

BINDER THE BLACK CRAB

TM



A CHRONICLE FOR
VAMPIRE: THE DARK AGES®



BLINDER THE BLACK CRUCIFIX™

AD 1212-1225

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BLINDER THE BLACK CRIPPS™

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Introduction:

Going Before Destruction

Pride goeth before destruction, and
an haughty spirit before a fall.
-Proverbs 16:18

WHAT IS UNDER THE BLACK CROSS?

Under the Black Cross chronicles the further disintegration of the old order of Dark Medieval Europe, as the vampiric Long Night comes to its end and a new age of conflict begins. Where vampiric elders once struggled in painfully slow moves and countermoves, this new era is one of bold action and bloody conflict. Where conflicts were once quiet and isolated matters to be settled between two rivals, they now explode into large battles that reach out to affect vampires across Europe. Intrigue and subtlety must now go hand in hand with war craft and daring. The weak, the hesitant and the nostalgic need not apply.

The scions of Caine come to call this new and deadly time the War of Princes, and its first major battle occurs in **Under the Black Cross**.

PATRICIANS AND FIENDS

The chronicle follows the ambitions of the Ventrue Lord Jürgen. A childe and vassal of the powerful elder Hardestadt, Jürgen is set on using the burgeoning chaos in Europe to claim his place as a great lord. Instead of fighting endlessly with his clanmates and others in the Holy Roman Empire itself, Jürgen sets his sights to the seemingly endless expanse of pagan lands to the east. Moving his court to the city of Magdeburg on the River Elbe, he announces to the world that he is to claim new lands.

His first major campaign, and the subject of **Under the Black Cross**, takes place in Hungary, where his fellow Ventrue have suffered serious reversals, and the Tzimisce rule the night. Using his influence among the Teutonic Knights as a cover, Jürgen looks to stab at the Tzimisce heart and claim a goodly chunk of Transylvania for himself. This agenda puts him face to face with the *voivode* of *voivodes*, the terrible general of Transylvania, Vladimir Rustovitch. Furthermore, it puts the players' coterie squarely in the middle of the battle.

MANY FRONTS, MANY BETRAYALS

It quickly becomes clear that vampiric warfare can no longer be an isolated thing. Jürgen's new capital of Magdeburg soon swims with vampiric intrigues, from the ambitions of the French Courts of Love to the machinations of the Tremere Usurpers. As the war progresses, more and more forces come into play. Long isolationist observers of their so-called better's endless conflicts, the Gangrel of Hungary come out of the woods enraged. In western Hungary, the two lords' agents battle for influence in the court of the mortal king. When that same king embarks on the Fifth Crusade to the Holy Land, the war spills over into Outremer and shapes the future of the city of Acre. Knights and warlords clash on the battlefield. Spies and assassins move through the night. Through it all, the innocent are caught in the middle.

Characters who involve themselves in the struggles between Lord Jürgen and Vladimir Rustovitch thus find themselves in a position crucial to the future of Dark Medieval Europe. They have in their hands the means to either contain the conflict and restore some measure of stability to the fracturing order of the

Long Night or choose sides and bring it all crashing down in a nightmare of war and madness.

The choice is theirs.

BITTER CRUSADE REDUX

Under the Black Cross is not explicitly a sequel to **Bitter Crusade**, the chronicle of the Fourth Crusade and the end of the Long Night, but the same characters can take part in both tales. Vampires who feel strongly about the crusader movement can easily become involved in the struggle in Hungary and the Fifth Crusade itself. Those who made Tzimisce contacts during **Bitter Crusade** might also find themselves on the other side of the coin, working as spies of the *voivodes* to bring Lord Jürgen low. However you use them, the two chronicles allow you to transition from the Long Night to the War of Princes with your players' characters at center-stage.

THEMES AND MOOD

Each tale in **Under the Black Cross** has its own special theme and mood, but the chronicle overall highlights questions of leadership and self-interest, the self-destructiveness of factionalism and the conflict between the sacred and the profane. Affairs among the kine reflect a lack of leadership and the battle of factions as Hungary, potentially the strongest power of Central Europe, recovers from a civil war to come under the rule of a king who is more interested in hunting for religious relics than building a strong realm. In the Holy Land, the lack of an effective leader leaves the armies of the Fifth Crusade at odds over goals, as kings argue whether to attack Jerusalem or the Muslim stronghold in Egypt. Their failure leads to a useless campaign in the Nile Delta and buys only a few more years of life for the shrinking Crusader Kingdom.

The Cainite world mirrors these themes. Lord Jürgen's ambitions to expand into Eastern Europe bring him into conflict with the Tzimisce and Gangrel who are already there, while Myca Vykos and his patron, the Dracon, manipulate them all. None see the broad tapestry; none see how their internecine struggles threaten all of their unives. If the characters embrace this theme, they will have the chance to exercise the leadership that their so-called better's so sorely lack.

The mood of this chronicle is one of swirling confusion and accelerating threat and violence. Hints come in the intrigues at Jürgen's court in Magdeburg, growing more open in the factional struggles at Acre, and finally burst forth in the final battles in Hungary. As Storyteller, keep these themes and moods in mind as you and the players weave the chronicle, bringing them back every so often to retain the drama's thematic unity.

OUTLINE

Under the Black Cross contains three main stories. The first and the last detail the dramatic events in the German city of Magdeburg and southeastern Hungary, while the second presents an interlude in the Kingdom of Jerusalem and Acre that ties the Fifth Crusade in with events back in Europe. If this is to be part of

a larger chronicle, then you can easily interweave your own events and stories among the three chapters. If you are playing only a short chronicle with **Under the Black Cross** as its focus, or wish only to use individual stories, then the chapters are easily separated for your convenience.

Chapter One: Shadows at Court finds Cainites and their servitors gathering in Magdeburg in 1211, at the court of Lord Jürgen, a powerful Ventrue prince tied to the Teutonic Knights. Here, he announces his plans to expand his influence into Hungary, where King Andras II has invited the order to guard his Transylvanian border and convert the local population to Christianity. Jürgen holds a great fete, and the coterie is among those who pay homage to him. They have their first taste of the factional politics of Cainite Central Europe as the Gangrel disrupt the proceedings and the Tzimisce Voivode Rustovitch makes his initial challenges to Jürgen. Other intrigues grip the court as well, as parties unknown steal the gift of the Courts of Love, the symbol of their esteem for Jürgen. By solving the mystery, the coterie can gain powerful allies, patrons and enemies for the future.

Chapter Two: Ashes of Outremer takes the coterie to the Levant in 1217 as part of the Fifth Crusade, an attempt to break the power of the Islamic Empire by seizing Egypt (thus making the Muslim hold on Jerusalem untenable). The Cainites first arrive in Acre, where they discover that the city is barred to them by a mysterious aura. No vampire may enter without facing certain destruction. When the aura suddenly vanishes, the characters are thrust into the complicated politics of the Cainite Middle East as the local prince's throne is threatened and factions struggle for power. Others, including mortals infused with apocalyptic zeal, fight over the fragment of the True Cross, which is said to be the source of the aura. The choices that the characters make help determine the fate of Acre and into whose hands the holy relic falls.

Chapter Three: A Call to Arms brings the coterie to Hungary in 1225 for the chronicle's climax. King Andras has withdrawn his support from the Teutonic Knights, and both Jürgen and Rustovitch know that the final battle is at hand. Although they are disciplined and powerful, Jürgen's forces have the worst of it and are forced back into a dangerous position that brings about an intervention by the powerful Gangrel, Morrow. The coterie can play a central role in this conflict, either choosing one side or the other, or aiding the subtle plans of Myca Vykos to gain his own territory in the lands over which Jürgen and Rustovitch are fighting.

Chapter Four: Dramatis Personae details the many actors in **Under the Black Cross**. It provides game statistics for those who are most likely to cross the players' characters' paths in important ways.

Appendix: Endless War provides advice to the Storyteller, from ways to introduce the players to the chronicle to stories to tell in between the major chapters. It also presents option for continuing the chronicle beyond the end of the book, with suggestions of future developments.

LORDS AND LADIES OF THE NIGHT

Under the Black Cross features many of the leading vampires of Dark Medieval Europe. The players' characters remain the key actors in the drama, but they have a chance to

SOURCES

While **Under the Black Cross** is a chronicle of horror and dark fantasy, it is firmly rooted in the history of real regions and peoples. Storytellers who wish to delve more deeply can consult the following sources. Each of them served in the design of **Under the Black Cross**.

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Oliver of Paderborn, Cardinal, d. 1227. *The Capture of Damietta*, translated by John J. Gavigan. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1948

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meet (or meet again) several important Cainites. Some of these Cainites include:

- **Lord Jürgen**: One of the chief Ventrue of northern Germany, a vassal of Hardestadt and the new prince of Magdeburg. Jürgen may be the characters' patron or their implacable enemy in this nocturnal war.

- **Voivode Vladimir Rustovitch**: One of the most powerful Tzimisce in Eastern Europe and the high general of the Transylvanian voivodate. Rustovitch is Jürgen's opponent in **Under the Black Cross**. The coterie has the chance to resolve the conflict or revel in it.

- **Myca Vykos**: An Obertus Tzimisce and a survivor of the sack of Constantinople. Vykos enjoys the backing of the Dracon, a mysterious Tzimisce Methuselah. He seeks his own territory to establish a haven for himself and his mentor, Symeon. He relies upon the coterie to help him achieve it.

- **Jervais bani Tremere**: Diplomatic envoy of the Usurpers. He attempts to forge an alliance with Lord Jürgen against the Transylvanian Fiends. He goes about it with duplicitous schemes, and the characters have the chance to thwart him.

- **Etienne de Fauberge**: The nominal prince of Acre. His throne is weak, for his sire, Varsik, grows tired of his unfaithful dealings and lack of progress. The coterie becomes his best hope for survival.

- **Gauthier de Dampiere**: Gauthier is a mortal crusader who has been fighting against the "night devils" for several decades.

GOING BEFORE DESTRUCTION



He clashed with them repeatedly during the Fourth Crusade, and he comes to Acre with the Fifth, intent on protecting the city and the holy relic within. The characters have to deal with the consequences of his actions.

SETTINGS

Under the Black Cross takes the coterie from a rich trading city on the eastern frontier of the Holy Roman Empire to the capital of the Crusader Kingdom in the Middle East, and then back to the wilds of Hungary. The following information provides the Storyteller with an overview of the regions in which the drama takes place. Storytellers who want more information can do their own research and may also want to read the *Dark Ages* supplements *Veil of Night* for Islamic vampires and *Transylvania by Night* for more information on the Tzimisce and Southeastern Europe.

MAGDEBURG AND THE ELBE

The Elbe River runs north from the mountains of Bohemia, until it empties into the North Sea near Holstein, just south of Denmark. Prone to flooding, the river has been an important trade route and agricultural axis for millennia, and it has been inhabited since prehistoric times. By the 12th century, the river stood as the traditional border between the lands of Germanic peoples and the northern Slavs. It was in that time that the

Germans began their push east, as Albert the Bear was given title over the *Nordmark* (the so-called "North March," the lands east of the middle Elbe). Pushing east, colonizing and supporting missionary work (as well as swamp drainage and forest clearance), he founded the margraviate of Brandenburg, which still holds those territories.

By the time of *Under the Black Cross*, Magdeburg is one of the center-points of the eastern expansion of the Holy Roman Empire. To its west are Saxony, Thuringia and other well-established duchies and lands. To its east are Brandenburg and the other marks (border lands). It is the perfect place for the court of an ambitious German Ventrue such as Lord Jürgen

THE CITY

The earliest references to Magdeburg itself come from the early ninth century, when Charlemagne built a fortress there in 806 at the edge of the Slavic frontier. The town itself was a center of commerce, one of the main markets for trade with the Wends, who lived across the Elbe. As the years passed, Magdeburg grew into an important commercial center, conducting an active maritime trade with ports as far away as Flanders and the Baltic Sea.

Magdeburg was also prominent as a center for government and the efforts to convert the pagans of Eastern Europe. Emperor Otto the Great, who had already founded the Benedictine monastery of Saints Peter, Maurice and Innocent at Magdeburg

in 937, convinced Pope John XII to create an archbishopric there in 967, with dominion over the bishoprics of Brandenburg, Havelberg, Merseburg, Meissen and Zeitz-Naumburg. Its first archbishop, Adelbert, took his throne the next year and used his see to send missionaries east as far as Russia. By the time of **Under the Black Cross**, the archbishop is Albrecht II, and Magdeburg is preparing for a crusade against the pagan Slavs. The archbishop is also in the process of granting administrative freedom to the burghers and citizens of the city, a model that is destined to spread through much of Germany as the "Magdeburg Law."

In the shadows, authority is much clearer. Lord Jürgen has claimed title as prince of the city and master of the Brandenburg margraviate and the Eastern Marches, and he has the power to enforce his rule. Yet such wasn't always the case. An important port and trading city, Magdeburg has a well established, if small, Cainite population through the end of the 12th century. A Brujah named Cedric ruled as prince, and he had done so since Otto the Great's time at least. Used to dealing with the Gangrel and Tzimisce who hunted among the Slavs to his east, he was a political animal who saw no reason to simply submit to the Ventrue Jürgen. As it turned out, he never had to. Instead, a devastating fire swept through the city in 1188, burning much of it to the ground, including Cedric's haven. Jürgen assumed stewardship of the city soon thereafter.

ACRE AND THE SECOND KINGDOM

Known in Biblical times as "Accho" to the Hebrews, "Acce" to the Romans and "Ak-ku-u" to the Assyrians, Acre is an ancient city that was first mentioned in Egyptian texts in the 19th century BC. Founded by the Canaanites, it has been fought over and conquered many times in its past. Assyrian, Seleucid, Roman, Muslim and crusader armies have all marched through its gates in victory. Under the rule of the crusaders, it has become a cosmopolitan port with quarters for Genoese, Pisan and Venetian trading houses. Under an agreement with the kings of Jerusalem, each is allowed to govern its quarter under its own consuls and police it with its own watch, which conveniently provides each with an armed force to use against the other.

As capital of the Crusader Kingdom, Acre is also home to many of the military orders. The Templars and Hospitalers moved their headquarters here after the fall of Jerusalem, the Knights of St. Lazarus maintain a hospital for lepers beyond the walls, and both the orders of St. Thomas of Acre and the Teutonic Knights were born in Acre. Much as they add to the kingdom's strength, however, they are also a source of weakness, for dispensations from the pope have freed them from any royal authority. They often act on their own against the Muslims.

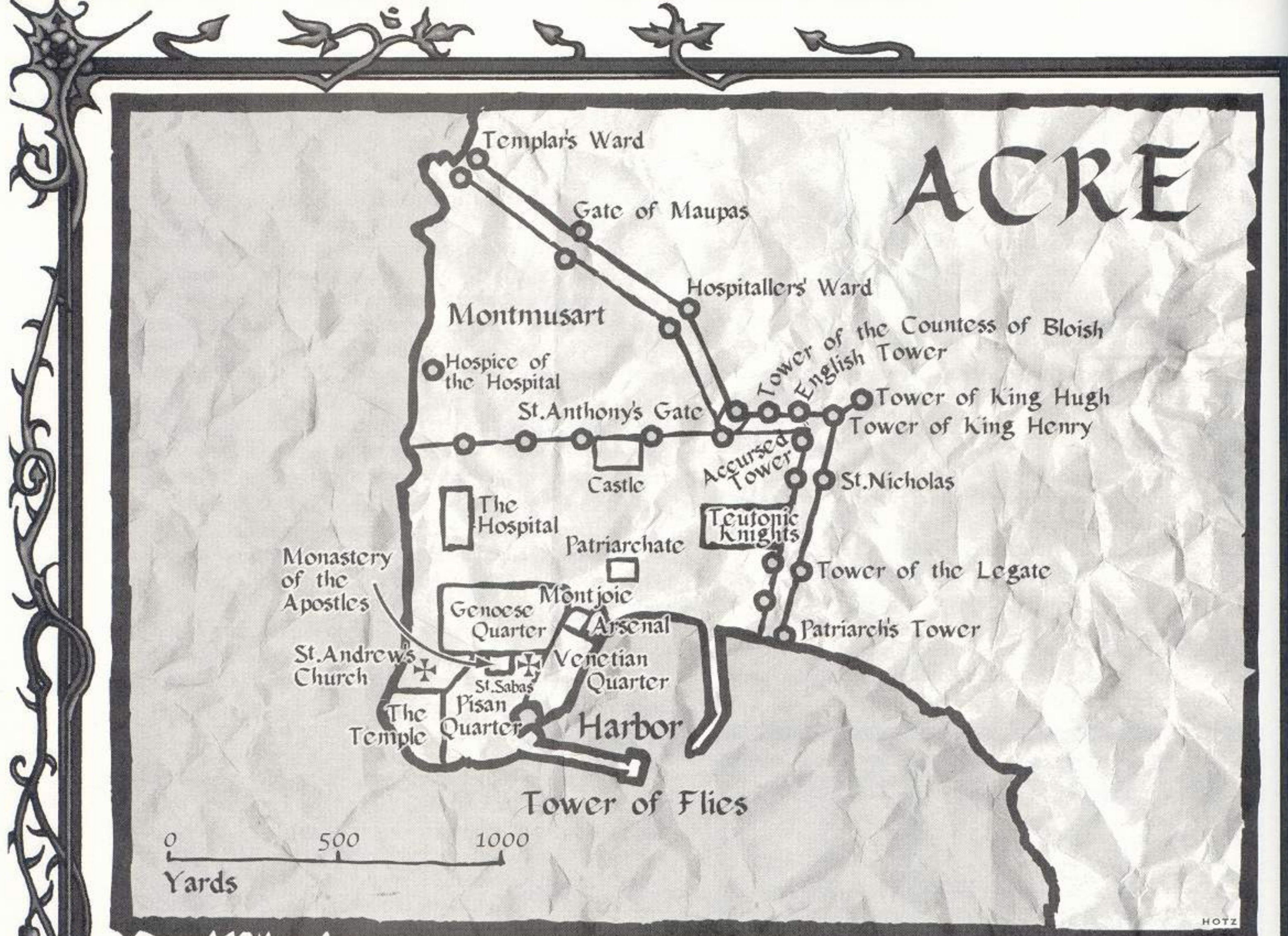
A SUCCESSION OF KINGS

With the fall of Jerusalem to the army of Salah al-Din (or Saladin, to crusader ears) after the battle of Hattin in 1187, the Kingdom of Jerusalem was in desperate straits. Not only had it lost its capital and chief city, but also the revenues from the traffic in pilgrims that enabled the kings to raise troops. Worse still, the ransom paid for King Guy de Lusignan, captured in the disaster at Hattin, included the port and fortress of Ascalon. The viability of the kingdom itself was in question.

Seeking to stabilize the realm and reestablish his authority, Guy moved his capital to Acre in 1188, although he first had to besiege it and could not enter until 1191 (after the Third Crusade took the city). There followed a period of repeated instability. First, King Guy was challenged for the throne by his brother-in-law Conrad of Montferrat, who was murdered by assassins that were sent by the Old Man of the Mountain. Fearing for his own life and tired of dealing with his fractious nobles, King Guy himself renounced the throne in 1192 and bought the isle of Cyprus from the Knights Templar.

There followed a succession of short-lived kings who all died within a few years of taking the throne. Rumors began to spread that perhaps God had turned against the kingdom and that he would allow the Muslims to destroy it as punishment for the crusaders' sins. It was in this troubled context that the barons of the kingdom asked the king of France to provide a husband for Mary, the daughter of Conrad and Isabella, herself the sister of King Guy's wife, Sibylla. Philip Augustus chose the reluctant John of Brienne ("Jean de Brienne," in French), who arrived in Acre to assume his throne in 1210. He rules until 1225, when he cedes his title to his son-in-law, the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. At the time of **Under the Black Cross**, John is still the king of Jerusalem.





GEOGRAPHY

The kingdom of Acre, and the Christian holdings in the Holy Land in general, sit in a perilous position. King John's realm comprises a narrow strip of land between the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee to the east and the Mediterranean on the west. A plain of varying width parallels the coast, starting wide in the south and narrowing as it courses north, save around Acre. The city commands a wide plain that rises to a pass through the mountains, leading to Safad and the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps 30 miles to the southeast lies the Muslim fortress of Mount Tabor, poised like a dagger to cut the kingdom's throat. The Muslim capital of Damascus sits across the Anti-Lebanon mountains, 120 miles to the northeast. To the north is another Crusader state, the County of Tripoli, and the kingdom of Antioch is beyond that.

Acre itself sits on the northern curve of the Bay of Haifa and boasts a wonderfully protected harbor, although problems with silt require regular dredging to keep it open. Much traffic flows through Haifa when this isn't done. Mount Carmel climbs sharply to the south of Acre, the high point of a ridge that runs inland and southward to form an obstacle to east-west travel. The interior of the land is a difficult country of hills and mountains, which shelter small fertile valleys and plateaus. Taking refuge among these peaks, fierce clansmen have resisted oppressors and invaders for centuries. They now make life miserable for crusaders who venture too far from the plains.

UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

On the east is the Jordan River, which begins in these mountains and fills the Sea of Galilee before heading south to the Dead Sea. Crusaders and Muslims do not fight much over the mountain country, preferring instead to clash over the plains and river valleys, coveting their wealth of farms, orchards and sheep herds.

CAINITES IN OUTREMER

Like their mortal kine, the Latin Christian vampires of the Kingdom of Jerusalem were forced to flee in the aftermath of Hattin. While some returned to Europe, others established new havens for themselves in the lands left to them, in some cases filling the night with the screams of battle as they contested territory with Cainites who were already in place. Their position remains precarious, though, for the failure of the kingdom itself would leave them exposed to the meager sympathies of the Muslim Cainites who would come in their armies' wake.

One other problem weakens the vampires of the Second Kingdom: They are barred from entering Acre itself. Since the first century, a holy aura has surrounded the city that prevents any Cainite from entering. To even cross the threshold of the city's gates means Final Death as the vampire bursts into flame. As a consequence, their influence over the king and the church is minimal, since the mortals are safe from vampiric control within the aura. Even their ghouls may not tarry long within

Acre's bounds for, while the aura does not kill them, it makes them physically weak and leaves them in terrible pain. What influence the vampires can wield comes indirectly through willing mortal agents and nobles whose houses have been suborned by a Cainite in their midst. Nevertheless, the lack of access to the centers of power leaves them in a vulnerable position compared to their Islamic cousins.

THE AURA

Acre's aura is a mystery to Caine's childer. The most reliable stories say that the influence appeared sometime after St. Paul's visit in the first century and that, within 200 years, no vampire could enter the city. By the time of the Arab conquest, the aura had grown so that Cainites had trouble approaching within a mile of the city's walls. Forbidden to vampires, the city was abandoned until Varsik embraced Etienne and convinced him to claim it as his own, thus becoming the prince of a city that he could never enter. The leading theory as to the aura's origin has it that the city shelters a large fragment of the True Cross and that that fragment causes the effect. This mystery remains unanswered at the time of **Under the Black Cross**.

Vampires first notice the aura when they come within a mile of Acre, first as a tickling or burning itch, getting progressively more painful and spreading throughout their bodies the closer they come to the city. Eventually, the victims' flesh blackens, blisters, smokes and finally catches fire. The intense heat reduces body and bone to ashes within a minute.

AURA MECHANICS

When a Cainite first enters the aura, a mile from the city walls, the player makes a Stamina (+ Fortitude, if any) roll at difficulty 7. Success means the vampire may go on, although the pain grows greater. Failure means she is in agony and can't continue. A botch means the victim's hands and neck begin to blister and smolder. At one-half mile, the player makes another Stamina (+ Fortitude) roll at difficulty 8. Even with a success, the vampire's skin reddens and cracks. With a failure, small fires erupt from her head and scalp. The victim's player must make a Röttschreck roll, and the victim takes one level of aggravated damage. On a botch, the vampire falls to the ground and bursts into flame. The character takes one level of aggravated damage per turn until she can get out of the aura (which very few have ever done successfully).

Within 100 yards of the wall, the difficulty rises to 9, while the effects of success and failure are the same. At the gate itself, the difficulty is 10 for the Cainite to cross the threshold. Before she can do so, the player must also spend a point of Willpower for the character to even go on. Ask the player if she is sure she wants to do so and if she understands the likely consequence. Once she agrees, failure on her roll is equal to a botch — the vampire bursts into flame and dies. Success means that she is able to cross triumphantly into the city, where, in the tunnel under the gate, she bursts into flame and dies. The faithful speculate that this destruction within the city is tantamount to an elevation to Heaven and a salvation of the eternal soul, but no one can be sure.

Note that characters with a rating of 9 or more on the Road of Heaven or Humanity make their rolls at one difficulty less, while those on the Road of the Devil or Serpent make them at

TRUE CROSS?

Under the **Black Cross** assumes that the main rumors about Acre are true. The Apostle St. Paul, converted on the road to Damascus, came to Acre in the first century bearing a large chunk of the Cross of the Passion stained with the holy blood of Jesus himself. He gifted the relic to those he converted to the Word of Christ, and they kept it safe in a reliquary. Within a century, it had been ensconced under a shrine to the saint that contained some of his own relics. The epicenter of Christian faith in the city, the Cross' power over the unliving radiated to an unprecedented level and pushed the Damned out of the city. Gauthier de Dampiere receives a vision while praying at the shrine and takes the Cross fragment out to protect it from the Damned. This act brings the aura crashing down and opens the city to the very vampires he hoped to thwart. Indeed, it is the combination of the fragment and its centuries-old resting place in the shrine to the Apostle that creates so powerful an aura. Once the fragment is removed, that unique effect disappears forever.

All this is very much in keeping with the Dark Medieval atmosphere of **Vampire: The Dark Ages**. Stories of holy relics were rife in those days, and the Holy Land was especially rich in them. The modern reader may balk at the likelihood of a surviving fragment of the Cross, but the medieval mind was very much willing to accept it. But before confronting your players with the Cross on which Christ died, take your own feelings and theirs into account. Storytelling games exist to have fun with, and treading carelessly over your player's faith probably doesn't translate into fun. You can very easily decide that the artifact is something completely different, perhaps even some ancient vampiric relic.

one greater. Ghouls may enter Acre, but must roll Stamina (+ Fortitude) every hour (difficulty 7) or be incapacitated by pain. A heart attack kills them on a botch. Finally, the aura is much weaker in the day than at night. Halve all difficulty numbers between sunrise and sunset.

HUNGARY AND THE SIEBENBÜRGEN

The lands known as Hungary have been occupied for millennia by the living and unliving, first by the Celts and Dacians, then later the Romans who conquered them and turned their lands into the provinces of Pannonia and Dacia. Wild lands of forest, grassy plain and mountains, these lands also came to be the hunting grounds of Gangrel and Tzimisce, who clashed with the Lasombra and Ventrue accompanying the Romans. When the Romans withdrew under pressure of civil war and Germanic invasion in the fourth century, the Animals and Fiends re-



claimed their lands from the fleeing Cainites but never forgot how they had once been invaded.

The central plains of the former Roman Pannonia are perfect for horses, and, in the centuries after Rome's departure, the land provided homes for waves of nomadic peoples such as the Huns, Bulgars and Avars. Charlemagne crushed the latter in AD 800 and established Slavic dukedoms as frontier marches. When one of these dukedoms, Moravia, rebelled against Carolingian rule during the reign of Emperor Arnulf in 892, he invited the nomadic Magyar peoples from the Don river basin to attack the Moravians in the rear. The Magyars were a federation of 10 hordes or tribes that called themselves the *On Ogur*, from which the word "Hungarian" was derived.

Under Arpad, the leader of the strongest tribe, the Magyars invaded the Danubian plain and easily occupied it, destroying the Moravian empire in 906. Flush with power, they turned on their German hosts and defeated an imperial army in 907, occupying what had once been Pannonia. For the next 50 years, influenced from the shadows by the Brujah who lusted for revenge against the northern Ventrue, they raided across Europe, even into France, for riches and slaves. Not until King Otto I crushed their armies at Lechfeld in 955 did they settle down to building a kingdom within their own lands.

It was no coincidence that this change was reflected in the defeat of the Brujah, for a great war chief of the Magyars, Bulscu, had betrayed the Zealot elder Dominic and, as a reward, was Embraced as a Ventrue. He returned to the capital at Buda and

created a refuge for himself deep beneath its castle. From here, he has dominated and manipulated the Arpad dynasty and ensured Hungary's allegiance to the West against the Slavic and Orthodox East, and its Cainites.

Through the next 150 years, Hungary would suffer dynastic crises as Arpad usurped Arpad and no atrocity was too great to secure the throne. Yet this time was also one of political and social consolidation. By the time of King Ladislas I (1077-1095) and his successor Coloman (1095-1116), relative peace on the steppes allowed Magyar armies to expand east toward the Carpathians and over them into Transylvania. Using both imported Saxons and Szeklers, a people related to the Magyars, as colonists, the Hungarians founded towns, built castles and churches, and dominated the local Vlachs and the remnants of the Dacians. In the night, the Ventrue dominate Transylvania's mortal rulers and its Cainite society, led by the brilliant Nova Arpad. And here also they come into direct conflict with the Tzimisce.

Under powerful kings and with a burgeoning population, Hungary grows by the time of King Bela III (1173-1196) to be one of the most powerful states in Europe, with the king's revenues equaling those of the king of France and that monarch's daughter becoming Bela's wife. Under her influence, French concepts of knighthood and chivalry influence the Magyar nobility, setting the stage for the introduction of western military orders.

As of 1211, Hungary is ruled by King Andras II ("Andrew," in English), younger son of Bela III and brother of King Emeric

(1196-1204). Andras himself is a weak king, more interested in hunting for religious artifacts and spending the accumulated wealth of his predecessors than in governing. So loose is he with royal funds and lands that the crown is nearly impoverished, leaving him dependent on his nobles, whom he cannot restrain. Hungary is reduced to such a state of anarchy that, in 1213, rebellious nobles murder Andras' German queen, Gertrude of Meran, out of anger at the spendthrift ways of her courtiers. In 1217, seeking to restore a measure of his authority, Andras agrees to undertake the Fifth Crusade, but he stays in the Holy Land only a few months.

In the sixth year of his reign, 1211, King Andras invites the Teutonic Knights to protect his Transylvanian borderlands against the ravages of the Cuman peoples by colonizing it and converting the population to Christianity. In return, he grants them extensive privileges and immunities from taxation. This practice continues until 1225, when the king grows tired of the knights' arrogant demands and expels them. It is this 14-year period that is the focus of **Under the Black Cross**.

CAINITES OF HUNGARY

Just as the fate of the wolf mirrors that of the herd it hunts, Cainite affairs mirror those in the mortal realm. The once-brilliant rulership of the Arpad Ventrue of Hungary has been brought low by a series of reversals. Nova Arpad was captured and impersonated by an agent of other interests, the imposter weakening her position until the true Nova freed herself and exacted vengeance. Meanwhile, Bulscu's ways have become more and more sybaritic, transforming him from a potent elder to an ineffective ruler. Although the true Nova Arpad is free anew by the time of Andras' rule, her reputation has been seriously weakened. All this turmoil leaves the Hungarian court open to other influences, chiefly from the West. Lord Jürgen sends his childe Baron Heinrich von Achern to the region, and there he seeds agents close to the king and others into areas of Transylvania. Heinrich wears the guise of a Teutonic Knight, and the invitation to his order has much to do with his influence at court.

The Tzimisce, long the undisputed masters of Transylvania, have seen their power eroded by the migration of Saxons and Magyars into their homeland. The rise of the Tremere Usurpers has given them an enemy to fight but distracted them from the slow erosion of the way of life that supports the *voivodate*. Vladimir Rustovitch, a brilliant strategist and cruel general, has risen to lead Fiendish efforts to regain the night. He has begun a strategy to erode Ventrue influence in King Andras' court by employing his childe Kara Lupescu, a scion of the Vlaszy revenant family and a Magyar herself.

GEOGRAPHY

The kingdom of Hungary is split into two halves, the west and the east. The western portion of the kingdom, Hungary "proper," comprises four main regions. The first is the Little Alfold, a plain rich in resources, separated from Austria by an extension of the Alps. On the east, it is cut off from the Great Alfold plain by the Northern Mountains. The Great Alfold is the second major region, a patchwork quilt of sand dunes, dry plains and floodplains. Mortal settlement is dominated by isolated farmsteads, called *tanyaks*, in the western portion. In the

east, the people of Transtisza ("Beyond the Tisza") cling to the lifestyle of the Magyars' earlier existence as a steppe-people, dependent on raising cattle. Third are the Northern Mountains, which separate the Great and Little Alfolds. Sparsely settled at this time, the region is famous for the blood-red wines of Hungary. The last major region is Transdanubia, which comprises all the lands west of the Danube save for the Little Alfold. It is a densely populated region of rolling uplands, and it features many fortified towns, castles and monasteries. Dense forests cover the Bakony and Mecsek ridges, and mysterious, mist-cloaked Lake Balaton in the north is the largest freshwater lake in Central Europe.

