the town focus on a strategy for violently assaulting the creature, others to devise a way to hamper its effectiveness, and still others to gathering information on where to find it and how to contain its metaphysical aspects once located. Information about it has to be gathered with caution and care, and other forces moving in the region focus more on the direct military threat posed by the Beast-Men.

Fortnight is hampered in its research and planning by the discovery that more than one prominent community member had fallen subject to the Manipulator's influence, including the current mayor of the town; a Nipponjin expatriate named Shibata Junko. Additional complexity is added when it becomes apparent that the magical influences of the Manipulator will cause a catastrophic breakdown of the Runestone shield out of Skollar if the Fortnight Runestone, a key pillar of the system, is not deactivated and destroyed. This is undertaken very directly by a Skollarian expatriate Grey Witch named Helga Hannasdottir, but the approach is insufficiently cautious and creates additional repercussions for the area. Mending the damage cause by deactivating the runestone ultimately costs Helga Hannasdottir her life, but the catastrophe it represented is thus averted.

Unfortunately, this also means that the Skollarian Runestone shield, activated to moderate the corrupting influences of the wastes and provide reinforcement in the absence of the corrupted guardian Hickory, is now likewise inactive. Each successive effort to try and stem the growth of the Goblin Wastes and the spread of its catastrophic influence has fallen rapidly, leaving Warwick increasingly subject to the very real consequences of that corruption where previously it had been most susceptible to the violent direct action of Waste-dwelling creatures and peoples.

A historical artifact dating to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, remnant of unsuccessful experiments by a religious organization into the manufacture of durable magical power sources, is located and obtained to use as a weapon against the Manipulator. The



object is intended to hold a large magical power source, but its creators were never able to devise a methodology for making use of power thus contained. Thus, all they had made was essentially a dangerous magical trap which should be able to contain the metaphysical substance of something like the manipulator, provided its physical substance could be interfered with sufficiently to allow it to be deployed. The box, such as it is, requires the substance of voluntarily committed mortal souls to operate not so much as power sources for its own action but instead as substance for its governing internal structures, leading to criticism of it as a device both when it was originally created and in the modern context of its use against the manipulator.

The Manipulator itself reaches sufficient power and stability that it begins to physically move itself south. Fortnight decides to capitalize on this to meet it where southbound threats of the Goblin Wastes are traditionally met with opposing force: at the narrow neck of passable land around Fort Hayes. An expedition is mounted to assault the thing, carry the artifact into its physical interior and activate it to trap the essence of the being inside.

Though dangerous and chancy, this assault is successful, and the creature is physically killed and spiritually trapped inside the confines of the magical artifact in order to cease its influence and the danger it poses to Warwick. The artifact disappears from all record in the proper manner of horrendously dangerous artifacts whose location ought not be public knowledge. What remains of the Beast-Man Army, no longer governed and pressed by the Manipulator, are swiftly defeated in the field by the combined efforts of the Knights of Queen Anne and Royal Alban Army.

The summer of 2014 sees the sad passing of Serena Talbot, wife of Baron Anthony Talbot, who had been subject to a lingering illness, likely a cancer. Serena leaves behind two young sons. A few months later, under a certain amount of pressure and impetus from his own people, Baron Anthony marries a young woman from liberated Doomstadt named Ravenna. Ravenna Talbot proves immediately popular amongst the people of Freeholt, praised for her kindness and the establishment of care homes for war orphans. She additionally works to support her husband the Baron's longstanding efforts to employ and uplift the liberated slaves of Doomstadt, and blends in well with the peerage generally despite humble origins.

It will become general knowledge only several years later that *this* Ravenna Talbot is not identical to the later figure of some importance, but instead a mercenary doppelganger named Jinan impersonating Ravenna at her own request and for her own future goals.

South of Warwick, Doomstadt continues to recover from the damage wrought by the civil war. In the ruined lands where Dorogai once ruled, House Beria rises to overcome all opposition and become one of the 5 great houses of Doomstadt after the political defeat of its rival, Dankova, for the position. It relocates the capital of the region from the ruins of Geissen to its own stronghold in Asten, south along the Volga river.

The war between Alba and Malay proceeds in a sluggish and desultory fashion. It involves a great deal of political and financial maneuvering as well as repeated naval confrontations. The primary approach Alba is taking in this early phase is to isolate Malay economically and thus force it to the bargaining table without committing to a policy of conquest. With the strong familial relationship between so many in Alba and Malay, it creates a public relations crisis to situate the war correctly in ethical terms. King Michael of Alba cannot commit to a policy of total war against Malay without alienating major supporters at court. King Jean-Michelle has to balance the resistance of his own people to subordinating their prized autonomy to the now-foreign interests of the kingdom of Alba with the knowledge that there is an intimate interdependency that the two nations cannot entirely discard.

Farther south, in the final chapter of the trade war between Thracia and Sassania, investigators and diplomats from Melité spend six months hard at work analyzing the roots of the conflict in great detail. At the end of a contentious and aggressive pursuit of information, the agents of Melité report on the origins of the trade dispute and facilitates an outcome that both countries can agree upon. It is declared that there has been no vast conspiracy and neither nation is "at fault" but businesses in both places, particularly the commodity exporters rather than growers or manufacturers, were preying excessively. Both countries agree to make certain rules for import and export interests and punish quasi-responsible parties. In the discrete manner of such enterprise, deals are almost certainly made in the background to further settle the score. No armed conflict arises from the situation, but only thanks to careful work of the diplomats.

In the western deserts of Damascus, border skirmishes begin occurring between the Medjai of Songhai and soldiers of the border Nomarch of Bahariya, whom the Medjai believe to be a danger to both kingdoms. They see it as a moral duty to oppose the Nomarch, but Damascus resents the intrusion, which is regarded as arrogance. The Damascenes back Bahariya, consequently, and diplomats argue. The Nomarch of Bahariya, Ibham Zoldana, is known by some to be lich of tremendous age who conquered that section of desert more than a hundred years ago in the wake of the Asmodean War. It is tolerated because it's very good at the task of defending the border and does not trouble neighboring provinces. Since the death of its

great-grand-nephew and subordinate lich, Saadi Zoldana, in Warwick in 2010, the Nomarch has begun buying increasing numbers of imported slaves from the markets of Alexandria, rousing concerns about the creature's intentions. This kind of necromancy is not well-regarded in Damascus, not because of a revulsion for necromancy generally but because of the abuse of slaves, which has a negative historical weight and is something they're gradually moving away from.

The political dynamics of the conflict between Songhai and Damascus are treacherous and difficult to untangle, laden with historical interrelationships and pride. Nomarch Zoldana flies in the face of any semblance of propriety and seems to have no interest in productive de-escalation.

North across the Mari Magno, Scythia and Subir manifest their recurring argument about the city of Obirsk, which both claim. The status quo had been for them to both levy taxes on the city but at a reduced rate so that it doesn't pay "twice", while still paying twice. Scythia chooses in 2014 to steeply increase their taxation of Obirsk causing it to threaten not to pay any at all and go entirely Subirian. Fighting breaks out about the dispute both near and within the city. Ultimately, this situation is ended with an elaborate hostage crisis about tax revenue which was vicious, undignified, and extortionate. The city, for once, comes out ahead of this iteration of the conflict.

And in the extreme northlands of Nordehavn, the campaign of reacquisition instituted by High King Gudrød the Black of Nordestrand has come to its natural conclusion. Following the agreement that had placed him in command of the Norsk armies in the first place, Gudrød retires to his position as Earl of Nordestrand and the Norsk settle out into their separate roles as petty kingdoms once again. Many had hoped or feared that Gudrød would attempt to retain power and thus foment division and opportunity for enemies of the Norsk, but he appears to take the task of being a war-king very seriously and the cessation of its mandate as a matter of extreme importance.



Instead of a warring, united Nordehavn, matters return to a more normal status in the wake of this conquest. Inishmora is hit by some raiding in the late spring, which causes strife and frustration particularly amongst the Skollarian diaspora in Scoheim, but not a devastating amount of conflict arises from it.

# 2015

## Rite of Ascension

The aftermath of the Manipulator sees a gradual but steady rise in dispersed undead activity in Warwick, particularly in the west. While at first this seems to be unfocused, investigations begin to uncover a pattern to the attacks. Soon enough it is found to be the work of a previously encountered servant of the Chimera, Taggart, a lich of substantial means that was responsible for many deaths in Drackenvelt before being sent away unharmed in exchange for defying its master.

Having had 3 years to study and improve, the lich Taggart now is engaged in an effort to gather together implements for a substantial ritual working of some kind. By researching the components and analyzing the ongoing activities, researchers into the undead spearheaded by Damn Raven of Fortnight ascertain critical details about what is being attempted.

One of the early indicators is the aftermath of a ritual wherein the lich Taggart reportedly finds, summons, and consumes the demon lord Qz, a previously very potent demonic influence that had been weakened by failures its own efforts to ascend to a larger form of itself. If indeed it is the demon Qz that was consumed, that theoretically constitutes an absorption of substantial knowledge about specific kinds of magic that are of particular interest to the lich Taggart.

Undead forces gather in size and strength, attacking a variety of remote communities and pursuing fragments or remnants of powerful entities located throughout Drackenvelt. Artifacts left over in a temple of Nul dating to the Thracian Occupation (of which Taggart had core operational knowledge from his time serving the Chimera) are on the list of targets. Manifest magical creatures such as Genius Loci are attacked, suborned, interfered with, or consumed in remote areas. The toll in terms of mortal lives lost is not as high as recent undead incursions, but the focused and deliberate assaults are nevertheless devastating and strategically effective. Within a few months of seeing the rudiments of the plot, northern Drackenvelt finds itself all but cut off by well-placed undead.

Taggart seems to be engaged in a systematic consumption of other powerful entities in an effort to bolster its own personal power not as an end unto itself or to acquire specialized abilities, but to prepare it for a confrontation it intends to provoke based on knowledge obtained from research in a remote portion of the wastes to which it fled after its last confrontation with Fortnight. The site in the wastes, near where Hickory was destroyed, is rumored to have had evidence of

ancient magical research and an implicit connection to the history of understanding the false god Ravnos the Usurper, a being whose dominion over the undead is understood to have been obtained through the ascension of a mortal person. That mortal achieved this by acquiring vast amounts of metaphysical power and seizing control of facets of reality whose purview would ordinarily be considered the province of the Gods themselves.

While a rich understanding of Ravnos is difficult to explore, the common understanding holds Ravnos to be a person (or series of persons over time replacing one another) who relentlessly pursued power, performed arcane rituals, and ultimately fulfilled an act described almost universally as "Seizing the Crown of Thanatos." Thanatos, an ancient Great Dragon figure and peer to the Great Dragons of legend that are the focal point of the Dragon Orders, was the facet of draconic divinity associated with death. Legend and theology hold that the dragon Thanatos had his crown—an emblem of his power—stolen by a mortal, giving a portion of that power to the mortal, who becomes Ravnos. Deprived of the important powers contained in the crown, Thanatos dies or is destroyed, and the remainder of the divine associations of Thanatos descend to the dragon's protégé Styx, who forms the foundation of the death-oriented aspects of the Dragon Orders in recorded history.

All such matters are associated with the times of, immediately preceding, or immediately following the pre-historical events of the Dragon Wars, and thus can only truly be examined through the lens of mythological history. As was encountered during the confrontation with Fire-Eye, even the Fae have only a murky understanding of those events, deeply impacted both by their distance from the circumstances and by the nature of mortal thought when considering the events over time.

Whatever ancient knowledge Taggart did obtain or believed itself to have obtained, it believed it could find a way to increase its own personal power sufficiently to call out to Ravnos the Usurper and obtain an actual manifest response of some kind. This would then allow Taggart to challenge the false god, destroy it, and claim the Crown of Ravnos for itself.

While the plot seems outlandishly impossible and ridiculous in such a bald telling, there was no doubt that Taggart had obtained sufficient knowledge to enable his sequential, devastating assaults on the region and the consumption and absorption of serious, dangerous, important entities that did increase its personal power considerably. It gained heretofore unheard of abilities for a lich, and the threat level it represented grew geometrically more dangerous in very rapid order.

Whether or not there was any credence to be had in the plot Taggart was undertaking, like the demon lord Qz its efforts at ascension would have definite, tangible, extremely destructive consequences for the mortals living in the lands it sought to use for this goal. This means that the Fortnighters, who were best equipped to launch any manner of counter-assault, had to not

only defend against the depredations of the ongoing undead assaults but also dismantle, disrupt, and destroy the effort at ritual ascension in any way possible. A philosophical question could be considered as to whether or not it is worth preventing Taggart from ascending to the false godhead, usurping the usurper and controlling all things related to undeath. General consensus held that while Ravnos may be the most reviled being in the whole of the universe, he was nevertheless not taking a true personal interest in anything he did in the course of his involvement in mortal reality. The lich Taggart would have personal, immediate issues that would provoke immediate and proximal catastrophes if it continued on the path of gaining power. The functional assessment of who would make the best future 'god' of the undead is a matter that so exceeds mortal analysis that it hardly bears thinking about.

While the undead forces of Taggart hold at bay any attempt at reinforcement from an increasingly agitated Duke Jinx, Fortnighters scramble to seize control of elements Taggart requires to attempt his ritual of ascension. Time and place are assessed for when and where the lich is most likely to make the attempt, entities are warned or defended, and a series of schemes are embarked on to undermine the lich's authority with its subordinates or disrupt its command structures. Ultimately a confrontation is planned for when the lich will reveal itself at the Fortnight Crossroads at midsummer to collapse boundaries between the mortal world and the Sundered Lands and invoke the name of Ravnos.

These Crossroads are particularly notable for being central to the Barony of Drackenvelt and thus a point of strong connection to the land of Faery, where the significance of a location echoes more than its physical properties. It also has a demonic history with Crossroads-type demons, and has been the site of repeated magical curiosities and experimentation.

When this confrontation occurs, the crossroads themselves become fundamentally inaccessible, lost in a demesne bridging the planar gap between the mortal world and some aspect of the Sundered Lands. A subject lich in Taggart's control uses a sunder ritual to destroy Oliver Grayson of Beacon, a seasoned local deemed by Taggart to be of particular threat to his plans, but the veteran soldier is reincarnated within hours by his associate Charlotte Leonard.

While in the state of fusion or connection, the Crossroads become impenetrable to observation or manipulation. Within the harsh confines of that hybrid demesne between mortal world and Sundered Lands, Taggart indeed appears and conducts what are meant to be the final elements of the plan. A massive battle of some occurs, the details of which are sparse and difficult to interpret. Ultimately, Taggart is unsuccessful, its assault rebuffed, its power broken and destroyed, and the creature itself absolutely annihilated. The Fortnight Crossroads gradually settle out of the chaotic state of planar surreality, and the undead armies scatter and break.

Two other local citizens, rogue or expatriate Taelgranis named Mic'hael and Bandorian, are sadly sundered during the events that went unseen.

The destruction of Taggart enables the military forces trying to intervene to finally break down the boundaries around Drackenvelt and reinforce the area, gradually restoring order. This leads to a period of relative peace and calm for Drackenvelt punctuated by a series of peculiar conflicts that while not ordinary are at least more ordinary in scale and impact.

There are several undead-related incidents of minor and diminishing scale through the rest of the autumn, often associated with rumor of a lich whose name is put about eventually as Sarah Miller, also known as "The Starving Woman." This figure is described most often as a sort of civil adapter of undeath, someone who helps undead creatures hide in plain sight where possible and minimize the harmful impact they have on surrounding communities. Opinions are divided about this as an unappetizing positive influence that reduces civilian harms or an insidious plot that hides true monsters from view. As difficult as the lich is to resolve in terms of just how hated or hunted she should be, especially when compared to catastrophic monsters like Taggart, she is even more difficult to find or catch. Without creating herself as a primary foe or causing enough harm to reach the upper portions of anyone's list of priorities, she drifts into the background awareness of Drackenvelters,

Drackenvelt instead must deal with disturbances amongst several localized groups of elemental beings being troubled by what prove to be an ambitious pair of Taelgranis golemancers attempting to delve into their own family history to perfect and advance the arts of golem manufacture, manipulation, and control. The disturbances bring to light several beings of regional importance but do not ultimately result in a great deal of chaos or destruction. One of the brothers works extensively with the Knights of Queen Anne's Watch to manufacture and maintain what he hopes will prove to be a usable golem workforce to assist in the public defense. This effort has a few logistical shortcomings, however, and proves ultimately impractical when the methods of construction are revealed to be profoundly antagonistic to elemental entities in the area.

The golem craft, it would seem, relies on binding elemental beings to the physical structure of the golem. Angry elemental beings make poor neighbors and their agitation causes significant (if, again, not catastrophic) difficulty. Much like the Fae-binding theory of Road through the Wastes advocated in 2010-2011, the practices are widely regarded by all but the most mortal-sentient chauvenists to be unethical and unacceptable.



The other of the two Taelgranis is more invested in researching older crafts of previous generations in their family. In particular, there is family history describing a large number of Orichalcum golems supposedly accessible through the use of a set of objects dubbed The Golden Regalia. These tools would allow the appropriate descendant of the original crafter to access and utilize the golems, stored in a metaphysical 'elsewhere' demesne associated with local magics and artifacts. This brother's efforts to obtain and secure the artifacts of the Golden Regalia not already under his control cause a certain degree of upset and disruption as well, and he requires persuasion away from pursuing those ends.

A positive outcome of the golem-related research is the discovery of a few items manufactured of authentic, antique Taelgranis Orichalcum, the exotic near-mythical metal supposed invented by the Taelgranis of Atlantashar in the distant past. The construction method of the metal was lost to history, a matter of particular cultural tragedy to the Taelgranis. With these new-found pieces, close analysis of the material allows talented metallurgists and alchemists an opportunity. Months of hard work and lateral thinking brought about the reverse-engineering of a process by which to manufacture new objects out of Orichalcum.

Rather than keep this knowledge as a profitable personal secret, the metallurgist responsible for the most critical portions of the research set about immediately publishing far and wide the information of its complex and difficult manufacture so that others would be able to duplicate it. That smith, a retired Imajickan and Alban Army veteran and former Doomstadt freebooter named Oliver Greyson (recently reincarnated,) ultimately earned recognition by elevation to knighthood in the Order of the White Rose for his work on the rediscovery of Orichalcum.

A minor plague of assassination attempts is provoked by innovations in discreet hiring practices that make it possible for assassins to connect much more indirectly with persons desiring their services. The anonymity of the clever system makes unraveling it and breaking it apart challenging, bordering on impossible, and forces people to rely almost entirely on pursuing individual assassins rather than trying to deal with the persons hiring them at all. That genie can not be put back into the bottle, but at the very least some of the particulars can be addressed.

The largest and most successful manifestation of the deviousness of this assassination technique is the death of Baron Ahren Jarvik. Throughout the separatist insurrections of the past two years, the Baron was the target of repeated assassination attempts, thwarted only by an extremely wary and cautious approach to personal safety. Sadly, these precautions were not ultimately sufficient to protect him against the concerted effort of whoever it was that still very much desired his death.

After this unfortunate event, Duke Jinx raises Lord Walther Hulse of Mountain Vigil to the post of Baron, moving the capital of Drackenvelt to the mountain stronghold. This has varying popularity as a decision, because while Walther Hulse is a widely respected lord who has had command of his mountain passes for decades, lords in the lowlands feel that he has treated them with indifference or condescension in the past and are not necessarily enthused about swearing fealty.

At the same time as Baron Hulse is appointed, Duke Jinx takes the unusual step of creating a new lordship out of the township of Fortnight. While previously held and controlled by Sheriffs directly appointed by the Baron, this situation devolved into ineffectiveness after the departure of Baroness Anasazi. Anasazi had resided in the town of Fortnight as her country seat, and the remote area was well suited to oversight by a direct appointee under those circumstances. When Anasazi was replaced by Ahren Jarvik, the structure was less stable and well-orchestrated, ultimately leading to the summary dismissal of a sheriff in the midst of a crisis. Fortnight was given leave to manage its own affairs in the relative interim, but that too is an unsustainable practice. The region needed its own permanent lord.

Ever balancing the political ramifications of such appointments, Duke Jinx elevates an aging Knight of King George, Sir Alistair Oswald from Bitterfield in Daneholt, to the position of Lord of Fortnight. Lord Alistair Oswald is a highly respected knight with a regional presence, relatives well situated amongst the peerage, and a proven history of leadership. Additionally, Lord Oswald is a capable financial administrator with very little interest in an ongoing life of campaigning as he approaches his autumn years. This means he will be able to oversee the administration and taxation of the lands of Fortnight but will be willing to abdicate many considerations regarding its actual defense. These can be delegated to the Fortnighters themselves, who have a proven record of effective autonomy when it comes to dealing with military, magical, and existential threat management. The idea is to facilitate a fruitful marriage between the Fortnighters and their new Lord, and efforts are made to make sure the relationship starts off on a good foot. Lord Sir Alaister Oswald, his Gael' Braugh wife Rosemary (Roma), their son Sir Anthony (also KOKG), and daughter Imogen all move to the area of Fortnight and take up residence in a dilapidated manor house not far from the fortifications of the ruins of old Fort Night, which they set about promptly improving. The site was likely to have originally been the residence of the Warden of Fort Night, but the Oswalds swiftly improve the manor into a small, serviceably walled keep.

Alaistair Oswald is introduced to the rest of the peerage at a fealty ceremony arranged at Fort Hayes where the lords of Drackenvelt come together to commit themselves to the service of Baron Hulse. Hulse is also on a path to emphasize that he is taking his elevation seriously and wishes to demonstrate to his lords that he will be fair and judicious in his use of authority.

Alba's war with Malay grinds onward with diplomatic negotiations getting more, not less, acrimonious and several serious naval battles during the summer. Malay, continuing to do well economically in spite of the increasing pressure on their sea trade, is nevertheless unable to recruit much in the way of international allies against Alba's naval power and must hire mercenary assistance instead. Alba remains reluctant to attempt to land armies along the Malayan coast, foreseeing that as the Rubicon beyond which Malay will be able to directly solicit military assistance from Hispalis, Sassania, and Abruzzio. This would require Alba to then solicit direct aid from Inishmora, Thracia, Uthmanli, and Damascus. The resulting conflict would get very regional very quickly, and is the consequence both nations are deliberately trying to avoid.

Norsk raiders spare Inishmora for the year and focus attention on the northern coasts of Alba, as Alba is navally engaged with Malay and less able to defend itself. This forces Alba to divide its navies and thus to lose ground in its efforts to blockade Calais. The war is gradually becoming more popular in Malay as it becomes less popular in Alba, and never mind that it was all but demanded by the Alban Court in the first place.

This reflects a problematic factionalism and division in the Alban court that sets pragmatic economic policies at odds with points of pride or honor in a deliberately false dichotomy that creates ongoing arguments and power maneuvering.

In far-off Damascus, the conflict gradually developing between the ancient kingdom and its longtime ally becomes slightly more heated. Border disputes between Songhai and Damascus intensify as efforts at diplomatic intervention break down. Damascus is reluctant to fully oppose Songhai or defend the lich-Nomarch Ibrahim Zoldana. The lich is not only a long-ago immigrant from Imajicka, not a Damascan or Nikirian at all, but it is also undiplomatic and personally unpleasant. Damascus, in desultory fashion, is obliged to defend its own authority, while at the same time becoming increasingly outraged at Songhai claiming a higher moral authority or right to impede that sovereignty. This is especially true since Songhai has not-so-delicately pointed out that the land is only Damascene at all because Songhai won it back for them in the 1800s, and if they won't take care of it, then Songhai feels obliged to intervene. Skirmishes escalate to major assaults, and it begins to be apparent that Zoldana has been accumulating a pretty redoubtable undead army out there in Bahiriya. This army of the undead has a decided advantage against the mortals of Songhai and grows after every fight. Because that's just the way Necromancy works. So it goes.

A rumor that begins to circulate in the autumn with unpredictable implications. While subject to a lot of variations in detail, the substance of the rumor most commonly describes a meeting taking place between Prime Naristhel Zaphrinath of Elysian, Gothar Brightvale of Myn'Traval, and Dolosus Mauvis of Dramikov: the three leaders of the three Sidhe racial homelands gathering together in a secret undisclosed location for a conference or negotiation of some kind. The story suggests that the three were meeting to discuss something private or secret that they would do together or had to negotiate about. It goes on to explain that the meeting was gate-crashed by the unexpected arrival of Fae superpower Diana, Lady of the Trandafir. Variations suggest that was the point of the meeting, that the leaders were manipulated into meeting in the first place, or that one of the three invited the powerful Fae without telling the others. Given that the exact location of the meeting is not even remotely consistent between versions of this rumor, the details of various leaders thinking on it is well outside the relative capability of any source to predict. Supposedly, deals or negotiations of importance take place between the various parties at this meeting, and everyone leaves again. The persistence of the rumor allows it to be used as a conspiratorial cause for any given narrative, and it has the potency to continue being such for years forward. Notably, none of the involved leaders make any effort to obfuscate or deny having some sort of meeting, but neither do they confirm any detail of the occasion.