Two major rivers, the Danube and the Tisza, drain Hungary. The Danube floods twice a year, in early spring and early summer, while the Tisza floods regularly with the snowmelt in the Carpathians. The floods of both rivers cause devastating damage to towns and villages in the plains. In the early 13th century, her major cities are Buda-Pest, home to the court of Vencel Rikard and his perverted sire, Bulscu, and Esztergom, the royal and religious capital. Here Geza Arpad, former king and now a Ventrue childe of Bulscu, sits as vampiric archbishop. He supports Baron von Achern and the German Ventrue in an effort to stab at his decadent sire.

Mountains ring the east of the kingdom, Transylvania, giving it an isolated, almost trapped feeling. North and east are the dark Carpathians, while the Transylvanian Alps and the Bihar Mountains form the boundaries on the south and west, respectively. They form a ring around the Transylvanian Plateau and the northwestern plain. While the plateau and plain have good soil for farming and the mountains yield a rich harvest of timber and minerals, the mortals who live here enjoy little of the land's wealth or beauty. They instead cower in fear of their lords, both those of the day and the night, and they merely hope for survival.

Transylvania is also known as *Erdely* to the Magyars and the *Siebenbürgen* to the Germans, the latter name derived from the towers of the seven cities of Transylvania. They are Bistritz, Kronstadt, Klausenburg, Mediasch, Hermanstadt, Schaasburg and Balgrad. Nova Arpad supposedly acts as prince from her lair in Mediasch, but with her weakened position, she can just watch as Jürgen claims her lands. The latter makes Kronstadt his capital in the region, and it stands as his last fortress in the waning nights of his war.

THE TEUTONIC ORDER

Under the Black Cross uses as its historical backdrop a key moment in the development of the third great military order of the Middle Ages, the Teutonic Knights. Although never quite reaching the status of the Knights Templar or the Hospitalers of St. John, the German knights grow to be a power to be reckoned with. More importantly, they achieve some feats that their rival orders never do, such as creating their own theocratic state out of conquered — or more euphemistically, "converted" — territories in Prussia and along the Baltic coast. This chronicle captures the order in the transition from a relatively small band

of monastic crusader knights focussed on the Holy Land, to a nation-building power with strong ties to both the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire.

The order takes its inspiration from the German Hospital of St. Mary founded in or around 1127 in Jerusalem. A gift from wealthy German patrons, the hospital had a mission to serve their impoverished compatriot pilgrims, who had need of care. The hospital was never over-large, and it fell under the authority of the Hospital of St. John after a dispute in 1147. Nevertheless, it maintained some well-placed patronage, and Countess Sophia of Holland was buried there in 1172. It also came to the attention of some of the Christian Cainites who infested the city, including Lord Jürgen, at that time a knight-envoy for his sire Hardestadt. Jürgen saw the power of the Templars and Hospitalers, and he saw in the German Hospital the possibility of opening another order to his influence. Such plans would have to wait, however, since the German Hospital of St. Mary fell when Jerusalem fell to Saladin in 1187.

A second German Hospital sprang up in the fields outside Acre in 1190, as the Christian forces of the Third Crusade laid siege to the city. Crusaders from Lübeck and Bremen built this makeshift field hospital from the masts and sails of the ships that had brought them to the Holy Land, and it served their countrymen until the Muslims surrendered the city in 1191. Guy de Lusignan, king in exile of Jerusalem, gave the hospital a tower in Acre for its use at this time. Over the next several

years, the Hospital of St. Mary of the Germans in Jerusalem, as the new order named itself, campaigned for recognition as a separate entity from the Hospital of St. John and standing as a military order. They made inroads with the pope, the powers of Outremer and Emperor Henry, receiving small holdings in Tyre and Jaffa in the Holy Land, Barleta in Italy and Palermo in Sicily. Finally, in 1198, in a grand ceremony at the Temple in Acre attended by the masters of the Knights Templar and Hospital of St. John, the patriarch of Jerusalem and the king of Jerusalem, the order became military.

The Teutonic Knights were born.

THE TEUTONIC RULE

Pope Innocent III recognized the order in a bull in 1199 and instructed it to follow the Templar rule in all things, save in their hospital duties where the knights would follow the rule of the Hospital of St. John. Like the Templars they were thus organized under a Grand Council, consisting of the *Hochmeister* (grand master), *Gross-Komtur* (high commander), *Ordensmarschall* (marshal-general), *Spittler* (hospitaler), *Tresler* (treasurer) and *Trapier* (quartermaster). Geographically, the order consisted of a series of commanderies, each with at least 12 knights overseen by a *Hauskomtur*. The commanderies of a province formed a *Ballei* and a regional commander called a *Landmeister* oversaw a group of *Balleien*. At first, the sole *Landmeister* organized the German holdings (the only region



UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

where they numbered enough to warrant the position), but the structure would spread in later years.

In terms of daily life, the Teutonic rule was the Templars' own and so quite austere. The brothers swore oaths of poverty and chastity and undertook the requirements of monastic life, spending much of their waking hours in prayer. With the passing of the years, some of this dedication and discipline would dissipate, but never the ambition it accompanied. In the early years, the Teutons were the very example of the chivalric ideal: pious, daring and nigh unstoppable.

GROWTH AND INFLUENCE

Once it became military in nature, the Teutonic Order grew in leaps and bounds. In its first decade, it remained focused on activities in the Holy Land, growing in size and undertaking campaigns in the East. It received lands throughout the Holy Roman Empire and in other areas of Europe as well. Although they maintained holdings in Acre, the Teutons quickly fell into rivalry with the Templars and Hospitalers, both of whom were very protective of their positions as the preeminent orders of chivalry of the time. Under the early *Hochmeisters*, the order concentrated on Armenia, leaving Syria to the better established orders. In these early years, the Teutonic Knights were relatively small in number and established commanderies and fortresses at Amouda and Haruniye. A campaign in Cilicia in 1210 brought an end to much of their activities in Armenia and Anatolia, when many of the knight-brothers died in battle along with their third *Hochmeister*, Hermann Bart.

This nadir of power, however, ushered in a new era of expansion and prestige for the order. Hermann von Salza became *Hochmeister* with Bart's death, and he set about securing new patronage and position for the order. Over his illustrious career, he would manage the seemingly unmanageable feat of remaining in the good graces of both the papacy and the Holy Roman Emperor, who feuded incessantly. Personally, he would also gain the right to wear the golden cross of Jerusalem on his habit (beneath the black Teutonic cross) from the Crusader King, John of Brienne, after his knights' activities at the siege of Damietta during the Fifth Crusade (see p. 18).

Even before that crusade, von Salza's order refocused itself on quasi-virgin territory for the military orders: pagan Eastern Europe. The order's greatest successes would come in Prussia and Livonia where it established a theocratic state (the *Ordensstaat*) after 1230. But as early as 1211, a mere year after the defeat in Cilicia, the order received from King Andras II of Hungary the invitation to occupy his Transylvanian borderlands. The Teutons would be there until 1225.

THE ORDER AND LORD JÜRGEN

Despite Jürgen's interest in the German Hospital of St. Mary, the Teutonic Knights remained largely free of vampiric influence in their early years thanks to the accident of their headquarters in Acre. That city has long been *terra incognita* for the Damned due to the powerful supernatural aura that many trace to the supposed presence of a fragment of the True Cross in the city (see pp. 10-11). Therefore, Lord Jürgen could only slowly work his claws into the burgeoning order, using those knights

who spent most of their time in Tyre, Jaffa or the order's European holdings. Lord Jürgen's eyes have never really been on the Holy Land so much as the Eastern Marches, however. His quest to assume the status as his sire's preeminent vassal (and perhaps to replace him) has him looking to kingdoms of Poland, Hungary and points east. The Ventrue of these lands are not overly loyal to Hardestadt and the Tzimisce lay traditional claim to the entire area, so it seems a prime land into which to expand. If he can claim it and hold it, his status will rise tremendously. From the earliest, his plans in the region have included the burgeoning Teutonic Order. Even before its official adoption of the mantle of a militant order, he was sending parties of ghoulish knights into the marches under the banner of the German Hospital.

Jürgen performed or authorized the Embrace of a few selected knights and priests in the early order, but he has most often relied on the blood oath or other forms of influence. This influence allows his agents to continue to perform daylight activities (and hence remain full members of the order) and, if necessary, even to travel to Acre. Lord Jürgen's most valuable agent in these activities has been Lucretia von Hartz. Traveling among the order's commanderies in the guise of a nurse pledged not to see the sun again until the Saracen is ejected from the Holy Land, she has spread her sire's influence across the order. Powerful in blood and charms, she has spread a secret movement within the larger order called the Order of the Black Cross, which subtly corrupts the crusader ideal into service to Jürgen's cause.

THE ORDER OF THE BLACK CROSS

The Order of the Black Cross is a classic "order within an order," a staple of vampiric influence in monastic and other closed institutions for centuries. The members are all part of the Teutonic Order who have come to understand (or, more precisely, been led to believe) that the Black Cross is the secret heart of their brotherhood. Just as the Teutonic Order itself holds out the promise of special status and service to a higher cause in the lay world, the Black Cross does the same among the Teutonic brothers themselves. It appears to be another circle of initiation, whose members are an even greater elite. Through the mouth of Lady Lucretia, select candidates hear of the great powers and honors bestowed on those who are willing to pay the price of service to their Lord. Swayed by her honeyed words and the example of her own vow to never see the sun, most take the first step under the black cross.

Of course, damnation awaits. What at first seems like service to God, becomes service to the order and its god-like masters. Once a brother (or a sister-nurse) is initiated and brought fully into the secret order, what might have seemed unthinkable becomes a matter of sacred duty.

ORGANIZATION

Lucretia is the linchpin of the Order of the Black Cross, and she serves as its *Gross-Komtur*, with her fellow vampire Heinrich von Achem as *Ordensmarschall*, and Jürgen himself as the largely unseen *Hochmeister*. Those who are brought into the secret order retain their function (as knight, priest, sergeant or nurse) but also gain a rank. At first, a candidate becomes an *Eingeweihter* (initiate), later rising to become a *Bruder vom Kreuze* (brother of

the cross), and finally a *Komtur vom Kreuze* (commander of the cross). This three-degree system, inherited from ancient mystery cults and a variety of other religious orders, corresponds to increasing degrees of vampiric influence. A Teutonic Brother becomes an initiate of the cross only after a lengthy period of study with Lucretia or one of her close assistants. Quite gifted in the Discipline of Presence, she uses this time to indoctrinate and entrance the candidate. (For more on this process, see the **Ashen Cults** supplement). To become a brother of the cross, an initiate must undergo a series of holy sacraments administered by a brother-priest and overseen by Lucretia. The wine is laced with quantities of vitae (either Lucretia's, Jürgen's or that of a trusted vassal), so that the blood oath is in full effect by the time the candidate rises in secret rank. Finally, those few who are awarded the honor of becoming commanders of the cross undergo an elaborate and private ritual during which they must pledge to give up the sunlit world as Lucretia has. The ritual culminates with the Embrace.

As of 1211, when **Under the Black Cross** begins, Lucretia has Embraced only a very few Teutonic brethren. Ghouls are simply much more useful as catspaws in the daylight hours, and she has at least one brother of the cross in every commandery outside Acre. The commandery established in 1209 near Magdeburg is the stronghold of the secret order with the entire company initiated into at least the first degree.

ACTIVITIES AND AGENDAS

Lucretia's recruiting is not purely cynical from her perspective. Although she hides the full truth of her state until the Embrace of a prospective childe, she sees her actions as an honorable way in which to serve her liege and recruit vassals. A follower of the vampiric codes of chivalry, she is protective of her various thralls, and she does not expose them to needless danger. They are highly trained and valuable soldiers, not to be squandered on petty games. She makes sure to oversee the ghouls' training. The best candidates spend time in Magdeburg and get to meet *Hochmeister* Jürgen and serve as his court guards or in his war parties. She is careful to bring only those who are ready into contact with the full Cainite court, a lesson she learned after having to hunt down and kill a ghoul whose religious indignation was so great as to break the blood oath.

With the opening of the *Siebenbürgen* in Transylvania, the Black Cross' moment has come. Acting on her sire's orders, Lucretia is transferring many of her catspaws to Hungary to undertake the occupation. These ghouls and entranced warriors have been told the truth — that the Slavs and Cumans of the Eastern Marches are under the thrall of devils called the Tzimisce. It is these Fiends that the order must fight. Jürgen has ordered her to accelerate the Embrace of the ghouls in Hungary, and Lucretia is doing so. She wants to make sure, however, that the ghouls and mortals are well established first so that their forces are not weak during the day.

BEYOND THE SHADOWS

Despite Lord Jürgen's confidence otherwise, the Teutonic Knights are hardly simple dupes. Willful, determined and fired by a crusader's faith, the members of the order are not so easily cowed to the ways of the Damned. The fact that Lucretia has

been successful is a testament to her understanding of the importance of being discrete and selective, and her ability to couch damnation in chivalric terms. But her reach only goes so far and there are many Teutonic Brothers who exist well beyond it.

Hochmeister Herman von Salza is no vampiric catspaw. Like many of the lords of his day, he is aware that there are dark powers afoot in the medieval night, and he recognizes that they must be dealt with carefully. He is not yet aware of the Order of the Black Cross, per se, but he does know that some of his brothers are fired by a passion somewhat darker than his own, and that they may have formed an alliance among themselves. He is a political man, however, and he is willing to make use of these fanatics to further the cause of the order.

In Acre itself, there are those who are less convinced that the rot within can be contained. A small group of knights have come to believe that most of the military orders are subject to the dominion of devilish powers. They wholly distrust the Hospitalers and Templars, but they have made common cause with the Brothers of St. Thomas of Acre, a small English militant order. They bide their time, waiting for a way to strike at the darkness among them. That chance may well come during **Under the Black Cross**.

THE FIFTH CRUSADE

The Fifth Crusade is yet another attempt to secure the Crusader states from Muslim attack and regain Jerusalem, this time by organizing an attack on Egypt. This strategy is the same one that many had argued for at the start of the ill-fated Fourth Crusade. The idea is to seize Islam's richest province and thus break Saracen power in the Levant, leaving Jerusalem to fall into Christian hands like a ripe apple. The plan is sound, and it comes within a hair's breadth of success, yet it meets a futile end because of petty arguments over precedence and the short-sighted pursuit of factional goals.

ORIGINS

The latest European crusade has its roots in the dreams of a desperate, aging man. Pope Innocent III never forgot the disaster of the Fourth Crusade, which had ended in the sack of Constantinople. His greatest dream was to end the incessant feuds within Christendom and recover Jerusalem, a dream that seemed to fade further and further with each passing day. Peace had reigned for the past 20 years between the Second Kingdom and the Islamic Empire under Salah al-Din's brother, al-Adil (whom the Franks called Saphadin). Both sides honored a series of peace treaties and truces long after their expiration. European and Muslim alike discovered there was much money to be made in trade, and no one wanted to do anything to jeopardize it. It galled the pope that the Franks in the Crusader Kingdoms cared more about money than the recapture of the holiest city of Christendom.

The Lateran Council of 1215 declared the forgiveness and remission of mortal sins for those who took up the Cross. The next year, preachers and itinerant monks set out all across

Europe, even as far as Ireland and Scandinavia, to rally the populace to another crusade. Visions of the Cross suspended in mid-air were reported and eagerly spread from pulpit to pulpit. For all their efforts, though, reports came back to the pope that the rulers and nobles of France, the usual backbone of any such expedition, were ignoring the calls for crusade, and that infighting between the Italian city-states threatened the financial backing needed to pay for ships and supplies. And Innocent would go to his grave with this disheartening news. It was on a mission to mediate such differences between Genoa and Pisa that he died after a sudden, brief illness. Succeeding him was the elderly Pope Honorius III.

DARK BEHIND THE LIGHT

Other forces were at work in the shadows, guiding and influencing as best they could the workings of pope, king and council. Although the problems of the Fourth Crusade brought home to many Cainites how their control over the mortal world was weakening, still others sought to turn the new crusade to their advantage.

As before, the argument centered around the goal of the crusade: Jerusalem or Egypt? Lasombra in Italy and France wanted to strike again for Jerusalem, to recover what they saw as their rightful place as rulers of the Holy City's nights. But they were opposed by certain Followers of Set, who operated from even deeper in the shadows to influence and corrupt the crusade's purpose. With a subtle word here and a suggestion there, they

shifted the crusade to an attack on Egypt, their long-sought means to drive the Muslim vampires from the land and reclaim their master's homeland. Their unwitting allies in this (or dupes, depending on whom one asks) were the Ventrue of the northern lands. Eager for glory, wealth and land, they listened to whispers in their ears and pushed too for the attack on Egypt.

Their success lessened the interest of the Lasombra, who considered the Ventrue to be stepping beyond their natural place and into a role reserved for the Magisters, that of leaders. Sulking over their defeat, they concentrated their attention on affairs in Europe, where the lack of interest from the French nobility paralleled that of the French Magisters and the Toreador who hunted the same domains as they. Thus the Fifth Crusade was left to the vampires of the north and the mortals of Hungary, Austria and Frisia.

COMPLICATIONS

The death of Pope Innocent was not the only problem that the crusade faced. The Crusader army had to gather, and, even before that, those who had taken the Cross needed coercion to keep their promises. Emperor Frederick II continually found new reasons to delay, while King Andras II of Hungary, who was enthusiastic at first, lost interest when it became apparent that he would not inherit the Latin throne of Constantinople. After pressure from Pope Honorius, however, he finally agreed to have his army ready by the summer of 1217.



GOING BEFORE DESTRUCTION

Transport was a problem, too, since the army had no ships of its own. These were to be provided by the Frisian and Rhenish contingent, sailing around the coasts of France, Spain and Portugal to reach Italy. However, storms and disease took their toll, with many ships being lost off France. Then the remaining ships stopped at Lisbon, where some were persuaded to aid in the attack on the Muslim fortress of al-Qasr. Others refused and traveled on to Italy, while those who stayed behind suffered many casualties taking al-Qasr. By the time the disparate elements gathered again in Italy, it was too late to sail for the Holy Land until the next spring. Tired of waiting, the crusaders were forced to arrange for their own, inadequate transport, which meant that they had to leave part of their army behind. It wasn't until the fall of 1217 that the Germans under Duke Leopold VI of Austria and Hungarians of King Andras reached Acre at last.

THE CRUSADE

Ashes of Outremer, the second chapter of *Under the Black Cross*, concerns itself with only the first portion of the Fifth Crusade, the events at Acre in the autumn and winter of 1217 and 1218. If, however, you wish to continue your chronicle in the land of the Setites, you certainly can do so.

SOJOURN IN ACRE

The crusade begins in earnest with the arrival at Acre of the Hungarians and Austrians, as well as a force of Cypriots under King Hugh de Lusignan. Almost immediately, the leaders fall to bickering among themselves over command of the army. While King John considers himself in command, the Austrians and Hungarians take their orders from Andras, to whom Duke Leopold is allied, while the Cypriots obey only King Hugh. The Military Orders, in turn, obey only their own leaders. This contention plays to the advantage of the Muslims, for Sultan al-Adil wants nothing more than a continuation of the peace. Indeed, he is most concerned with the threat of a rebellion by his nephew, al-Afdal, a son of Salah al-Din who has allied with the Seljuk Turks.

Food shortages threaten the crusader army as much as disunity. The harvest in Syria has been poor, and there is not enough to feed an army. This shortage leads to the army's first operations, an extended raid into the Jordan river valley and eastern Galilee to find food. While al-Adil covers the approaches to Damascus and has his son, al-Mu'azzam guard the road to Jerusalem, he need not have worried. The crusaders concentrate on taking food from civilians and looking for relics. King Andras is quite pleased to take possession of one of the wine jugs from the marriage feast at Cana. The raid ends with the return of the crusaders to Acre at the end of November 1217.

The second major event in Acre comes with King John's decision to attack Mount Tabor, an important Muslim fortress that must be neutralized before the army can leave for Egypt. Highlighting the lack of unity among the Europeans, Kings Andras and Hugh refuse to join in this attack, as do the Military Orders. Sent to help defend the Kingdom of Jerusalem, they leave its army on its own in a crucial operation. In spite of the caviling of his allies, King John attacks Mount Tabor twice, on December 3rd and 5th. In each case, he withdraws on the verge of achieving victory, something for which no adequate explanation is ever forthcoming. At the end, he returns to Acre without

taking the fort. Ironically, six months later al-Adil decides that Mount Tabor is too exposed and orders it dismantled.

A third crusader operation seemingly accomplishes nothing save losing the lives of several hundred Hungarian knights. Near Christmas, 1217, 500 crusaders under the leadership of King Andras' nephew decide on their own to ride northeast toward Beaufort Castle, perhaps with the idea of establishing their own lordship east of Sidon. Regardless of the intent, it ends in disaster as the fierce winter and even more fierce people of the mountains harass and ambush them until the few survivors are forced to retreat. This last operation does play an important role in the shadow world of Cainites. A goodly number of the Hungarian knights are Vlaszy revenants loyal to Kara Lupescu and they abandon their mortal brethren to the slaughter. Thought dead by the king's men, they establish a hidden fortress near Beaufort Castle from which to harry the vassals of Lord Jürgen.

January of 1218 sees the end of what has been called the "Hungarian Crusade," when King Andras decides that he has done his duty and takes his army home. This is where the action of the Fifth Crusade in the Acre area concludes and where *Under the Black Cross* returns to Europe. The crusade itself, however finally heads to Egypt.

DAMIETTA

Andras may have left for home, but others stay in the Holy Land to continue the crusade. At first, the delays continue and the forces do little save secure 'Atlit for the construction of the Templars' *Château Pèlerin* (Pilgrims' Castle). In spring, the long-delayed Frisian fleet finally arrives, and the crusade sets sail for Egypt on 24 May of 1218, with King John of Brienne as its commander. Al-Adil takes steps to raise an army in Syria and his son, Egyptian Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, moves forces from Cairo to defend Damietta, the important trading city at the mouth of the eastern branch of the Nile and the crusader target. A long siege begins when the crusaders arrive and take position downriver from the city.

The city's geography makes an assault from the river the only viable route, so the crusaders' first target is the Chain Tower. This fortification on an island in the middle of the river allows the Muslims to raise large chains across the Nile to block shipping and protect Damietta. Taking the tower is hardly an easy task, and traditional assaults fail. It takes the construction of a floating siege engine for the Franks to take her in August. At last, Damietta is vulnerable and — so the story goes — the elderly al-Adil dies of shock in Damascus when he hears the news of the tower's capture. Sultan al-Kamil's authority in Egypt remains with his father's death, but not without challenges.

The crusaders await reinforcements before moving on to the city, and with the papal forces that arrive in September comes the pontiff's legate, Cardinal Pelagius of St. Lucia. King John may have been happy to have additional forces, but he cannot be pleased with the legate. Already, the king's command is a matter of running herd over the heads of the military orders and various other nobles. Now he has another cook to spoil the soup. And spoil it he does, for Pelagius is an ambitious clergyman who is determined to drive the crusade right to the heart of the enemy. He disdains compromise and challenges John's authority openly.

Muslims and Christians exchange attacks with relatively little impact save to wear on morale over the next five months.

In February of 1219, however, al-Kamil's forces briefly retreat from their positions because the sultan receives word of a pretender challenging his throne. By the time the Muslims restore order, the crusaders have occupied both sides of the river, making their siege all the more effective and their positions highly defensible.

Al-Kamil and his brother al-Mu'azzam (the Sultan of Syria, who arrives to reinforce the Egyptians) then make their first suit for peace. The crusade's underlying strategy (to take rich Egypt and trade it for holy Jerusalem) proves entirely effective, but its divided leadership is altogether unable to capitalize on it. Indeed, the Muslims offer Jerusalem and much of the kingdom's former territory in return for a withdrawal from Egypt. Unsurprisingly, King John is all for recovering his capital and kingdom. Pelagius and the heads of the military orders refuse.

More fighting occurs through the summer, with the Muslims unable to dislodge the Christians from their positions, but the crusaders unable to take the city or push the Muslim troops back from their own encampments. In August, the Muslims propose terms again, adding to the previous offer the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (dismantled the previous year in anticipation of returning it to the Franks), the fragment of the True Cross lost to Saladin at Hattin and several key castles. Again John is ready to agree, this time backed by the Teutonic Knights and the French and English nobles who are there to lead their crusaders. The Hospitalers, Templars and, most vociferously, Pelagius refuse. That November, the city finally falls and the Christians occupy Damietta.

DEBACLE

Up until this point, Pelagius' hard line has proven effective. Although the crusaders have already forgone two chances to retake Jerusalem and its lands, they now hold Damietta and expect to regain the Holy City still. Unfortunately, the divisions in the crusade's leadership come to a head, and King John sails for Acre in February of 1220, both to push an ill-fated claim for the throne of Armenia and to get away from Pelagius. He remains in his kingdom to defend it from an attack from Syria

later that year. Under the legate's authority, the crusade stays in Damietta awaiting the patronage of some great European king. Emperor Frederick II of Germany is a likely candidate, but his arrival in the east is consistently delayed.

Meanwhile, al-Kamil has plenty of time to reinforce his camp, to such a point that it would later come to be known as the city of al-Mansur. The sultan is not above continuing his efforts to reach a negotiated settlement, however. In June of 1221, he again offers the Christians Jerusalem and most of Palestine, along with a 30-year truce and payment to rebuild the Holy City's fortifications. Having heard of the imminent arrival of Duke Louis of Bavaria at the head of Frederick's forces, Pelagius refuses again.

Duke Louis is under orders to await Frederick at Damietta, but he soon falls into Pelagius' way of thinking. Together, the duke and the legate convince the other crusade leaders that the time to move is now. The pope orders King John back to Egypt to join the effort, and the crusaders march from Damietta in the middle of July. They move south and take terrain at a goodly rate, occupying Sharimshah (15 miles south of Damietta) on 20 July. Knowing that the Nile's floods are coming, John wants to stop the advance, but Pelagius orders them to push on. The legate foresees the Christian forces taking Egypt as a whole. In fact, they overextend themselves and get cut off from Damietta by Muslim forces using now-navigable canals to move around their enemies.

Surrounded, outnumbered and low on food, the crusaders attempt a panicked retreat on 26 August. It is a disaster. The Muslims open canal sluices to flood the lowlands that the crusaders must cross. After two days, Pelagius sues for peace. Al-Kamil listens, but, holding the majority of the crusaders, he is in a position to dictate terms. Where once he had offered up Palestine, now in exchange for the return of Damietta, he offers an eight year truce and the fragment of the True Cross (which it turns out, he may never have had). Defeated, Pelagius can only accept.

The crusade is over with nothing but squandered resources and wasted lives to show for it.







Chapter One: Shadows at Court

What a king, what a court, how fine
a palace, what peace, what rest, what re-
joicing is there!

-Peter Abelard

INTRODUCTION

A deceptive tranquillity masks the Hungarian countryside. Typically, vampiric forces relish the stillness. Since their dark Embrace, Caine's children have learned the value of moving about unheard by mortal ears. Yet despite their vast skills, there are times when subtlety is beyond the reach of many Cainites.

After cementing his power base in Germany, Lord Jürgen has set his predatory eyes to Hungary's Transylvanian borderland — and the Tzimisce heartland. The year is 1211, and, amidst the darkness of the Crusades, the Ventrue lord has set his court in Magdeburg. Daringly, he has also moved a division of knights a short distance from territory under the protection of Vladimir Rustovitch, one of the Fiends' highest lords. Lord Jürgen is well aware that this move will incite a conflict with the masterful *voivode*, but Jürgen believes that he must crush all opposition with a firm hand in order to grasp power and greatness.

To solidify his efforts, Jürgen has gathered supporters. **Shadows at Court** is a mystery surrounding Jürgen and his courtly allies. The story unfolds in Magdeburg, where some of Europe's most powerful Cainites gather.

HOW TO USE THIS STORY

Shadows at Court is a prelude to open conflict between the Patrician Lord Jürgen and the Fiend Vladimir Rustovitch. This story serves to illustrate how Cainite ambitions gravitate around mortal coils. By rooting poisonous seeds among the Teutonic Order of Knights, Jürgen has used the pretense of crusade and chivalry to further his ambitions.

King Andras II of Hungary, beset by unruly barons at home, fears that his borders are open to attack from the pagan Cumans. To protect his kingdom, he has called upon the Teutonic Order, offering them Transylvanian holdings to keep that frontier safe. This is a long-awaited opportunity for Lord Jürgen to move those knights who are under his sway into the Tzimisce lands and claim those lands for his own. Such a bold move deserves another, and Jürgen has announced that he is to reign as vampiric lord of Magdeburg on the River Elbe. The eastern frontier will be his.

While his power ferments, however, Lord Jürgen's armor reveals the sliver of a crack. All is not as the Ventrue had envisioned, and an incident mars the celebration of his new court. The ensuing debacle puts alliances to the test and forces shadowy motivations to center stage. The players' coterie has the chance to earn a place of honor at court and see the first blows of the war to come.

THEME & MOOD

Shadows at Court is a story of uncertainty. While there is no mistaking Jürgen's intention to use his court to challenge *Voivode* Rustovitch, the motivations of his guests are much less clear. Envoys, enemies and allies swirl about the Magdeburg court waiting for any opportunity to gain advantage or eliminate rivals. Subtle schemers weave their way between ambitious conquerors, and the two are sometimes hard to tell apart.

UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

Although they ceremoniously support him, even Jürgen's closest allies doubt his abilities to wage war.

This same uncertainty spreads to the future as well as the present. Cainites are creatures of habit who are used to existing with a calcified status quo of immovable elders. But those nights are coming to an end, and Jürgen's bold move to cut at the very heart of the Tzimisce domain is a clear sign of even greater chaos to come. And so the support of his peers is wary, for to embrace this campaign seems certain to lead to an all out war.

Magdeburg's Cainites fearfully anticipate the conflict that Jürgen's court heralds. The mood in the city is as gray as the winter skies. While Magdeburg's children brace for war, tension and insecurity engulf the streets like a feverish plague.

PLOT

Shadows at Court is a mystery told in three acts. The setting for this story is Jürgen's court, the site of a great ceremony at which the Ventrue is to accept the mantle of Lord of the East, under the mantle of his sire Lord Hardestadt. To bear witness to this great event, Jürgen invites many vampiric factions, some of whom support the Ventrue, others who wish he would abandon his ambitions.

Act one takes the characters to the grand reception and among the most powerful forces in the region. In the palatial surroundings, the coterie witnesses the presentations of many envoys who come to offer their alliance or pay tribute. Some openly challenge the Ventrue's power bid; others who oppose Jürgen whisper their hushed disapproval from the shadows.

The most significant symbol of Jürgen's acceptance comes from the Courts of Love's Toreador envoy, Rosamund of Islington. She presents the Ventrue lord with a gift of great symbolic significance: a broadsword inlaid with Teutonic, Ventrue and Toreador symbols. After each party makes its presentations, a nervous fete marks the evening. Before it is over, the symbol of the Toreador-Ventrue alliance is challenged, and a betrayal that mocks Jürgen's pretensions breaks the pre-war preparations.

In act two, the characters attempt to make sense of the disruption. Vampiric egos and agendas clash, and the conflict draws the characters into a struggle to find the truth. They also make the acquaintance of agents who will play a vital role in future events.

Act three brings the coterie a hair's breadth from the real mystery. The characters take charge of the investigations surrounding the challenge to Jürgen's authority. During their quest, the young vampires bear witness to events that set the stage for the coming war. The act ends as the characters unmask their foes.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

Jürgen, like the great kings of the Dark Medieval, is both ruler and general. In the former role, he has summoned a wide variety of Cainites to Magdeburg to mark his new title, and many others may come unannounced. **Shadows at Court** uses the basic assumption that the players' characters are tied to a vampiric court that is allied with Lord Jürgen. They may be the lords of a small hamlet or shire that owes fealty to Jürgen or his own lord, Hardestadt. They could also be envoys of a vampiric

prince or baron in that situation, or something else altogether. Their official task is to show support for the new Lord of the Eastern Marches, but they are also in Magdeburg to scrutinize his actions. Elders probably await reports from the characters and expect them to offer whatever support they reasonably can in order to forge bonds of vassalage and prestation between themselves and the ambitious Ventrue. They should also keep careful track of other envoys and agents in Magdeburg.