An example of something that gets attributed to the results of the secret meeting—despite being the culmination of a long and clearly laid pattern—is subtle political change in Sylvanator. Dissidents interested in pursuing more overt relationships with the rest of the world gain incremental support. This prompts invitations to those with current embassies in good standing in Myn'Traval to allow them to each open one small business interest in the city so long as it doesn't involve profits associated with slavery, necromancy, exploitation, or advanced technology. This is a **substantial** concession for the reclusive, xenophobic, conservative Sidhe nation. Additionally, the number of foreigners permitted to visit the interior under extremes of sponsorship (a very uncommon but not completely unheard-of occurrence usually associated with dire illnesses and pilgrimages) is slightly increased by subtly decreasing the rigor of opposition to such ventures. These measures are viewed as very unpalatable and dangerous by old-fashioned conservatives, but they are slightly outnumbered by the hesitantly progressive factions. This is the Gael'Braugh version of turmoil.

In other news of Sidhe curiosities, an unusually high number of male babies are born in Doomstadt, which is interesting. Though formal census-taking is neither precise nor exhaustive, it's usually thought to be about 20% male births in any given year. In 2015, it was more like 25%, a detail only really teased a few years later (Late 2018) by genealogists in Danzig.

And in sadder affairs, a devastating earthquake hits the mountains in north central Shalkara causing catastrophic damage in Baiguan, Neimeng Gu, and Tsianhai. Particularly severe is the damage to ancient and much treasured temples in the city of Xiling, capital of Tsianhai province. This event is called "Kepaisi Yu Shan" (The vast and terrible grief of the mountains) by the people of Shalkara and leads to unspeakable harm to historical artifacts and a great deal of death and destruction. The well-established bureaucracy is quick to respond and alleviate what suffering they can, but the lives lost are a terrible cost.



# 2016

## Surging Tide

The period of comparative peace and quiet for Drackenvelt in particular and Warwick in general continues into the new year without any major catastrophes. This provides the population a significant and important opportunity to prepare and improve land and infrastructure, making strides towards the broader social goal of making a settled, readily habitable land out of the unruly frontier territory. Time spent in collective efforts of this sort helps to strengthen the bonds between Alban and Warwicker towards the equally important objective of blending the citizenry together into a cohesive group.

Unfortunately for the court in York, peacetime doesn't mean a decrease in costs for Warwick. The lull in ferocious activity there provides an excellent opportunity to invest in major development projects like the beginning of an effort to bridge the Vandalus River on the Thracian high road between Port Blackwater and Newcastle. The bridge project is massive and ambitious but will provide tremendous economic opportunity and growth potential to the interior of Warwick, which currently relies on river ferries to facilitate traffic. The bridge is also extremely expensive and while King Michael regards it as a crucial investment priority, there are elements of his court that do not agree and would like to see Warwick independently financing itself by now. Though Warwick has only been under any modicum of Alban management for 9 years, this is just long enough for the up front financial benefits from Doomstadt to have faded in memory and the long term work to begin prying at Royal coffers.

Drackenvelt experiences a few months of perplexity and localized danger when an assortment of people in the region begin acting erratically from a lack of proper dreaming sleep. This is traced back to machinations by a gentleman named Charles Hulm who has set himself at odds with the sheer concept of bad dreams in an effort to conquer the probably-Faery-adjacent meta-reality of Nightmare, where a being named Insomnium holds sway. In order to achieve this, Hulm was capturing nightmare-concept entities and trapping them in a clever magical and alchemical binding.

In illustration of the idea, consider that many people have nightmares that involve falling. Because of the common thread between these nightmares, there is a unified formal concept that can be considered "Falling" which has personification

in the realm of Nightmare. Hulm would achieve some sort of lucid state of dream and attack this concept of “Falling”, trapping it with various means and reducing it to a physical object which could be held in the physical world and no longer interact with people's dreams.

After this happens, it becomes the case that no one can have any nightmares about falling. At all. It's just not a nightmare that happens anywhere near where this is going on. Admittedly, over a larger region of influence and considered timescale, the concept of falling is not eliminated from all of reality in terms of what can or cannot be dreamt. However, because of the complexities of interactions between the mortal world and the “elsewhere” places that can be touched upon, particularly in magically unstable places like near the Goblin Wastes, there is a certain amount of reciprocity and mutual impact that can be achieved by direct action where otherwise this might seem implausible.

This is the kind of conflict that is broadly filed under “Faery Problems” by the population at large, but there are serious and meaningful health consequences to the disruption of dreams and dreaming.

Mystical and sleep experts collaborate to facilitate communication with dream-related entities sufficient to intervene on behalf of nightmare-kind and thwart the efforts of Charles Hulm. Hulm is ultimately captured and handed over to the Nightmare ruler, Insomnium, to atone for the harms he created by his various ingenious disruptions.

With things remaining relatively stable in Warwick, Duke Jinx petitions to the court that he become more directly involved with the Malayan conflict, now that his 4<sup>th</sup> Army is in much improved and restored condition after its long investment in Doomstadt. This necessitates a number of formal meetings in York before the Duke is indeed dispatched with the 4<sup>th</sup> army to take the campaign to the land for some direct Jinxonian intervention. The maneuver is strategically planned to keep at bay the previously mentioned threat of drawing foreign interests into the war on Malay's side. It will remain a very strategically economic policy that is very evidently not a matter of conquest.

Jinx is to move south and capture the central grainlands in Malay, holding them and clamping down regional trade in foodstuffs, which will be a severe hit to the Malayan export of grain. With enough protestation that it is definitely not an effort to conquer or rule Malay, this can be pitched to international observers as no more or less than a different flavor of blockade. That is, at any rate, the hope. Jinx and the 4<sup>th</sup> Army under Major General Stanbridge head south at the earliest sign of spring, to travel through Doomstadt with Dolosus's acquiescence and strike Malay's northern border.

The spring equinox heralds a transition to a period of greater instability in Warwick, however, as small localized areas of corrupted energy start to emerge in remote areas along the northern Wastes boundary. These are distributed all across the northern border rather than being intensely localized in one particular portion of the duchy. Because of the incident being so close on the heels of Jinx's departure from the region there is an immediate sense of unease about these "hot spots" of corrupted energy. While they do not appear at first to be any sort of coordinated attack or systematic problem, Jinx attains a kind of talismanic significance as a guardian figure whose absence 'allows' worrying things to occur.

The number and scale of these patches of corrupted energy, wild growth, and disruption begin to increase. Some spots expand while others become more dense or more wild and dangerous. Unusual crystalline growths become noticeable in many of them, and people begin searching for answers as to the pattern of these effusive, twisted energy locales. Additionally, methods for mitigating the damage or repairing the regions of disruption become important areas of research and effort.

A noticeable and meaningful similarity can be drawn between the corrupting energy influences of these regions and the energetic behavior seen by some who have looked closely at regions of the Goblin Wastes, and it is thought to represent a kind of surging expansion in the wastes border, though the cause for this scattershot growth is not well understood. Numerous organizations throughout Warwick work on different approaches to remedying the problems created by the corrupted zones and to mitigate the expansion or suppress it before it can accelerate. Ominous warnings begin to circulate that as more of these corrupted areas become interconnected with one another they will rapidly and aggressively fill out the space between with more and more corrupted energies, like a mold spreading swiftly across the surface of a neglected cheese.

The threat becomes readily apparent that, left unchecked, these corrupted energies will swallow up vast portions of Warwick and render it rapidly indistinguishable from the Deep Wastes. As any portion of the Wastes any substantial distance from the Warwick border is fundamentally inimical to mortal sentient life, this would essentially destroy the Duchy. It would become unsustainably chaotic and impossible to live in, and the Wastes would almost certainly become a direct border threat to Doomstadt instead. And by summer it emerges that there are people who are actively promoting the spread of these areas by 'planting' the corruption in locations of energetic significance called *loci imperium*.

Persons involved in this effort seem to uniformly experience visual signs of corrupting influence. They begin to develop dark, purplish streaks beneath the skin, particularly around the extremities and face where blood runs very near the surface. They also demonstrate frequent, sometimes very serious, mental instabilities. Those who deliberately partake of the corruption in an ongoing way seem to develop an almost cult-like fascination with the furtherance of the corruption of the land, associating



it with philosophical ideals about balancing order and disorder. These seem to be naturally arising imperatives within the corrupting influence as it stands, symptomatic of the affliction rather than emblematic of a conspiracy, but there are prominent examples of the situation that may or may not really represent 'leadership' so much as they represent extremely effective examples with the ability to persuade others and evangelize on behalf of letting the Wastes in.

Additionally, persons afflicted in this way develop potent magical powers and abilities all out of sync with the normal progression of carefully curated talent, making them dangerous and unpredictable for an entirely different set of reasons.

Corrupted regions begin appearing in and near major towns and cities as well as in the countryside. One of the particularly notable incidents of this type takes place in the lakeside dock district of Brunswick. Two young men, badly covered in the darkened veins all around the face and eyes, arrive in the city preaching fervently about the need to embrace the Wastes. They travel openly in Brunswick, evangelize, and promised to transform the Ullswater. Lake Ullswater is the purest water in all of Warwick, a matter of significant important to the downstream success of grain-growing regions along the Vandalus and to the health and welfare of all Daneholt.

This purity and potency make it, apparently, a particularly appetizing location for someone with the corrupted mindset of those tainted by the chaotic energies. It is fortunate that the two are off their wheels enough to attempt to reach out to the lake by way of the city, rather than elsewhere, or they might have had easier access to it and created a massive well of corrupted energies. When confronted, however, the two prove to be not only addled but deeply dangerous, heavy with exotic powers obtained by embracing the chaotic magics.

Sir Boris of Brunswick, captain of the Daneholt Baronial Guard, reacts quickly to the threat, resulting in a dramatic chase through the streets of the city as he endeavors to keep them away from the docks. They are hounded through various districts, over and under buildings. Sir Boris even orders a warehouse near the port be fired to block their path to water. After a grueling pursuit, Boris alone traps the two men in a tower about an old theater and drove them to ground there, only to be ambushed by a swarm of wildly corrupted Waste-warped rats that the two practically conjured right out of the city sewers.

A great battle ensues in which Sir Boris valiantly and dramatically battles and defeats both corrupted enemies, but in the confines of the tower where the fight occurred, the knight is unable to escape when, as he explains it, the two "got so angry they exploded into burning purple goo." He is terribly burned by the corrupt liquid offall produced in this event, in a fashion not

amenable to magical healing and rife with corruption itself. He is kept securely from public view and tended for months in the confines of Baron Eadred's household, fighting for his life against the duplicitous infection and his own injuries.

Incidents of similar scale and drama occur in other regions of Warwick as well, including in Drackenvelt where a particularly prominent Wastes-evangelist naming himself Jigo progresses to a great many significant locations and creates a particularly acute situation in the region. If there had been an organizing intelligence driving these events, this overplays its hand, however. The density of events in Drackenvelt provokes hard work and countervailing action on the part of the citizens of Fortnight. Collaborating with civic organizations across the duchy and particularly with the Knights of Queen Anne, Fortnighters help contribute substantially to developing a way to cleanse afflicted areas and prevent them from building energetic relationships to one another.

The effort to counter the Corruption becomes a mathematical and logistical traveling salesman problem, but one which the Fortnighters and allied organizations are equal to undertaking. A great deal of communal effort and cooperation eventually drives down the incidence of corrupted territory sufficiently to prevent it from reaching the dangerous tipping point that would convert Warwick into Wasteland.

Additionally, treatments are developed to assist those who were afflicted personally by the corruption in order to reduce their dependence on and interaction with the chaotic and dangerous magical energies. Of interest to that effort is the unique multi-faceted nature of the corruption as a direct affliction. It acts as a tainting and disordering influence on the physical body as well as on the mind, spirit, and to some extent or another the soul of those who engage with it. This requires, then, that all treatments address the conflict and ailment on each of these strategic levels as well. The results are interestingly sophisticated and highly individualized. Furthermore, this has potentially profound implications about the Goblin Wastes themselves, of a sort that is difficult to verify or analyze but which provides fruitful philosophical ground for exploration.

Getting rid of the corrupted regions is a long and drawn-out process that continues through the rest of the year but becomes steadily less difficult as time goes on. Unfortunately, the impacts were not limited to territory inside of Warwick but in fact also had a strong impact on Near-Wastes lands north of the border but not truly in the deepest of Waste lands. That has a strong impact on the lives of tribal peoples, goblinoids, and other sorts living beyond the reach of Alban intervention and causing a great deal of rearranging allegiances and territorial claims, some of which overflow down into Warwick.

An example of that takes the form of a clan of Ogres called The Breach which begin rampaging down into Warwick in a welter of violence starting in mid-autumn. The Breach are a very aggressive people who had determined through the investigations of their Shamans that the persons responsible for corrupting and destroying their lands originated in Warwick and were causing the corruption deliberately. Regarding this as a vicious and unprovoked attack, the Breach set about a campaign of vengeance to prove to Alba that it would not tolerate such abuse.

The Ogres were difficult to negotiate with and displeased by the insinuation that Alba should not be held accountable for the behavior of rogue agents. As far as they were concerned, they were a rival nation invaded, assaulted, and deeply harmed by the direct action of Alban citizens, and therefore no amount of plausible deniability would suffice. It required extended military intervention from the Royal Army and Baronial Guard to contain and control the Breach. The much-abused mountain town of Aetherstone in the Drackenburg of central Drackenvelt was all but burned to the ground in one of their raids, although the majority of its citizens were able to escape the assault.

In light of the ongoing engagement at sea between Alba and Malay, Norsk raids again focus on the northern coastline of Alba this year but are fewer in number and less aggressive than the previous year. This is possibly related to a series of devastating storms which cause severe damage to the coasts of Scythia, Ruslav, and Osterland, as well as battering Islas del Sol. While no one stands out as the single worst, the summer is so replete with aggressive weather that the season itself gets called "Black Sky Summer" by residents of the afflicted regions. Damage is significant and the seas are uncommonly treacherous for most of the prime raiding season. This has a dampening impact on a lot of seafaring throughout the northern and western regions of the Mari Magno.

On the south side of the sea, hotter and dryer weather is becoming the unpleasant norm. Songhai, now fully engaged in concerted fighting with Damascus, suffers badly from demonic incursions taking advantage of the chaos. Zoldana, the lich Nomarch of Bahariya overplays his hand when he fails to reinforce an allied contingent from the neighboring nome of Hawara so as to deliberately add their dead to his own forces. Hawara was part of Songhai for centuries before being ceded to Damascus, so the abuse of their warriors makes Songhai even angrier than they would have been to fight them in the first place. Now Songhai is quadruple angry, but Damascus is thoroughly outraged with Zoldana as well. Huge efforts are undertaken to chill the fight with Songhai so as to allow Damascus to try and find some way to resolve matters with Zoldana, but only to limited success. The year ends with the dispute more muted and internal conflict in Damascus escalating.

# 2017

## Reprise

After Duke Jinx spends the better part of a year seriously engaged in locking down the grain-growing regions of central Malay, he is able to assert a stranglehold over the economy by damaging infrastructure and blocking trade. It is not the most extreme or aggressive campaign of his career, but it certainly is a very strategically effective one. Malay yields near midwinter and terms are arranged for declaration so that peace can be announced in February of 2017.

The treaty is a magnificent coup for King Michael if one is able to dig down into the details of the long-term economic gains that will accrue to Alba over the next few decades as a consequence of the agreement. But at the surface level there are aspects of the treaty that leave a bad taste in the mouth, including the fact that Duke Jinx is forced to publicly apologize for destroying so much historic and beloved architecture such as bridges, and is mandated to be sent out of Malay **immediately** upon signing of the agreement.

From a certain perspective, the treaty between Malay and Alba showcases a great deal of letting Malay have the appearances while Alba keeps the rent. King Michael trades a bit of public humiliation for his favored Duke and gets in exchange the resolution of major financial issues. Debts for exchange of lands between Alban and Malayan nobility are summarily nationalized by the governments of each nation and then exchanged on the national level rather than by individual brokerages between the peerage. These exchanges are to be conducted in such a way that Malay will ultimately pay substantially more than the lands they are purchasing are worth, while at the same time receiving substantially less than their forfeited lands in Alba were worth. In point of fact, the only money to change hands in any given year will be the difference between those two sums, and thus ultimately Malay will be providing bulk payouts both to its own citizens whose debts were nationalized by Alba and to Alba whose nationalized debts in turn are deliberately and explicitly overvalued by the treaty.

There is also a suite of trade considerations that impact relations between the two countries, using the opportunity to formalize a few points of interest that had been left unclear by the dissolution of Imajicka. The noblemen who collaborated in the assassination attempt on Queen Fumiko of Alba will not be surrendered to the Alban Government but will be dealt with by

Malay “as though the Queen of Malay herself had been target of such an outrage.” Unfortunately, the politics of the moment mandate that Alba accept the disavowal of all responsibility by the more elite members of the Malayan peerage who may or may not have provided material or financial assistance to the perpetrators of the plot. There is only so much that can be done about things like that.

14 years into his reign it is becoming increasingly apparent that while entirely capable of the full range of courtly activities and demands of his position, King Michael the Good is, in his heart of hearts, an economist.

The deliberate sacrifice of a bit of dignity and importance in exchange for so much financial benefit would usually be strongly favorable to the factions at court that favor the practical over the ideological, but positions seem to rapidly reverse when the matter has to do with Malay instead of Warwick or Doomstadt. This is both enormously frustrating and at the same time somewhat revelatory as to the tribalism at play in the factional divisions. It provides an opening for the King to make subtly different assaults on his adversaries to capitalize on the fact that they're being more oppositional than principled.

Of interest in Drackenvelt during the winter and spring is the discovery of a trove of information regarding the passing of King Richard III's Crusade, what happened to its army and to some of the critical figures in that army. A tremendous amount of detailed and first-hand knowledge is obtained when members of the Company of the Black Lion, the royal guards commanded by Sir William Van Dance in the time of King Richard III, emerge in central Drackenvelt with scattered memories of their experience.

The group is undead, and missing its commander Sir William. The undead company, however, are mostly disoriented about their state and information is extracted in the process of mercifully dispatching the fallen heroes over the course of a few months, during which time there emerges a much more detailed picture of what happened after the Crusade lost touch with Imajicka and before it returned as an army.

The substantive details are that after fighting very far north and suffering significant losses, the crusading army encountered a strange miasma that rapidly and ferociously transformed them all into exotic and dangerous undead creatures. King Richard personally had been experiencing visions, as was somewhat in the public sphere of knowledge, but these are revealed by the fallen Sir Isaac Glenarthur particularly to have been of some malign origin, essentially luring the King and his army to the wastes to be captured and transformed.

The transformation happened very quickly but in its early stages, before becoming completely converted, the Company of the Black Lion fled south to seek assistance. Realizing they would not survive as themselves, Sir William sacrificed himself to facilitate Sir Whitney De Gaul entrapping the rest in a covert, static demesne of Faery (thanks to his Fae heritage, Whitney had unique and specialized knowledge and abilities in that regard.) Various impactful events had weakened the boundary of that demesne over the last several years. The recent substantial influence of the Corruption resonated sufficiently with this construct, that the now entirely undead group awoke. The most lucid of these, Sir Isaac, was able to assist in the mercy-killing of the rest before they could cause undue harm. So passed Sirs Marlon Hayward, Henri Valois, Robert and Simon Graham, Whitney de Gaul, Isaac Glenarthur, and Dames Victoria Exeter, Elaine Comstock, and Nicole Rigal.

The events leading to the demise of Sir Whitney bring about the surprising reappearance of the powerful Archidama Cherise La Fey, his mother. Archidama Cherise has been missing since the time of the war with King Richard Returned. The appearance of her son as an undead creature and subsequent efforts to tamper with reality in a scale commensurate with his skill and her ambition brought her out of where she had secluded herself in the Fae realm to offer consultation and assistance. Under a certain amount of duress she expresses the possibility that she could in theory return to court and offer some assistance to King Michael, though the proximity of her grief at the absolute loss of her son is such that she gives no particular time frame for doing so.

These circumstances also set the stage for the Knights of Queen Anne to deliver their first elevation to Knighthood for a brother of the order outside of the high command structure. This honor descends to Brother Saraneth, a sergeant at the Fortnight Watch post. For his years of diligent and exceptional service, with demonstrated leadership and excellence against numerous foes of the Night's Watch, including distinguished service in battles against the Chimera and Manipulator, Brother Saraneth is knighted in solemn ceremony by Post Commander Dame Solanna at the site of the ruins of old Fort Night, the place where the original order was founded in 1712 by Queen Anne.

In May, her Grace the Duchess Olivia of Warwick hosts a large-scale symposium dubbed the Forum on Principles of the Arcane, sponsored by the Applied Magical Research Institute and taking place in Newcastle. Luminaries from many countries are invited along with all manner of magical researchers and enthusiasts to speak and listen at a week-long conference on a wide array of topics. The impetus driving the holding of this formal event comes from rising frustrations and anti-magical sentiment in rural areas. Arguments have become quite animated and even disruptively harmful in areas where mages and magic itself are being held to account for the disruptions magical miscreancy and dangerously powerful mages create.

Advocacy grows both in Warwick and York for 'something to be done about all the mages,' whether this take the form of limits on what magics can be done and by whom, systems to ban or forbid certain practices, or to simply drive mages away. A substantial part of the driving energy behind this comes at the suggestion of an internationally known researcher, professor Reginald de Luca. In a widely replicated letter entitled "Speculations on the Impact of Widespread Magic Use," De Luca advocates for the possibility that things like the Maelstrom, the Demon Wastes, and the Goblin Wastes grow and expand not only as a natural and ineffable cycle, but because the use of magic in the world fluctuates. The essential theory is that with all three of the above places in a state of expansion or advancement, correlative inferences can be drawn between major magical events and major growth in regions of fundamental disorder. The implications are that without reducing reliance on magic, catastrophic magical climate change could be the permanent and irrevocable result. This theory is hotly disputed but becomes popular in some circles, especially those already predisposed to distrust or dislike mages.

The Duchess's Forum on Principles of the Arcane certainly doesn't determine whether any of this can be proven, but it does provide a framework for further research and provides a certain amount of communal vetting of the evidence to vary the weight given to different perspectives. A complication emerges some time after the conference when it is discovered that nefarious influences are actively funding an assortment of groups on both sides of the debate, as well as some of the more aggressive activists taking direct action in Warwick in reaction to it. This means the same source of funding might support a strange and dangerous crackpot mage with overly ambitious ideas that threaten his or her neighbors, while also paying for supplies and information to be given to the sort of people who might persecute that same mage and burn his laboratory to the ground. With major financial interests putting pressure on public opinion in so many ways, it is difficult to untangle to political strategy at work.

An echo from history emerges in the north of Drackenvelt when Meridian Cornwall resurfaces decades after disappearing from her home to evade her father's demand that she marry the son of Duke Llewellyn of Cymru in 2005. Now in her thirties and having lived a long while in rural Warwick with her husband Valen, Meridian Cornwall is loathe to be interfered with by her father now, though he immediately exerts himself to try and demand her return.

The only reason that Meridian Cornwall came to public attention at all is that she has become the hunted target of an anti-mage group calling themselves the Crusade for Warwick. Originally a non-violent political action group, the Crusade for Warwick begins by advocating for precautionary principles and laws designed to protect the world for future generations.

Unfortunately, their rhetoric becomes more and more extreme over time, until they create nearly as much disruption as the overtly violent groups and then descend into violence themselves.

Meridian Cornwall and her husband Valen are obliged to take shelter from the Knights of Queen Anne's Watch at Hayes after a harrowing escape from mage hunters. The two have a troublesome history with the Nights Watch going back to their original flight from Bartholomew Cornwall 13 years ago. A heated attempt to demand that the Watch provide both Meridian and Valen to a representative of Duke Cornwall leads to a request that Fortnighters come up to handle the political issue so that the Watch can keep its hands clean in the matter. Thus, representatives of Fortnight are given the unique opportunity to ever-so-politely tell a senior official in the house of a Duke, one Louis Arberth of Lyonesse, to absent himself from the area with all speed, given that Meridian Cornwall has no interest in going anywhere on her father's say-so.