There are, of course, plenty of other reasons that the characters could be at court. Some of these include:

- **Foreign Observers:** The coterie has no connection to either Jürgen or Rustovitch. The characters are from western lands, Outremer, the Papal States or some other domain, and they are passing through the region — perhaps to examine the events surrounding the continued dynastic unrest in the Holy Roman Empire. As a good host, Lord Jürgen offers them his hospitality and invites them to bear witness to the official ceremony.

- **Agents of Rustovitch:** The characters are *Voivode* Vladimir Rustovitch's secret agents. Their instructions are to witness the ceremony and to record the event, not to disrupt the evening. (There will be ample time for such displays later.) The characters must amass information on the workings of Jürgen's court. Since they are relative newcomers in the region, the characters' infiltration should be effortless: Virtually every vampire in the region has received an invitation. The characters are not necessarily Rustovitch's thralls. The so-called *voivode* of *voivodes* may simply have reached an accord with well-placed vampires to trade information for other services. Just how much the vampires hold back from their patron, and how they prevent him from discovering that, is up to the players.

- **Ne'er-do-wells and Undesirables:** Although *Shadows at Court* is a story of courtly doings, Magdeburg is hardly a city of lords alone. Many of the vampiric envoys arriving to witness Jürgen's declarations bring an entourage of low-blooded spies and agents with them. Any gathering of powerful vampires attracts others to it, as well. Jürgen himself has invited Ravnos entertainers, and many other of the supposedly low-blooded are bound to show up as well. A group of less-than-noble vampires can easily find ways into the court, either as part of the entourage of a patron or through contacts among the assembled vampires.

MAJOR PLAYERS

A trinity of forces directs the events of *Shadows at Court*. One of the key players is Lord Jürgen and his army. As the Ventrue's nemesis, *Voivode* Rustovitch is the second power. Even though he makes no appearance, Lord Vladimir casts a large shadow over Jürgen's procession. Lastly, an unknown force is attempting to carve its own domain from the territories of the others. It is the coterie's task to uncover the mysterious agent's true face before he crumbles the region's fragile power structure.

LORD JÜRGEN

Vassal to the most powerful Germanic Ventrue, Lord Hardestadt, Jürgen has become one of the preeminent princes in the Holy Roman Empire. Not only has he amassed a goodly number of vassals, but Jürgen has extended his reach to eastern regions that were previously immune to the empire's touch. To

facilitate his plans of conquests, he has seeded the Teutonic Knights with loyal servants. Under the guise of holy crusade, Jürgen is thus able to defeat his opponents using a legion of well-trained knights.

With the debacle among the Arpad brood of Ventrue (see p. 13), new opportunities have opened up for Jürgen in Hungary. His agents have been operating in the region for several years, and now that Bulscu and Nova Arpad's position has been weakened, he has inserted agents in the court of King Andras of Hungary. His chief agent there is Baron Heinrich von Achern, who has helped secure an invitation for the Teutonic Knights to defend the kingdom's frontier from the pagan Cumans. By concentrating his agents among the Teutons who are sent to Hungary, Jürgen hops to cut out part of the Tzimisce heartland, weakening the Fiends and opening up all of Transylvania and Poland for conquest. It is a daring plan, one he intends to reveal during the ceremony marking the establishment of his court at Magdeburg.

VOIVODE VLADIMIR RUSTOVITCH

Regal and confident, Vladimir Rustovitch is a spire of strength, tenacity and perseverance. Using skilled spies, tactical genius and an ability to meet any enemy brutality for brutality, Rustovitch has fashioned one of the most impressive estates in Hungary and become *voivode* of *voivodes* with the support of several Tzimisce elders. Vladimir Rustovitch is everything he presents himself to be: a powerful lord who has both wits and courage to crush his opponents. Even though some have tried to usurp his power, no one has succeeded.

The land under Vladimir's reach is quite vast. For the most part, displays of force are unnecessary to remind Cainites of his right to rule. But Rustovitch has been unable to dispose of the Tremere Usurpers, and that weakness has opened him to other attacks. He knows that he must stand firm against all challengers, lest the other *voivodes* decide that he must be replaced. Jürgen just may be more than he can handle, however.

MYCA VYKOS

A wanderer since the fall of Constantinople in 1204, the Obertus Tzimisce Myca Vykos seeks a secure domain from which to operate. He speaks in the name of the Dracon, an enigmatic Tzimisce Methuselah, so he operates with a certain immunity as long as he doesn't make himself into an overt threat. This immunity gives him all the freedom he needs to use his greatest strengths: subtlety and guile. Should he wish it, Myca Vykos has enough influence to gain an audience with Vladimir Rustovitch.

Like Lord Jürgen, Myca is ambitious. Unlike the Patrician, he believes that he can accomplish more through patience and manipulations. This he learned with the Obertus, a scholarly order of Tzimisce monks, and through the teachings of his sire, Symeon of Byzantium. Currently, Myca observes Lord Jürgen's machinations with interest. Although he does not believe that Jürgen will triumph, Myca is convinced that the Ventrue's crusade will offer a unique opportunity to establish a domain. Myca bides his time, watching for possible forces that he can sway to his side.

JERVAIS, MAGUS OF CLAN TREMERE

Given unlife in 1102, Jervais is a true schemer. A representative of Ceoris, the Tremere stronghold, Jervais is aware of his clan's precarious existence. The Usurpers have been under assault from the Tzimisce for decades, and they have few allies elsewhere. Therefore, Jervais is seeking an alliance that would strengthen his clan. The sorcerer is present at Jürgen's regalia as an envoy. Blinded by his desires for power, Jervais is willing to use any means necessary to forge alliances. Sensing the coming conflict between Jürgen and Rustovitch, Jervais is hoping to leach a favor from the Ventrue lord or place him in a position in which he views an alliance with the Tremere as an indispensable commodity. Two other Tremere accompany Jervais: his childe Alexia of Nicosia and a French magus named Thierry.

MINOR PLAYERS

Since *Shadows at Court* is but the opening volley of a war, those who play a part later in the struggle could well be introduced at this time. The opening of Jürgen's court also draws the eyes of many Cainites. You can easily insert characters from other courts and lands, who may play an important role in your own chronicle.

BARON HEINRICH VON ACHERN

A trusted vassal of Jürgen's, von Achern is a born politician who has inserted himself and several of his ghouls into the entourage of King Andras of Hungary. Armed with the story of Nova Arpad's disgrace, Jürgen and von Achern have enforced their place at court and displaced many of her agents. Bulscu Arpad, Bulgarian overlord and Nova's patron, has had little choice but to concede to their demands for the time being. Von Achern has traveled from the royal court at Esztergom to Budapest and finally Magdeburg carrying official sanction from the weakened Ventrue lords Nova Arpad, Bulscu and Vencel Rikard allowing Jürgen's forces to claim domain in Hungary.

KARA VLASZY LUPESCU

Part of Rustovitch's brood Embraced from the Vlaszy family of Magyar revenants, Kara is a slap in the face of Tzimisce stereotypes. Although she bears some signs of fleshcrafting, she has the demeanor of a knight and courtier. Honorable and well spoken, she is *Voivode* Rustovitch's most trusted envoy to western courts, both mortal and unliving. As such, she is in Magdeburg to represent the *voivodate*. It is here, also, that she first clashes with von Achern, which will have important implications in latter years.

MORROW THE SAGE

Morrow the Sage is a powerful Gangrel roaming southern Hungary. One of the oldest childer of the dreaded Arnulf, Morrow has forged many alliances among the Gangrel packs of the region and formed a territorial attachment to their lands. Given to great wisdom, the elder Gangrel has the respect of most of the region's packs, and she can lead them in a conflict if the need arises. Although she possesses a cool demeanor, she can be ferocious if provoked.

UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

ROSAMUND OF ISLINGTON

The envoy of the vampiric Courts of Love (which have domain over large parts of France), Rosamund is at court to present Lord Jürgen with a powerful symbol of the Toreador-Ventrue alliance. This great courtly event is hardly the first she has attended, and, despite the grandeur of Jürgen's procession, Rosamund maintains a calm presence that befits her experience and grace. Secretly, Rosamund also hopes to enthrall Lord Jürgen. Unfortunately, though, a traitor's plans jeopardize these schemes.

LUCRETIA VON HARTZ

Jürgen's most valuable ally, Lucretia is wholly devoted to her lord. She is rational and friendly, but she becomes ruthless when angered. Lucretia is a knight with superb skills. She leads many of Jürgen's Teutons, and she is an indispensable asset on the battlefield. Lucretia is also honorable, and she does not suffer cowards or fools who try to sully her pristine image.

ALBIN

Albin, also mockingly called the Ghost of Magdeburg, continues to exist only at Jürgen's mercy. The Caitiff hid from kine and Cainite alike for years. Fellow vampires called him a ghost because of his diminutive stature, his unusually pallid complexion and his existence more as a phantom than a nightly predator. When Jürgen took command of the city, he rightfully saw that Albin's unprecedented knowledge of the city could be useful. Still, Jürgen is a cruel master, and he never lets Albin forget that he owes him his existence.

AKUJI

To most who know her, Akuji is an enigma. Of North African descent, Akuji possesses an adventurous spirit. She traveled from her native land to Europe, becoming a storyteller of some renown. Despite her skills, Akuji was looked upon with disdain. Sensing her solitude and her penchant for accumulating knowledge, a Nosferatu embraced Akuji and made her his apprentice. It is during her tutelage that Akuji met Jürgen, himself then a neonate. Since that time, the pair have been close friends, and Jürgen can count on Akuji's loyalty, which is second only to Lucretia's devotion.

SILAS AND THE RAVNOS ENTERTAINERS

Having heard reports of Silas' dazzling spectacles at various Cainite gatherings, Lucretia recommended that Jürgen hire the Ravnos' services for the instatement ceremony. Silas and his two Ravnos comrades care little for what they see as the pretentious games of vampiric courts. They prefer gaining a reputation as agile jugglers and, of course, master tricksters to the few that appreciate such things.

THE COTERIE'S INTRODUCTION

The opening chapter of *Shadows at Court* presumes that Lord Jürgen has welcomed the characters. The manner in which Jürgen or his vassals invite the coterie varies depending on the characters' origins. Currently, Jürgen is intoxicated with the

notion of extending his influence across the Elbe and beyond. It is not particularly difficult even for outsiders to gain access to the court. Jürgen is anxious to have word of his power spread.

- **Official Envoys:** Months ago, Jürgen sent envoys to vampiric courts throughout Europe to invite them to send observers to Magdeburg. Many of those invited are courts also associated with Hardestadt and Clan Ventrue, but Jürgen made sure to invite others who might be less disposed to wish him well. The more who come to Magdeburg, regardless of their agendas, the more legitimate Jürgen's claim to power seems. Those who sent word that they would be arriving find quarters prepared for them in the fortified town, and a ghoul agent or even Lucretia herself meets them. Those who arrive unannounced (but bearing the letters of a known lord) find less spacious quarters but are welcome nonetheless. Jürgen's ghouls announce their presence when the ceremony begins, and attendees are introduced.

- **Courtly Spies:** The coterie has come to Magdeburg under the pretext of friendship. Like Lord Jürgen's true allies, the coterie represents a court having received an invitation to the Patrician's instatement. Unbeknownst to Jürgen, the coterie (or perhaps the lord they represent) is secretly allied to Rustovitch. If this is not a viable option for the characters, they can still act as informants. But rather than being real representatives of a court, Rustovitch has fabricated a lie: The coterie is impersonating a group of courtly envoys. Regardless, the coterie may share an alliance of sorts with Rustovitch, but the characters are still largely independent. In order to succeed, the characters must tread carefully. Jürgen is observant and has spies of his own. He may suspect that the coterie

is made up of informants, but that will not bother him. Jürgen is all for keeping his enemies within striking distance — and sending a clear message to the Fiends. Still, the Ventrue is no fool, and the characters are watched.

- **Others:** Characters arriving without feudal patronage can still gain access to the goings on. The Ravnos entertainers are only part of the night's festivities, and enterprising vampires can insert themselves into the spectacle. Others may simply roost around Magdeburg without taking part in the ceremony itself. Jürgen can just as easily stage the Ravnos entertainment in his stronghold's courtyard, opening the events to other vampires as a beneficent lord might. Character might well be in town searching for something other than Jürgen's attention. Stories of witch-hunters tied to the crusades are a growing source of concern among the more careful vampiric lords, and they may well send agents to investigate the Teutonic Knights, the newest of the major military orders.

ACT ONE: FRAIL ALLIANCES

This first act, taking place on a dark and damp winter night in 1211, highlights the stark splendor of Lord Jürgen's new court. The ceremony takes place entirely within Jürgen's stronghold, specifically within the castle's opulent ceremonial chamber. The characters bear witness to the lavish affair. They also make the acquaintance of Cainites who are associated with the Ventrue leader. While mingling with other guests, the coterie discovers that the pretentious display fails to mask the uncertainty in the room. As scenes progress, the characters encounter some of Lord Jürgen's opponents. They also stumble across a mystery.

SCENE ONE: THE COURTLY PARADE

The coterie arrives in Magdeburg. The normally still and quiet streets are thick with tension and dread. Rarely do citizens venture forth after dark, but tonight seems to engender greater caution still. Doors are bolted tight, lights are dimmed, and shutters are closed. Sensing no distinction between the chill of the bare night and the cold seeping from homes, the coterie may well wonder if all mortals have abandoned the city.

The characters may not know the reason for this air of disquietude. Since the establishment of Jürgen's court and the arrival of the Teutons, Magdeburg's kine live in fear. Although most of them are unaware of Jürgen and cannot fathom a vampiric link, their instincts tell them that the night has become more dangerous. Lone travelers disappear, and townsfolk hear tales of their neighbors being weakened in the night by vile spirits. The knights' presence is hardly reassuring either. Often cloistered in their keeps, the Teutons seem to come into the town proper only to deliver swift justice to sinners and traitors. Those with even a small shame to hide fear the Black Cross as much as they do the night.

WE MEET AGAIN

Those who have already played the first chapter of **Transylvania Chronicles I: Dark Tides Rising** (set in 1197) or **Bitter Crusade** (set in 1202 through 1204) may very well have a history with some of the characters who appear in **Shadows at Court** and throughout **Under the Black Cross**.

Those who helped establish a fort in Tihuta Pass in **Dark Tides Rising** may very well have done so acting on orders of Lucretia von Hartz. If so, they have every reason to come to Magdeburg, since they are probably vassals of Jürgen already. Even those who did so under the auspices of another faction are likely implicated in the vampiric politics of the region by 1211, and they could well receive an invitation to court to help secure the Teutonic Knights' position. With the reversal in Arpad fortunes, they may well be looking to keep an eye on Jürgen or cement an alliance with him.

Those who have a history with Myca Vykos (from either story) probably recognize that he is a skilled manipulator and that betrayal is to be expected. Even if they truly hate him, there's little they can do against him save warn others. By the time they are really in a position to harm Vykos (in **Chapter Three: A Call to Arms**) he'll be too valuable to undermine.

GREETINGS

Assuming that the characters are allies who received an invitation, one of Jürgen's vassals approaches the characters soon after they make their appearance in Magdeburg. This representative is most likely an indentured knight, either a ghoul or a Cainite servant. He asks for the characters' names and demands to know why they roam Lord Jürgen's domain. If the coterie presents its invitation, the servant welcomes the coterie to Magdeburg. Additionally, he bids the characters to follow him to Jürgen's keep and join in the festivities. The servant leads the coterie through winding cobblestone streets with such ease and alacrity that it would be difficult for the characters to retrace their steps. The coterie gains entrance to the celebration chambers.

If the coterie has not received an invitation, one of Jürgen's servants approaches the characters while they prowl Magdeburg's streets — this after having spent a considerable amount of time observing them. The players should be allowed a roll to notice that someone or something is stalking their characters (Perception + Alertness, difficulty 7). If a character spots the prowler, Jürgen's servant makes her appearance. She asks why the coterie is in town. She also asks the characters' names. Unless the characters grossly violate Cainite etiquette by refusing to recognize Jürgen's domain or by threatening his agent, she welcomes them and invites them to join the festivities. If they are wealthy or high-blooded, she invites them to stand as representatives of their court (whatever that might be). If they are less presentable — entertainers, lepers or pilgrims, say — she has them come to observe, but she forgoes presenting them to the assembled envoys.

Jürgen has many loyal servants, and any number of vassals can greet the coterie upon its entry into the city. If only to foreshadow their future involvement in the play, Lucretia von Hartz or Albin the Caitiff can be the first characters to approach the coterie. Although the characters can deduce superficial traits from first impressions, it is far too early at this stage of the game to guess these characters' involvement in the events that are to unfold.

THE GRAND HALL

Jürgen's servant escorts the coterie to the Grand Hall, where a number of Cainite dignitaries are chatting and observing the room with keen interest. Ghouls, unreleased childer and other servants may attend those who dress and act as nobles and lords. Shortly after having shown the characters inside, Jürgen's servant excuses herself. She leaves to inform Jürgen of the party's arrival. She gives Jürgen the characters' names as well as their places of origin. Throughout the early evening, other faces make their appearances, all escorted to the chamber by one of Jürgen's servants. This goes on until all of Magdeburg's Cainites residents are present or accounted for. Only then does the evening proceed.

Although the room is rather dimly lit, the characters can still perceive many details in this chamber. The Grand Hall, as Jürgen's servant called it, is vast and open. The indiscernible ceiling is well over 20 feet high, disappearing in a veil of shadows. Four stone and marble pillars demarcate the edges of the hall. Old paintings and richly textured Ventrue banners adorn the walls. Against the furthest wall is an elevated throne

befitting the wealthiest sovereign. An intricate insignia is meticulously carved within the oak seat. Behind it, a gargantuan Ventrue symbol hangs from the wall. Those with knowledge of such things (say with a ranking of Etiquette 3 or more) recognize the mark of the powerful Hardestadt in the symbol. A lush, ruby blanket is draped over the chair, while a series of luxurious mats, of similar hue, conceal the stone floor. Save for the door that led the coterie inside, there appears to be no escape from the Grand Hall.

To the left of Jürgen's throne is a stage and crimson curtains that conceal what lies behind. Facing both the stage and Jürgen's seat is a regal table covered with gifts, dried floral arrangements and scrolls. Throughout the room stand Teutonic Knights clad in armored mail and helms. No doubt awaiting her lord's arrival, Lucretia von Hartz stands behind and to the left of Jürgen's throne, equally if not more impressive.

THE PROCESSION BEGINS

Lord Jürgen enters the room, and a wave of restrained applause fills the chamber. Jürgen is dressed formally but not ostentatiously. The most distinguishable adornment is Jürgen's fine, raven wrap, which devours all nearby light. Following Jürgen closely is a woman of irreproachable beauty, Rosamund of Islington. If not for the intense curiosity focused on the lord, Rosamund's presence would steal the show. She stands to Jürgen's right, and a high-backed seat is brought behind her.

Jürgen raises his hands and the chamber falls silent. The Ventrue lord makes a short speech thanking all attendees. He looks to Rosamund and thanks her for participating. All eyes are on Rosamund, and the chamber erupts in applause once again. Another beautiful Cainite, Rosamund's male attendant, holds a velvety, deep blue case and moves behind Rosamund. Jürgen and Rosamund take a seat, and a musician makes his appearance on the stage, creating a pleasant sound as he plays the flute.

After engaging in more chatter, the various envoys present themselves to Jürgen. They approach the Patrician and offer words of friendship or fealty. This is a perfect opportunity for the coterie to observe the characters in attendance. In addition to various Ventrue allies, the chamber has its share of notable guests. Characters who mingle can learn the identity of any attendee easily.

Several Lasombra make their presentations and offer Jürgen various historical tomes. Jervais, a Tremere representing Ceoris, accompanied by two other Tremere warlocks, makes his presentation and offers a scepter of friendship. The chamber surges slightly as the Tremere makes his presentation. Some envoys whisper that the treacherous Tremere are only here to try and forge a desperate alliance. Other guests do not make so public a presentation. They include a still Nosferatu who is wrapped like a mummy and shrouded in darkness; Myca Vykos, a Byzantine Cainite who, it is whispered, is the favorite of a great Methuselah; an unusually tame Malkavian; and a woman of dark complexion named Kara who is said to be Rustovitch's envoy. The most unusual Cainites in attendance are three brightly clad Ravnos who stand in sharp contrast to the understated elegance throughout the room. The Charlatans are present as entertainers, and their leader, who stands taller than his two brothers, is named Silas.

UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

RUMOR MILL

The various presentations and preparations take several hours, and the assembled Cainites and their attendants have plenty of time to interact socially. Characters with a few social graces can uncover some important background information. Convey some of the following rumors and speculation as you see fit. It's best done through roleplaying, but judicious Charisma + Politics rolls can also be used to represent time and effort gathering information. The sources of the following facts (and lies) are up to you. They are grouped by subject rather than speaker.

- **Jürgen:** "He is nothing but a catspaw for Lord Hardestadt, you know."; "The most dangerous warrior the Patricians have."; "He fought in the Holy Land and wants to call a crusade in the Fiends' lands."

- **Jervais and the Tremere:** "He is a diabolist."; "They are here to enchant Lord Jürgen with their ways."; "Jervais was expelled from the Tremere fortress of Ceoris, so he seeks an alliance against his own kind."

- **Magdeburg:** "That wretch, Albin, was the so-called prince of this place before Jürgen and his knights showed up, you know."; "This city can't hold vampires in this number."

- **Rosamund:** "She's a childe of Queen Isouda de Blaise, one of the French Toreador."; "I hear she's brought French knights to their knees with just a glance."; "She has allies among the most wretched sorts. Charlatans and Serpents, they say."

- **Baron von Achern:** "A Lasombra in Ventrue's skin, that one."; "Andrew of Hungary is his ghoul, they say."; "I've heard he was Bulscu Arpad's bum-boy in his breathing days."; "It sticks in his craw that Jürgen and Lucretia has been to the Holy Land and he hasn't. He wants to go on crusade."

- **The Hungarian Ventrue:** "They had so much potential, once upon a time."; "Jürgen thinks he's going to cow them, but he'd better be careful. The Arpads are degenerates, but not fools."; "I hear they've agreed to let Jürgen traipse around their domain."

- **Kara and the Tzimisce:** "She's a Fiend? I thought she was a Brujah, or maybe a Toreador..."; "You think she's the Fiends' only envoy here? Rustovitch has spies everywhere."; "Don't be fooled. She sailed up the Elbe on a ship with a sail made of flayed skin."

Everyone in the room studies everyone else, no doubt trying to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of their peers. The coterie is also the subject of stares and whispers. Some people want to know, "Who are the strangers?" As with other gossip, news of the coterie's origins travels fast. While everyone is busy scrutinizing every Cainite, characters notice one vampire who draws no attention despite never being far from Jürgen's side. The procession pays no mind to the diminutive, pale man. To them he is no more than an insect on a wall. If

characters inquire, they discover that the silent servant is named Albin, a Caitiff slave of Jürgen. He is said to be the one to see to obtain safe feeding.

WORD FROM THE EAST

The crowd's attention waxes and wanes with the various presentations. Fell free to add any dignitaries relevant to your individual chronicle, for Jürgen has called together many ambassadors indeed. The crowd snaps to attention when the Tzimisce contingent steps forward. Tall and stunningly, inhumanly beautiful, Lady Kara approaches flanked by two Vlaszy revenants in armor. If not for the fact that one of the revenants seems to have no mouth, their fiendish nature would be perfectly concealed. Kara bows curtly and addresses Jürgen.

"I am Lady Kara Lupescu, Daughter of Ezbeth of Vlaszy, childe of Radu, and envoy of Vladimir Rustovitch, *voivode* of *voivodes*. My lord asks that I convey his thanks for your invitation and recognizes your domain over this city and its hinterland."

Jürgen's thanks are nothing but a curt nod — an obvious slight.

"The *voivode*," Kara continues, returning Jürgen's venom, "does wonder what concern of his are the claims of a petty German warlord."

"If you cannot tell him," comes von Achern's voice as he steps forward, "I wonder what your mother taught you. After all, I have heard that the Whore of Bistritz knew all the tricks to extract secrets from our Arpad kin. Regardless, I'm sure the truth will become clear soon enough."

Observant characters can pick up on the dynamic of the room. Many of the envoys from other courts are enjoying the verbal dueling, barely repressing smirks. Jürgen, Rosamund and Vykos watch with forced stoicism. For her part, Lucretia has her hand on the hilt of her sword, and several of Kara's ghouls do as well. The characters may also notice that they are positioned between the action and several Teutonic Knight ghouls. Jürgen breaks his silence by calling for Baron von Achern to continue.

"Milord, as you surely know, Andras, the mortal king of Hungary, has been convinced that the pagan Cumans on his eastern frontier pose a threat to his realm. In order to defend his lands, he has called up the aid of the Order of the German Hospital of St. Mary.

"For myself, I bear with me letters of state from Lord Bulscu Arpad and his vassals, Lady Nova Arpad and Prince Vencel of Buda and Pest, inviting you to claim domain in the region under the auspice of the Hospital. They agree that you can and should stand against the Fiends who infest those dark lands."

Kara is visibly stunned for a few seconds. "Those lands are neither theirs to grant nor yours to claim, Patrician. The Founder made covenant with the very earth there. No letters of state or mortal catspaw can come before that."

"We shall see about that, whore's-daughter," von Achern replies.

Kara draws her sword and bears terrible fangs as the insult hits home. Here revenant seconds draw their weapons as well, and the hall resounds with the sounds of steel as Lucretia and her knights do the same. The knights behind the players'



coterie leap into action as well, and the characters may well get swept up in the action, as one of the knights — Brother Kurt — lunges forward. Characters can stop things from getting out of hand by restraining Kurt and reminding everyone that they are in Jürgen's home. Insults are one thing, but bloodshed is another. If they don't do so, Jürgen bellows for everyone to stop once Kara has landed a powerful blow on the ghoul Kurt.

Kara reins in her burgeoning frenzy after a few seconds and storms out without another word.

THE FINAL PRESENTATION

The room is still reeling from the standoff between von Achern and Lady Kara, barely processing the Baron's news about Hungary as of yet. Lord Jürgen has yet to pronounce whether he is going to act on this news, and how.

Choosing her moment, Rosamund of Islington rises from her seat. Throughout the procession and as the envoys presented their gifts, she offered nothing but a slight curve of her lips. Yet as she stands, Rosamund has the eyes and ears of every Cainite; and this without needing to request silence. She takes a few steps forward, and her aide moves beside her, opening the precious case that he has guarded valiantly all night. "I come to offer a great symbol of the favor of the Courts of Love," she says majestically. She poetically describes the making of the sword. Each gem, she claims, is among the rarest of its kind while the metal — of pristine quality — was forged by Europe's finest smiths. Reaching into her companion's case, Rosamund

raises a shining broadsword inlaid with precious gems and covered in decorative crests.

Jürgen thanks Rosamund for her gift as he does all the guests and then segues into his own pronouncement. "I am heartened," he announces, "that so many have graced Magdeburg with their presence this night. And I greet the kind words of my Hungarian kin and our Artisan peers with equal cheer. Baron von Achern, Lady Rosamund, you have given me the tools with which to right many wrongs.

"I have set my court upon the River Elbe for a reason. For too long, the Eastern Marches have been wild and untamed, ruled by a collection of terrifying lords of Clan Tzimisce and other forces darker still. Our clanmates and allies in Hungary and Bohemia have suffered at their hands for too long. The Fiends' twisted legions have plagued every just plan to defend our domains against pagan and Saracen, even going so far as to raid into Dalmatia during the crusade of 1202. It is time for this to end."

Jürgen raises the sword that he has just received to punctuate his point. "We can no longer stand idly by and wait for the next, inevitable assault. With the accord of the noble Arpads, my vassals undertake the construction of strongholds in Kronstadt, in the Transylvanian region of Hungary. This domain shall serve as a bulwark against the aggressive Fiends, and I pledge myself and my sword to defending it."

For a solid minute, the assemblage remains in stunned silence. The implications of claiming domain in the Tzimisce

GETTING INVOLVED

The various presentations, ultimatums and proclamations of this first act have very serious implications for the rest of **Under the Black Cross**, but in some cases they may be a little less than dramatic in play. If the players are just sitting back watching you play out various speeches, the session can get boring all too quickly. The key to keeping the players interested is to get them involved in the goings on and interacting with the participants. Look for any opportunity to do so, such as:

- **“Wouldn’t You Say?”**: In the midst of one of the many presentations or arguments that happen in this act, have the participants call for support from one or more of the characters. Vampire courtiers are skilled at picking the right impromptu allies, so have von Achern (for example) ask the opinion of characters who are likely to agree with him. For best effect, have the participants pit one coterie member against another and see if the players can turn it to their advantages.

- **Animals Afoot**: If any of the characters decide to leave the hall to have a look around, make the player roll Perception + Alertness (difficulty 8) to spot a pack of wolves creeping through the streets of Magdeburg. With three successes, the character might even see one wolf flow into mist or into the form of a wild woman. This is Morrow. Even if the player fails the roll, dole out a few hints — perhaps wolf song that seems awfully close.

- **I Spy With My Undead Eye**: Characters paying attention to the assemblage can pick up any number of interesting clues that could have them investigate (and interact) further. Successful Perception + Subterfuge rolls could reveal one of von Achern’s seconds seething with anger (he is an Arpad vassal who hates to be subjected to the German Ventrue), Vykos in conversation with Lady Kara (on the merits of Obertus philosophy and the fate of Constantinople) or Silas the Ravnos eyeing a precious bauble on the cloak of one of the Lasombra delegates.

heartland sink in with each moment, until several of the vampires closely aligned with Jürgen burst into loud cheers. Soon others join the chorus. Many of the dignitaries refrain from cheering, however, and they break into discussion of how Jürgen’s plan may redraw the map of influence. It is no coincidence that Jürgen has made this speech and that a sword is the chosen mark of the Ventrue-Toreador alliance. War has been declared.

SCENE TWO: FERAL DISRUPTIONS

At Lord Jürgen’s command, music and dance erupt in the chamber. A group of Toreador envoys attached to Rosamund begin the dance by inviting other dignitaries to join them in celebration. Jürgen, who maintained a cool detachment dur-

ing most of the procession, is now visibly aroused. Clearly, Rosamund’s presentation has delighted the Ventrue lord. In addition, Jürgen is proud of his announcement, and he relishes the thought of gaining domain over Hungary.

GANGREL WARNINGS

While the dance is underway and the Toreador envoys slowly entice more Cainites to join their fete, a thunderous crash spoils the scene and a gust of wind blows the stage’s curtains open. The musician stumbles backwards and onto the stone floor. The crowd falls silent as three towering figures emerge from the crimson curtains, all dressed in furs and other rough clothing. The central figure, a massive woman, stands considerably taller than the others. Reacting with lightning speed, a ghoul knight leaps onto the stage brandishing his sword in a vast, sweeping motion. But the intruders are faster still. Two of them move forward to counter the attack and swipe their claws at the ghoul knight. The brash Teuton’s head falls from his body, rolling onto the floor where the guests part in horror.

The three hulking figures are Gangrel, come to protest the evening. All three are particularly imposing. The two slightest savages, still immense in comparison to the attendees in the Grand Hall, possess blatantly animalistic features — tusks, glowing eyes and patches of fur. The third and largest Gangrel, though ferocious in appearance, is collected, and she manages to convey that she is in control. Lucretia, sword in hand, is ready for combat. If not for Lord Jürgen’s restraining hand, she would not hesitate to attack.

For the first time this evening, Lord Jürgen reveals his true physical presence. Though not overtly as frightening as the Gangrel, he is clearly a force to be reckoned with. The Ventrue rises from his throne and commands attention without even making a sound. His presence is so powerful that he virtually radiates authority, making everyone temporarily forget any doubts they may have about his leadership. Even the cool Rosamund is caught off guard.

“How dare you disrupt this ceremony?” Jürgen demands, once all eyes are upon him. The Gangrel turn their attention toward the Ventrue lord. “Speak your mind!” he orders them.

The tallest Gangrel, a female with gray quill-like fur, barks her response. She identifies herself as Morrow and declares that Lord Jürgen’s ceremony is a mockery. She knows that Jürgen has sent a force of knights in Hungary, and she declares that the land there is only Rustovitch’s at her pleasure. The wilds in which Jürgen intends to build his strongholds are held by Gangrel packs, and even Rustovitch operates there only because he pays tribute. She has no interest in revising that agreement, and she demands that Jürgen rescind his attempts to establish his authority. She will view anything less as a challenge.