Suspicious about Louis Arberth of Lyonesse become compounded by some evidence that he has direct financial connections to the dissident Crusade for Warwick. This is to say, it is suspected that a high official in the house of Duke Bartholomew Cornwall was paying an organization to advocate for reducing the use of magic and continued supporting it into its period of extreme behavior. Thereupon, the Cornwall-adjacent funded Crusade had coincidentally stumbled across Duke Cornwall's own estranged daughter and, not knowing of any connection, tried to kill her for being opposed to their ideology. More information is difficult to obtain. Louis Arberth perishes on the sailing voyage home.

In spring, Baron Anthony Talbot passes away, leaving behind his second wife, the Baroness Ravenna, and his two sons. Ravenna makes a Progress of the duchy to receive condolences from the lords of the land and to familiarize herself with them and make introductions. She is regarded favorably by the peerage on this journey, being a charming and charismatic woman of middle years who demonstrates a sharp mind, keen interest in governance, and sympathetic demeanor.

The northern portions of Warwick begin to report and extremely serious massing of goblinoid tribes preparing to strike south into the duchy. Determined to meet the aggressive threat with immediate and organized resistance, Baron Walther Hulse of Estermont calls his banners to his aid and recruits assistance from the Knights of Queen Anne's Watch, the Royal Alban Army's presence in the Duchy, and whatever can be solicited from Newcastle. Unfortunately, Newcastle is simultaneously under a similar threat and Duke Jinx has to send the bulk of Newcastle's defenders north to the vicinity of Mourning to defend a different mountain pass against the same force.



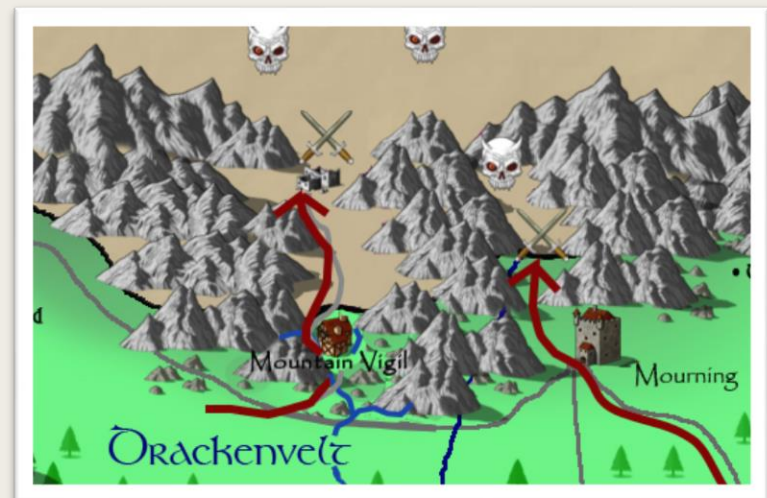
Additionally, Duke Jinx is the target of an abrupt very serious assassination attempt. When a ritual sunder is levied at the Duke, the canny Felinae defenestrates himself from a high tower window to avoid the ritual, barely surviving the attempt. This causes tension and anxiety as it is not clear what the source of the assassination attempt might be. The Duke's personal security is elevated, and serious investigation is undertaken, but like many other issues bubbling to the surface in the moment, this consumes effort and resources that will soon be required elsewhere.

Volunteers and bannermen from all over Drackenvelt flock to Mountain Vigil, which sits astride a mountain pass into the north through which many serious incursions have driven in the past. The armies are organized and pressed hard into the north to meet the Orc, Goblin, Ogre, and miscellaneous waste inhabitant army in a narrow-necked valley several days march north of the baronial seat. The pro-active approach is well received and promises to do a great deal to lessen the suffering of the people of Drackenvelt generally by stopping the incursion before it can occur.

Unfortunately, the advance reports of this army fail to articulate either its scale or its desperation. The army is not merely an invading force but is in fact a panicked flight; huge numbers of Waste-dwelling goblinoids trying to force their way south into Warwick because they are being driven there. They are not fleeing a nebulous energetic discord or a peculiar territorial creature. They are being driven by a terrifying, obliterating, utterly unexpected army of the undead.

The holding action against the goblinoids becomes more desperate as several important figures, Baron Walther Hulse amongst them, press farther north to try and blockade the incoming horde. Hulse has made arrangements for the throat of the valley to be rigged with mining charges that would cause rockslides barricading it from use by an incoming army, to be deployed at a strategic time to block the onrushing army while hopefully destroying significant fighting forces at the same time. With the realization that the goblinoid threat is merely a precursor, it is determined that this action will be taken at the end of a deliberate pause to evacuate forces from the immediate area of the imminent landslide.

Even as scattered undead forces in unite strength begin to leak to and through the invading forces and defenders, dangerous Wastes-warped diseases and parasites began to spread amongst the



supporting forces arrayed behind the front lines. Sightings of undead that defy understanding appear, exotic or alien forms like have not been seen before. Innovations. Creatures that harvest the souls of the dying and fling them into reservoirs to power further atrocities. Twisted analogs to mortal forms to exploit the weaknesses of any adversary. Things that invade the mind. The scale of the threat, appearing so suddenly, causes panic and great urgency amongst the gathered forces. A powerful necromancer must be at the front of this endeavor.

The source is determined to be a potent and ancient lich naming itself Mortimus Tenebrisus. It is a former Ravnos worshipper from historical Stilleseig, (a nation fragment of once and future Doomstadt) with a penchant for experimentation and isolation. Preferring to hide away from mortal view, this creature had long ago retreated to the Goblin Wastes and made a long-term effort to stay out of conflict with the affairs of mortal governance. Normally an independent actor who would not be keen to invade Warwick and preferring to wreak its atrocities amongst the isolated peoples of the Wastes, the lich Mortimus Tenebrisus proves to be under a complex and extreme binding that forces it to act. While the ravaging undead are of Mortimus' manufacture, the creature is not the origin point of the army but is instead being driven to take this action.

It is additionally of note that Mortimus is not, strictly speaking, just a lich. While liches have a relatively consistent skillset, this one has made advancements to its own prowess over a long period of time and a great deal of experimentation. In many ways, Mortimus represents what a being like Taggart could have become with more patience.

Describing itself as an Ascended Lich, Mortimus has the ability to become incorporeal and to travel between many different locations associated with deliberately infused fragments of its mortal remains. It has the ability to invade minds and dreams, and to interfere with people in assorted appalling ways. It is a unliving nightmare and the only thing preventing it from a swift and decisive victory is the fact that it quite evidently not enthusiastic about the undertaking.

In the confrontation north of Mountain Vigil, the previously held positive public opinion of Baroness Ravenna Talbot of Freeholt comes crashing down when it is abruptly and horrifically revealed that she is not who she was thought to be. Hastening south from the front lines to bring word of the pending evacuation, Sir Anthony Oswald of Fortnight is attacked, costing his own guards their lives, by Ravenna and a cohort of undead. She controls Mortimus. She is a lich. Though her physical body is destroyed when Fortnight rushes to Sir Anthony's aid, the lich simply retreats to her phylactery, ready to continue the offensive.

Mortal grandchild of Mortimus in the days when he led a cult in Doomstadt that worshipped Ravnos, the birth of Ravenna, a Dhampari infant, was seen as the arrival of a Ravnosian messiah. She was given tremendously exalted status and

weighted with expectations from an early age while being raised into the worshipful service of the false god Ravnos. She was created into undeath as an adult and encouraged in all her ambitions, until the extremism of her enthusiasm provoked her grandfather, then-lich Mortimus, to confine and contain its megalomaniacal grandchild. As a ferociously powerful, innovative lich trapped in a catacomb beneath what would become the city of Geissen in Doomstadt centuries ago, Ravenna simply waited.

In 2012 Geissen burned. The shaking of the earth as the city was vitrified was sufficient to disrupt the boundaries and circumstances of her confinement. Ravenna escaped.

In the meantime, the lich's grandfather Mortimus had long since become disillusioned with Ravnos worship and decided to move its passion for academia to somewhere that wouldn't be constantly provoking organized war to destroy it.

Ravenna took immediate measures to begin implementing a plan it had centuries to develop while trapped in its own temple. The first objective was to travel to wherever its grandfather had gone and seize control of the elder ascended lich, so that Mortimus' power and potency could be wielded as a weapon for Ravenna's own ends.

Even these revelations were insufficient to encapsulate the scale of the danger. With Baron Hulse and Sir Anthony Oswald of Fortnight both at the front lines dealing with the incoming horde, Ravenna triggers the failsafe detonation of the valley early, before the armies could back out. Nearly a third of Drackenvelt's defenders are in an instant trapped on the wrong side of the destruction with no possibility of making it back south to Mountain Vigil. Their only hope is to thrust west along the mountainsides, trying to stay ahead of the mass of Undead pressing south under the control of Mortimus, to try south for Fort Hayes as soon as they are able. The plausibility of this action will almost certainly hinge entirely on their ability to negotiate an immediate and meaningful armistice with the massive goblinoid forces still around themselves, now likewise trapped north of the valley at Fines Stand.

(The valley north of Mountain Vigil acquired the name Fines Stand in this confrontation when, in the early stages of its assault, it was heroically defended by the aged former Baneford Militia captain Andrew Fines who had volunteered with other militia veterans to be in the earliest of assaults. When a flank broke beneath the weight of an assault by Orc pack-masters and ferocious wargs, Fines and his militia held their ground at a small outpost, defying the Orcs and not yielding ground. Though slain to a man, the tactical brilliance and stalwart leadership of Fines kept the site from folding under the attack. Reinforcements were able to regain control of the position before Fines himself fell.)

Panicked subordinates and alarmed militias rush to adjust their plans and move to reinforce the Baron and his loyal forces from Hayes, only to find that in the moment of northward focus, while forces were arrayed just so, Ravenna had rallied massive forces of undead out of seemingly nowhere and slammed down an effective multi-pronged blockade on the Duchy of Warwick, isolating it completely from its sea ports and shutting down major routes of commerce. Every deep dark woodland of the entire Duchy seems to sprout a concealed undead brigade. Most of the 4<sup>th</sup> army remains in Doomstadt having not yet returned from the recent conclusion of hostilities with Malay. The Duke himself is isolated in Newcastle by concerted assault on his diminished ducal guard forces when it occurs. In this sudden and appallingly well-executed strike, Baroness Ravenna cuts Warwick off.

It has had a long time to work out this plan.

One of the most prominent impacts is what happens in Blackwater, where a catastrophically contagious undead plague begins to take over portions of the city. The disease spreads swiftly, first and foremost amongst menial servants and chimney-sweeps. Arriving in the city as a devastating fungus growing on firewood, the disease spreads when the ashes of the burned wood are inhaled. The victim sickens and dies, then is instantly raised as a revenant upon death. When the revenant is in turn destroyed, its corpse erupts with further infectious spores. Because of the early targets, some in the city begin to call this horror the Cinderella Curse.

Though the Knights of Queen Anne quarantine as much as possible to study the disease, they require outside assistance to develop even a modicum of a working strategy for combating it. The best methods involve consuming a great deal of liquor to stave off the symptoms of the disease, but this is only a delaying measure learned by observing the slowed rate of illness amongst inebriates. It takes research and study to learn that by brewing a potent, otherwise poisonous liquor from the roots from waste-warped motile plants called Healing Bells the afflicted can be cured of the Cinderella Curse. The cure, if taken by one who is not sick with the deadly plague, is almost immediately fatal. Healing Bells, a plant of particular interest to the ascended lich Mortimus, can be found mingling with some of the undead forces strategically placed throughout the western end of the duchy, leading the Knights of Queen Anne's Watch to place a prize bounty for their acquisition to brew the deadly cure.

Hundreds of afflicted individuals die in the densely packed slums of Blackwater before the disease can be properly contained, and hundreds more perish before it can be adequately treated. The Knights of Queen Anne are at the forefront with the aid of clerics from temples throughout the city and brave volunteers coming in from healing enclaves to help treat and

battle the disease. While it spreads in the countryside as well, nowhere is it so dangerous as in Port Blackwater. Corpse fires used initially to burn the deceased serve only to spread the disease further, accounting for how dense and devastating the impact of its initial strike proves to be.