Morrow makes her declaration not in the hopes of initiating diplomatic discourse, but rather as a warning: Heed her words or else. The Gangrel leave as they arrived, like the gust of a raging wind. Jürgen mulls the warnings for a moment then smiles in confidence. After ordering Lucretia to secure his keep, he asks that the nervous revelers pick up where they left off, as if nothing had occurred.

While considering Morrow's threats genuine, Jürgen does not believe that the Gangrel brood can or will ultimately become involved in the political affairs of the high clans, which they typically abhor. He is sure that the Animals will let their "betters" fight it out then settle with who ever comes out on top. He smells the fetid taint of Rustovitch's manipulative hand in this affair, especially since the Gangrel arrived shortly after Kara, Rustovitch's envoy, left the chamber. At this point, nothing can stay Jürgen's determination, and he knows that he cannot back down and still save face. Although the characters and envoys do not yet know of its significance, this scene foreshadows the involvement of the Gangrel predators in the coming war.

SCENE THREE: THE GAMES AT COURT

Sensing that the festive mood has been sullied, Lord Jürgen wishes to erase the memory of the Gangrel disruptions. The third scene begins as the dance ends and Jürgen calls for his entertainers to amuse the audience. The crowd pushes forward in anticipation.

EXOTIC FABLES OR TRUTHFUL TALES?

Among the many colorful attendees at Jürgen's gala, the Malkavian poet, Calvin, is one of the most captivating. Although he remains still for most of the soiree, the Malkavian comes to life when it is time to give his stately gift, the reading of a poetic creation prepared especially for Lord Jürgen and his guests. The Malkavian gives a long, sad discourse on the tragedies of forlorn love. Calvin speaks of a mythical prince struggling against a terrible demon who brutally rapes his one true love. Rather than quench his fires of hatred, this prince retaliates with equal brutality, defiling his demonic foe's prized possession. Sadly, the tragic prince does not recognize his folly. The foe he has fought so mercilessly is none but himself, who was mesmerized by his own gaze in a mirror. The demon was completely imaginary and the horrors committed were the prince's own sins. Upon realizing this nightmare, the prince goes mad and falls to Hades, never again to walk the earth.

To characters who pay careful attention, Calvin offers poetry that is cryptically evocative of the tensions in the region. The Malkavian's poem, particularly the disturbing and graphic description of the woman's rape, speaks of the destructive folly of Jürgen's assault on the villages of Transylvania. The poem itself, while alluding to many things, offers the opinion that Rustovitch and Jürgen are two sides of the same coin. Whether Lord Jürgen or anyone else in attendance decrypt the Malkavian's poetry, they choose not to act on the insolent critique.

The first artist is Calvin, a Malkavian thespian who skillfully interprets a series of poems; some of his own making, others from famed scribes. The crowd seems largely indifferent, although some of the more learned delegates may compliment him on his rhetorical skills. The Ravnos acrobats and jugglers follow and immediately capture the room's attention. The artists possess impressive skills, handling an assortment of dazzling, colorful trinkets. They also fling sharp and fragile playthings, seemingly oblivious to the danger. At the height of their act, the performers juggle lit torches to the amazement of all. Faced with the danger of fire, the Beast rears its ugly head, and several guests recoil to the far end of the hall.

At the end of the performances, each entertainer bows before Jürgen in a clearly rehearsed fashion. They approach the lord while he holds the sword. The Ravnos and the Malkavian kneel and kiss the precious weapon, a sign of their fealty, and (to the crowd) an acknowledgment that Jürgen is the preeminent lord of the domain. Yet, several scurrilous tongues wag that this is part of their act. The Charlatans, these supposed experts say, defiantly reject the political structures that their haughty cousins have constructed.

THE DECEPTION REVEALED

While the Ravnos bask in the room's congratulatory offerings, the Tremere envoys—the evening's final act—prepare for their presentation. Wearing thick robes stained with sown runes, no one in the room can mistake that these Cainites are sorcerous Usurpers. Some observers demonstrate open disgust, but most offer polite greetings. The Tremere offer shows of petty Thaumaturgy, which elicits a mixture of polite awe and restrained disgust. Even Lord Jürgen takes interest in the Tremere's workings—something that conveniently works to the advantage of the conjuring Cainites desperately seeking an alliance.

After flashy displays, the Tremere begin their final trick: divination. For this act, the magi require the participation of attendees; some are eager to offer their assistance. The Tremere focus their sorcery on private possessions, from which they will discover secrets and origins. After they are given several items and they successfully divine truths (perhaps drawing one of the coterie members into their workings), Lord Jürgen rises and halts the spectacle. He presents the Toreador gift to Jervais and asks him to reveal the origins of the sword's painstaking craft.

If she is concerned by this challenge, Rosamund doesn't show it. She simply nods and awaits the Tremere's divination. She knows the Ventrue lord well enough to realize that Jürgen's request is meant to impress upon the envoys the value and rarity of the precious sword. Jervais grasps the prize, smiles, closes his eyes and turns to the audience, running his chubby fingers across the gem-adorned hilt. He then places it on the ground and draws an intricate pattern around it with a piece of chalk. He proceeds to open his fingertip and let fall a single drop of blood on the blade, which promptly burns away in to a puff of smoke. Jervais inhales it and after a few seconds, his smile vanishes and he is visibly agitated. The crowd begins to whisper and Jürgen, who sits impatiently, finally requests that Jervais

WHISPERS OF TRUTH

Level Three Thaumaturgy Ritual

The ritual enacted by Jervais and his acolytes invokes the echoes and imprints left upon objects by those who hold them dear, starting with their makers and owners. It is basically a thaumaturgic reworking of the *Auspex* power *The Spirit's Touch*, used to divulge more precious information. Secrets of manufacture are the easiest to reveal, since they involve the object itself, but other hidden truths can attach themselves to an object. If the item is used in a secret act (an assassin's knife, for example) then the truths of that act may bubble to the surface. If the item is very important to its owner — like the heraldic shield of a knight — it may carry secrets of his actions as well. For this reason, thaumaturges generally use this ritual on objects held dear by one they wish to learn more about. (The *Usurpers'* demonstration of their arts during the ceremony thus serves not only to impress the crowd, but to learn details about the courtiers.)

The thaumaturge places the object in the center of a scrying circle drawn with alchemically prepared chalk. The circle includes many arcane symbols, used to evoke the "memory" of the object. After concentrating for a few minutes, the thaumaturge flicks onto the object a single drop of his own fresh blood, which instantly boils like water on a hot cookstove. The evaporating droplet releases a plume of smoke that the thaumaturge inhales. He then receives visions or impressions from the object.

System: The full ritual takes 15 minutes to complete. The player rolls *Intelligence + Occult* (difficulty 7) and receives one secret for each success. These secrets will have to do (in order) with the following: the object's manufacture or composition, the object's use, the object's owner, events that have occurred around the object. The ritual can also be performed in a shortened version, which the younger Tremere Alexia and Thierry use on various objects in the crowd. It takes only a few minutes, but the difficulty becomes 8 and the thaumaturge gains only one secret from the object, regardless of the number of successes. Even if it isn't successful, the ritual's casting purges the object clean of spiritual echoes, and it cannot be used on the same object more than once until the object has had time to pick up new imprints. The same is true of the *Auspex* power, *The Spirit's Touch*.

provide a promised truth. Some suspect that Jervais' magic trick has failed.

"This is a peculiar," Jervais stutters nervously, pushing back invisible hairs from his bald head. "This blade seems to be no more valuable than any other. Forgive me, but this is more a stage item than a true blade." Jürgen demands some explanation, and Jervais explains that his magic revealed a truth. The sword is either a duplicate, or it is not what the Toreador

claimed it to be. According to the magus, the gems are imitations and so is the blade, being made of no more precious materials than a common soldier's blade. "A forgery of remarkable skill," Jervais finally says. After grabbing the sword from Jervais, Lord Jürgen turns to Rosamund, swings the blade high in the air and brings it down on the stone floor. He raises the obviously dented blade and shows the blemish to the Toreador. "Weak forging and false stones," he grumbles, anger and disgust in his voice. Rosamund says nothing, but embarrassment and anger stir her Beast. She retains control, but careful observers may notice quickly bared fangs or bloodsweat on her brow. "Usurper trickery," someone whispers.

For the second time, Jürgen's evening is disrupted. After quick words with the Tremere, Jürgen calls for the music to resume, as if that can possibly distract the baited crowd and salvage a soiled celebration. Just as Lord Jürgen and Rosamund prepare to move behind the curtains with the sword, Jervais approaches them. After a few words, the magus and his attendant Alexia head behind the curtain with Jürgen and Rosamund. The Tremere have requested the chance to defend themselves from accusations of treachery while Jürgen and Rosamund investigate the matter, something within their rights as guests of the house. Nearby characters may overhear this conversation (players make a *Perception + Alertness* roll) and others may deduce the basics (*Intelligence + Etiquette*).

While the actors of this drama move from the stage, from a distant corner, the envoys can hear Calvin the Malkavian offering his opinion. "A counterfeit sword for a counterfeit alliance?" he asks, posing the question to the dumbfounded audience. Everyone stands rooted to the floor awaiting Lord Jürgen's return.

ACT TWO: ACCUSATIONS AND RECRIMINATIONS

The second act of *Shadows at Court* reveals the unsightly insecurities underlying Jürgen's court — and in light of the brewing tensions, the paranoia that reigns among Magdeburg's Cainites. With the revelation of trickery, factions turn against each other in attempts to place blame. It becomes clear to the coterie that a complex, multifaceted deception is at play. The characters have to uncover the truth despite the chaos in Jürgen's keep.

SCENE FOUR: EXAMINATIONS

After attempting to calm the quarrelsome guests, who argue the validity of the Tremere claim, Lucretia von Hartz leaves to join her lord. Meanwhile, Jürgen's other guards maintain a vigil. They survey the crowd for anyone attempting to leave the chamber.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Only two Toreador envoys remain in the chamber. They angrily eye Thierry, the Tremere whom Jervais left behind. He

stands awkwardly by the stage with all eyes upon him, but no one approaches him. While the assembly waits, the coterie can easily make chatter and learn some of the tensions that lie beneath the surface.

Ideally, the characters observe and gather information that could later become useful. For now, most envoys in attendance have little to offer but rumors, but even they can be useful. Some claim that this upset is part of *Voivode* Rustovitch's master plan. They say that not only did he plan the Gangrel disruption, but he also convinced the Courts of Love to betray Jürgen. Rustovitch, they say, is no savage fool like some of his fellow Fiends. He is a master tactician and political schemer. Other observers are quick to single out the Tremere, who are known for their treachery, and who, therefore, must be responsible for this debacle. Couldn't that ritual have been some form of alchemy and not divination? From his corner, if the characters ask for his opinion, Calvin says only, "The Toreador are the sword's bearers, and, as everyone knows, bearers are always responsible for wielding their weapons." Although this might not make much sense to the characters, in his own peculiar way, Calvin suggests that the Toreador themselves must have a role to play in this affair. As the characters may discover at the end of this chapter (see p. 41), the Artisan delegation harbors a traitor.

In regards to the sword, the most vocal diplomats either claim to know nothing or they try to steer blame to others. Generally, the Cainites display great pettiness. If the characters approach Thierry, the remaining Tremere, he blurts out his insecurity. He is newly Embraced, it seems, and this is his first time among other vampires. He wonders if perhaps Jervais didn't make a mistake. Thierry contends that he does not doubt that the sword is as his master claimed it to be, rather he questions Jervais' wisdom in revealing the truth in this climate of hostility. Lastly, Thierry fears that Jervais has inadvertently made his clan's already precarious position with Jürgen even more fragile.

Meanwhile, the Toreador envoys continue to assert vehemently that their sword is genuine. They are angry with Jürgen for even considering Jervais' claim. After an hour has elapsed, Jürgen returns to the chamber after having examined the sword carefully. Veiled from the characters' eyes, Lord Jürgen called for one of his servants, a gemology expert, to inspect the sword. After some discussions and further examinations, Jürgen, Jervais and Rosamund are in agreement: The sword is indeed a fake!

This scene closes as Lord Jürgen reenters the stage and apologizes for the disruptions. He acknowledges that the sword is not a genuine item of value. Jürgen also promises to get to the bottom of this affair and asks that his guests demonstrate patience and understanding. He thanks Jervais for his bravery in revealing the truth despite fear of reprisals. Observant characters may note that such thanks gives the Tremere envoys a certain status at the court. In fact, the Ventrue lord has agreed to grant them an audience to discuss a possible alliance.

Lord Jürgen asks politely that the assembled Cainites remain in the city while he unravels this mystery. The coterie may note—or hear others mention—that after this disastrous

evening, it would be easy and understandable for Jürgen to lose his composure and demand that all Cainites be bound to his keep. Such would be the mark of a lesser lord. By exercising restraint, Jürgen projects confidence, which is the very thing that many Cainites have lacked since Jürgen moved to Magdeburg. If nothing else, Jürgen has managed to salvage a part of the evening. He has saved face by showing that he is secure in his new court, come what may. By setting the Cainites free from his hall without interrogations, Jürgen subtly asserts his control. It is almost as if he dares the Cainites in attendance to flee. It doesn't matter where they hide, he seems to say, he will find all traitors.

SCENE FIVE: REVELATIONS

The fifth scene deepens the mystery at court. After allowing the Cainites in attendance to leave, the majority of envoys remain in Jürgen's keep, hoping to uncover some truth. They wonder, did Rosamund offer a mocking gift, or is there some other explanation? The Toreador dignitaries are still in shock. They maintain that the sword that they brought was made with precious gems and was of the finest quality. The crowd whispers its disbelief. Whether they wish it or not, the characters are drawn into this mystery.

ROSAMUND SPEAKS

After a brief silence, Rosamund of Islington, still imperious to criticism, makes an announcement. She believes with unflappable clarity that a thief replaced their sword. She conjectures that this unknown thief did so either to undermine the Toreador-Ventrue alliance, to make a profit from the item's value, or both. As Rosamund makes the suggestion, the various Cainites still in the Grand Hall begin to point fingers. Presented with such surety and emotion, no one seems to doubt that Rosamund speaks the truth.

Since they are known as thieves, some Cainites immediately accuse the Ravnos of robbery. Others claim that agents of Rustovitch infiltrated Jürgen's fortress to replace the sword with a fake. Since the coterie is new in town, many Cainites look at the characters suspiciously. Some also blame the Gangrel who intruded earlier in the evening. While these suggestions are made, some Cainites, who sensed the hangman's noose approaching, are relieved. For the time being, they have not been accused.

Unless Rustovitch was behind it, the most rational Cainites in attendance reject the idea that Morrow stole the sword. They assert that the Gangrel prefer more direct methods of intimidation. The assembled Cainites then erupt into loud arguments, as two groups form. One, whose most vocal proponent is Baron von Achern, believes that the Gangrel are responsible, likely in collusion with Rustovitch. The other, with the Toreador envoy Ignatius at its head, opposes this opinion. After some time, von Achern and Ignatius agree that the Gangrel interruption, at the very least, provided ample opportunity for a would-be thief to plant a pretender sword. Since the Gangrel pack is not present to defend itself, it is easy to assign the predators blame, or at least, to claim that they participated in this mess.

EYES AND EARS AT COURT

Considering the flurry of debates, the players' characters can easily become overwhelmed, especially if they are unfamiliar with courtly activities. If the characters do not mingle or attempt to befriend the guests, some Cainites approach them sensing their confusion and their status as newcomers in the city. Unless they have an existing enmity (and perhaps even then), Myca Vykos is the first to befriend the coterie, offering his opinion on the matter at hand.

Myca believes that the Toreador faction is telling the truth, and he suspects that Jürgen will believe the same. If Rosamund's sword was genuine, the only possible conclusion is that the real item was stolen. While sharing his beliefs with the coterie, Myca reveals little about himself. If the coterie inquires about his interest, he says that he is merely an observer. Afterward he departs the characters' company, turns and smiles, and says that he has no doubt that they will meet again.

Vykos is hardly the only person paying careful attention to events, however. Akuji, Jürgen's Nosferatu ally, has ample reason to mistrust Vykos' interest in her lord's court. She has many contacts throughout the region who report that Vykos has been meddling in Jürgen's affairs. The Byzantine Fiend has offered handsome gifts to anyone who has information on her lord. When Akuji notices Myca attempting to befriend the coterie, she creeps to the characters' side to ascertain the nature of their conversation. She may also approach if she notes tension between the coterie and the Fiend.

Lacking the social grace of a diplomat, Akuji approaches the characters with no pretensions. She is curious and wants to know why Vykos spoke with the coterie. Akuji makes no apologies for her frankness, feeling she is perfectly within her right. After all, this is her lord's manor. If they are in any way familiar with the ways of the Nosferatu, or if one of the coterie's numbers is a fellow clan member, then this should come as no surprise. It is a well-established fact that the marked Cainites, privy as they are to great secrets, often garner information by requesting it.

Whether the characters reveal the nature of their conversation with Myca is their choice. The coterie may do well to remember that they are outsiders. Particularly if they are distant allies or if they are spies trying to gain closer access to Jürgen's court, offering some information freely would be to the characters' benefit. If the characters answer the Nosferatu's questions and ask her why she is interested in Myca, Akuji says that Vykos is a mysterious man and she is a creature who collects puzzles and enigmas. She might also let slip that she has been investigating Vykos, since she believes that he wants to harm Lord Jürgen. She does so either to gauge the characters' reactions or in the hopes that they will communicate the warning to Vykos.

If the characters resist sharing information with Akuji, she swiftly departs their company with no words. Assuming that the coterie is forthcoming, Akuji reminds the characters that Cainites are selfish creatures with hidden agendas. She leaves the party with this note: "Always remember that there are shadows behind shadows."

GATHERING RECOLLECTIONS

After a brief glimpse at the workings of Jürgen's court, the characters probably recognize that many factions could be responsible for the night's tumult. Most Cainites are currently in agreement that a theft took place. Like any investigators, it is useful if the characters try to recollect the evening. Having agreed that the Gangrel perturbation provided a useful distraction, the coterie may try to recall whether a would-be thief used the intrusion as an opportunity. Even if the characters don't share that sentiment and they fail to focus their reconstruction on the Gangrel disruption, they may still remember clues. Should the players not specify what their characters try to recall, the difficulty attached to any rolls should be increased.

Players should roll Intelligence + Alertness for their characters to recall useful information. Anyone who relies on her character's knowledge of court proceedings ("Who wasn't around when they should have been?") may roll Intelligence + Etiquette to achieve the same results. All rolls are against difficulty 8, with each success garnering a single clue. Characters may also gather these clues by interviewing witnesses, in which case Charisma + Investigation or Subterfuge rolls can supplement roleplaying.

The first clue that the characters may recollect is that one of the three Ravnos entertainers (Silas) vanished during the Gangrel intrusion, disappearing behind the red curtains on the Grand Hall's stage. The character doesn't remember exactly when the Ravnos reappeared, he simply recalls seeing him in the hall after the debacle with the Gangrel ended.

The second clue is only useful in understanding the larger events at work. Myca Vykos witnessed the disappearance of the Ravnos entertainer and said nothing. During the chaos, Vykos remained calm and looked directly at the Ravnos when the

CHARLATANS AND THIEVES

The rush to accuse the Ravnos reflects an unfortunate tendency to make this clan's members the scapegoats for thievery and deception. Characters may gather some of the following supposed truths from the crowd:

"They hunger for theft just like others hunger for blood." (False. Some Ravnos do steal, but that is hardly a trait of the entire line.)

"They aren't welcome anywhere in Europe." (False. Many lines of Ravnos have long histories in Europe, going as far back as Alexander the Great.)

"They conjured that sword from thin air." (False. Although Chimerstry is impressive, it would be nigh impossible to create so convincing a fake lest an ancient was involved.)

"They murder their own and destroy the works of others." (False, mostly. There is intra-clan conflict between different lines of Ravnos and *some* believe in undermining order and structure.)

entertainer disappeared behind the curtains. Additionally, the fact that Myca didn't express surprise during the Gangrel intrusion suggests that he may have known that it would take place. Although the coterie has no way of knowing, Myca hopes to benefit from the coming conflict between Jürgen and Rustovitch. His spies revealed that Kara, Rustovitch's envoy, informed Morrow about Jürgen's celebration, hoping the Gangrel would intrude.

The third clue is the disappearance of Jürgen's Caitiff servant, Albin. The diminutive slave left the chamber prior to the Ravnos entertainer. The character who recalls this information doesn't remember seeing the Caitiff leave, just that he was missing during the altercation (although he was present during the standoff with Kara). Similarly, the character doesn't remember when Albin reappeared, only that he was by Jürgen's side again shortly after the ceremony resumed. Characters with *Auspex* may suspect that Albin possesses *Obfuscate*.

If the characters are unable to recall anything, either Akuji or Vykos can pass on the first clue. This should only happen if they have a reason to help the characters, however. Akuji won't aid anyone whom she feels is there to help Vykos' interests. The *Tzimisce* is more amenable, however, and he might well point the characters in the direction of the Ravnos to further weaken Jürgen's hold on his court. He'd rather stay aloof from it all, but if suitable agents need a little push, so be it.

SCENE SIX: SHADOWING THIEVES

There is much to gain from solving the dilemma of the missing sword, and the characters are encouraged to follow up on any useful details that they remember. Lord Jürgen is sure to look kindly on the characters who unravel this mystery. This favor alone should motivate the coterie to catch the culprit and find the sword. Even if the characters are acting as spies for Rustovitch (or another powerful Cainite) they can make inroads by uncovering the identity of the missing sword's thief. The characters' primary duty as spies is to collect information on Jürgen's court. Solving this embarrassing problem for Jürgen is certain to gain them favor and thus access to valuable secrets.

FINDING SILAS

Armed with the knowledge that the Charlatan conveniently disappeared during the Gangrel intrusion, the most logical course of action is to stalk Silas' movements. Doing so shouldn't be all that difficult as long as the characters work together. A few *Intelligence + Investigation* rolls (for shadowing) are appropriate. On the second night following Jürgen's reception, a few hours short of daybreak, the characters observe Silas climbing down one of the outer walls of Jürgen's keep. The sly acrobat is carrying a bag that he hid during the Gangrel commotion. The coterie follows the Ravnos to his caravan, a short distance from Jürgen's fortress.

The characters may either confront Silas or wait to search the caravan. If they do the former, the Ravnos puts up only mild resistance. He is terrified that he is to be staked for the sun and is likely to run or throw himself on the mercy of those who have

found him out. Regardless of how they search the canvas bag, the characters find a number of trinkets and precious items that the characters recognize from the reception. They are all items that the Ravnos has stolen. Silas confesses to his crime immediately. If the characters ask him about the sword, the Ravnos pleads ignorance. The characters also notice other canvas bags in the Ravnos caravan. If they search the bags they find small, stolen items. Searching more thoroughly through the caravan (*Perception + Alertness*, difficulty 6) reveals the object of the characters' quest: The Treador broadsword is hidden beneath piles of straw under the canvas bags.

Upon finding the sword, observant characters notice Silas' surprise, which seems quite genuine. He swears innocence and passionately affirms having no idea how the sword made its way into the caravan. "I swear 'tis a trick!" he shouts repeatedly until gaining the attention of Akuji and Lucretia von Hartz. Soon enough Lucretia and her knights forcefully drag Silas away. If the Ravnos fled, the characters can contact Lucretia upon finding the sword if they wish.

WHAT ABOUT ALBIN?

Silas, the Ravnos entertainer, was not the only figure to disappear mysteriously during the Gangrel intrusion. The characters may have noticed Albin's absence, and they can pursue this clue one of several ways. If they approach Akuji, they find the Nosferatu generally unconcerned. Albin, she says, makes a habit of creeping about the stronghold. He acts as Jürgen's eyes and ears, and she would find it suspicious if he had not crept away in the event of an attack. She does not suspect him of wrongdoing, but she does admit that he might be a good information source.

The coterie may thus approach Albin directly with either accusations or inquiries. Albin scoffs at any insinuations regarding his loyalty, saying he would never do anything to jeopardize his lord's love. Although he is not aggressive, perceptive characters may sense that the Caitiff represses an inner rage. Having lived at the mercy of others for his entire existence, Albin has learned to bow to all Cainites, regardless of their standing. Years of servitude and supplication have made him bitter, and a keen observer may detect a hint of resentment. He does not know what happened to the sword, he says, and he denies any involvement. During the Gangrel altercation, Albin claims he was moving throughout Jürgen's keep, making sure that other forces had not penetrated his lord's defenses.

The third option open to the coterie is to stalk Jürgen's servant. Ultimately, doing so provides little insight on Albin. Generally, the Caitiff remains within the fortress walls, and he never does anything especially suspicious. Careful observers (or those with *Auspex*) may note that Albin does have some ability in the Discipline of *Obfuscate*, seeing him vanish behind one pillar only to reappear across the room, for example. When he does venture out into Magdeburg proper, following him is distinctly harder. No one in Magdeburg has better knowledge of the city. If the coterie decides to pursue this matter directly with Jürgen, he dismisses the characters' beliefs, claiming that the Caitiff servant is sly and often lends the



impression that he vanishes. Jürgen may also be distraught that the characters are making unfounded insinuations about his “loyal servant.”

Interestingly, while stalking Albin, the characters may come across another mysterious figure. For their characters to notice the stranger, players must make a Perception + Alertness roll (difficulty 9). With three or more successes, the characters discover that the figure is also stalking Albin, not the coterie. If the characters confront the man, he identifies himself as Lucius, one of the Toreador accompanying Rosamund (and companion to Ignatius). Reluctantly, he reveals that he is investigating the sword’s theft, and he is simply following the characters because he is suspicious. In fact, Lucius is following Albin to make sure that he doesn’t jeopardize his plans — Albin knows the real culprits. If the characters confront Lucius and say that they noticed that he was following Albin and not them, he claims that he was only keeping an eye on the Caitiff because the coterie seemed so interested in him. Following this confrontation, Lucius departs the characters’ company, angry that they have taken up his valuable time. For more information on Lucius’ involvement, see the aftermath of this chapter (p. 41).

KEEPING IT FOR THEMSELVES

Ambitious characters may opt to keep the sword for themselves instead of bringing it to Jürgen or Lucretia, of course. Just what consequences doing so has depends entirely

on what the characters do with it. If they go to Rosamund, she thanks them graciously. With their permission, she keeps their role secret from Jürgen but acknowledges her debt to them. She then uses “her” discovery of the sword to subtly show up Jürgen. Lucretia approaches them for help in the next act anyway.

If the characters do not return the sword at all, they may be discovered by others investigating matters. The Toreador Ignatius makes a good candidate for a detective dogging their heels. He might well accuse the characters of the theft. Just how they deal with this turn of events is up to them.

ACT THREE: TRUTH AND LIES

The third act opens with a mixture of relief and doubt. On one hand, the mystery of the missing sword is seemingly solved, yet many questions remain unanswered. As the coterie had hoped, Jürgen offers the characters congratulatory praise. Still, a gnawing doubt lingers. Has the coterie found the real culprit?

SCENE SEVEN: GUILTY UNTIL INNOCENT

With the missing sword’s discovery, the characters gain Jürgen’s attention. Despite this victory, the coterie wonders if the Ravnos, who claims innocence, has not been made a

scapegoat. Worse still, if Silas isn't the culprit, the characters face the possibility that they were pawns in the larger designs of a faceless, Machiavellian Cainite.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

During the first acts, the characters—very much outsiders to the complex workings in the region—have attempted to gain Jürgen's trust. If the characters are Rustovitch's allies, they have no need to deepen their investigations of the sword's theft. The coterie has Jürgen's gratitude, and that will bring the characters in close proximity to Jürgen's secrets. But Silas' professions of innocence may still nag at them. After all, if the Ravnos entertainer was duped, how long before the characters also become puppets? Jürgen is no fool, and it's likely that he shares the coterie's doubts. The Venture lord could discover on his own that Silas isn't the thief. Consequently, the characters would likely face Jürgen's wrath if he suspects them of involvement. If the characters still have doubts, those doubts alone should motivate them to keep digging for answers. This is all the more true if they are actual allies of Jürgen's. Faced with lingering questions, the only remedy is to find answers.

JÜRGEN'S WISDOM

Aided by Akuji's watchful eyes, Jürgen has followed Lucretia's movements closely. Despite Silas' capture, Jürgen also suspects that another thief is responsible for his sword's theft. Currently, Jürgen must maintain a false facade. As far as everyone is concerned, he believes the real culprits have been found. Jürgen must also publicly distance himself from Lucretia, who has lost face. Doing so will not only satisfy the forces that constantly scrutinize Jürgen's every move, but it will also lull the real thieves into a false sense of security, thus facilitating Lucretia's efforts. Secretly, Jürgen has every confidence that his loyal servant can successfully uncover the culprit's identity.

SILAS' PLEAS

Throughout his ordeal, Silas maintains his innocence. During each interrogation, Silas remains consistent. The same can also be said for his two companions, who are also locked in a cell. Silas admits only to stealing trinkets during the procession, which he stored in a bag while the Gangrel pack disrupted the soiree. Even if physical intimidation is used, Silas and his partners refuse to take the fall for the broadsword's theft. Since the characters brought Silas to justice, Jürgen allows the coterie to interrogate the acrobat. Still, regardless of what methods they use, the characters garner no different a response than any other interrogator.

Unfortunately for Silas' sake, he or his fellows will let slip that they were at a gathering sponsored by the Courts of Love in Brittany. This fact may come out during the interrogation or Rosamund may recognize them and let the characters know. This

soiree, which was held three months ago, was planned for Rosamund in honor of her coming trip to Magdeburg. Silas performed for the gathered Cainites, and he had ample opportunity to steal the sword, which was in the Courts of Love's possession by then. This fact only adds to the pressure on Jürgen to dispose of the Charlatans, whom many of the assembled vampires see as distasteful and gifted with strange arts of conjuration. Although the characters may know that summoning a sword out of thin air is probably beyond Silas' abilities, that fact doesn't prevent Magdeburg's Cainites from calling for the acrobat's blood.

LUCRETIA INTERVENES

After the dust has settled, one of Jürgen's loyal retainers, Lucretia von Hartz, approaches the coterie. Racked with guilt, she confesses that she is responsible for Silas' crimes. Lucretia is quite irrational, and she spouts repeatedly that she is to blame. She is angry both at herself and the Ravnos acrobats. After allaying her fury, the tormented Lucretia reveals her involvement.

Having heard of the entertainers' prowess, Lucretia procured the services of Silas and his friends for Jürgen's ceremony. She had no idea, of course, that the Ravnos were thieves. Now that they stand guilty, Lucretia is greatly dishonored and, in her eyes, completely responsible. The only way to redeem herself is to undo this mess. This would be impossible if she thought that the Ravnos were guilty of stealing the sword. Fortunately, she does not.

Lucretia is in a tight bind. She cannot ask local Cainites for help. They would view this as a sign of weakness. At the moment, many people close to Jürgen blame her for this entanglement, and no one wants to associate themselves with her. "My dear," they scoff, "this is entirely your problem to solve."

This embarrassment brings Lucretia to the coterie's side. As outsiders, the characters can shield this matter from local Cainites. If the characters agree to help Lucretia find the real thief, she promises them to repay the favor—as long as they maintain complete discretion. It is vital that they not draw undue attention. There are probably many people who do not want the identity of the real thief to come to light. Since the sword was found, most Cainites in Magdeburg are content to let scapegoats take the fall. They all have more important concerns, such as the coming war with *Voivode* Rustovitch.

Whether they are Jürgen's followers or Rustovitch's spies, the characters can only benefit from Lucretia's intimate knowledge of both Magdeburg and Jürgen's court. She is the Venture lord's eyes, ears and voice within the Teutonic Order (see p. 15), and they can be of great assistance. Once the coterie and Lucretia join forces, the logical course of action is to investigate anyone who may have information regarding the broadsword's theft. To uncover the truth, the characters will have to be sneakier than their deceitful prey.

At some point during the character's investigations on Lucretia's behalf, either in Magdeburg proper or as they leave the city in search of Morrow, either Jervais or his childe Alexia notice their continued snooping. This discovery precipitates events in later scenes, but it may not be especially suspicious at the time.