In the earliest stages of the plague, Lord Marten of Blackwater is forced to shut down the port entirely to prevent the further spread of the disease. No aid can come in from outside the city without drawing more people into the quarantine. However, neither can the plague spread beyond it by sea, a small mercy. Dover, Bonn, and Calais are safe from its influence.

When the plague is finally brought under control, months later, it has claimed nearly nine thousand lives in the city, mostly amongst the poor. This is higher even than the devastating toll of the Red Plague, only a few years earlier, but the city has expanded so much that it represents a slightly lesser percentage of the population than that affair.

A critical difference in the management of this crisis is how adroitly the new Lord Marten of Blackwater drives cooperation between factions in the emergency. Under his aggressive leadership style and sophisticated wheedling, profiteering on the suffering of the people of Port Blackwater became the highest form of crime in the city for months. Pardons and privileges were exchanged ruthlessly for help with the public catastrophe, and Harbormaster Eliazar Salvicci is turned into something of a folk-hero rather unexpectedly for his extremes of cooperating and civic-minded intervention, no matter what machinations took place behind the scenes.

Marten, aggressive and controversial, ended up choosing to have the quarantined victims of the plague treated on ships in the harbor to keep them away from the rest of the city. This proved effective as an isolation strategy, but also contained the implicit threat that, *in extremis*, those ships could be burned or sunk to save the city from the disease. The people of Blackwater knew that they could count on Marten to follow through on that threat.

Weakening Blackwater and consuming as much attention as possible from the Knights of Queen Anne all moves towards the larger endpoint of Ravenna's meticulous scheme. Another prong of the assault comes as a concerted siege of the vast city of Newcastle. Ordinarily one of the strongest and most defended points in the duchy, it is struck hard while its most potent defenses remain north of Mourning along the border, cutting them off from the sprawling metropolis. The outlying parts of the city are evacuated to within the outermost of the city walls, but this causes terrible overpopulation and the walls are insufficient protection against particularly virulent attackers, intangible enemies, and strategic chaos.

The disease plaguing Port Blackwater strikes harshly in Newcastle as well, but with a very large and determined healing corps in the city, it has slightly better results in isolating the illness to try and mitigate the destruction it can cause. This is not to say the effects are not devastating, but in a city upwards of 200,000 souls, the costs could have been much, much worse. The Duke struggles to deal with his own immediate catastrophe and has few resources to send as reinforcement to other regions, effectively pinning down the proven existential threat he represents to the forces of the undead.

The most evident weakness in Ravenna's strategy is the fact that its grandfather, ascended lich Mortimus Tenebrisus, is not enthusiastic to be under its control and is willing to employ a certain amount of lawyerly maneuvering to minutely impede its ambitions. Through a pantomime of recalcitrance and legalistic foot-dragging, Mortimus manages to clue-in observant Fortnighters struggling to reinforce Baron Hulse from Hayes. Mortimus is recognized as a possible avenue of interference. Elements of Ravenna's plan become clear.

Ravenna, like others before it, is on a path to ascension. Like Taggart, it means to challenge Ravnos for the power of the crown. Like its grandfather, it seeks to drive its own power to its ultimate capacity through the consumption and control of other potent entities. Its recipe, however, is different. And its recipe requires the enslavement and ultimate sacrifice of Mortimus to its ambition, a sacrifice the ascended lich is unwilling to make.

While everyone involved is well aware of one another's desires to betray each other as soon as it is possible, an understanding is achieved. If Mortimus is freed from Ravenna's control, she can't use its incredible reservoir of power and resources in her quest to cement her own power into an ultimate condition suitable for her rite of ascension. Breaking that bond is the key to breaking Ravenna's ability to wreak destruction, denying it access to resources the older lich has spent centuries accumulating. It is, in essence, the only leverage accessible to her adversaries. Fortnighters will, therefore, allow themselves to be manipulated by Mortimus to liberate itself from Ravenna's control while looking for any opportunity they can muster to weaken either enemy.

The machinations are too many and too intricate to list. Magical bindings upon multiple phylacteries, despicable beings created by the warped imagination of the ancient ascended lich, perversions of any semblance of natural order, mind control, dreams, subversion, and limitless horrors.

Baron Hulse's forces, including Sir Anthony Oswald of Fortnight, are narrowly able to evade the pursuing forces of Mortimus' undead hordes in the Wastes and return to Warwick alive. They are rescued by reinforcements brought north to Rose

Hill from Fort Hayes under the direction and management of Mallory Hulse, Baron Walther's daughter and heir, whose firm hand and decisive command prevent the immediate aftermath of her father's stranding north of the mountains from becoming a rout that would have led to the collapse of all resistance.

Such forces as remain are rallied to defend civilian populations while ways to interfere with Ravenna's machinations are pursued throughout the Barony. One of Mortimus' three phylacteries is claimed and the bindings upon it dismantled, creating in essence a portion of the totality of Mortimus that is no longer under Ravenna's control and able to act independently, though most of Mortimus itself is still subject to the younger lich's will. This fragment of Mortimus provides illumination and assistance to some degree while still unleashing its own machinations in an ongoing way.

When Sir Anthony and the Fortnighters return to liberate the township of Fortnight itself from undead control, they find that servants or slaves of Ravenna have manufacture and erected an intricate doorway, infused with devastating undead energies, in the center of the town itself. Unbound Mortimus, the portion able to communicate openly with Fortnight, explains that the portal is a connection to its personal secret laboratory deep in the unreachable hidden lands of the distant north Deep Wastes, where it keeps its greatest prizes and desperately powerful entities. By opening this portal, Ravenna will be able to bring extremely powerful entities Mortimus has created in the Wastes and transport them directly to the heart of Warwick in service to itself cause, causing horrible damage. Destroying the portal will make Ravenna's use of those resources take longer, but it will only change the timescale of the horror, not its reality.

Fortnighters reluctantly agree to Mortimus' assertion that the best course of action will be to travel through the portal themselves, voluntarily, despite its grotesque necromantic origins and energies, in order to dismantle or destroy as much as possible of the tools available to Ravenna. Increasingly, public opinion is that it matters less whether or not Ravenna succeeds in its ambitions than whether or not it destroys the lives and lands of Warwick on its path to ascension. The danger is so extreme that stopping Ravenna from unseating Ravnos becomes a secondary, largely philosophical concern.

The journey through this necromantic portal is undertaken, leading a detachment of seasoned Fortnighters to the madman's labyrinth full of poisonous wastes energy inimical to mortal life, protected only by the wards and protections the ascended lich itself has placed on its domain. There, they battle innumerable monstrous creatures, seizing and destroying everything they can and encountering unspeakable horrors demonstrating even further the obscene and horrifying scale of the evil represented by Mortimus. Included amongst these horrors is a veritable lake of souls, stolen by twisted psychopomp variations created by Mortimus out of Valkyries, things he calls the Valkyr. These things slay mortals and claim their souls before



they can pass to the sundered lands, filling a vast well with the substance of these mortal lives in numbers too appalling to sanely contemplate: it is the work of centuries of the most gratuitous evil imaginable. The horror is beyond most people's capacity to even contemplate, let alone mend.

In the ultimate confrontation with one of Mortimus' most overtly threatening creations, Fortnighters battle a skeletal dragon animated by the cumulative energy of harvested souls. Two of the townsfolk are slain by the dragon in the conflict, but instead of sundering directly their souls and drawn into the horrifying well of souls itself.

Upon this event, Mortimus launches its carefully-laid trap. Fortnight held in its control one of Mortimus' three phylacteries, allowing them to exert some meaningful leverage in their ability to threaten it. Because only Mortimus can manage the machinations of its own lair sufficiently to allow the Fortnighters to return to the Lake of Souls at all, the ascended lich hastily trades to the Fortnighters access sufficient to let them reclaim their fallen brethren, so long as they leave the phylactery that they control behind. This is done, and the phylactery of Mortimus Unbound is left behind in the wastes. Everyone returns alive, but with less leverage. A major tool of Ravenna's potential forces is destroyed, as is the portal, but at a substantial cost.

Data is gathered to find the location of a second of these phylacteries, in an effort to regain any influence over Mortimus while further weakening Ravenna by limiting it's access to the elder being. The phylactery is guarded by a substantial undead force near enough to Fortnight to be struck, and the second phylactery, this one still controlled by Ravenna in its way, is obtained and meticulously liberated. Then, with extreme caution and attention to detail, the second phylactery is ritually sundered by local archon Charlotte Leonard of Beacon.

This means that there are now only two remaining, diminished, portions of Mortimus to be contended with. One portion of him is anchored in an untouchably distant refuge in the wastes, the skull left behind in the catastrophic deal with Mortimus to save fallen Fortnighters' lives. The other is a piece of Mortimus' mortal spine in the personal hands of Ravenna at all times. Weakened, it is possible that there will be real impediment to Ravenna's ultimate ritual, but Mortimus Bound is also entirely subject to Ravenna's will and less accessible to the Fortnighters themselves.

In a convulsion of magic almost unspeakable in its perfected timing, Ravenna prepares to perform her ultimate ritual by triggering a disruption in reality in and around the area she has chosen for the *loci imperium* of her ascension. The ritual must be performed at exactly the right time and under extreme conditions. It has vast destructive potential and a significant and real chance of failure. Based on what occurs, it is believed that to provide an optimum number of opportunities to get it right,



Ravenna uses her own and Mortimus' knowledge of portals, Fae realms, time, and the twisting of magic to create a sort of standing phenomenon whereby time itself, in a very localized place, will become twisted back upon itself into a short lived (to outside observation) but deeply alien phenomenon. The day of the ritual will happen thrice. She will be able to attempt her ritual three times, and if any of those three efforts succeed, she succeeds.

The magical details are complicated and difficult to explain or analyze. Those who lived through it have disconnected and challenging assertions about how it was structured, and even the most expert of observers struggle to fully explain the scope of the rituals (if rituals they were) undertaken to make it happen. This has some additional similarities to the machinations of Taggart which were almost certainly based on fragments of the same source information and research, but the approach is entirely different.

Where Taggart sought to empower itself to provoke a confrontation in which the Crown of Ravnos could be martially claimed from the false god, Ravenna seeks to empower itself in such a way that it can reach out and merge with Ravnos, stepping into his role by joining and consuming the false god personally rather than defeating him and taking the power away. At least that's the idea. This was by some referred to as an effort at an 'unholy marriage' to Ravnos, and reflects at least in some part the messianic destiny to which Ravenna had been relentlessly subjected as a child.

Whatever the case, Fortnighters struggle to demolish every fragment of potentiality they can before the ritual occurs on Friday, December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Several people are sundered by rampaging liches and desperate minions of Ravenna seeking to control the ground. The ritual proceeds. It fails, destroying Ravenna completely, and a held breath lasts through the night.

In the morning, it is Friday, December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017 again. Those who had sundered the previous day awake in their beds with scarce knowledge of it. Some people caught in the very heart of it feel the déjà vu and know they are in line to repeat the affair. Ravenna is still out there, preparing her ritual. But now, some of the sequence of events she must follow are better known, better understood. The confines of the warped time-domain are explored and examined by those who have fragmentary knowledge of what might be happening. It is predicted that there will be three Fridays the 29<sup>th</sup> of December in total, that time beyond a very limited area is proceeding regularly, and that to those who enter Fortnight after the commencement of the warped time domain there will be only quiet emptiness awaiting whatever outcome is occurring in the simultaneously extant Friday.

Fortnighters determine to spend their lives like water on the second Friday, confident that no cost is too great when it comes to interfering with the ritual and learning everything possible about it. Great risks are encouraged. The more information that can be gathered, the more destruction that can be wrought, the higher the likelihood that on the third Friday, Fortnight will be able to thwart the last and final effort of Ravenna.

The second Friday the 29<sup>th</sup> of December turns to night, and Fortnighters throw themselves at disrupting Ravenna's second attempt at the ritual. They barely find it but learn crucial details about the requirements for a prepared ritual site. The ritual is performed. It fails. Ravenna is destroyed.

In the morning, it is Friday, December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The archons and researchers believe this will be the last Friday before all of Fortnight trapped there, for better or worse, will be flung forward to Monday, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018. Deaths on this third Friday will be true deaths. Consequences will become permanent. This is the last chance to truly stop Ravenna, who after the previous two days failures now has its own best and most complete potential to succeed.

This time, the location is found in time to assault it. The ritual itself is attacked in earnest, along with all the components that can be destroyed or interfered with. Mortimus has been stifled. Every element that can be broken down before Ravenna's final effort has been.

In the midst of Fortnights assault, Ravenna speaks the ritual for the third and final time.

It fails. Whether by faults in its own ambition, the systematic resistance of its trapped grandfather Mortimus, or the desperately engaged interference of Fortnight, the ritual fails.

Ravenna is destroyed.

With it are taken many mortal lives, and the ritual also destroys the second of Mortimus Tenebrisus' phylacteries, leaving only the fragment remaining deep in the Wastes, out of reach, to ever be a matter of contention again. Ravenna's meticulously deployed armies, now leaderless, falter.

Order is gradually, painstakingly restored.

While Warwick is consumed by the abrupt assault of Ravenna and inwardly focused, Alba attempts repeatedly and dramatically to regain access to its harbors there. The navy, somewhat exhausted by years of steady conflict with Malay, is stymied by the inability to put in to Blackwater Harbor, and the lack of access for larger ships at the smallholding seaports along the coast north. Daneholt has only small berthage and is under sustained undead attack. Lady Lisann Gera of Gera's Point has fortified up her own stronghold entirely, trapped there under a static siege. The deep-water docks of Duskgate are destroyed by sabotage, along with sections of the protective jetty, and the town itself is also under siege. Lidna is hardly a fishing village, its own docks barely reconstructed enough after a previous catastrophe to allow small boats to come or go. Farwatch Point's harbor is open, but the town is ruinously engaged by the undead.

Lady Dame Amelia Van Dance, First Lord of the Admiralty, personally oversees a series of landings and actions in an effort to break the sieges at the minor ports, but is unable to get sufficient ground forces to make the needed difference thanks to the size and scale of the Alban ships at her command. Reinforcements are requested from Dover.

Lady Amelia is joined personally by Baroness Anasazi of Tir Anwar, a prominent spokesperson and trusty ally of Duke Jinx Lledrithcath. Between the two veterans, a new stratagem is devised to break the coastal sieges.

While the southern fleet waits just off Blackwater Harbor for the moment it can land there to reinforce Lord Marten and make for Newcastle, in November the northern fleet under Lady Amelia is back off the coast of Warwick along with an assortment of quasi-aligned recruits obtained by making a temporary contract with the easternmost kingdom of Nordehavn, Sigtuna. This required King Michael finding an emissary to negotiate with notorious enemy of Imajicka Sigtryg "White-Eye" Alreksson, Earl of Sigtuna, but the conversation was fruitful. A swarm of Norsk raiders in longships, orchestrated by Baroness Anasazi of Tir Anwar and led by ferocious berserker Mona Trygsdottir, land huge numbers of Alban army forces and Norsk raiders alike in a series of crushing blows to the undead along the coast, ultimately bringing enough force to bear at Farwatch to unleash the captive fury of that townships substantial armed defenders to the reinforcement of Fort Hayes.

With treatment of the Cinderella Curse finally well underway, by mid December Lord Marten is able to unlock the harbor and allow the forces of the southern fleet to land. Forces brought in to Port Blackwater press hard towards besieged Newcastle. Mona Trygsdottir and Baroness Anasazi work their way up the coast. Reinforcements are sent north by land as well, arriving in the vicinity before the end of the year but only just. By the time they are breaking the undead forces down in the forests of central Drackenvelt and on the way to liberate Fortnight itself, Fortnight is drawn into the fateful Friday and all is resolved before the ducal reinforcements can arrive in earnest.

Newcastle is broken loose of the undead forces pinning it down, allowing a furious Duke Jinx, now unfettered, to rally every banner he can claim and set out for the west, but the timing is such that he is hardly underway with a small, angry, cobbled together army before the end of the year.

In the eastern reaches of Warwick, there is acute turmoil in Freeholt. Ravenna had been a beloved figure for several years there after her marriage to Baron Anthony Talbot and her attentive care for his two sons. When Ravenna outs herself as a Dhampari lich monster of catastrophic scale, the Talbot sons abruptly disappear.

Furthermore, she had been promoting the growth of a religious organization particularly in orphanages and care homes that preached a sense of well being through personal achievement and ambition. Lacking a moral compass of any kind, this religion was well received by ambitiously amoral people and variously naïve optimists, as well as by children, but the whole affair was a front for gradual conversion to the church of Ravnos. The discovery that clerics in this organization knew that their cult of "Sovran" (usually mistakenly thought to be Sovereign, a linguistic trick exploited by evangelists) was a cult of Ravnos-in-the-making led to outrage and confusion wherever the cult's priests and missionaries had taken root.

When Ravenna originally married Anthony Talbot one would have expected him to notice her lack of pulse and general state of Dhamparism and undeath. The ability to disguise herself as an ordinary Human woman for an extended period of time without her husband or stepchildren catching on was an alarming perplexity amongst the earliest to discover her duplicity. In fact, this had been achieved as mentioned previously through the use of a mercenary doppelganger, Jinan, who took Ravenna's form and married Anthony Talbot in her place, becoming the beloved and caring stepmother and advocate at her mistress's behest.

When Jinan began to understand she was not dealing with a stealthy coup of the baronial power in Freeholt but in fact something larger and much more horrifying, she became desperately afraid of the master who had hired her services. Jinan had become deeply attached to the two young children of Anthony Talbot and fled with them the instant Ravenna struck, managing to keep them hidden and guarded throughout the unfolding of the entire affair.

After Ravenna's forces are driven back in the east, Jinan emerges from hiding immediately and confesses to the castellan of Signal Hill absolutely every aspect of the plot that she was privy to, accepting immediate arrest in shame. Her stepsons advocate in her defense, and the castellan, highest remaining authority of any kind in Freeholt at the time, is unsure how to handle it. In consultation with the lord of Freehaven, it is eventually decided to petition Duke Jinx for a pardon of Jinan

the doppelganger. She is of direct aid in uncovering the means by which her mistress poisoned Baron Anthony over the course of two years, of who aided in that scheme and where to find all persons with intimate knowledge of her own deception, but most central to the argument in her defense is her relentless guardianship of the young Talbot children, to whom she confessed very early on.

This pardon is ultimately granted, allowing Jinan to take the name Jinan Talbot and serve in the Talbot Household as an adopted aunt to the young boys, the elder of whom is now a 12 year old Baron Presumptive with a steward regent to manage the affairs of the barony until he comes of age. Jinan Talbot is the first recorded example of a known and announced Doppelganger being permitted open service in the household of any peerage in Alban or Imajickan history. Doppelgangers tend to be solitary, isolated, distrusted and reviled creatures given no faith whatsoever and destroyed immediately upon discovery. Jinan, having sold her talents, was responsible for many crimes. But she also was responsible for saving many lives and is believed by the people of Freeholt generally to be a proven good person, deserving of the Freeholters' beloved second chances.

Beyond the reach of the desperate circumstances of Warwick, something begins happening in remote edges of the Subtellurium. The initial phenomenon defies analysis and description but beings driving some "rural" Taelgranis into the larger towns. It gradually becomes more generally known in the Subtellurium itself that something is causing tiny parts of the far edges of the Subtellurium to cease to exist. This information is kept very quiet but begins a worrisome trend.

Far to the southeast, another war with the undead is raging, but in different form. In Damascus, frightful antique lich Nomarch Ibrahm Zoldana is encouraged to step down and pay wergild to Hawara nome, the neighboring province whose soldiers the lich allowed to die so that it could add them to its own armies of the undead. Sultan Sayf-da din Saban and the other Nomarchs, outraged by this, demand that Zoldana should step aside with implications that the lich will incur the wrath of the Sultan if it doesn't cooperate.

Negotiations stretch as the canny old lich works to capitalize on the unwillingness of the sultan to outright remove it, which would be very, very expensive and difficult. Both Songhai and Bahariya are now heavily engaged with demonic incursions, and are hampered by mutual hostility, but it allows Zoldana to demonstrate his superb effectiveness as a border

guardian to the sultan. Skirmishes play back and forth between Bahariya, Songhai, and demons, 2 or 3 parties in each, and the demons are making real progress into Songhai but not Damascus. It is speculated that there might be a new Demon Prince involved, an appellation not granted any leader of demonic forces since the Asmodean War of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but that is only rumor thus far.

Such rumors tend to be driven by events like the total solar eclipse passing over Nekhen and a swath of the desert that occurs in the summer, which is believed to be associated with the rise of demonic powers. Sept 1792, the start of Asmodean wars, featured a prominent eclipse and is not the only example of this being the case.

Elsewhere, stellar events are causing other excitement as well. A meteorite impact event in Saimonia causes earthquakes and damage to a large area in the southern part of Haemus (a kingdom or province of Saimonia depending on how you look at it and what year it is.) This impact leaves a crater hundreds of feet across and a huge section of forest burned or knocked down. Several towns are moderately damaged in the region, roads ruined, and the event is widely considered an important and meaningful omen. Additionally, a large fragment of the heavy metal of the meteorite survived impact which, in spite of the devastation, could mean a major windfall in revenue for those who would care to exploit it. Star-metal, whatever it proves to be or do, is a tremendously finite resource and can become instantly an order of magnitude more precious than gold. The chunk that survived is more than ten feet long and shaped like an irregular potato, weighing 16 tons or approximately the same as 20 head of full-grown cattle, which is a great deal of star-metal for pioneering capitalists to contend with.



# 2018

## Artifact, Artifice

Cleaning up after the chaos and devastation caused by Ravenna's assault on Warwick consumes much of the Duchy in the early part of the year. The Duke, in a state approaching apoplexy, spends months on the rampage purging undead remnants from any place he can find and exterminate them. The bulk of the 4<sup>th</sup> Alban Army makes its way up home to Warwick at long last and is dispatched to the project in earnest, as well as to support and recovery for communities devastated by the spreading of the undead plague which hit so hard in Port Blackwater and Newcastle.

Some of the cleanup process brings attention to the machination of a few gangs and organizations in Blackwater. Because of a trend of interest, some information is uncovered and swiftly brought to those who fought Ravenna directly at Fortnight about a potential artifact of the wastes that could be the object of keen interest by multiple parties. In particular, this artifact appears to be the obsession of a previously very small Blackwater criminal organization operated largely by a number of were-rats and called the South Paw.

The artifact and history around it are of interest, dating to the Thracian occupation and one of several efforts to conquer the wastes in the past, but the motives of the gang are not immediately transparent. The artifact is clearly dangerous and empowered by exotic and ancient high magics. The secrets of where it might possibly be found had been uncovered by the South Paw gang when historians, seeking additional clues as to the passage of King Richard's Crusade prompted by the sudden influx of revelations about the Company of the Black Lion, found and explored a variety of old documents looking for anything with any connection at all to expeditions into the Wastes. One such document found is a diary belonging to someone who had witnessed the creation and use of this Thracian artifact – a specially enchanted suit of armor named **The Sawolmangian**.

The history of the Sawolmangian is obscure and of great interest to historians, but in practice it is a devastating creation that relies on the destruction and consumption of souls in order to convey tremendous power to the bearer, whose mind is suppressed to absolute emotionlessness until they go mad or their soul is entirely consumed. In its first and only true implementation, the Sawolmangian (Devourer-of-Immortal-Souls) was worn by a heroic figure in an early Thracian expedition.

The bearer emotionlessly butchered his way northward becoming more and more disconnected from reality and able to invoke ritual magics almost at will. When the creators of the Sawolmangian tried to intervene to stop it, they were slain by the bearer, but the effort of doing so consumed the last of his own spirit and the expedition fell to pieces, with only a single known survivor returning south in the following weeks or months.

It appears that the temporary lull created by the fall of Ravenna's forces provided a unique opportunity for a motivated expedition orchestrated by the South Paw gang to find and recover the armor before the power vacuum is replaced by more normal Goblin Wastes activity. While they are able to find, excavate, and retrieve the accursed armor, it does not function properly at first. At least, it does not function according to the desires of the South Paw conspirators attempting to make use of it, causing madness and horrible damage to the spiritual strength of anyone who dons it. Rather than attempt to create an ultimate timeless warrior out of the uncontrollable Sawolmangian, the South Paw instead attempt to manipulate it to use the ritual magic it invokes to create magic items which could then, in theory, be sold for profit. The exchange of lives for magic is hideous, but more so is the fact that they continue trying even though it doesn't do as they like. Items enchanted by the maddened, dying bearers placed in the Sawolmangian consistently come out twisted and cursed.