NIGHT'S PREDATORS

Even for Caine's childer, running through the woods at night is never safe. Hundreds of predators stalk the shadows waiting to make prey of the characters. Some of these nocturnal creatures are native to the area. The characters are most likely to encounter wolves, which live in abundance in the hilly terrain and plains. Although most of these pack hunters aren't likely to attack without cause, they may try to defend their territory if they perceive the coterie as a threat. If the characters are particularly loud and obnoxious while traveling through woodland paths, they may, to their eternal woe, attract the attention of their mortal enemies the savage Lupines. It is not necessary to ignite a conflict between a werewolf and the coterie to emphasize the wilderness' dangers. Still, the howls of a distant Lupine can act a reminder — Cainites are not the masters of this forest domain.

SCENE EIGHT: WOODLAND DEPARTURE

There are many leads that the coterie can pursue following its alliance with Lucretia. For her part, Lucretia believes that Morrow, the Gangrel disrupter, knows something. She does not consider it is a coincidence that the Gangrel intruded into Jürgen's keep during his ceremonial instatement. Someone must have told Morrow to disrupt the evening. That same person may be responsible for the sword's theft.

This scene is optional and dependent on whether the coterie decides to track the Gangrel pack. In itself, this endeavor is dangerous since the woods are never a safe place for urban Cainites. If the coterie does not include anyone with woodland skills, Lucretia can provide a ghoul with skill enough to act as a guide. Since the journey from Transylvania to Magdeburg is a long trek, Lucretia believes that Morrow and her pack must have found shelter somewhere nearby. Their likeliest haven is with a Gangrel who inhabits the woods a few miles south of the city. According to Lucretia, Morrow is highly respected among Gangrel even as far north as Magdeburg. Thankfully, Lucretia knows where the Gangrel in this region generally roam.

After some time stumbling through the woods, the characters may feel quite insecure. The cacophony of wild sounds echoing throughout the forest is very unsettling, and they seem to be getting nowhere with their search. Since the stalking skills of Gangrel in the brush are superior, the characters do not find the Gangrel brood. The Gangrel, however, uncover the noisy intruders easily.

Morrow makes an appearance along with her pack. Immediately, she demands to know the coterie's purpose. Five Gangrel accompany Morrow, each more savage looking than the other. Observant characters may notice that the Gangrel all bear similar crude markings in their skin. If the characters ask Morrow what she knows about the sword's theft, she angrily replies that she wants nothing to do with politics and cares little for missing

swords. She reiterates her warnings that Jürgen's plans to establish domain in southern Hungary can only spell disaster. If the characters suggest to Morrow that she may have been used as a pawn to allow someone to steal the sword, Morrow laughs.

Morrow's outburst, though perhaps confounding, is simply a reaction to the coterie's arrogance. She is amused that most outsiders, including the coterie, view the Gangrel as impulsive louts. Even if the coterie does not press her for answers, Morrow reveals that Kara, *Voivode* Rustovitch's envoy, told her about Jürgen's ceremony before leaving for Transylvania. She had hoped that Morrow would do the Fiend's dirty work and kill Lord Jürgen. Morrow is no fool, however. She will let the Tzimisce do their own killing. Morrow used Jürgen's ceremony as a means to express her warnings, which, despite what Lord Jürgen may believe, are quite genuine. She thinks that the Ventrue and Tzimisce conflict will bring doom upon the region. Furthermore, Morrow believes that meddling in human affairs is the work of weaklings. Specifically, she refers to Jürgen and Lucretia, saying it is foolish to use human knights and crusaders as a cover for vampiric dominance. Despite her taunts, Lucretia knows better than to engage in verbal swordplay. Regarding the Toreador broadsword, Morrow claims that Kara made no mention of this item. She doubts that Rustovitch would be bothered with an object of such trifling consequence.

Suddenly, a chill wind howls, gaining strength and carrying a blinding snow. Simultaneously, as if the elements and the Gangrel are one, Morrow's mood sours dramatically. "Remember well that I am friend to none save my kin," she adds with a growl. Afterwards, Morrow demands that the coterie depart the woods before she and her pack force them out.

A coterie with a Gangrel member doesn't get a much friendlier response from Morrow. She is a little less aggressive, but hardly welcoming. Morrow cannot understand one of her clan meddling in the "civilized" affairs of the high clans, acting as a hunting dog for a Ventrue like Lucretia or Jürgen. She may even resent the Gangrel character more for trying to help them.

SCENE NINE: ROSAMUND'S KEY

Still no closer to cornering the unseen thief, the coterie and Lucretia return to Magdeburg with greater determination and a handful of nagging questions. Was the sword in fact stolen and replaced during the Gangrel disruption? Is someone close to Rosamund responsible for the deception? Or perhaps Albin the Caitiff knows something that he isn't sharing?

The characters may not suggest it, but Lucretia makes a realization: The only way they can find their slippery thief is to determine when the trickster could have stolen and replaced the Toreador sword. Since she was never far from the gift, Rosamund of Islington is the person best suited to provide answers to this mystery. If the characters talk to Rosamund, she is friendly and cooperative. After some reflection, Rosamund does not believe, despite what others have concluded, that a thief made a switch during the Gangrel debacle. She is certain that she would have taken notice. Rosamund is equally convinced that her entourage is beyond reproach or betrayal. If that is the case, then the sword must have been replaced prior to Jürgen's gala.

Faced with the coterie's questions, Rosamund retraces her steps before arriving in Magdeburg. She claims that only her Toreador companions and Jürgen's trusted servant accompanied her prior to entering the city. This revelation immediately arouses Lucretia's suspicions, and she asks that Rosamund elaborate. The Courts of Love's envoy says that Albin approached Rosamund's caravan a full night before she arrived in Magdeburg. Albin kept the Toreador delegates company as an escort until they breached the city's walls. With this revelation, Lucretia's dour mood changes. She thanks Rosamund repeatedly and leaves the scene, even if the coterie objects.

Outside of Rosamund's earshot, Lucretia reveals that Albin had specific instructions regarding the Toreador envoy. He was not to approach Rosamund until she arrived in the city. Since she knows that Albin is not one to casually disregard Jürgen's directions, Lucretia suspects that the Caitiff may be involved in this mystery. He certainly had an opportunity to switch swords. This scene ends dramatically as the coterie and their knightly companion rush to find the furtive Cainite.

SCENE TEN: TO FIND A THIEF

Rushing to scour Lord Jürgen's keep, the coterie is unable to find the Caitiff servant. No one, including Akuji, seems to know where he has gone. Lucretia takes the coterie to the Caitiff's room, a stone barracks within the fortress walls. They find the heavy wooden door barred from the inside and have to force or chop it open (Feat of Strength, level 6). The small chamber is a shambles. What meager furniture there was has been reduced to kindling, clothes and other trinkets are scattered about, and chunks of the stone walls have been damaged as if by a heavy battleaxe or other weapon. Jervais, fearing that the coterie would uncover Albin's role in the theft and ultimately trace it back to him, released a creature called a reaper to eliminate the Caitiff. What the characters find is the after-effects of that attack. Albin is now on the run. For more on the reaper, see p. 102 in Chapter Four.

Characters searching for clues can discover the following (roll Perception + Investigation, difficulty 5):

- The stonework around the small window is severely damaged as if to widen the opening. At least some of the debris is inside the room. (The reaper broke it when forcing it's way into the room.)

- At least two of the great slashes in the stone floor and walls are bloodied with Cainite vitae. (The reaper grievously wounded Albin with its scythe-like appendages.)

- In one corner, there is a freshly torn-off rat's head. Characters especially familiar with rats may notice strange characteristics, such as bizarre fur color or needle-sharp teeth. (In desperation, Albin struck back by ripping out one of the thing's many rat-heads.)

- There is a bloody streak (again of Cainite vitae) running down the outside wall. (Albin leaped from the window to escape the thing, which pursued him.)

Characters may try to find witnesses to this commotion. Although no one else was in the barracks when the reaper attacked (Jervais timed his incantation for that very purpose),



UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

guards may well have heard some commotion an hour ago or so (about when the characters were in conversation with Rosamund). Players may rightly deduce that Albin was under attack, although they may assume that the attackers were Tzimisce or Gangrel. If asked where Albin would flee to, Lucretia suggests Magdeburg proper, where the Caitiff knows every hiding place. She can confirm that he is also very skilled at Obfuscate. She suggests that the characters search for Albin while she raises the guard to defend the city. She fears that whatever attacked Albin was of Tzimisce origin.

IN THE DARKENED CITY

Normally, Albin would be nigh impossible to find in the settlement that he knows so well. He moves from hovel to inn to barn to shop without being seen or heard, and he has established many passages and havens in the small city. Fortunately for the characters, these are not normal circumstances. The reaper hunting Albin — endowed with thaumaturgic tracking skills — is a dogged enemy indeed, and Albin is very seriously wounded. After spending much of his blood healing, he is still Wounded and has but a few points left in his blood pool. With Lucretia raising the alarm, knights and watchmen are beginning to swarm through the city looking for attackers in general and Albin specifically, making his job all the harder.

Nevertheless, the characters shouldn't have an easy time finding their prey. In fact, they might find evidence of the reaper much more easily than they do of Albin. As the thing uncovers hiding space after hiding space, it causes terror in the city and might have slaughtered animals and mortals along the way. The characters also hear strange chattering sounds and catch glimpses of the terrifying thing.

Have the players roll Perception + Alertness every so often, doling out first signs of the reaper's activities and then quick glimpses of it or even of Albin. Characters with Auspex should be able to spot fleeting glimpses of the obfuscated Caitiff. Eventually, bring the coterie, its prey and the Tremere beast together at once. If the characters are having a hard time, Albin eventually decides to reveal himself with the reaper almost on top of him. He needs help defeating or escaping the thing, and he can only assume that the knights are hunting him as a thief. The coterie is his only hope.

Whether they discover him on their own merits or he reveals himself, Albin immediately starts pleading with the characters. He is obviously grievously wounded. "Please," he begs, "it's coming! I'll do anything."

A twisted, insect-like creature then breaks onto the scene, leaping from a rooftop or squirming out of a window. Terrified, Albin squirms and tries to flee. The aberration uses the mammoth scythes on its forelimbs to slash its way to its prey, mindlessly felling anything in its path. If the characters clear a path to Albin, the creature cleaves him in two with just one swipe. If they hope to gain any information from the traitor, the characters have to fight and destroy the reaper.

During the fight, Albin makes an attempt to escape, but his wounds make it difficult. The players should be able to stop him, even with a quick word.

SORCEROUS TRUTHS

After they dispose of the reaper, the characters can convince Albin fairly easily to be cooperative. They can soothingly promise shelter, bark at him that his allies have abandoned him, threaten to kill him themselves or most anything else: The Caitiff is wounded and traumatized, and he has few mental defenses left. Albin reveals that it was the Tremere who convinced him to betray Lord Jürgen. They promised that they would teach him the vaunted secrets of Thaumaturgy. He intended to use this newfound power to free himself of his tyrant lord's crippling grip. He is determined to exact his vengeance on Jürgen, whom he believes treats him like a dog. He made his deal with the Tremere Alexia of Nicosia, he says, several months ago when Lord Jürgen began fortifying the area in preparation for his assumption of domain.

If she is present, Lucretia shouts out, "You *are* a dog!" The characters have to hold Lucretia back, otherwise she is likely to decapitate Albin on the spot. If she isn't, the characters have the choice of whether or not to return Albin to Jürgen. The Caitiff is sure to face execution, so characters who decide to spare him would be justified in asking just about anything of him, including going under the blood oath. If they do so, their best strategy is to report that the reaper killed Albin, but they must be sure that he never reappears in Magdeburg.

SCENE ELEVEN: DISPELLINGS

After a tumultuous confrontation, the coterie returns to Magdeburg either with Albin or their revelations. Unless they lie, Lucretia confirms all she can, damning Albin. Soon after, Jürgen frees the Ravnos entertainers, but gives them an order never to return to Magdeburg — under threat of a blood hunt. Content to regain their freedom, Silas and his companions depart without fuss.

Thanks in large part to the coterie, Jürgen was able to recover the sword and dispel this embarrassment with relative ease. Ultimately, Jürgen proved to be in control of his city. Still, this affair has tarnished his already fragile image. Sensing a conclusion to this affair, most envoys who remained in the city leave. However, some diplomats are unsatisfied. They continue to express doubt. Many vampiric forces in the Holy Roman Empire and points west share this opinion, and they wonder if Jürgen's invasion plan isn't a folly. Currently, most are content simply to observe.

THE FATE OF THE TREMERE

In all likelihood, Jürgen learns that the Tremere are responsible for the broadsword's theft. He then submits the envoys to his wrath. Jervais' misguided attempts to gain Lord Jürgen's favor proved what the Ventrue lord already suspected: The Tremere cannot be trusted. Seeking an explanation for this behavior, Jürgen personally interrogates Jervais. Although he does not use force, Jürgen's presence alone is enough to cow the Tremere. Ultimately, Jervais denies any personal involvement, and Alexia takes the blame. She claims that she acted on her own volition, thus absolving her sire and mentor. Alexia claims that she put her treacherous plan in motion only to favor an alliance.

She hoped that Jürgen, fearing that the Courts of Love had forsaken him, would consider the Tremere as an enticing alternative. The result of the Tremere scheme is quite the opposite — Jürgen may never trust Jervais, and he expels the Tremere from the city. He seems a hair's breadth away from calling a blood hunt on Alexia, but refrains for the time being. For the moment, at least, there is to be no alliance with the Usurpers.

If the characters take the bold option of not reporting the Tremere's involvement to Jürgen and taking up the matter with the Usurpers themselves, Alexia again takes the full responsibility, insulating Jervais. She promises them whatever service she can to maintain their silence. Later, Jervais may decide to eliminate them outright if they prove troublesome, however.

JUST REWARDS

If he returns to Magdeburg, Albin receives his lord's dubious mercy. He is not executed, but he is chained at the bottom of an abandoned well, feasting only on rodents. Should he have need of his slave, or should he think of a punishment more befitting the crime, Jürgen promises to fetch his wretch from this hellish pit. Meanwhile, Albin has much time to feed his hatred and dream of revenge against the treacherous Tremere.

As for the characters, regardless of their backgrounds, they have succeeded and won Jürgen's appreciation. The Ventrue lord tells them he is in their debt — something he takes very seriously. He owes the coterie as a whole one favor, which the characters may call upon at any time. Rosamund is also thankful, and, although she makes no formal pledges akin to Jürgen's, she implies that the characters will have a friendly ear in the Courts of Love, should they ever require it. Despite this victory, Jürgen does not divulge his court's inner secrets. Save for one or two kindred Cainites, the Ventrue lord trusts no one. Jürgen investigates the characters' backgrounds if they decide to stay in the region. If the characters are Rustovitch's agents, Lord Jürgen does not necessarily find out (assuming the characters do a good job of covering their tracks). Regardless of who they are or whom they represent, Jürgen never completely trusts the characters. The Ventrue lord has learned the key to survival — keep an eye open for any potential threat.

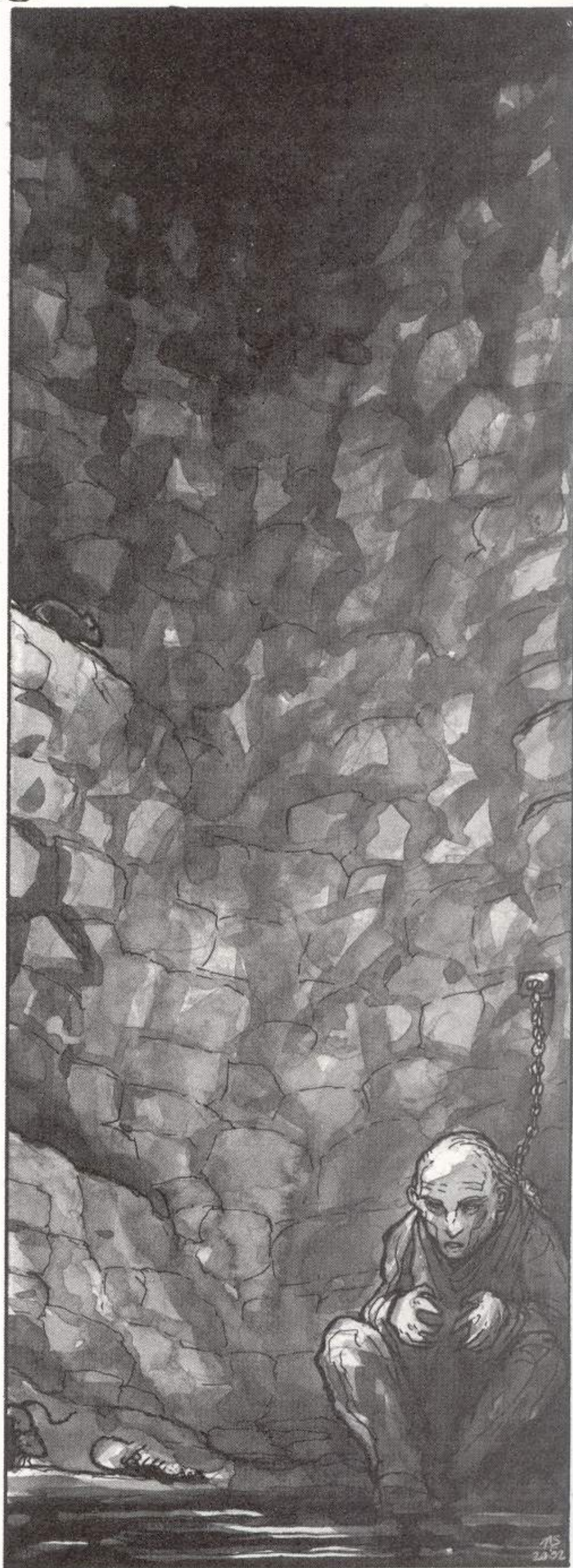
CLOSING NOTE

At some point during that night, after Albin and the Tremere have been dealt with, one of Lucretia's guard patrols returns with troublesome news. They have found a body across the river from the city, one that Lord Jürgen should see. The characters can easily accompany the lord across the Elbe to the east coast. There, stretched across the frame of a small boatman's house, is the flayed and fleshcrafted skin of a ghoul. Scrawled across the fleshy canvas is a bloody message:

Let it be known that we are at war. Bring your forces if you wish. Victory will be ours.

Anyone versed in the ways of the Tzimisce knows that such declarations are traditional among the Fiends. As for the ghoul's body, it lays on the ground, bloody and horrific. Only the face still has its skin, and pain and fear twist its features. The assembled Cainites easily recognize Brother Kurt, the ghoul knight who attacked Kara Lupescu at court several nights ago.

UNDER THE BLACK CROSS



EPILOGUE

The completion of a complex puzzle does not automatically provide a clear picture. Although the coterie has uncovered the truth behind a multitude of deceptions, they may have some lingering questions. Especially inquisitive characters could peel back another layer to the intrigue.

The key lingering question is how the fake sword was made. Albin made a willing dupe for the Tremere plan, but his talents have limits, particularly in the areas of forgery and smith works. The only way the Tremere could have realized their deception was with considerable foresight. Somehow, Jervais knew that the Courts of Love were preparing a gift. He also gained such detailed knowledge of the shining broadsword that he ordered the creation of a detailed duplicate. This was only possible if the Tremere had access to the sword before Rosamund's party carried it to Magdeburg. Although other actors may wonder at this, they do not approach the coterie about it. The characters are on their own.

STALKING JERVAIS

The only Cainite with answers is Ceoris' duplicitous agent. When Jervais is cast from Magdeburg, the coterie has a unique opportunity to track him. He departs from Magdeburg almost as soon as Jürgen releases him. The characters follow from a comfortable distance, relishing the irony that for the first time since this debacle, the shadows provide needed cover for them, not their enemies. To their surprise, the characters discover, after they have spent some time traveling the countryside, that they are not alone. A hunched and hooded figure also follows the Tremere closely. From a distance, the characters can judge that the stranger must have departed Magdeburg virtually in concert with Jervais.

Following Jervais and the stranger simultaneously is difficult. Shortly after noticing the hooded newcomer's presence, the coterie realizes that Jervais' and the stranger's paths diverge. The coterie has a choice to separate or to follow only one figure. The characters may also consider that this may be another ruse in the Tremere bag of tricks. They may ask themselves whether Jervais engineered this affair precisely to split the coterie, in the hopes of exacting revenge. Regardless, stalking one or both leads ends at the same destination, a small village two night's travel distance south of Magdeburg.

A CLANDESTINE RENDEZVOUS

The characters discover, to their surprise, that the hooded stranger and Jervais meet at a designated meeting place in the small village. The choice of locale matters little. An abandoned barn, a crumbling cemetery just before dawn or a hidden cave in a nearby cliff all suffice. Supported by two assistants, Jervais meets the interloper who unveils himself. If the characters succeed in watching the rendezvous without giving themselves away, they discover that the hooded figure is none other than Lucius, one of Rosamund's aides, who was present at Jürgen's reception.

From the body language alone, it is clear that both Jervais and Lucius are upset. Although they limit their aggression to verbal taunts, the Cainites come close to a physical confrontation. If the characters succeed in overhearing, they learn that Rosamund's aide was party to Jervais' deception. It was he who gave the precious knowledge allowing Jervais to forge a duplicate. If the characters fail to overhear, learning the identity of the hooded stranger may be enough for them to guess that it was he who facilitated the Tremere plan. The only remaining question is why?

AMBIGUITIES

The characters are faced with several options. They can attack Jervais and his accomplices, but this may result in a confrontation that the characters aren't sure to win. Another more favorable option is to approach the duplicitous Cainites without aggression and simply ask for answers. It matters little to Jervais whether Rosamund's agent is revealed. After all, Jervais has already failed and suffered the consequences. Lucius does not share this opinion, and he may attempt to flee. Since he is clearly outnumbered, Lucius does not fight the characters.

Jervais' story is that Lucius was acting on behalf of elders within the Courts of Love. They wished to ensnare Lord Jürgen by putting him in an awkward position, he says. Doubts about the validity of the sword would be a grave insult between to the Courts of Love, one Jürgen would have to make amends for.

Lucius' story is different. He claims to have been blackmailed by the Usurpers, who used their blood sorcery to uncover past crimes, such as the destruction of several rivals in the courts of Brittany and trading secrets with agents of Prince Alexander of Paris, a powerful Ventrue lord. Jervais forced him into another treachery.

Just where the truth lies is up to you to decide, but it probably should not be clear to the characters. If they carry any of this news back to Magdeburg, Rosamund promises that Lucius is to be punished, and Jürgen seems satisfied.







Chapter Two: Ashes of Outremer

...same council was far removed from
our leaders
-Oliver Scholasticus *Historia Damiatina*

INTRODUCTION

Ashes of Outremer brings the conflict between Jürgen and Rustovitch into the Holy Land as each faction sends predators to stalk the Fifth Crusade. It also shows quite vividly how war breeds war, as characters with their eyes toward Hungary nevertheless see the city of Acre transformed and come face to face with the mortal faithful who fight all of their kind.

This chapter takes place toward the end of 1217, six years after *Shadows at Court*. In the interim, Lord Jürgen's forces have established a firm grip on the *Siebenbürgen*, the region of Transylvania around the Olt River. He has established Kronstadt as his main headquarters, with other cities and strongholds across the region supporting it. Backed by King Andras II, the mortal Teutonic Knights have progressed through the region, and many Germans and Magyars have settled here. This network of kine hides Jürgen's forces and gives them secure feeding stock, securing their position. Lucretia has accelerated the Embrace of members of the Order of the Black Cross, further strengthening her lord's position in the *Siebenbürgen*.

This is not to say that the battle has been easy. Rustovitch has used waves of monstrosities, cadres of highly mobile revenant raiders and many other forces to hold the Ventrue back from further expansion. The Germans have faced every horror imaginable, and many have paid for it with their lives. Still, the Ventrue seem to hold the advantage, and they become better entrenched with every year. Off the battlefield, the political struggle is just as intense. Kara Lupescu has become a force to be reckoned with in the court of King Andras, arguing through her Vlaszy proxies that Magyars (not Germans) should settle and Christianize the area. Nova Arpad is rumored to support those arguments, working against her Patrician clanmates, who have usurped her position.

In the midst of this battle, King Andras embarks on the Fifth Crusade, unwittingly trailing unliving predators behind him.

HOW TO USE THIS STORY

Ashes of Outremer is designed as the next installment of the *Under the Black Cross* chronicle, continuing the themes laid down in *Chapter One: Shadows at Court* as Lord Jürgen's ambitions lead his agents even further afield than Transylvania. Storytellers who wish to use this chapter as part of an independent chronicle, perhaps even one with its long-term focus in the Holy Land, will find that they can easily separate this chapter from the remainder of *Under the Black Cross* and adapt it to their needs.

THEMES & MOOD

There are several possible themes for a coterie to explore in this chapter. First is the question of leadership and the conflict between duty and selfish interest. The struggles among the Cainites for power in Acre mirrors the lack of effective leadership among the mortal crusaders as their kings quarrel and pursue their own agendas to the detriment of the Fifth Crusade's stated goals.

Next is the theme of duty to one's secular lord and the pursuit of religious truth — or even redemption, itself. The coterie is faced with the choice of either working to settle the political order of Cainite Acre or tracking the whereabouts of a fragment of the True Cross. They possibly can do both, thus reconciling these two paths. They may even come into contact with the relic itself and experience revelations that lay bare their true natures.

Finally, there is the theme of contact with alien cultures. As vampires, the characters are already familiar with the intense politics and conflicts of Cainite society in Europe. This chapter adds an additional layer of complexity, bringing them into extended contact — and likely conflict — with Muslim Cainites. In a reflection of the mortal conflicts of the region, the coterie needs to make deals with ostensible foes in order to accomplish its goals, against the wishes or interests of its allies and lords. The characters also find that clanmates can still be divided by religion.

The mood of this chapter is one of confusion, conflict and "hurry up and wait." Crusaders and Cainites come and go, almost at will, and the army is forced to wait until a Frisian fleet finally arrives. Confusion reigns without clear leadership, and conflicting motives and goals add to the frictions between factions. Boredom is one of an army's worst enemies, and incidents born of that boredom face the coterie with severe challenges.

THE PLOT

Ashes of Outremer is composed of three acts. The setting is the city and environs of Acre in what is known as the Second Kingdom of Jerusalem or the Kingdom of Jerusalem and Acre. The action can range as far afield as the ruins of 'Atlit (the future site of the Pilgrims' Castle) south of Haifa, to the fortresses of the Teutonic Knights at Starkenberg and the Muslims at Mt. Tabor. It is in this area that a great army is gathering for the Fifth Crusade, in preparation for an invasion of the Nile delta in Egypt.

The first act brings the characters to the Holy Land, where they are forced to land at the port of Haifa, some 15 miles south of Acre, because of the holy aura over Acre (which prevents entry by Cainites). Once there, they make their way to the court of the prince of Acre, Etienne de Fauberge, disparagingly known as "the Prince of Dirt," since he is forced by that same aura to make his court outside the city he claims. Here they meet the major players of the area and learn that Etienne's power is not secure. The players learn that Gauthier de Dampiere, a crusader who has targeted Cainites before, has arrived in Acre and is meeting with members of the various military orders. What he is doing here is unknown as yet, but the Cainites' agents report that he is preaching a warning of a great evil among the crusader army. They also witness a demonstration of the aura's power, as a Cainite submits to God's judgment and tries to enter the city, being destroyed in the process.

There follows the death of several crusaders, some of whom are ghouls in the service of crusader Cainites. These thralls committed atrocities against the local Muslim populace, and they seem to have fallen victim to Islamic Cainites operating in the area. The coterie has the chance to learn more of these guerillas and perhaps make initial contact with them, leading to conflict or forging the basis for future cooperation.

The act closes with a midnight tournament, sponsored by Etienne for his noble guests, who are growing restless. The coterie becomes more deeply involved in local politics as various factions make initial contact to sound its members out. Knightly characters have the opportunity to participate. At the climax of the tournament, all realize that the aura has vanished. The next morning, the crusader army begins its sortie into Galilee in search of food and battle.

The second act develops the twin plots of the struggle for the control of Acre and the hunt for the fragment of the True Cross. Various vampires scramble for territory and havens, and the coterie may become embroiled in such disputes. The characters may also investigate Gauthier's activities and learn that he and several other devout knights made away with the holy relic, collapsing the aura about the city. Meanwhile, Prince Etienne is faced with an ultimatum from his sire, Varsik. He must find the Cross and retain Acre or be deposed, perhaps facing a blood hunt. It is here that various factions try to gain the coterie's definite support for their plans, including Etienne, who makes it clear that he is willing to change allegiance in return for protection.

Act three brings the coterie to the climax, in which it plays a major role in settling the rulership of Acre, in the fate of the Cross or both. Sir Michael of Durham and a band of his fellow Grail Knights come onto stage at this point. While here for the crusade, he decides to pursue the Cross, both from religious devotion and a desire to bring it to the Castle on the Lake, the hidden stronghold of the Order of the Bitter Ashes. The coterie's actions determine if he is a foe, an ally or a non-factor. In the political arena, the characters have the chance to broker Prince Etienne's offer to swear allegiance to Lord Jürgen, hence putting the city into his domain, or to support another candidate. On the spiritual side, the vampires even have a chance to come into contact with the fragment of the Cross of the Passion that has rested in Acre for so long. In both arenas, the vampires face very real threats to their very survival, as well as the chance to gain great prestige.

On crusade, the stakes are always high.

INTRODUCING THE CHARACTERS

There are a few ways in which the coterie can find itself in the Holy Land and involve itself in the drama of *Ashes of Outremer*. The simplest option, and the basic assumption here, is that the characters are acting on Lord Jürgen's behalf. The characters likely gained Lord Jürgen's respect in *Shadows at Court* and they fit the bill for agents to carry his banner among the predators who are stalking King Andras' crusaders. His vassal Baron von Achern is his lead deputy on the expedition, and the coterie might be required to stay in contact with him. Alternatively, the characters might be allies of Jürgen who might support him but are not under von Achern's authority. This option would be particularly fitting for players whose characters are Teutonic Knights.

Many other options exist to bring characters to Acre during the Fifth Crusade:

- **Vassals of another Cainite, or independent crusaders:** The characters could be vassals of Count Dieter or another rival Cainite, and thus opposed to Jürgen's plans. They may also have come to the Holy Land on their own, seeking glory, wealth and land for themselves. It's entirely possible for independent Cainites to try to establish one of their own as the prince of Acre.

- **Muslim Cainites:** If the Storyteller has based his chronicle on the Islamic vampires of *Veil of Night*, the coterie could be of any clan of the *Ashirra* (a sect of Muslim vampires) — or even the *Banu Haqim* ("Children of Haqim," the Assamites) — fighting to drive the *Franj* from the Holy Land. The emphasis would be on sowing doubt and chaos among the infidels and seeing that the Cross leaves the Levant so that Muslim vampires can infiltrate the capital of the Second Kingdom.

- **Agents of Varsik:** The vampires may be native to the area, but are Eastern Christians, perhaps even Bashirites, in the service of Varsik. In this case, they accompany Aram Hovannes to Acre and work to retain his control over the area and to obtain the fragment of the True Cross.

- **Subjects of the Second Kingdom:** The characters are Europeans from the Acre area. Nominally under the rule of Etienne and, through him, Varsik, they may be aligned with one or more of the factions at play, such as Maria d'Agostino. Otherwise, they could simply be independent vampires who are caught up in the politics of their "betters."

- **Grail Knights:** The players are members of the Order of the Bitter Ashes seeking the relic to bring it safe to the Castle of the Lake. Their almost-total focus is on its recovery, although accomplishing their goal requires involvement in local intrigues.

MAJOR PLAYERS

A crusade and a scramble for a major city in Outremer brings together a wide variety of Cainites. The characters know some from *Shadows at Court*, and others are newcomers to the tale.

BARON HEINRICH VON ACHERN

Lord Jürgen's major agent at the court of King Andras, von Achern has several goals in the Holy Land. He desires most of all to gain glory for himself and his master. The war in Transylvania goes well, with the Teutonic Knights (and hence the Ventrue) establishing a more and more secure fiefdom. With King Andras' participation in this new crusade, von Achern hopes to build on his success by claiming domain from the Saracens. He dreams of establishing himself as the prince of Damietta in Egypt, and he wants the army to move as quickly as possible, even if it means a distasteful alliance with lesser Cainites. When the holy aura of Acre vanishes, he sees the greater opportunity to make the Second Kingdom a vassal-state to Lord Jürgen. After all, the Ravnos prince is obviously unfit to rule and a weakling not to be trusted. Arrogant, vain and cruel, von Achern is also pragmatic and willing to make a deal if it gets him what he wants. To make things even better, he has discovered that Kara Lupescu (his Tzimisce nemesis) and her entourage of revenant knights have followed King Andras to the Holy Land. Far away from the homeland she holds so dear, the Fiend should be easy pickings.

ETIENNE DE FAUBERGE, PRINCE OF ACRE

Above all else, Etienne wants to hold on to his unlife. He does not want to suffer Final Death unredeemed in God's eyes. The holy city of Acre also fascinates him, and he has learned to enjoy his role as an information merchant. But his sire Varsik will be very angry with the loss of the relic and may even declare a blood hunt if both the Cross and Acre are lost. Etienne is ready to cut a deal with almost anyone to save his skin, even with the Muslims. In this, he has only limited support among local Cainites, including his fellow Bashirite Ravnos. Nevertheless, he can be a valuable ally. Indeed, he has useful contacts among all sides in Acre. Information is always useful, and Etienne has a reputation for reliability. He also is willing to make concessions to retain his title, which could include even allowing a Muslim presence among the Cainites of Acre. Finally, while he is not the preferred candidate of any faction, he is the second choice of most and would therefore be an acceptable compromise. Etienne also wants to maintain the truce with the Muslims, a stance that many vampires with their hands in the trading houses appreciate.

KARA VLASZY LUPESCU

Lady Kara has spent the last six years fighting the German Ventrue at court and on the battlefield. The Tzimisce and revenant knights of her extended family, the Vlaszy, have held their own on the field of battle, but her main efforts have been at court. Unlike most Tzimisce and revenants in Hungary, who are of Romanian stock, the Vlaszy are Magyars and hence better accepted by the ruling classes of Western Hungary. She and her cousins have wormed their way further and further into the royal court and Andras' entourage. The king still respects von Achern and his mortal proxies, but Lady Kara is gaining ground every year. Her participation in the crusade is meant first to enable her to personally keep an eye on von Achern and for her family to prove its loyalty to Andras. Once the Cainite scramble after the aura's disappearance begins, Kara sees an opportunity to strike at von Achern.

MARIA D'AGOSTINO

A Genoese Lasombra, Maria is chief among the Italian Cainites of the kingdom, and whispers in the night hint that she wants to be prince herself. Maria has her haven in Haifa, disguised as the proper wife of her merchant husband, who is really her ghoul. The opening of Acre presents her with an opportunity to advance Lasombra and Genoese interests in the Holy Land while striking at those of the Ventrue, Pisans and Venetians. She has no interest in allying with Jürgen or his vassals, and she holds Germans and Hungarians in thinly disguised contempt as barbarians. She might, however, try to suborn the coterie away from Jürgen or make an offer to an independent group. Thanks to an impressive network of ghouls and other agents, she has contacts among the Templars, the watch in the Genoese quarter of Acre and in the court of King John of Brienne. She also has support from the Cappadocians in the area, as well as some of the Nosferatu who work at the lepers' hospital just outside the north wall of Acre. She wants the Crusade to divert from its plan to attack Egypt and instead move on Jerusalem. Some say that she is so consumed with

ambition that she plots to eliminate the powerful Ravnos Varsik in the process.

HANIFA BINT NASIR

A Brujah (or *Mushakis*, to use the Arabic term) on the *Ashirra* version of the Road of Chivalry, Hanifa defends local Muslims from suffering inflicted by their Christian overlords and takes revenge when she cannot protect them. She is the head of a small coterie of like-minded Muslim neonates, and she leads them in guerilla actions that are meant to spread confusion and terror among the Christian interlopers. While dealing with the *Franj* is distasteful, she is willing to take advantage of the bickering and strife that arises from the opening of Acre. If she learns of the Cross, she lends support to whomever promises to let it escape, and she fights any Cainites who try to recover it. The region is better off without the *Franj* rallying around such a relic.

ARAM HOVANNES

Aram Hovannes is a child of Varsik and another Bashirite Ravnos. He is Varsik's personal representative, whom he has sent to evaluate and upbraid Etienne for his lack of progress. When the True Cross vanishes, he will make it clear that Etienne must recover it or be deposed or even face a blood hunt. Largely indifferent to political competition between Christian and Muslim, he might aid the characters if they show any sign of trying to recover the Cross, but he opposes them if they threaten Varsik's control of Acre. He travels as a merchant with a guard of mercenaries, all ghouls, and conducts business near Acre to maintain his cover.

MINOR PLAYERS

Many other characters make brief appearances in *Ashes of Outremer*. Although they are listed as minor characters because the coterie spends relatively little time in direct contact with them, they all have important contributions to make.

GAUTHIER DE DAMPIERE

Gauthier, an aging crusader with many years of experience fighting the devils that lurk in the night, is the catalyst for much of the action. It is he who convinces brethren of the Teutonic Knights and the Knights of St. Thomas of Acre of the devils who are sure to accompany the crusade. Assuring his fellow knights of the desperate danger they face if the relic is not taken to a safe place, he and the brothers flee first to the old fort at 'Atlit, then with King Andras as he returns home. Ironically, this action opens up Acre to vampiric influence. The players' characters may never see Gauthier, or they may come face to face (or chest to sword) with him if they pursue the Cross.

LUQMAN IBN WAHID AL BASIM

A Follower of Set, Luqman wants the matter of Acre's prince settled so that the armies will move on to Egypt and weaken the Muslim regime there. Al Basim lends his support to whichever side seems most likely to win, but he opposes d'Agostino if she seems likely to get her wish to attack Jerusalem instead. A master of the verbal poisoning, al Basim operates by planting rumor and innuendo, not by direct confrontation. He directs the coterie

away from the cross if he deems it better for it to escape, or toward it if that means the quickest solution to the problem. By the end of act two, he knows that Dampiere and his knights are hiding at the ruins of 'Atlit, the future Pilgrim's Castle. He operates under disguise as a Muslim Toreador scribe named Duqaq ibn Jamil. Characters who have gone through **Bitter Crusade** may recognize the Setite agenda to use the Christian crusades to disrupt the Muslim hold over Egypt.

ALEXIA OF NICOSIA

The Usurper Alexia, banished from Jürgen's lands after the events of **Shadows at Court**, has spent much of the intervening years in the small Tremere chantry on Cyprus. She is now traveling as part of the contingent of King Hugh of Cyprus, hoping to further her thaumaturgic studies. She does her best to steer clear of Jürgen's agents, but she sees the vanishing of the city's protective aura as a great opportunity. Alexia works mightily to locate and get "the artifact" for Clan Tremere (she doubts that it is actually a fragment of the Cross). She may try to bring Dampiere and his allies together with King Andras, so that the greedy king tries to take the relic back to Europe with him. Clan Tremere could then easily claim it along the way.

MICHAEL OF DURHAM

A Grail Knight of the Order of Bitter Ashes, Sir Michael is here with his band on crusade. When he learns that the source of the aura is a fragment of the True Cross, he spares no effort to bring it to the Castle on the Lake. Of all the vampires in the Second Kingdom, save perhaps the players' characters themselves, he may be able to tolerate the relic's presence. Michael can provide the military force to tip the balance to whatever side he favors, and he favors those who help him get the Cross. He will have nothing to do with Tremere, Tzimisce or Followers of Set.

COUNT DIETER VON KARLACH

A Ventrue count traveling with Duke Leopold's Austrian contingent, he opposes von Achem's efforts to win Acre for Lord Jürgen. For him, glory and chivalric honor are paramount, and he challenges von Achem to combat at both the Midnight Tournament and the climactic trial by combat.

ACT ONE: HOLY LAND, UNHOLY NIGHTS

Act one begins in late September, 1217 with the arrival of the Hungarian, Cypriot and Austrian armies in Outremer. The crusade is already in disarray, evoking memories of the chaos that doomed the Fourth Crusade. Although King John of Brienne, titular king of Jerusalem, has the greatest claim to lead the expedition, he has trouble asserting his authority. Kings Andras of Hungary and Hugh of Cyprus do not readily obey him, while the leaders of the Military Orders — the Templars, Hospitalers and Teutonic Knights — claim the right to act on their own. Even the head of the Church in Acre, Patriarch

Radulfus of Jerusalem, claims primacy. After all, the Church itself called the crusade in the Lateran Council of 1215.

As if squabbles among the nobility were not enough, this year has seen a poor harvest in Syria. Shrunken in size after Salah al-Din's great victories in the 1180s, the Second Kingdom has ironically come to depend on Muslim Syria for its food. Combined with the boredom generated by interminable waiting, the shortage of food leads to tensions, short tempers and a lack of discipline among the Christian army. More than a few crusaders have committed atrocities against the local Muslim population while stealing food or merely for sport. In an ominous development, someone has begun taking revenge.

Cainites in the Second Kingdom face similar problems. A Christian prince holds court here, but he is a Ravnos of the Bashirite lineage — a schismatic in the eyes of Latin Christian vampires, and from an ignoble clan. Etienne's supposedly loyal subjects look for the first signs of weakness and plot to take his place, while Cainite crusaders think to take his throne for themselves or their masters. His sire grows impatient with him and sends an emissary who may seek to install himself as prince. And, of course, Acre itself — the main city of the Second Kingdom — is off limits to the unliving. The confused leadership among immortals hampers their cause as certainly as the mortals' in-fighting does their own.

SCENE ONE: ARRIVAL IN ACRE

Act one brings the characters to Acre and gives them an introduction to the local situation, letting those new to Dark Medieval Outremer get their bearings. The atmosphere is anxious, as soldiers who are eager to do battle and fulfill their vows sit and wait, while civilians try to stay out of their way and protect what little food they have. For vampires, this is not a problem. The gathering of an army from all across Europe means that there are many, many mortals for them to feed from with little chance of discovery — provided they stay away from those strong enough in their faith to resist the Damned.

PORTS OF CALL

Under the Black Cross assumes that the players are traveling as part of the crusader armies arriving from Europe, specifically in the contingent of Heinrich von Achem. But, unlike the mortal soldiers from Hungary or Austria, vampires cannot land at Acre's port. Characters making a single success of an Intelligence + Occult roll of 8 or better (less, if the characters have already been to the Levant) will know that no Cainite has been able to enter Acre for over a millennium. (Speculation is that a mighty relic generates a powerful aura.) Whatever the truth is — and centuries of investigation have failed to find it — vampires who try to enter Acre spontaneously burst into flame and suffer an agonizing Final Death. Even their ghoul servitors are in great pain the whole time they are within Acre's walls.

As a precaution, then, vampires sailing to Acre habitually make arrangements with friendly captains in Italy, Constantinople or Cyprus to travel on a ship delivering cargo to the ports of Sidon or Haifa, respectively north and south of

Acre. In the players' characters' case, traveling with von Achem's troops, they are on a ship that docks on the evening tide at Haifa, roughly a night's journey along the coast from their goal. The port is quiet, deserted of all save the workers necessary to unload the ships, for the general population takes shelter within their homes, hiding from the local crusader garrison. A few timid vendors hawk their wares of fruit, pastries and fresh water to the *Franj* warriors, but poor sales discourage them from trying very hard.

Characters traveling to Acre by other means have several options. Besides arranging their own sea travel, Cainites beginning in Constantinople could travel overland through Anatolia, then south along the east coast of the Mediterranean through Antioch, Sidon and finally arriving at Acre. They must pass through the lands of the Nicene Greeks and the Seljuk Turks, but gold and a judicious use of the Blood smoothes many a path.

A coterie journeying north from Jerusalem or other cities can simply take any of a number of roads, either inland through Judea and Galilee or along the coast from Ascalon. The greatest danger comes when crossing Muslim lines, but trade caravans do so regularly, and characters should have no difficulties arranging passage to Etienne's court. There are *Ravnos* and *Setite* traders who make a tidy sum ferrying Cainites between Jerusalem and the coast.

However the characters travel to the environs of Acre, they come to realize that they are traveling through an extended armed camp, with watch posts and bivouacs growing

more frequent by the mile. Painted shields hang from tall poles or trees, identifying noble houses coming from all across Europe. At one camp, in the light of a great bonfire, a brawl has broken out between German crusaders and newly arrived Cypriot troops. Fist and rocks have escalated to dagger and swords. No clue is to be seen what started the fight, although a lone priest stands among them shouting for peace and reminding them that, "The true enemies are the servants of Satan in Jerusalem!" His words have little effect, but the soldiers' officers bring the fighting to an end eventually.

Should the Cainites wish to intervene, von Achem forbids it. "We must be at Acre before dawn," he says, "for tomorrow night we present ourselves at the prince's court." A measure of sarcasm creeps into his voice as he adds, "The glittering palace of the Prince of Dirt!"

SCENE TWO: COURT OF DIRT

The vacuum of leadership in the mortal crusade finds its kin in the fragmented power structure of Acre's Cainites. While Etienne de Fauberge holds on to his title, other powerful vampires whisper and plot among each other, and factions dance to see which might take his place when the time is right. The characters become a part of these dark games — slightly at first, then more markedly when the power brokers realize that the coterie itself may hold the keys.



UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

This scene illustrates the fault lines dividing the vampires of Acre and the fragile nature of Etienne's rule. It may even occur to the players that no one in Acre cares much about the crusade itself. Instead, they all focus on achieving their own objectives. The characters have to choose among the factions for themselves. It also provides the first warnings of the presence of Gauthier de Dampiere, who has come on a crusade of his own. Finally, this scene provides graphic evidence of the aura's power, as an exhausted Cainite surrenders himself to God's judgment.

CARAVANSARY

Etienne makes his haven within the walls of an ancient caravansary, a large inn surrounding a courtyard a bit more than a mile from St. Anthony's Gate. In the guise of the pious host, he provides traveling merchants with rest, stabling and storage, while he in turn gains intelligence from them and occasionally feeds. He walks among those who live outside the city's walls, even within the area of the aura's influence. Although he is constantly in pain from the holy aura, and despite the occasional flames that flicker around his undead skin if he ventures too close, he is obsessed with Acre and its secret, and he feels that the pain serves to purify him before God.

The arrival of so many soldiers has made many potential havens outside of Acre unsafe, so Etienne has graciously offered lodging in secure storerooms and a small series of underground catacombs that were built by Christians in the days of Diocletian's persecutions. "Besides," he adds, "I have the room to spare. With the coming of war, there will soon be few caravans on the road." He only asks that dwellers in the catacombs treat them with respect. They also sheltered Nestorian Christians, persecuted by the Byzantines in the Fifth Century and still regarded as heretics by the Latin and Greek Churches. "Like us, they were damned, but they still adored God."

PRESENTATIONS AND PRESENTIMENTS

Etienne holds court beginning just after sundown, when his ghoulish servitors close the gates to the courtyard and set up a simple throne for him by an ancient Roman fountain. Torches surround the courtyard in sconces on the wall, but not close enough to invoke Röttschreck. If, however, they make his Cainite guests a bit uncomfortable, then Etienne is pleased. A little discomfort promotes humility. Beneath the moon and stars, Etienne invokes the name of God and welcomes his guests. He calls for God's blessings on the crusade and its warriors and prays that it may succeed before the coming Day of Judgment, "which Bashir has shown is coming soon."

He then invokes the Tradition of Domain and explains his laws. In addition to the Six Traditions, Etienne has but one firm command. There is to be no violence of any sort within a mile of the city — that is, within the influence of the aura. "For it would be a mortal sin against God to raise fist or bare fang in anger within his Realm of Peace. Those who violate this command will be taken within the city and, with the coming of night, be left to God's punishment." With that, he calls for the newcomers to present themselves.

Unless they have achieved substantial rank, the characters are left until last, so they have a chance to observe. In turn, they

notice the keen gazes coming from the Cainites who are already resident in Acre. A Perception + Alertness roll (difficulty 7) with a single success reveals that the others are sizing up the new arrivals. Two or more successes show that one in particular — a dark-haired Cainite woman in expensive Italian fashions — is staring at Count von Achern with barely concealed contempt. This is the Lasombra Maria d'Agostino. The characters can also pick out a face from the past: the Tremere Alexia of Nicosia. Wearing clothes of a significantly more Moorish cut since her appearance in Magdeburg years ago, the Usurper seems to be doing her best to avoid everyone in von Achern's party. If the characters approach her during the evening, especially if they challenge her right to be here, she pointedly reminds them that this is not Magdeburg.

The first to present himself is von Achern, although Count Dieter objects that he has rank over a "common baron." Before von Achern can do more than glare and begin to reach for his sword, Etienne signals all to silence and consults with a thin, aquiline-faced Cainite standing behind him on his right. This Cainite is Aram Hovannes, an agent of Varsik. After a moment, he rules for von Achern, as he is also a Teutonic Knight. Count Dieter presents himself second, much to his chagrin.

The players' characters come next, if they were not part of the retinue of a noble Cainite. Prince Etienne interviews them about their past and their intentions in the Holy Land, and he grants them permission to feed while here. Following them, only Alexia remains to present herself. As she approaches Etienne's throne and begins to speak, another voice calls from the shadows near the gate, "I claim precedence over the Usurper."

From under an arch, there steps forth an elegant, cold beauty who also graced the halls of Magdeburg keep those years ago: Lady Kara Vlaszy Lupescu. As she walks forward, flanked by two Vlaszy knights, the characters note von Achern's ghoulish knights putting hand to sword and hear the baron himself suppress a bestial growl. "I am Lady Kara Vlaszy Lupescu, child of Radu and warlord of the Knights of Vlaszy. I am here on crusade and seek your permission to hunt." Observant characters may recall looking in that direction earlier yet seeing no one in the arch.

Before the murmurs that rise from the gathered company can become shouts, Etienne again signals for silence. He chides Kara for her lack of courtesy but accepts her introduction and grants her permission to hunt. He also warns her to preserve the peace of Acre, "for we have heard of your war with the Tremere." He then turns to Alexia, who glares at Lupescu, and grants her permission as well.

After the presentations, Etienne turns to the crowd and issues them a further warning to be wary around mortals: "...especially the mortal crusaders. I have heard that there is in Acre a knight of great holiness, by the name Gauthier de Dampiere. He preaches to all who will listen that devils follow the crusade, demons in human form. We do not know what his plans are, for we are nearly blind in Acre, but we do know that he has been talking to the military orders. Be circumspect, and remember to preserve the Silence of the Blood."

JUDGMENT NIGHT

The coterie may be expecting a welcoming feast at this point, but Etienne has other plans. After the audience is

ASHES OF OUTREMER

RUMOR MILL, REDUX

Once again, the characters have plenty of time to gather rumors and other information among the assembled Cainites and ghouls. Some of this information can also pop up later in the story. Charisma + Politics rolls remain appropriate.

- **Etienne:** "Not much of a prince, is he?"; "You see that one whispering in his ear? That's an agent of Etienne's sire, here to keep an eye on him."; "I hear he bargained with Hardestadt once, many years ago."

- **The Crusade:** "Another foolish game played by popes and princes."; "Jerusalem is sure to fall. I hear the Assamites have withdrawn to Persia. The other Muslims vampires don't have a hope without them."; "I hear say King Andras wants to get his hands on as many holy relics as he can."

- **Gauthier de Dampiere:** "I saw him in Constantinople 15 years ago, you know. He killed three Brujah himself."; "He hears the voice of St. Paul when he sleeps, they say."; "I hear he's gathering members of the military orders at the Monastery of the Apostles in the city."

- **Von Achem:** "Long live the undead king of Hungary! Hah!"; "He wants to usurp his master, Lord Jürgen. This crusade is his way to do it."

- **Count Dieter:** "An Austrian. He's a distant vassal of Hardestadt, but he hates Lord Jürgen."; "He's enthralled to that Hungarian Patrician... Arpad, Nova Arpad."; "His sire was in league with the Baali, you know."

- **Kara and the Tzimisce:** "She's killed four of von Achem's childer over the last five years. Four."; "She took a blood oath to Vladimir Rustovitch when she was a mortal girl, that one. Her whole family does that."; "I hear she ruts with King Andras of Hungary."

- **Alexia of Nicosia:** "She's under a blood hunt in Germany."; "She's here to steal the secrets of Saracen blood magic. Good luck, wench."

- **Maria d'Agostino:** "She basically runs trade out of the Genoan Quarter in the city."; "I hear the Cainite Heresy wants her destroyed and that's why she can't return to Italy."; "She was born a Moor, you know. Still is, really."

concluded, a frail, distracted-looking Nosferatu bows before the prince. "Are you certain of this, Jerome," the Ravnos asks. The vampire, wrapped in leper's robes, says nothing. He merely nods. Etienne has a look of near-ecstasy on his face, and he tells the assembled Cainites that, tonight, Jerome has decided to accept God's judgment: He will either be healed of his curse or destroyed. "Let us walk with him and bear witness."

The gates open, and Etienne leads the assemblage into the late night. A light mist covers the ground, and wan moonlight bathes the walls of Acre. As the characters come within a mile of the city, a painful prickling begins at the back of their necks and

hands — the first sign of the aura's presence. Maria d'Agostino, walking nearby, leans toward one of the coterie members and says softly, "I would go no closer. Etienne is a fool who finds salvation in pain. The Leper's fate will be the same as all the others who approach Acre too closely — the fires of Hell."

The crowd stops and watches as Jerome continues his journey, the breeze carrying the sounds of prayer from his blistered lips. As the coterie watches, he walks toward the Gate of Maupas, his steps more plodding and his body bent as if in great pain. Soon the sharp-eyed see smoke rising from him and the light of small flames licking around his head. Then, before anyone can intervene, he falls to the ground in a heap and suddenly bursts into a bright white fire. No sounds or screams come from him, just a few seconds of blazing fire and then nothing but smoldering ashes. After a moment of staring in sadness at the spot of the Leper's end, Etienne turns to the assembled vampires. "God has judged Jerome and found him sinful. Let us repair to our havens and pray for him." With that, the Cainites disperse into the night.

SCENE THREE: SNAKES CRAWLING IN THE DESERT

This scene disabuses the characters of any notions that their side has the monopoly on virtue, and it illustrates the bad effect that inactivity is having on the morale and discipline of the army of the Fifth Crusade. Left to their own devices, soldiers both mortal and immortal seek to release their tensions on the nearest target, often innocent civilians. The scene also serves to introduce the coterie to another player in the Acre power structure, the guerillas of Hanifa bint Nasir. She is a staunch defender of Muslims but is not averse to dealing with Christians. She has traded information with Etienne in the past, so the characters may lay the seeds of cooperation in this scene so that they can bear important fruit later.

DEADLY SPORT

In the middle of October, a few weeks after the immolation of Jerome, the coterie hears word of the massacre of a family of Muslim innkeepers by Christian soldiers. Soon after rising for the evening, news is brought to the characters by Duqaq ibn Jamil, the Toreador scribe at Etienne's court. Duqaq is the cover identity of the Setite Luqman ibn Wahid al Basim, but the characters have no way of knowing that.

He tells them that the family in question had been hiding its Islamic faith, having made a false conversion to Christianity. They were discovered in prayer several nights ago by a patrol consisting of a French Cainite and his ghouls. The vampire gave the ghouls the women "to make sport with," then executed the entire family. "It seems they had grown bored here and needed excitement."

But now there is a problem. The Frenchmen have vanished. They went out on patrol in the same direction last night, but they have not returned, and no word has come of them tonight. Duqaq has come to the coterie as an emissary from Etienne. He wishes them to follow the patrol's path and discover its fate, before rumor runs rampant through the army. They are to leave tonight, tell no one and report back to Duqaq.

Players who make a Perception + Empathy roll (difficulty 7) are confident that Duqaq is telling the truth. In fact, he is. Etienne suspects Hanifa's work and is concerned about his position should it be known that Muslim Cainites were killing Christian vampires in his territory. The prince can confirm Duqaq's words if need be, although he won't appreciate any lack of subtlety on the coterie's part.

Luqman has chosen the characters as Etienne's errand-boys for reasons of his own. He is well aware that von Achern wants to make for Damietta and the Nile, and he hopes that sending vampires allied with him toward evidence of the problems of waiting around will spur the baron to action. He may also have heard that the coterie has previous experience solving problems such as this (as evidenced by its activities during *Shadows at Court*). If the characters are not tied to von Achern, he hopes that their investigation will still spur on the Christian forces and the predators among them.

PERCEPTIONS OF TRUTH

The trip to the inn takes no more than two or three hours. On arrival, the coterie sees an empty burned shell, likely the work of the patrol. If the coterie examines the ground around the inn, one success at a Perception + Survival roll (difficulty 7) reveals faint horse tracks heading into rough country to the north. Two successes confirm that someone tried, but failed, to cover the trail. A single Perception + Investigation roll (difficulty 7) uncovers a grisly find: the severed hand of a small child and a bloody doll in Arab dress.

Following the trail leads to a small box canyon among the rough hills beyond the inn. The sight that greets the coterie is one of a vampire's greatest fears. A full garment of knight's armor lies on the ground, seemingly pinned there by a sharpened wooden stake. The armor shows signs of scorching and contains a quantity of fine gray ash: Its wearer was staked for the sun. An Intelligence + Politics roll (difficulty 6) identifies him as a French noble from the heraldry on his shield. Nearby lie the remains of his servitors, who have been hacked to ribbons then savaged by animals.

On a Perception + Alertness roll (difficulty 8), the characters hear movement on the stones behind them. Otherwise, they are surprised when a woman's voice says, "I'd like to think he screamed when the sun rose, the way that little girl did when he hacked off her hand. But I know it couldn't have been." Looking around, the coterie sees that the canyon is blocked by an armed band of warriors — Muslims by their dress, Cainites by their skill and demeanor. There are three more of them than the number of the coterie, with the extras at the top of the canyon walls with bows. Hanifa bint Nasir continues: "Now, *Franj*, tell us why we shouldn't stake you, too."

The coterie has a number of options here. Cainites on the Road of Heaven or Chivalry can probably convincingly denounce the French vampire's actions as sinful or dishonorable, perhaps even asserting that they, too, would have taken revenge. Depending on the vampires' approach, use what combination of Traits you think are appropriate. However they proceed, they must make three successes at difficulty 7. Let the negotiations continue until the coterie succeeds, but make the characters sweat. A botch in this case merely raises the needed

successes by one. Hanifa really does not want a fight now. What she wants is someone to take her warning back. Honorable war is one thing, but butchery will be answered with butchery. "Tell Etienne that we will respect a truce as long as he controls his domain. Should another supplant him, the truce is dead."

If the characters are spoiling for a fight, the characters can attack, but they will not escape serious injury. Hanifa and her warriors will retreat after a few turns, melting into the night, but not before the archers plant a few arrows in the characters' backs, a lesson to the rash. Use the Teutonic Knight and Gangrel Predator templates for Hanifa's coterie (see p. 101), adding appropriate Disciplines to reflect their clan.

TALKING WITH A SERPENT

Upon their return, the characters are met by Luqman/Duqaq, who is waiting for their report. When he hears the news, he tells the characters that it is as Etienne feared: "The excesses of you *Franj* are arousing the anger of the Muslim vampires. I have no doubt the *Banu Haqim*, whom you call Assamites, are already among us. And tonight I have heard rumors of mortals fighting within the city as food grows short. At times, I think the Muslims merely have to wait — the Christians will tear themselves down."

SCENE FOUR: TOURNAMENT AT MIDNIGHT

This scene provides a break for players in need of the thrill of combat, for Etienne has decided to host a midnight tournament for his crusader guests. The festival mood provides welcome relief to the tension engendered by the last few weeks of enforced inactivity and allows Etienne to reinforce his station. The climax comes not in the final combat, however, but at the moment when all present realize that the holy aura of Acre has vanished. In the events that follow, the characters are drawn deeper into Acre's Cainite politics, and they can become power brokers themselves.

It is the end of October, and the lowering clouds and cold winds that blow from the mountains mirror the depression among the crusaders. Food is still short, and there has been no word of the fleet coming to take the army to Egypt. It is with likely delight, then, that the coterie receives word that Prince Etienne will host a tournament the next evening, an event to lighten spirits and give warriors a chance to practice their martial skills. Baron von Achern in particular welcomes the chance to test himself against both Count Dieter and Lady Kara.

JOUSTING WITH SWORDS

The coterie arrives at a large cleared field, perhaps 100 yards on a side, near some secluded Roman ruins but within sight of Acre's walls. All the Cainites whom the characters met at Etienne's court are present, and, as retainers of Baron von Achern, the characters are expected to help prepare him for battle. Still, they are not passive observers, and they may participate in the various tests and interact with the other guests.

The tournament begins with Etienne addressing the crowd and welcoming his guests. At his side, as always, is Varsik's agent, Aram. A success at a Perception + Empathy roll (diffi-

culty 8) will show that Etienne is more nervous in Aram's presence than he has been in the past. He explains that there will be three events or tests: a javelin toss, single combats and a general melee. Combats end on the first blood or surrender, and all actions are afoot, as the night makes the ground too treacherous for horses. Some of the Franks in attendance (including the characters) may well scoff at such a limitation, but they know that Etienne is still prince, and his rules hold.

As Storyteller, use the regular combat rules to adjudicate the results of these tests, the greater number of successes indicating the winner. Spectacular successes in combat may call for frenzy rolls on the part of the victim. In the course of the tournament, two incidents stand out:

- **Javelin Hurl:** After a run of five yards, the first contestants all throw their spears at a mannequin in Saracen dress that hangs from a pole. Kara Lupescu is last, and, pausing before her run, comments that a stationary target is no challenge to a warrior. At that, to gasps from the crowd, two ghouls bring forth a bound and blindfolded mortal. They unbind him, and, given a shove, he runs in terror as he realizes what is in store for him. Before he can get far, however, the Fiend trots a few steps and flings the spear with all her might. An instant later, it finds its mark, piercing the fleeing Arab through the heart and pinning him to the ground. To Etienne's chagrin at this affront and the applause of others, Lupescu bows and leaves the field. Characters who have dealt with Kara before may find this out of character, and it is somewhat. She intends to have the as-

sembled Cainites dismiss her as a typically cruel Fiend, not as a rival and threat. For the most part, it works.

- **Single Combat:** The highlight is the battle between Baron von Achern and Count Dieter, who have been rivals since their arrival in Acre. Although the fight is to first blood, each fights with the savagery of real battle. At the last, von Achern scores a mighty hit, the pain from which sends Count Dieter into frenzy. It comes to an end quickly as the baron strikes another blow that completely incapacitates the count, though it does not send him into torpor. Humiliated, Count Dieter is dragged from the field, muttering of revenge.

JOUSTING WITH WORDS

Non-combatants among the Cainites can move among the audience and speak with Acre's vampires. Tailor the conversations to fit the details of your own chronicle and the coterie. Stories of their activities in Magdeburg and the war in Transylvania may well dominate much of their conversation. The major actors in Etienne's court all have things to add as well:

- **Aram Hovannes:** Smooth as the skilled merchant he was in life, Varsik's agent talks in general pleasantries that reveal none of Varsik's displeasure with Etienne. Rather, a perceptive character may realize that Aram is subtly asking her questions, trying to learn where she stands and what she knows of the crusade's next moves.

- **Maria d'Agostino:** This Genoese Magister is accompanied at all times by her ghoul bodyguard, who poses as her husband and the head of the family during the day. She does little



UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

to hide her contempt for Etienne, arguing that the vampires of the Second Kingdom should be ruled by a European prince, but someone more sophisticated than the Ventrue brutes from Germany. Unless the coterie has demonstrated great loyalty to Baron von Achern, she will sound the character out on the possibility of providing support, "in case of political change."

• **Alexia of Nicosia:** The Usurper seeks out a member of the coterie, preferably one who may have shown her some sympathy during their first encounter. She sounds them out and lets slip that she is interested in making amends to Lord Jürgen somehow. She also suggests that whatever is causing the aura around Acre could be used against the Tzimisce if the Tremere were allowed to study it.

• **Prince Etienne:** The Ravnos seems uncomfortable and pensive, unable to appreciate the night's entertainment. A sympathetic word from a player's vampire elicits the admission that his inability to discover the source of the aura has displeased his sire, Varsik. "If I do not succeed soon, perhaps Aram will be prince here at the next crusade." He drops subtle hints that he may be willing to change allegiance to Lord Jürgen in return for protection, though any clumsy or blatant offer of treason repels him.

THE AURA FALLS

The climax to the scene comes during the final general melee, a few hours before dawn, when the combatants divide into two equal groups and charge each other. Armed with ax, sword, mace and hammer, each Cainite and ghoul involved wants the glory of being the last standing. Play-out individual combats for each character involved, and make them as dramatic as possible. Call for frenzy rolls and let one or two non-player vampires fail theirs for dramatic effect.