To understand their dilemma, the South Paw leverage demon summoning and blood rites (just ordinary operating expenses) to kidnap an experimental archon from Fortnight and extort her into decoding some of the magical issues they are experiencing, which she does while waiting for the inevitable violent reprisal her abduction will provoke from Fortnight allies.

The group has to be hunted down and stopped from continuing the effort to attempt to use the Sawolmangian for profit. Once the victims are rescued and the bulk of those responsible found and killed or captured, the artifact itself is summarily destroyed rather than allow it to continue posing a seriously threat to ambitiously amoral magical study.

A collection of citizens in Fortnight, deeply troubled by the fact that Mortimus Tenebrisus, ascended lich, escaped final justice in the destruction of his granddaughter Ravenna, begin to collaborate on a plan to launch an expedition to return by supernatural means to the laboratory in the deep, deep Wastes where they can attempt to find and sunder the last remaining fragment of the apocalyptically vile Mortimus. Though the expedition is undertaken with a certain amount of caution and rigorous preparation, it is also regarded by those undertaking it to be a commitment to a suicide mission. Several of them feel



that they are unlikely to return alive but consider putting an end of the creature Mortimus a moral imperative, no matter the cost.

Once a strategy that represents what is deemed to be a quasi-reasonable chance that it could successfully destroy the monster, the expedition departs in late spring to go to Nordehavn. From there, they launch their expedition with the beseeched intervention of a Valkyrie who has approved their effort to avenge her fallen, corrupted 'sisters' that had been manipulated and destroyed by Mortimus. The expedition is armed to the teeth with specialized equipment and elaborate protections and contingencies, to be transported into the Wastes and assault the Laboratory without Mortimus's assistance and consent.

Seven formidable Fortnighters undertake the expedition. Only two escape sunder and of those only one returns to Fortnight to report the ultimate success of the final task. This survivor, named Vargos, is deeply traumatized but able to report success, and begins setting about the effort to try and reincarnate any of those who fell that can be retrieved. Thus ended Mortimus Tenebrisus at the hands of Fortnight, despite nearly a millennium of secluded atrocities and his own great and tested machinations to preserve himself for the future.

As rebuilding and repair continue throughout Warwick, there is a decided increase in refugees fleeing the Subtellurium from the increasingly poorly kept secret that places around the borders of their homeland are being destroyed. A good number of refugees suffer from serious memory problems, some having no knowledge of their own lives. These evacuees tend to congregate in a handful of places relatively amenable to building a Taelgranis diaspora. A temporary village springs up near Duskgate but mostly handles people for the short term, while the town of Zielona in central Drackenvelt, already well-populated by Skollarian refugees, welcomes an influx of Taelgranis as well. With these two groups, Zielona is rapidly becoming the largest town on the lake by population.

In Estermont, the Taelgranis refugees cluster into a neighborhood of Newcastle blending in with a substantial Paleteth population, while those who might seek refuge in the eastern parts of Warwick instead tend to seek out shelter amongst the Dverg of Stonehelm.

Not all who flee the Subtellurium are peaceful or good neighbors. Drackenvelt experiences a flurry of activity from an organized criminal enterprise calling itself the House of Tremors that moves operations to the surface and attempts to secure a stronghold for itself in the Drackenburg. This location is too close to the town of Fortnight for comfort, and the criminal

organization is broken apart when it attempts to wage a turf war against the well-armed and sufficiently paranoid community. A similar interaction in Newcastle yields an increase in public distrust of Taelgranis generally, problematic given the increased numbers there.

In all, something close to a thousand refugees escape the Subtellurium in hegira during the year 2018. This is a very dramatic and substantial number of Taelgranis to see in Warwick, even if it represents only a tiny fraction of those who dwell in the great and sprawling lands of the Subtellurium itself.

Drackenvelt also experiences a series of problematic interactions with local Fae. As has happened previously, major changes in the land or circumstances create instability in the relationship between the mortal world and the Faery wild. Years of wildness out of the Wastes and the consequences of corruption and invasion make it possible for a Fae of chaos, Lleu Llaw (pronounced colloquially as Theo-Tha by non-Cymry,) to move in and attempt to assert the primacy of the random, while her 'sister' Dylann contested the claim and suggested mortal order was supreme. The outcome of such debates can have amplifying and far-reaching consequences, so it is of some note that the Drackenvelters ultimately sway the issue towards the more orderly of the two Fae, Dylann, in preference to the chaos promoted by Lleu Llaw.

This represents another board hammered firmly into place of the relationship between Warwicker, Warwick, Alban, and Alba that is eternally unfolding in the developing frontier.

The Ravenna Tribulation caused a great deal of suffering to a great many people. Suffering comes in many sizes and shapes, and sometimes even a small suffering can be seen as a widespread tragedy.

In the disruption of many communities caused by the undead attack, a great many Dragoons were revealed to their communities either by using their powers against the enemies or by being seen as spirits, revealing their draconic lineage. While more welcoming than other places in Eurus, Warwick is far from perfect and no few of those revealed Dragoons were ostracized and driven from their homes, people fearing the unknown and secretive and resenting the implicit lie of a Dragoon living amongst them in secret.

Other Dragoons had been subject to a stealthy slave trade operating in the cover of recent disruptions, attempting to capture and export Dragoons as an exotic slave commodity, not entirely unlike a similar effort undertaken under the cover of the assault of the Manipulator. The destruction of the undead forces by the Duke and crackdown on illegal trade in Blackwater

by Lord Marten and Harbormaster Salvicci during the unraveling of the South Paw conspiracy both shattered the Dragoon slave market, but many victims were left homeless and bereft after their ordeal.

In Drackenvelt, many such Dragoons found a refuge in the Order of Fyornil's small sanctuary developing at Flame Haven, which was particularly welcoming to Dragoons. A substantial collection of the disaffected Dragoons began to congregate there, living openly in scales and making peace with that identity. The dragon order knights at Flame Haven help to alleviate their emotional suffering as well as providing home and refuge to those who were the victims of slavers.

Late in 2018, many living in Drackenvelt begin to experience new and different nightmares, vivid dreams, and strange fore-knowings. Past experience has made Fortnight in particular very alert for suspicious dreams that show large patterns. Ravenna could manipulate dreams, as could Taggart, and the assault of Charles Hulm on the demesne of Nightmare is not far enough back in memory to be quickly forgotten. Locals have been developing expertise in the study of dreams and dreaming, and find that the conceptual demesnes of dreaming are, to some extent, leaking into the mortal realm. Manifest entities of formless or "Hollow" dream spring into being in unexpected places, and townsfolk find themselves subject unexpectedly to mass hallucinations that border on travel between realms.

This represents a wavering of the boundary between mind and substance, waking and sleeping, mortal world and the veil to other-where beyond. Though the preference for order under Fae lady Dylann won out in concept when the Fae pursued this instability in their own boundaries, other adjacencies seem to remain in dispute.

The situation begins to coalesce into an understanding that there is a boundary of some sort under threat within the demesne of dreams which is causing dysmorphia and lashing out by dream-entities of many kinds. Importantly, some who engage with the dreaming creatures are afflicted by an inability to dream properly at all, causing them to become more and more exhausted, delusional, and unstable. This brings the conflict very firmly into the mortal realm when, as an example, a small group of the dragoons that had been staying at Flame Haven set out on their own to form a kind of blood-cult following the ambitious imaginings of a dream-crazed leader amongst them.

It is clear that the situation is worsening and needs direct attention, but the solution remains elusive as the year ends.

South of Warwick in Doomstadt, the birthrate continues to manifest differently than previously expected, prompting some deep investigation by researchers into the history of the disparity. By the end of 2018 the effect had been noticed and some serious research undertaken to figure out the reason that the last 3 years of births had seen changes amongst the Endrani. First it had increased to around 25% in 2015, then 28% in 2016, 31% in 2017, and on track to be fully 33% in 2018, prompting widespread and communal alarm and confusion amongst people interested in such things. Rumors start to fly around about why this might be, especially since information becomes available that the source of the disparity AND the reason it is changing are both so antithetical to scrying that they caused several Saitov specialists to suffer severe magical injuries. Prominent theories interpret it as some kind of attack, given the reduction in number of daughters, but this is contested by those who note that birth rates have overall slightly increased along the same plane. It is almost as though more Endrani babies are being born and the supernumerary children are more likely to be male than ever before.

Divination is not doing a great job of coping with the statistical futures (too dry?), and statistical games are messy anyway.

It's so late breaking a development that it will take months to hear back from investigators sent to Cynos to inquire whether they were noticing any of the same changes. Cynos was known to have slightly less of a disparity already, being somewhere closer to the 30% mark of male births. This is usually attributed to a much higher admixture of humans in their family trees. Less pure, less Endrani. Finding out if the rate is changing there will likely not occur until the spring of 2019 at the earliest.

Out west in Meridia, Songhai and Damascus remain in a tense condition that is not exactly war but is definitely not peace. Nomarch Ibrahim Zoldana of Bahiriya mistakenly abuses a pair of priestesses of Anope who had infiltrated his compound. They had snuck into his stronghold in an effort to assuage any potential indignity to the spirits of the Hawarans killed in 2016, which had yet to be resolved. Thinking them saboteurs, he turns them into mummies but doesn't do it properly or respectfully. Since they are priestesses of Anope, this makes them extremely, voraciously angry. Though slaved to his commands, the mummy priestesses manage to subvert enough of his control architecture to allow them to invoke sacred and secret rites of their own. The pair conjure a being called a Ba bird and send it with a message to their peers.

Outrage echoes through the faithful of Damascus and Pharaoh Nectanepho IV begins aggressively demanding that Zoldana be removed and destroyed. The Sultan, Sayf-da din Saban, is put in a very awkward position because religion is the

one place the Pharaoh has more power than he does, but he still doesn't want to invade one of his own nomes and get rid of the leader. The violence required would be huge, but the Sultan is almost certainly obliged to follow through or else become the catalyst in a civil war against the Pharaoh. Such a confrontation would be on the grounds where Nectanepho is the strongest and most resilient with the affection and admiration of the people of Damascus. It could break the Sultan's government to undertake such a rebellion against religious tradition.

Sayf-da resents the bind that he is in regarding the politics of religion. He also resents Zoldana for driving the conflict forward and the lack of caution that brought the conflict into this plain. He also resents Songhai for initiating the confrontation in the first place and its philosophical attack on the sovereignty of Damascus itself. In short: woe is the Sultan of Damascus. Zoldana meanwhile is hampered from within by rebellious minions, loses a few family members and starts not winning against demons as well and thoroughly as he had been. This makes him look weak, which could begin the process of creating a political smokescreen from within which the Sultan might ultimately decide to act.

Songhai gains ground against Bahariya but is still barely holding its own against the demons. It's all very messy.

In more pleasant international affairs, however, the year 2018 is not a total loss for peace and justice. Sassannia begins exerting gentle pressure against the merchant-princes of Nabotaea who rule the supposedly independent government of the small and vital guardian of the Azar (the passage to the east allowing sea trade with Shalkara and Nippon.) The aim of this pressure is to drive the ruling class to treat the native peoples of Nabotaea with more dignity and respect. Nearly all of the ruling class is foreign in origin, and the laws made to profit merchant interests above all others, leaving rural peoples and those whose families have resided along the banks of the Azar for centuries disenfranchised.

While the condition of being ruled by an elaborately structured foreign oligarchy imposed on them by foreign conquerors is not an ideal one, it is a tolerable substitution for being repeatedly conquered. What Sassannia is doing, then, is responding to internal agitation amongst the Human, Barbarian, and Trandafir peoples of Nabotaea and responding to their increasing desire for self-rule and autonomy in their long-disputed lands.

While Sassannia holds a fair amount of influence in the region and would have economic interests in maintaining the status quo, it seems like the backing of Sassannia for Nabotaeans to obtain true and legitimate independence comes from a place of sincerity by the Ada (religious leader and monarch) of Sassannia.

**2019**

Today and Tomorrow:

THE STORY GOES ON FORWARD INTO THE INDEFINITE FUTURE,  
MANY-HANDED AS A CUTTLEFISH. NO ONE YET KNOWS  
WHAT WILL COME OF THE WORLD.