When you judge the moment right, perhaps as a player's vampire becomes one of the last standing, a screech cuts through the night and stops everyone in place. It is Etienne, and he stares back toward Acre with a look of horror on his face. "It's gone, it's gone," he shrieks. It takes a moment, but players who succeed on an Intelligence + Alertness roll (difficulty 7) realize what's missing: The aura is gone. They no longer feel the ever-present tingling in their hands and neck that they felt whenever they were in sight of Acre. It is as if it never existed.

For the first time in a thousand years, Acre is an open city.

ACT TWO: INTO THE CITY

This act changes the pace and tempo of *Ashes of Outremer*. Where before everything was filled with the interminable boredom of waiting, the disappearance of the aura spurs Acre's Cainites to activity like ants whose hill has been kicked over. They rush to establish havens and domain in the city and to discover what happened to the aura. Political maneuvering quickens as well, for the loss of the fragment of the True Cross leads Aram to deliver an ultimatum to Etienne: find it or be deposed and perhaps even placed under a blood hunt. At Etienne's court, all factions court the characters for the struggle that is sure to come.

Again, the change in the vampire world is mirrored by the actions of their mortal kine — or is it the other way around? The evening after the midnight tournament, the coterie and the vampires of Acre learn that Kings John and Andras, as well as Duke Leopold of Austria, have marched their armies south into Galilee on an extended raid in search of food and holy relics. Perhaps the rumored piece of the True Cross has left with them?

The mood in this act is one of anxiety and activity, as the vampires are kept in motion from one scene to the next and they struggle to fulfill twin goals: find the relic and gain Acre for Lord Jürgen. There is also a sense of wonder, as they explore a city that no Cainite has entered since the time of Christ.

SCENE FIVE: SAFE HAVENS

October gives way to November and, as mortal armies march, Cainites are also on the move. The power struggles in Acre intensify in this scene as vampires stake their claims to lairs within the city. They also seek the answer to the mystery of the aura and how they may profit from it. They also discover Dampiere's role in the relic's fate.

The scene begins the night after the tourney, when Baron von Achern calls the characters into a conference. The atmosphere in his lair is like a council of war. Armed and armored for battle, von Achern tells them to enter Acre and make a haven for themselves there. Their actions will help stake Lord Jürgen's claim to Acre, should Etienne fall — as von Achern expects him to. The fate of the relic is a secondary goal. They should only be concerned if it looks likely to fall into Lupescu's hands. With that, he dismisses them.

VIRGIN TERRITORY

The coterie enters Acre through the Gate of Maupas, ironically using the same route that the Leper Jerome took — and met his Final Death on — several weeks earlier. They are greeted by a city awake at night and relaxed, now that most of the army has moved on. Torches burn at the entrances to businesses catering to late-night revelers, and the *suq*, Acre's marketplace, is crowded with townsfolk enjoying an evening's shopping. Here and there among the crowds, the vampires see others of their kind searching for new havens and hunting for blood. The following are samples of what they may come across in their wanderings:

• **The Madman:** Along the harbor's edge deep within the Pisan Quarter, a long jetty leads out to an ancient structure, the Tower of Flies. On a pile of rope where the jetty meets the street, a ragged beggar sits, alternately laughing and shouting curses at the tower. When asked, he replies that the tower should by rights be his, but squatters have already taken it over. He points at the rats crawling along the rocks of the jetty and laughs: "It seems our kind have been here all along." He then runs off to drive the rats out of "his home."

• **First Feeding:** Passing near the Palace of the Patriarch in the old town, a scream rings out from an alley. As they enter it, a fleeing woman slams into them, blood pouring from her neck. She shouts in French of "monsters" and that "the *chevaliers* at the Monastery of the Apostles was right," referring to Dampiere. Behind her comes a vampire caught in a feeding frenzy, obvi-

ously a newly released neonate. Lips smeared with blood, she glares at the coterie and hisses, "The cow is mine!" With a panicked kine in their arms and a frenzied Cainite before them, how will the vampires prevent a scene and preserve the Sixth Tradition? Saving the woman can help lead them to Dampiere, but it may also make them enemies among their own kind. If they manage to save her, she is very thankful. Her name is Eloise, a lay sister in the Hospital of St. John, and she can tell them that a group of brother knights have been preaching about "night devils" at the small Monastery of the Apostles in the shadow of St. Andras' Church.

- **Holy Land:** The aura of fiery faith that surrounded the city may have fallen, but that does not mean that Acre is an easy city in which to be a vampire. A city in the Holy Land bearing the marks of several crusades, the city is a network of churches, shrines, old Muslim sites and monasteries. For the Damned, much of the ground still radiates with the faith of the mortal populace and the influence of God. The coterie should come up against various examples of holy ground — from well-tended minor shrines to major churches and holy sites that date back to the first century AD. Enterprising characters might try to get a sense of the most powerful patterns of holy ground in the hopes of finding the resting-place of the Cross fragment. Doing so is hardly easy, but players can make an extended Perception + Occult roll (difficulty 9). Each turn represents about a half-hour of searching, and failing two rolls in a row means losing the ephemeral trail. By accumulating 10 successes, the characters find their way to the Monastery of the Apostles. At the Storyteller's discretion, levels of Auspex may add to the dice pool for these rolls.

- **The Magyars:** Vlaszy knights are among those scrambling through the city looking for havens. As the characters explore the eastern quarters, they will note that the Vlaszy have claimed the so-called Accursed Tower in the city wall's corner. Depending on their allegiances, the characters may come into conflict with some of the Vlaszy who challenge their rights to be nearby. Kara Lupescu is not at the tower. She too has heard of Dampiere's activities at the Monastery of the Apostles and has gone to investigate. If you need a way to get characters to the next scene, they might catch of a glimpse of her stalking around and follow her there.

RELIQUARY

Whether they are following rumors, Lupescu or the patterns of fate in the city, the characters eventually come to the small Monastery of the Apostles on a deserted street by the Church of St. Andras, between the Pisan and Genoese quarters. The monastery is hardly spectacular, more of a house that wraps around a gated courtyard. The iron gate is locked but hardly impossible to get through, either by climbing or wriggling through the bars. Character may also enter through one of the windows on the second floor, gaining access to the monastery. The ambient holiness of the site is palpable, and the Damned may feel their Beasts stir (ask for Courage rolls at your discretion).

The courtyard is a small square overlooked by the two-story monastery on all sides. The corners and walls of the courtyard feature shrines to the various Apostles of Christ, the largest being to St. Paul the Missionary, at the center of the far

HOLY GROUND

Holy ground has several effects and is rated in terms of a Faith rating. To summarize the full rules (which appear in several supplements), players make a Willpower roll when their Cainite characters try to enter holy ground (difficulty equal to the Faith rating). Success means they can proceed, although they still feel uncomfortable. Failure means they suffer one level of bashing damage per turn in the site. A botch means they cannot proceed. If the characters remain through the day, the players must make that roll again at dawn. All blood expenditures are doubled on holy ground, and difficulties for Auspex, Chimerstry and Obtenebration (and all perception-altering powers) increase by two. Blessed mortals (those with True Faith), however, have their rating increased by one level on holy ground (or more on especially potent sites).

Some examples of holy ground in Acre include:

Site	Faith	Notes
Monastery of the Apostles	4	-
Monastery's Shrine to St. Paul for the blessed	6	+2 Faith
St. Andrew's Church	3	-
St. Anthony's Gate	1	-
St. Nicholas Tower	2	-
St. Sebastian's Church	3	-

wall. What was once a surface of cobblestones before the representation of the Apostle and his donkey, is now a gaping hole. The cobbles lie in a rough pile nearby, obvious dug out of the shrine. If and when the characters get within a few yards of the shrine, the power of God burns at them with increased intensity (see sidebar and table). By the time they get there, however, the characters are likely to have other problems — in the form of the two armed knights: Teutonic Brother Karl and Brother Duncan of the Knights of St. Thomas.

Just how Karl and Duncan react to the coterie depends on the characters' behavior. Gauthier and his allies took the Cross fragment from its hiding place under the shrine of St. Paul the previous night and left for 'Atlit the following morning with a cadre of bother knights. Karl and Duncan were tasked with guarding the shrine from any devils who come to desecrate it. If the characters look obviously inhuman or are dressed as Saracens, the knights attack. If they are dressed as monks, pilgrims or crusaders (especially Teutonic Knights), the characters have a better chance of escaping without combat. The brothers are no fools, however, and Gauthier has warned them that devils move among the crusaders. The brothers ask the characters to recite the Lord's Prayer before the shrine of St. Paul. Doing so means approaching the holiest spot in the monastery and requires a Courage roll (difficulty 8) to endure the pain. Those who go through with it suffer one level of bashing damage but get a good chance to examine the excavated resting-place of the Cross fragment. The final complication

is that Brother Duncan is blessed with true sight. After a few minutes of interaction, roll his Perception + Faith (a total of five dice while near the shrine). A single success means that he senses evil from the characters and strikes.

Regardless of how the vampires cajole information from Karl and Duncan, they can learn that the Cross did indeed lie here and that Dampiere left with it. "The Cross of Our Lord, stained with His blood, which has rested here since St. Paul gave it to Acre's first Christians," is how they describe it. The brothers, however, do not know where Dampiere and his fellow knights have taken the fragment. A messenger was to come and get them once the relic was secure. They may also learn some of the same information by interrogating some of the monks at the monastery.

Use the Teutonic Knight template for Karl and Duncan. Each also has True Faith 1 (raised to 2 in the monastery and 3 near the shrine). They fight to the death, but they can be incapacitated and interrogated, and they are not above spitting out dying curses that reveal the Cross' fate.

SCENE SIX: DEMARCHE

Several weeks pass without a major development. Finding Gauthier proves very difficult, although the characters can gather a few facts. Several skilled knights from the militant orders (mostly the Teutonic Knights and Knights of St. Thomas) have gone missing and are said to have left on an expedition with Gauthier. The characters may also uncover that others are searching for Dampiere, including Kara Lupescu and Alexia of Nicosia. Kara seems to be onto the same leads as they are, having visited the monastery. If they don't go see him of their own volition, Duqaq catches wind of the characters' inquiries and offers to help as partial repayment for the services that they have rendered him before. He will contact them when he knows more. During this time, however, the political situation among the Cainites of Acre almost completely ruptures.

THE LAST STRAW

One evening, the coterie receives a summons to Etienne's court, but from Aram, rather than Etienne. Upon arrival, the characters find themselves alone. Raised voices and even shouting can be heard from a side chamber. If they listen, they hear Etienne plead that he has done his best, but Aram cuts him off. Varsik's agent accuses Etienne of forgetting his duties, of neglecting Varsik's interests to pursue his own games as an information merchant. He knows that Etienne has had dealings with Hanifa and many others. "Recover the Cross," he says, "or be cast down from your throne and renounced by your sire."

The interview between Aram and Etienne closes, and the coterie has just enough time to retreat and not be discovered eavesdropping. At the same time, the important Cainites of Acre arrive. They, too have received Aram's summons. When they gather, Aram mounts the dais with Etienne at his side, clearly in an inferior position. He announces an offer from "Varsik, sire of the current prince, Etienne de Fauberge," with a decided edge to the word "current." If anyone present recovers the holy relic and gives it to Varsik, that Cainite will have the eternal friendship of the most powerful Christian vampire in Jerusalem, a debt not to be sneered at. After letting that sink in,



ASHES OF OUTREMER

he signals the entertainers to begin. He then turns and leaves the Prince of Dirt to his misery.

The other vampires mix and talk in hushed whispers over warm cups of blood as jugglers perform among them, but the forced conviviality cannot wholly mask the tense negotiations taking place. Baron von Achern will tell the characters that this is the opportunity he needs to gain Acre for Lord Jürgen. They are to mix with the others and sound them out on the idea of von Achern becoming prince and to find out what each wants in return. As Storyteller, you can make use of the information provided in the character descriptions in **Chapter Four: Dramatis Personae** and in this chapter to play each of the Storyteller characters as they pursue their goals. It is here that Etienne will make a definite, but discrete offer to switch allegiance to Lord Jürgen in return for protection. By the end of this act, the players should realize that the only practical way to gain Acre for Lord Jürgen is to keep Etienne on the throne as his vassal. To do so will mean gaining the acquiescence of a majority of the other vampires, including Baron von Achern, to present Aram with a *fait accompli*.

THE GAUNTLET THROWN

At some point in the midst of the conspiring, the doors to the courtyard of the caravansary swing open. Above the noise of steel swords being drawn from their scabbards, a familiar woman's voice rises above the din: "Blessings on the house of the prince of Acre! We have come to enjoy your hospitality." It is the Muslim Brujah Hanifa bint Nasir and her coterie. Although their swords are sheathed, it is clear that they are watchful and prepared to fight.

Shouts rise from the crowd, and Etienne's ghoulish retainers move to attack, but he stops them with a gesture. He welcomes Hanifa and grants her the protection due a guest, as long as she keeps the peace. "The Peace of God be with you. What is your business?"

On a successful Perception + Alertness roll (difficulty 7), a character will notice her glance meaningfully his way before answering, and a further success (difficulty 8) will alert him that Duqaq and perhaps others almost certainly saw it, too. Her answer, though spoken to Etienne, is directed at Aram, who glares hatred in return: "Just this. Varsik is a Christian in a Muslim city, and he should be cautious of dictating terms. This is a time of war between faiths and placing a hateful lick-spittle or *Franj* warlord as sultan would be a provocation. Varsik is a trader, and roads can be closed and hospitality revoked, after all."

Bowing, she and her coterie then turn and leave.

ACT THREE: MONSTERS AND MASTERS

This act brings *Ashes of Outremer* to its conclusion. The pace quickens again as the actions that the coterie undertakes may well decide the fates of Prince Etienne and one of the most powerful artifacts in all Christendom. A new force arrives in Acre in the form of Sir Michael of Durham and his entourage. He wants to protect the relic by bringing it to the Castle on the

UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

Lake. Gauthier de Dampiere makes his move, too, deciding to seek protection at the court of King Andras of Hungary when word spreads about that monarch's planned departure for home. At the same time, the various factions make their final deals to decide Acre's prince.

In the mortal world, this initial phase of the crusade also draws to a close. King John's two attacks against the Muslim fort of Mt. Tabor fail, as he mysteriously withdraws his troops each time they are on the verge of success. In the midst of winter, a force of nearly 500 Hungarian knights and sergeants is almost wiped out while raiding in the mountains, seeking to establish their own domain without their king's permission. And King Hugh of Cyprus lays dying in Sidon. His passing marks the loss of the Hungarian king's interest in the crusade and his decision to return to Europe.

The mood of this act is one of closing possibilities, decisions and last gambles. It is mid-December, and an unusually cold, dark winter has left snow on the ground.

SCENE SEVEN: BITTER ASHES

This short scene introduces a new power into the swirling politics of Acre, one that stands above Cainites' petty squabbles and seeks only God's Will. The arrival of Michael of Durham and his entourage can provide enough force for the coterie to support whichever faction they back for the throne and be sure of winning. Durham is interested in one thing only, however — the fragment of the True Cross.

THE BEST AMONG THE WORST

One evening in December, as a light snow falls from a cloud-cloaked sky, the coterie is attending Etienne's court. Few others of importance are there, a sign of how weak the Prince of Dirt's position has become. The characters are there perhaps because they are Etienne's allies, perhaps because von Achern uses them as his eyes and ears, or even because they feel a measure of sympathy for the Ravnos.

Whatever the reason, the night's silence is broken by the jingling of horses' reins. A party of 10 riders comes into view. The company is a mixture of Cainites and mortals, but the mortals do not fear the vampires. If no character has prior experience of the order, an Intelligence + Academics (Heraldry) roll (difficulty 8) allows him to read the heraldry on the knight's shield. This is a party of the Order of the Bitter Ashes — the vampiric Grail Knights. The knights will identify themselves as they dismount, if the coterie fails to do so.

Etienne will almost be in awe as he greets Sir Michael and his entourage, not even waiting for the proper ceremonies to finish before he grants them permission to hunt and make a haven. Asked why he has come, Sir Michael graciously declines a proffered cup of blood and mentions the fragment of the True Cross, "for this is too unsettled a land for it to remain in, and we would see it safe." Etienne shakes his head and says that it is gone — to where, no one knows.

At some point, the players' characters may want to contact Michael to see if they can sway him to their cause. He disdains involvement in Cainite politics, but he agrees to support their cause if, and only if, they can lead him to the relic. Having stated his case, he leaves for his haven.

MORTAL STIRRINGS

The crusade is not going well for the characters' patron, von Achern, so the Baron is ready and willing to put the pressure on the coterie. The Hungarian knights who had set off early in December to form their own holdings in Outremer included many Vlaszy revenants, and the Baron is convinced that the deaths of most of the expedition is nothing but a cover for Lupescu to establish her vassals in a hidden stronghold nearby. Meanwhile, King Andras is wholly disillusioned with the crusade and looking to return to Hungary as soon as possible. Although the king's return would surely mean that Lupescu would head back as well, von Achern would have to as well.

The baron tells much of this to the coterie soon after the arrival of the Grail Knight and his entourage. Von Achern says that he plans to remain near King Andras and exert what influence he can to delay matters. The coterie must find the Cross fragment or another way to exert Jürgen's influence over Acre before they are all forced to head back to Hungary. If the characters are not tied to von Achern, they may hear of his concerns through the vampiric grapevine of the city. Duqaq, as always, is very well informed.

SCENE EIGHT: DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

This scene takes place a night or two after the arrival of the Grail Knight. Invited to the new haven of Maria d'Agostino, beneath a counting house owned by her family in the Genoese Quarter of Acre, the characters are offered an alliance with her faction. However they answer, or even if they demur, an acquaintance offers them information that allows them to finish things their way, if they give him what he wants.

BARGAINS OR BETRAYALS?

Beneath the House of San Angelo, the coterie is escorted by a ghoul into the presence of Maria d'Agostino. Here in her new haven, they find her in the company of others among Acre's important Cainites — Count Dieter, the Tremere Alexia and Kara Lupescu. She is clearly holding court, and her servitors act as if she were already the new prince of Acre.

She begins by stating that she intends to support Aram's seizure of the prince's title at the next full moon, a week hence. "He will think he rules, but I have the most important of the kingdom's true masters behind me, as you can see, and my hand is strengthened by the recent agreement signed between House d'Agostino and Lady Kara, for her master, *Voivode* Rustovitch. But it would be sealed if you joined me. Swear your fealty and become rulers of the Holy Land! Etienne cannot hold the throne, Aram is a heretic loyal to a heretic, and von Achern kisses the toes of the barbarian Magyars. None are true leaders. Swear!"

Successful Perception + Empathy rolls (difficulty 7) hint that her "subjects" are not as firm in their loyalties as she may think. Alexia clearly does not trust the Fiend. If the players' characters refuse or ask for time to decide, Dieter mutters about insolence and suggests that they be killed on the spot. A gesture from Maria stays his hand, "They are our guests and are free to go. We trust they will soon see the right." If they accept, Etienne is finished.

THE OFFER OF AN APPLE

As the characters approach their lair, they find Duqaq waiting for them. The Serpent in disguise wishes to speak with them privately. If they agree, he offers them a deal. He will provide them with the location of the fragment of the True Cross, and thus what they need to keep Etienne on the throne and win Acre for Lord Jürgen. But, in return, they must agree to one key thing: Under no circumstances is the army to move against Jerusalem. The crusade must stick to its original plan, and they must use all their influence and that of their allies to see that the army attacks Egypt. "It is Egypt or nothing. Do you agree?"

Characters may rightly argue that they do not have that level of authority over mortal authorities. The Hungarian and Cypriot kings are not vampiric pawns, certainly not *their* pawns. Duqaq says that he understands all that. "Kings are advised by barons and dukes, by priests and monks, and some of these are a little too fond of our blood. The Lady d'Agostino has many such friends, and she talks to them of heading for Jerusalem. Were she prince, her wishes would be that much stronger. Surely you can ensure that she does not get her way, yes?"

Should a character, perhaps one who has played in **Bitter Crusade** and thus encountered Setites determined to send a Christian crusade into Egypt, accuse Duqaq of being a Follower of Set, he will not deny it. "But think of this — our interests are the same. What harm have I done you? On the contrary, I offer you what you most desire."

If the coterie agrees, he will tell them that Dampiere hides at "the old tower of 'Atlit, the site where the Templars wish to build their new castle."

SCENE NINE: LIGHT OF SALVATION, FIRE OF DAMNATION

Scene nine brings the characters face-to-face with the power of mortal faith, both to enlighten and to destroy. The characters are now among the only vampires to know the location of the Cross fragment and Gauthier de Dampiere. They should realize that possessing so powerful an artifact is probably beyond their abilities, but using it for political (and perhaps spiritual) ends should not be.

The characters have the choice of simply giving the information to Sir Michael, accompanying him to 'Atlit to see the relic for themselves, or going there alone. In either of the former cases, Michael readily agrees to support their cause as to the principedom of Acre. If you do not wish to have them encounter such a powerful relic, Michael refuses their company, but promises to attend the court of the full moon. Otherwise, he accepts their company but warns them of the dangers. The remainder of the scene assumes that they accompany him. If they travel alone, the scene remains the same, save that Michael is not there to support them.

They also hear word that King Andras has gone on what he hopes is a last journey through the region in search of holy relics and to uncover the fate of the Magyar knights who disappeared earlier in the month. He and the band of Teutonic Knights in

his company travel by night, supposedly to better avoid Saracen warriors. In fact, this expedition came at the suggestion of various vampiric advisors. Von Achern believes that he planted the idea in Andras' mind, and he plans to find the Vlaszy revenants and eliminate them. The characters probably have no way of knowing this, but Kara Lupescu also supports the expedition. She hints to Andras that there might be relics to be had at the tower of 'Atlit, hoping that von Achern and Gauthier de Dampiere will destroy each other. Characters who do not go to 'Atlit with Michael may rejoin von Achern on this expedition.

TOWER OF THE PILGRIM

'Atlit is a set of old ruins south of Haifa, a tumbledown fort and a tower across the road. Dampiere and his knights are hiding here, hoping to figure out a way to escape the Holy Land without falling afoul of Cainites or their agents. The weeks spent at the tower have worn hard on them, and they are thin and ragged, though their faith is strong. (All have at least one level of True Faith.) There is one knight for each Cainite present, plus Gauthier.

The knights have guards posted, although the winter weather makes spotting approaching horsemen more difficult. Call for Dexterity + Stealth rolls, at a difficulty equal to the Perception + Alertness of the mortal guard, plus one for each level of True Faith that the knight possesses (two if the characters approach on horseback). Each Cainite needs three successes to approach undetected. If the characters manage to penetrate the ruins (which have an ambient Faith rating of 2 due to the Cross' presence) without being seen, Gauthier still gets a feeling that evil is afoot. He orders his knights to prepare a defense and takes the relic, wrapped in simple canvas and slips it into a bag over his back. His knight's instincts tell him to stand firm against an enemy, but he knows that escaping with the Cross must take precedence.

Just how the characters, Michael, Gauthier and his fellow knights come together depend on the players' decisions and your own preferences. Use some of the same guidelines as the characters' interactions in the monastery in Acre. If they approach as knights or pilgrims they may well get the chance to talk. Gauthier and at least one other knight share Brother Duncan's gift of true sight, but in neither case does Sir Michael seem evil to them. Fighting in the Cross' presence — including when it is strapped on Michael's back — gives all the knight three additional levels of True Faith.

If combat ensues, all the knights are ready and willing to die to protect the Cross. They fight to delay their attackers so that Gauthier can escape with the relic. They not only use swords and weapons, but push the vampires back with holy symbols with stunning effectiveness. Use the Teutonic Knight template, each with one or two levels of True Faith (not counting the bonuses from the Cross) and each with Melee 4 and Ride 4. These men are the cream of the knightly crop.

Gauthier cannot be convinced to surrender the Cross. The best that the coterie can do is convince him to accept Sir Michael's company as he brings the Cross out of the Holy Land for its protection. So, unless the characters somehow manage to kill the holy knights, the scene ends with Gauthier heading out of 'Atlit with the Cross, presumably with the characters following him.

UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

KINGS AND CROSSES

Whether it's in the company of Sir Michael or running from him and the coterie, Gauthier (and perhaps one or two of his brothers) make a run from 'Atlit that night. He runs right into King Andras' excursion toward that same tower. Needless to say, chaos ensues. Von Achern, one other vampiric knight and several ghouls are riding with the king, and when Gauthier comes riding from the tower with a fragment of the True Cross in a bag on his back, they feel what can only be the displeasure of God pass over them. Von Achern's fellow vampire — the Teutonic brother Altus — cannot stand the sudden reminder of his Damned nature. He falls from his steed and scampers into the Levantine brush. Baron von Achern maintains his composure but feels discomfort wash over him. The ghouls stir as well but remain by their lord. If the coterie is unwilling or unable to interfere, the characters can observe the following course of events:

King Andras calls for order, and Gauthier dismounts and kneels before him. "Most Christian King," he breathlessly intones in Latin, "I beg your protection. I carry a relic most holy and flee from devils in crusaders' garb. They seek to take this thing from we, which I have pledged to protect with my life. Brothers of the German Hospital, the Temple and of St. Thomas have already died to get me to your wise self."

Andras can barely suppress a proud smile, and his avarice for any holy trinket. "This relic," he asks, "what is it?"

"A fragment of the Cross of the Passion, milord. Brought to Acre by the Apostle Paul and kept safe there until this very fall, when devils came with the..." At this point, Gauthier's attention focuses on von Achern, "With the crusade."

The Ventrue baron struggles for control, his Beast recoiling from the power of the Cross but hungering for the power that it represents. His greed gets the better of him. "Our order," he stammers, "can protect this relic, King. This brave knight should hand it over to us."

"Devil!" Gauthier screams, rising and drawing his sword. His blessed sight has revealed his enemy, and he does not hesitate. "Show your true self!"

Von Achern visibly recoils from the zealous knight, falling from his steed in a pile. One of his ghouls tries to strike at Gauthier, but shock and the power of the Cross slow him. Gauthier pivots and lands a blow of his sword in the ghoul's neck. Blood gouts, and the smell of gore is the last straw that sends von Achern over edge. He leaps for Gauthier, baring fangs and spitting blood as if using the Presence power Dread Gaze. The king looks on in horror as one of his trusted advisors, revealed to be a monster from Hell, does his best to kill the holy knight Gauthier. Von Achern's cause is hopeless, though. Every time he gets within striking distance of Gauthier, white flames lick his form. Even in frenzy, he can only land a few savage blows before Gauthier lops off his head with a mighty blow of his sword. His monstrous visage burns to ash before it hits the dirt.

Von Achern's ghoul immediately flees into the night, and King Andras and his remaining knights take Gauthier (and possibly Sir Michael) into their protection. They flee toward Acre, making for Syria and Europe as soon as possible thereafter.

THE TRUE CROSS

The holy relic is a three-foot piece of dark wood marked by a dark stain reputed to be the Savior's own blood. The top of the fragment shows the mark of a hole where a nine-inch nail might have been driven into it, subsequently splitting the wood in twain. Other than that, it appears ordinary, albeit ancient. Gauthier has wrapped it in oilcloth to protect it, and he carries it at all times in a bag slung across his back.

This is a powerful artifact, and it could have serious repercussions on your chronicle were it to fall into the characters' hands. It's probably best that they not possess it. Beyond the spiritual and thematic problems of so important a holy relic being in the hands of vampires, the characters would also have to deal with the painful effects of the relic's holy aura, and the efforts of Sir Michael and his order to recover it from them. Even so, curious or devout vampire characters may want to see it — even if all they want is “just a peek.”

Following are some guidelines and systems for dealing with this holiest of relics, but feel free to conjure up other effects that suit your chronicle. The powers associated with the Cross are essentially limitless, and depending on the mood of your chronicle, such miracles as the sudden blazing of the sun in the night sky or the appearance of saints intent on protecting the relic can be altogether appropriate. Basic effects are as follows:

- This Cross fragment is a holy relic with a Faith rating of 5. This rating adds to the Faith of blessed characters who hold it, which means that Gauthier's True Faith is a stunning 8 when he has it.
- The Cross sanctifies the ground it is on. An area of roughly 20 feet around it becomes holy ground with a rating of 3. (Yes, this means that it is difficult to even approach Gauthier when he has the Cross.)
- If the Cross enters a place of Christian worship (which is already holy ground) it raises the level of that holy ground by 3. If it is placed in a reliquary or other area to be worshiped, the ambient holy ground rises by another two levels.
- A vampire who gazes at the Cross fragment and devotes his entire attention to it experiences a holy vision. This vision can be one of the Heaven denied him, the Hell that awaits him or even the holy face of Christ smiling with infinite love and remorse. Players whose characters experience such visions should roll Willpower (difficulty 9). Failure means that the character gains an appropriate derangement, such as a divergent Penitent personality.
- Any vampire who touches the Cross takes three levels of aggravated damage every turn (which he can soak with Fortitude, difficulty 8). This damage manifests as white flames that lick the victim's body.
- Players of devoutly Christian vampires (Road of Heaven 8+) gain a difficulty bonus of two on all rolls dealing with the Cross' effects, but they must roll Willpower (difficulty 8) after their contact with the Cross ends. On a failure, the character gains the *Nightmares* Flaw as her days are haunted by visions of the Cross.

The powerful aura that once surrounded Acre was a result of the Cross and its resting place. Although the Cross remains a supremely powerful relic, there is no wandering, mile-wide “aura of destruction” surrounding it once it is removed from the shrine to the Apostle Paul. Even returning it to the shrine probably doesn't restore the aura — once such a miraculous focus of faith is disturbed, there's no turning back.

The characters can interfere at any point in this dreadful turn of events, but saving von Achern is a hard task indeed. Even if the characters engage the assemblage in conversation, Gauthier eventually senses the evil in von Achern (and possibly the characters). Maintaining composure in close proximity to the Cross requires players to roll Self-Control against a difficulty of 8. (Players whose characters have Instinct roll against the same difficulty but must also spend a point of Willpower to override their inclination to expose their inhuman nature. Players whose characters are on the Road of Heaven roll against difficulty 6.)

Once von Achern loses control, the best that the characters can hope for is to save him from being destroyed. They can do this either by disabling Gauthier (a very difficult task with him backed by the Cross) or getting the baron to flee. If they haven't been exposed as vampires, they can then take it upon themselves to hunt and “destroy” the devil. Even if they succeed in saving von Achern, his reputation with Andras is utterly ruined.

The characters may also catch sight of Kara Lupescu, who is observing events from cover. She has been following von Achern and King Andras, waiting to see if they would come into conflict with Gauthier. The turn of events is everything she had hoped that it would be. Her attention is focused on the goings on around the king, however, so the characters have a good chance of getting the drop on her if they wish.

SCENE TEN: RESOLUTIONS

This is the final scene, in which the coterie's plans succeed or fail. Under a full moon, the Cainites of Acre gather to decide who will be prince of Acre. Depending on the alliances that they have made and how (and if) they disposed of the relic, the characters may have a majority of participants and a powerful armed force on their side. But one of the losers will not accept the result, setting the stage for a final conflict.

The mood of this scene is one of anticipation and wariness. So close to the goal, one must not let one's guard down too soon. It is nearly Christmas, and snow blankets the ground.

A DEAL IS STRUCK?

Before the gathering, Duqaq brings the characters to meet with Prince Etienne. If von Achern survived the last scene, he is there as well. The beleaguered Ravnos knows well that it is the time of truth, and he discusses matters with characters, as Lord Jürgen's representative.

"It is long past time to let go of pretense, my Frankish friends," he says. "To rule this city one needs two things: knowledge of this blessed and cursed land, which I have, and the support of a great lord, which I do not. My sire is nothing but a schemer in pilgrim's dress, and his mouthpiece, Aram, is ready to feed me to the dogs. I know of your liege's ambitions, and my aide, Duqaq, has told me of your own resourcefulness. His faith may be in the god Set, but I trust his judgment."

If the characters have not uncovered Duqaq's true nature as a Follower of Set, they may be shocked by Etienne's revelation. Duqaq certainly is.

"Come, my friend," the prince says to his aide. "I told you it was time to let go of pretense. Surely you didn't hope to fool a Charlatan?" He smiles and resists any suggestion of taking action against Duqaq. "I trust him more than any number of righteous Christians. But that is not the subject at hand. Tell me: Will your Lord Jürgen accept my vassalage as prince?"

It is wholly up to the players to answer the question. Von Achern, if he survived, owes them his life and is able to be convinced one way or the other. His own instinct is to accept the deal. Assuming he didn't survive, the coterie stands as the only people left to speak in Jürgen's name. If they accept Etienne's offer (even if they do so duplicitously) he thanks them warmly and says that he will see them again the next night, when Aram convenes a gathering of the city's Cainites. If they refuse, he does much the same, although he seems disappointed.

DISPUTED ELECTION

The next night, vampires of Acre all gather at the field by the Roman ruins where the midnight tournament was held. It is a larger convocation than any that has occurred before in the Second Kingdom. Word has spread that tonight will see Etienne deposed, and Cainites and ghouls from all the shadowy recesses of the Crusader State have come to see who their new prince will be. All of the major players from *Ashes of Outremer* are here: Maria d'Agostino, Kara Lupescu, Alexia of Nicosia, Sir Michael and his entourage and any others you wish to have in attendance. Many vampires the character have either not met or met in passing can be here as well. Hanifa and her brood are also in the crowd.

With the sound of a horn signaling the crowd to silence, Aram mounts a large boulder and gazes over the crowd. "Hear me! I speak for mighty Varsik of Jerusalem, childe of Bashir! Etienne de Fauberge, childe of Varsik and formerly prince of Acre, for your failures and betrayals, I declare you deposed and myself prince in your place. Furthermore, you are banished from this domain. I give you until daybreak to leave the city."

"No." The voice, quiet but clear carries across the field — it is Etienne's. "My sire cares not for God but rather for the treasures of Mammon. I renounce him, and I accept the title as Acre's prince under the vassalage of Lord Jürgen, Sword-Bearer

UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

of Magdeburg!" Etienne says this even if the coterie did not accept his offer. His last stratagem is to present them with a fait accompli and hope they see it can work.

Like a sea parting, the assembled Children of the Night divide, choosing sides. Some stand with Aram: Maria d'Agostino, Count Dieter, Lupescu and anyone whom the coterie failed to convince. Others side with Etienne: Duqaq, Sir Michael, Hanifa Bint Nasir and any others you see fit to include. Where the players' characters stand is up to them, but they must make a choice.

Let the players take the lead in determining just what happens next. Assuming that the factions are even close to equal in strength, Aram is inclined to settle things on the field of battle. He calls those who support Etienne traitors and orders them to stand down, advancing menacingly and trying to spark a generalized melee during which he wants to kill Etienne and as many of his supporters as he can.

If the characters respond to his moves with violence of their own, the melee begins. Run this as a series of individual encounters, as in the *Midnight Tournament*. In this case, there is no stopping for "first blood" or surrender — this is a vampiric war in small, a foretaste of what is to come in Central Europe. Frenzy is common, and fights are with weapon, claw and fang.

If the characters are more inclined to negotiate, they have a real chance at eroding away Aram's support. Maria d'Agostino is no fool, and she cannot risk losing her family's holdings in the Second Kingdom, for example, so she is inclined to change sides if the odds seem to favor Etienne. Alexia of Nicosia will switch sides if Lord Jürgen will lift his interdiction over her, allowing her to study matters in Acre. Even Kara Lupescu can be convinced to withdraw. She has already seen von Achern destroyed or disgraced, and although letting Jürgen gain Acre would be unpleasant, being destroyed in a pointless struggle would be even more so. If the characters manage to break Aram's faction, he bows, congratulates Etienne for being more skilled than he thought, then leaves, fleeing back to Jerusalem as fast as possible.

Any number of other outcomes is possible, such as eroding away Aram's support in the middle of a running battle. Whatever the course of events, make sure that the characters are the deciding factor. In the next chapter, they will have to craft a resolution between two much more powerful enemies, in the midst of an even more terrible battle, and they had better get their practice now. The fate of Acre is in their hands.

EPILOGUE: FURTHER ROADS

At the end of *Ashes of Outremer*, the coterie has likely played a major role in settling the politics of the Second Kingdom of Jerusalem. Prince Etienne is relatively secure on his throne with Jürgen's support, and Lord Jürgen has gained great prestige as its overlord. But what next?

Over the next few nights, word comes that King Andras is readying to return to Hungary overland through Anatolia and the Latin Empire. Traveling in his train are Gauthier and his knights, and, at the fringe, Sir Michael and his entourage.

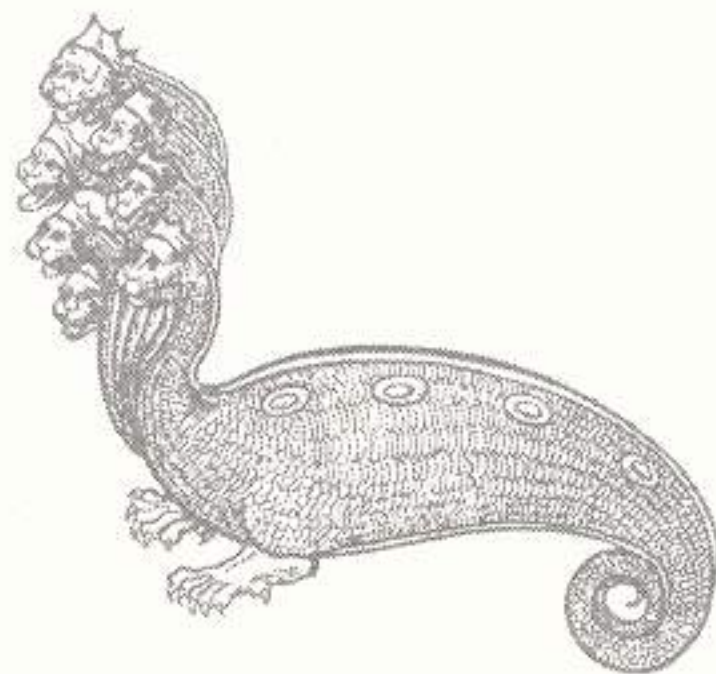


Duqaq tells the characters that Alexia has already left for Cyprus, "The sorceress thinks to alert her people. They may try to steal the relic in Constantinople."

With a bit of investigation, the characters can uncover that Kara Lupescu and some of her knights are also heading back with King Andras. The Vlaszy still hold the Accursed Tower in Acre, however, as well as whatever hidden stronghold they established outside the city. Etienne doubts that he has the authority to expel them just yet, and he fears that Jürgen's war with Rustovitch will mean the Vlaszy destabilizing his city. He is right, and savvy characters should recognize that, as well as the fact that there's precious little they can do about it right now.

The characters can also travel with Andras' army back to Hungary, both as guards for the artifact and to rejoin Lord Jürgen, assuming that they haven't been exposed as vampires. If they desire to stay in the Holy Land for a while, Etienne welcomes their presence. Duqaq can tell them that he has heard that the Frisian fleet will arrive in spring so that the army can move on at last to attack Damietta in Egypt. He also acknowledges that he is in their debt.

Whatever choice the characters make, war lies in their future, as it does for the whole of Dark Medieval Europe.







Chapter Three: A Call to Arms

Qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum
(Let him who desires peace, prepare
for war)
-Vegetius, *Epitoma Rei Militaris*

INTRODUCTION

For over a decade, the Teutonic Knights' influence in Hungary has grown largely unchecked. While the Teutons instill terror in the name of the Cross, Jürgen makes use of his collection of slavish knights like well-stringed puppets, directing their moves wherever opportunity presents itself. Evil has become a loosely bandied word that the determined Ventrue uses to denounce not devils or pagans, but rivals and detractors.

The year is 1225, and a reversal is at hand. The years since the crusade in Acre have been a mixed bag for Lord Jürgen and his cause. His Teutonic Knights have built a chain of strongholds and keeps in Transylvania, making themselves a power to be reckoned with in the region. Indeed much of the so-called *Siebenbürgen* is under their control. But their authority is hardly stable. Rustovitch sends waves of fiendish monstrosities to assault Teuton patrols and keeps, and his spies and assassins are everywhere. The attrition rate among the German knights is appalling, despite the fact that at least 10 enemies pay with their lives (or unlives) for every one of their own who falls. Jürgen has spent most of the last 15 years leading this campaign, and he now makes his haven in Bran Castle, in the fortified town of Kronstadt (modern-day Brasov). For all his battling — and more than a few potent Tzimisce have met their ends on his Toreador-crafted sword — only the strongholds and their immediate surroundings are truly secure. The wild lands and small villages are still fair game, with farmsteads reduced to burning hulks and villages transformed into slaughterhouses with horrific regularity.

Jürgen knew full well that this war would be hard-fought, so the brutality of the conflict does not concern him. Where he has found himself vulnerable is in the sphere of mortal politicking. Ever since the destruction of Baron von Achem in the Holy Land, King Andras has been leery of the German faction. He has also fallen more and more under the sway of powerful local barons, who forced him to sign over a great deal of authority to them in the Golden Bull of 1222 (Hungary's *Magna Carta*). Some of these barons are tied to the Vlaszy revenant brood, to Kara Lupescu and thus to Rustovitch. The Arpad Ventrue also have some sway over the barons, but they do not seem to be in any rush to use that influence on Jürgen's behalf. To make matters worse, a goodly number of Kara Lupescu's Vlaszy knights remain stationed in the Holy Land and have disrupted Prince Etienne's rule, making Jürgen's gain of domain there less than secure.

All these maneuverings come to a head in 1225, when King Andras formally expels the Teutonic Knights from Hungary. They have become too independent, so they threaten the realm. Kara Lupescu could not agree more.

Jürgen is not ready to withdraw just yet. Aided by Lucretia and his other vassals, he directs the knights to delay their withdrawal as much as possible. He knows that once the mortal order is gone from the region, he will have precious little support. Therefore, he must strike now, and strike decisively. Rustovitch has planned on this reaction, and he readies to make his final strike as well.

A Call to Arms is the story of this final battle.

HOW TO USE THIS STORY

A Call to Arms places the coterie in the epicenter of war. Despite what loyalties they may cherish, the characters have to consider their survival. Unless this war ends quickly, Lord Jürgen's attempt to conquer southern Hungary could have devastating consequences for all of Europe's Cainites.

With this chapter, all of the major players in *Under the Black Cross* reveal their true faces. Whether they wish it or not, the players' characters must do what no other Cainite is willing or capable of accomplishing. They must quell the bitter fires of hatred and stem a war before it becomes a vampiric genocide.

THEME & MOOD

Knowledge and opportunity are the keys to *A Call to Arms*' peaceful resolution. Having witnessed the birth of this conflict in *Shadows at Court*, the coterie must make use of its knowledge to end a war. To succeed, the characters must pay mind not only to forces that lie before them, but those who prowl nearby. In addition, times of war leave little time for reflection. Opportunity comes only once, and when it does, the characters must be ready to act.

While the characters witness a war, they are confronted with their predatory impulses. Violence seems to be the only course of action, but if they want peace, the characters must not give in to the Beast. The coterie's greatest challenge is to dispel the hatred between Lord Jürgen and *Voivode* Vladimir Rustovitch.

As if to facilitate the raging conflict of *A Call to Arms*, dark clouds blanket the moon and stars, masking the nightmarish landscape. Ghoul slaves, hulking degenerates and Cainite warriors are trapped in a feverish contest, unmindful of death and destruction. Without a doubt, the mood is horrific, and not even the darkness of night can conceal the dread.

THE PLOT

Since the dawning of his lavish court in Magdeburg, Lord Jürgen has struggled to trample his opponent, the fierce Tzimisce tactician Vladimir Rustovitch. Lacking in neither arrogance nor determination, Lord Jürgen is convinced that his forces will soon triumph. Sadly, however, victory could not be further from Jürgen's grasp. Although Jürgen's knights and foot soldiers are more skilled than Rustovitch's, the Tzimisce has always had the advantage of numbers. With the imminent withdrawal of the Teutonic Knights from the region, Jürgen can only hold on to the hard core of his army, the ghouls and vampires among the knights in Hungary.

Like mirror images, Jürgen and Rustovitch both decide that the time has come to end the war. With the Teutonic Knights withdrawing, Jürgen has to strike a decisive blow if he hopes to keep domain in the region. Meanwhile, Rustovitch is under pressure from the other *voivodes* to deal with the Ventrue once and for all. The Fiend has been biding his time, waiting for an opportunity to strike at Jürgen, and this is it. With the mortal knights leaving, the *voivode* has a chance to eliminate Jürgen himself on the field of battle. And so each lures the other into a final battle, confident that they can triumph in combat.

A Call to Arms is told in two acts. Act one recounts the moves that draw the two lords onto the field and sweep the coterie along with them. It also reintroduces Myca Vykos to the unsuspecting coterie. Vykos returns with a gift of insight. Meanwhile, Rustovitch, spearheading his forces into battle, pushes Jürgen and his dark knights into unfamiliar lands. Hoping to survive this setback, Jürgen makes a dreadful mistake and angers forces that have shunned the conflict until now.

Act two introduces the region's Gangrel to the battlefield. Unwilling to be Rustovitch's pawn, Morrow directs her alliance of savage packs and wild creatures. Meanwhile, Myca Vykos tries to enlist the aid of the weary characters. The coterie must decide on a course of action swiftly before all forces are locked in a deadly clash.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

The climax of **Under the Black Cross**, this story assumes that the characters are tied to Jürgen's forces in some way thanks to past events. Most easily, they can be allies or vassals of his who have joined his forces in Transylvania. As in **Shadows at Court**, they may also be spies for *Voivode* Rustovitch, crusaders who shadowed King Andras to Hungary in the aftermath of **Ashes of Outremer** or simply observers. If you are integrating this story with the very much more epic **Transylvania Chronicles**, then the characters may very well be local lords who have had to deal with the Ventrue-Tzimisce war in their midst. Unless they are firmly aligned with the Fiends, they have likely made some accommodation with Jürgen over the last decade and thus are at his side for the time being.

Regardless of their attachments, they are largely cut off from their superiors during **A Call to Arms**. Only Jürgen is accessible as his burgeoning Transylvanian domain collapses around him in a grand battle. Players may also easily portray local Cainites who become embroiled in the battle or envoys from some other court come to report on this war. As events spiral out of control, they are forced center-stage.

MAJOR PLAYERS

A Call to Arms awakens powerful Cainite forces. No longer satisfied with surveying affairs from a distance, *Voivode* Rustovitch is determined to crush Jürgen with his bare hands, if that's what it takes. Meanwhile, other agents who previously had a distant interest take an active hand in the war.

VLADAMIR RUSTOVITCH

Determined to eliminate his ambitious foe, Rustovitch bears arms and directs his forces on the battlefield using a mixture of vampiric hordes and koldunic abominations. Rustovitch's participation signals his determination to exterminate Jürgen. With experience and knowledge of the land on his side, there is little that can stand in the Fiend's way.

LORD JURGEN

Despite overwhelming odds, the Ventrue lord refuses to abandon his crusade for dominion. Although he understands that the odds favor Vladimir Rustovitch, Jürgen is counting on his forces' superior skills to tip the scales in his favor. Unfortunately, Jürgen's arrogance prevents him from realizing that the

DEATH'S REGIMENT

The precise number of Tzimisce warriors and their fiendish monstrosities is left purposefully vague throughout this story. Once he brings his full force to bear, Rustovitch has seemingly limitless manpower (if such a term is appropriate to fleshcrafted revenants and Fiends). It's important to the atmosphere of this story that Jürgen's forces be outnumbered, skilled knights holding back a vastly more numerous foes. So the answer to "How many troops does Rustovitch have?" is quite simply, "How many you want?"

That isn't the case for Jürgen. Most of the time, you probably won't need specific numbers, but there are times when players ask such things and it's useful to have numbers to throw around. The following numbers are rough estimates that reflect the attrition of the continuing battle (and the fragility of ghouls as opposed to vampires).

- **The Teutonic Height in Transylvania (circa 1224):** 80 to 100 Cainites, most trained as knights or soldiers; 300 ghouls, half trained as soldiers or knights
- **The Withdrawal to Kronstadt (scene two):** 50 Cainite knights, 150 ghouls (including about 50 knights)
- **The Sortie (scene three):** 30 Cainite knights, 30 ghouls (the balance defend Kronstadt and its environs)
- **Arrival at Tuzföld (scene four):** 28 Cainite knights, 20 ghouls
- **Tuzföld Battle, First Night (scene five):** Numbers begin as above. By the end of the night, there are 20 Cainite knights and 8 ghouls remaining.
- **Tuzföld Battle, Second Night (scenes six and seven):** Number begin as above and remain there until the Gangrel arrive. By the end of the night (and the end of the battle), there are 12 Cainite knights left and no ghouls.

greatest threat that he faces is not Rustovitch's raw power, but his tactical genius.

MYCA VYKOS

Myca knows when to bide his time. The scheming Tzimisce has been patient for years, waiting for the right opportunity to claim his prize, and he believes that the time is now. Myca does not plan on using violence, though, for brute force will achieve little in the midst of such slaughter. Rather, to win the night, Myca uses his knowledge of the region's key players, learned after years of shadow plays.

MORROW AND THE GANGREL PACKS

Morrow is the most volatile factor in this war, and she commands great respect from the region's Gangrel. During **Shadows at Court**, Morrow warned the coterie that she would become involved if the conflict reached her territory. Morrow resurfaces while Rustovitch attempts to manipulate her once again. The Tzimisce tyrant anticipates that Morrow is his ally. Sadly, he is mistaken.

MINOR PLAYERS

Although the conflict between Lord Jürgen and Voivode Vladimir Rustovitch is a clash of titans, other less influential agents have a key role. It matters little whether they influence a lord's motivations from afar or whether they are passing shadows. The minor players of **A Call to Arms** have the ability to make subtle changes that have a lasting impact.

LUCRETIA VON HARTZ

Jürgen's loyal vassal and the mistress of the Order of the Black Cross within the Teutonic Order, Lucretia remains at her lord's side in the final battles of the war. She has scored many victories over the last 15 years, but the constant warfare is eroding at her self. The Beast grows stronger with every peasant village that she and her knights wipe off the Transylvanian map.

KARA VLASZY LUPESCU

Kara's star has continued to rise since her coup in the Holy Land. She now stands as the most prestigious of the Vlaszy Fiends and the leading vampiric manipulator moving around King Andras' court. Much of her success has to do with the fact that the Arpad Ventrue, who have deep roots in the Hungarian nobility, want Jürgen out of Transylvania as much as she does. Kara is more than willing to deal with the devil she knows to get the Teutons out of her homeland.

JERVAIS

The Tremere sorcerer Jervais has not given up his plan to ingratiate himself with Lord Jürgen. Over the last few years, Jürgen has made some deals with the Usurpers to secure his flanks while fighting Rustovitch. Ceoris is just too close to the German lands in Transylvania not to make some arrangement.

AKUJI

Lord Jürgen's Nosferatu aide, Akuji makes a few appearances in this chapter. Since she began observing his movements, Akuji has distrusted Myca Vykos' intentions. Remaining at the coterie's side, Akuji waits for Vykos to act.

NORIZ THE CORRUPTER

A sharp thorn in the side of the *voivode* of *voivodes*, the avaricious Noriz has observed the conflict raging in Vladimir's backyard. Sensing an opportunity, Noriz hopes that a prolonged war with Jürgen will destabilize Rustovitch, allowing him to sweep the weakened lord's power.

ACT ONE: THE LOOMING STORM

An unusually chill and damp spring marks the setting for the vampiric conflict of **A Call to Arms**. As if to soak the blood pools from the ravaged hills, thick, cotton-like clouds hover low to the ground. Despite the grim elements, Lord Jürgen's forces have presented a valiant front against Rustovitch's endless swarms, but the constant barrage is taking its toll on the wearied knights. Yet somehow, Jürgen's vassals fight valiantly. Now, with the German's

support network withdrawing, Rustovitch is ready for his killing stroke. Mounting his feral horse and spearheading his greatest monsters, the tireless Tzimisce warrior takes to the war field for a final, bloody showdown.

As the warriors prepare, Myca Vykos makes a move toward the fulfillment of his ambitions. Sensing an opportunity, Vykos creeps towards his prey, Lord Jürgen. Only the coterie stands in his way.

SCENE ONE: BLACK SHEEP AMONGST WOLVES

As the Teutonic Knights withdraw from fortress after fortress, Lord Jürgen is concentrating his loyal forces in Kronstadt and other nearby strongholds. Already the best defended settlement in the region, the city is becoming even more impregnable. Jürgen's position may be dire, but he can hold out here for a goodly amount of time — certainly long enough to set his end-game into motion.

The characters either observe or take part in the concentration of forces in Kronstadt. If they are allied with Jürgen or spies who have infiltrated his camp, they can hardly avoid taking part in the defense and fortification of the town. They easily pick up that morale is low. Even though Lucretia and other leading Ventrue seem confident in their lord's ultimate success, the vampire and ghoulish knights and foot soldiers who make up the bulk of the German force do not share their optimism. Without the mortal support network of the full Teutonic presence, they say, they can hold out only so long.

STRANGE VISITOR

At some point when the characters are away from other vampires — either when patrolling the forest or mountains around Kronstadt or alone in their havens — they spot a bizarre creature indeed. A Perception + Alertness roll reveals a large bird or bat swooping low over the area, perhaps hunting for nocturnal prey. More than one success shows it to be quite unnatural indeed. It has a hawk's body with large membranous bat-wings and an indeterminate head. Even if the characters don't notice the thing, it does notice them, and it perches near them soon enough. This close, they can see that its head is actually a human hand, rudely grafted onto the body's feathered neck. Gruesome stitching holds the misplaced limb in place, and the same rude binding ties the bat-wings to the torso. Those who have spent much time in the region should recognize this as the product of Tremere thaumaturgic experimentation, although some may think that it's a Tzimisce beast.

The hand's fingers tighten into a sort of beak and it "sniffs" the characters. The thing then flutters over to the nearest available sharp stick (like a tree's branch or a writing plume), grips it like a writing implement, pierces its own breast with the tip and writes the following message in its blood on any convenient surface:

My sometimes friends,

I have a message of some interest for your Lord Jürgen. Meet me under the new moon in the village of Milash, and I shall convey it to you.

With regards,

—Jervais bani Tremere

Having delivered its message, the ghastly beast then dies.

Those familiar with the region know that Milash is a small village southeast of the city of Hermanstadt, on the western shore

of the Olt. Hermanstadt has seen its garrison of Teutonic Knights withdraw over the last month—the mortals heading to Balgrad to then sail down the Muresul; the vampires and ghouls falling back to Kronstadt. The region has come under heavy Tzimisce attack, but Jürgen has raiding parties going through the area and has maintained some outposts of knights, including in Milash. The new moon is three nights hence.

If the characters report this message to Jürgen, Lucretia or Akuji, they are sent to Milash post-haste. Jürgen confides in them that he has been dealing with Jervais and the Tremere of Ceoris on a limited basis for the past few years, in part because of Alexia's support of his candidate in Acre (if that actually occurred). He hopes that Jervais has information for him that will help him turn the tide of the war.

If the characters are not associated with Jürgen, Jervais still sends his messenger to them. In this case, his dealings with the Ventrué are even more precarious, and he needs a third party resourceful enough to smuggle something to Jürgen for him. The coterie fits the bill.

TO MILASH

The tiny river village of Milash has a long and terrible history in the region. It is said to be built around the place where a Roman centurion was sacrificed to the pagan gods of the region in centuries past, and it has been inhabited by Bratovitch revenants for centuries. When the Teutonic Knights arrived in the region, the revenants and their Fiendish allies put up strong resistance, but not strong enough. After weeks of battle, the knights took the town and slaughtered any who resisted. They turned many of the farmers and fishermen into slaves to fortify the village, which provided a secure point at which to cross the Olt. The Teutons also brought in Saxon peasants to resettle the village.

Now, Milash is at risk again. With the Germans withdrawing to the region around Kronstadt, east of the river, Milash stands as a critical outpost on the western shore of the Olt. It also makes a tempting target for vengeful Tzimisce and Bratovitch revenants.

When the characters travel from Kronstadt, they cannot help but notice signs of the advancing Tzimisce tide. Small groups of knights pass by on raids or falling back from assault, Tzimisce ghouls creep through the woods picking off lone Germans, and the very land seems to cry for vengeance. When the characters cross the Olt River toward Milash itself, either through their own means or on a barge set off from a port somewhat upriver, they see trails of fire in the mountains that loom above the town. "The Fiends mean to burn us out," says the watchman who greets them at the jetty. "Caine alone knows how long we can hold out."

That same fatalism is evident everywhere in the settlement. Tall log walls surround the dozen or so houses and huts, most closed tight with their mortal inhabitants praying for dawn inside. The clutch of Cainite knights and their attendant ghouls charged with defending this burg spend their time in the watchtowers, waiting for the inevitable attack to come.

The characters find Jervais in the small inn near the jetty. Alexia of Nicosia may be there as well, at your discretion. The Usurper sits perfectly still and corpse-like, but his eyes snap open when the coterie walks in. "Ah, as reliable as ever. Good eve, my friends."

Jervais dismisses any past animosity between himself and the characters. "We all make poor choices at time," he says. "Your liege has asked me to bring him something, but the prospect of making for Kronstadt and then returning to Ceoris under these conditions did not seem quite favorable. Hence, this meeting halfway." Jervais reaches under his cloak and pulls out a small velvet pouch, tied with metal wire and dyed with various arcane symbols. "This is what he requested." The characters can just take the pouch and leave, but Jervais is open to answering questions if they ask what it is. He is happy to do some boasting before vampires who were responsible for his failure 15 years ago.

"You may have heard that the Fiends have a close attachment to the soil of these lands, and that is indeed true. What few know is that all Fiends share a close bond with the soil in which they were buried upon their deaths. The grave dirt is bonded to them forever. Destroy some of it in the right way, and you cause harm to the Fiend like he has never felt." He points at the pouch. "That is dirt from the grave of Vladimir Rustovitch."

Jervais does not say how he obtained this sample, only that it is ready for Jürgen to use.

FIENDISH FLAMES

When the characters get ready to leave Jervais, or while they are all in conversation, a great crashing comes from outside, and a rush of heat bursts into the room. Yellow and orange flames suddenly rage outside the inn. "Greek fire!" someone screams in German, "The Fiends have catapults!" Smoke is filling the room, and the Beast rages inside everyone. Röttschreck rolls are appropriate for all Cainites.

Milash is doomed. The Tzimisce and their legion of Bratovitch revenants have decided to wipe it from the face of the earth. Great *vözd* war ghouls have been shaped into animated catapults capable of launching Greek fire. Hellhounds and other war ghouls scream down from the hills to overwhelm the walls. The Germans and Romanians on the outlying farms are already all dead, and townsfolk will soon follow. The characters must escape from this flaming hell.

To navigate their characters safely through the raging fire, players must roll their Wits + Survival (difficulty 8) each turn. Failure brings them into contact with the fire. Doing so causes two levels of aggravated damage, which can be soaked only if the character has Fortitude (difficulty 7). In addition, characters face the primal fear of Röttschreck even if they avoid the burning pitch. The difficulty is 7 some distance from the fire, 8 when in burning streets and 9 if trapped in a burning building. To escape Milash, the characters must get out of any building they are in and run through the streets for three turns toward the jetty. They can then either steal a rowboat and try to get across the river or head downstream and find another way across. Jervais uses his thaumaturgic skills to help him escape, and he is willing to help the characters if they ask.

Those who escape Milash can observe the burning town from atop a surrounding hill. The scene is an image of Hades, for the flames move in unison and with deliberate destruction. The blowing wind only feeds the fire, which seems to lick the streets with delight. From a distance, they hear a howl that evokes the image of a playful demon come to collect souls. Of the hundred people living in the village, only a handful of them escape with their lives.



SCENE TWO: THE LORD'S CALL

Once the characters make their escape, they are likely to head for Kronstadt and Lord Jürgen. The weather is dismal, and the roads are soaked with rivers of mud and difficult to navigate. The smell of horse and cattle feces taints clothes. The muck and filth is everywhere, caking garments like glue. Even right around the Teutonic stronghold, a sense of desperation is in the air. Word of Milash's fate has preceded the characters, and knights from other outlying areas have also fallen back here. Far too many vampires and ghouls are concentrated in this small city, and the mortal population is suffering. Many of the knights are Ventrue, each with his own special blood requirement, making matters worse.

Lord Jürgen is a pillar of strength in the midst of this chaos. His confidence turns hopelessness into grim resolve, and he greets the coterie with open relief. "You have it?" he asks, and assuming the characters give him Jervais' pouch, he thanks them and informs them that he is calling together his knights this very evening. (If the characters wish to keep the pouch for some reason, they can. Jürgen still calls the meeting and hopes that Rustovitch will come out to join him.)

JÜRGEN SPEAKS

The gathering is a makeshift thing, organized but utilitarian. There is none of the pomp and ceremony that characterized the gathering in Magdeburg or even Etienne's court in Acre. About 50 Cainite knights and three times as many ghouls gather in a field inside Bran Castle's outer wall to hear their lord speak. Jürgen stands

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on a high platform with burning torches at each corner and raises his sword — still beautiful despite all the blood it has felt.

"For years we have cut at the heart of the Fiends, my brothers! We have fought their thralls and monstrosities, cut down countless of their young and old alike. We have ridden through gardens of molded flesh and torn out the heart of broods more horrific than anything in Hades. And still our true foe has not shown himself.

"Deep in those dark hills," he says, pointing up to the Transylvanian Alps north of the city, "sits a dark chieftain who thinks to send his brood against us without bloodying himself. Well, no more!

"I call him out! Let the terrible Vladimir Rustovitch enter the field of battle, and we shall see who the greater warrior is." Jürgen holds up the pouch that the coterie gave him. "I hold here two handfuls of earth that he holds dearer than blood. Through this, the Fiend feels my call. He feels it most terribly!"

With that, Jürgen tosses the pouch into the flame of one of the torches. A gout of greenish flame curls up from the torch, and a streak of lighting arcs across the northern sky. "Yes, Fiend! Feel the fire burn and come! We are the Order of the Black Cross, and we wait for you!"

He raises his sword high, and the assembled knights chant his name for all to hear. The characters may be swept up in the enthusiasm or they may see the folly of pride at work.

THE VIPER'S BOON

Thanks to his influence and the help of the region's best spies, Myca Vykos has been one of the few Cainites able to travel freely

during this conflict. Often an unwilling witness to the brutalities of war, Myca has had a chance to study each faction's weaknesses. Spies in Rustovitch's camp have informed Myca that the Tzimisce lord is planning on joining the battle. After years of waiting, Vykos is ready to pounce. As far as he is concerned, Rustovitch's direct hand in this conflict signals that the end is near. Jürgen is easy prey, and Vykos will not hesitate to devour him.

After months of study, Myca Vykos believes that Jürgen is bound to fall before Rustovitch's superior might and cunning. Unfortunately, he recognizes that it may take months before Jürgen succumbs. Even if it is futile to resist, the Ventrue has the undying support of his troops, and he is not likely to relinquish his hold.

Myca Vykos lacks the raw power to realize his plans. His assets are trickery, charm and the reputation that his hidden lord, the Dracon, confers to him. He must convince Jürgen and Rustovitch that he is the only person who can end this war. Thankfully, Vykos knows that vultures watch Rustovitch's home and that these scavengers will destroy Vladimir if he does not produce a victory. Rustovitch's problems back home make him predisposed to concessions. If only to keep Jürgen at bay, Rustovitch may grant Vykos a small power niche. Vykos must also find a way to convince Lord Jürgen. Currently, Myca needs allies within Jürgen's camp. As outsiders susceptible to consider his plan, the coterie represents Vykos' best opportunity to gain Jürgen's attention.

Myca Vykos arrives in Kronstadt two nights after Jürgen's rousing speech, while the knights prepare their defenses and Jürgen plans his strategy. He brings news of the north, which he announces to Lord Jürgen, the coterie and other Teutonic Cainites with intentional drama. Vladimir Rustovitch has heard Jürgen's call, Vykos declares, and is riding to the assault. Vykos explains that he knows this through his network of spies among the revenant families, and he further reports that the signs of mobilization are everywhere in the Fiends' Carpathian homeland.

Jürgen thanks Vykos for his report and dismisses him with a curt nod, but once the Tzimisce monk is out of earshot, the Ventrue lord is clearly pleased. Rustovitch's main advantage in the war has been numbers, he explains, but Jürgen's forces are superior man-for-man. By luring the *voivode* onto the field, Jürgen is convinced that he can bring him low. Jürgen and Lucretia then begin making plans, selecting the best Cainite and ghoul knights to accompany them on the field against Rustovitch.

If and when the characters leave Jürgen's presence, they find Vykos waiting for them. Away from prying ears, he warns the coterie that the war is about to take a turn for the worst. He claims that the current bloodshed pales in comparison to the terror descending from the hills. Rustovitch is not a fool, the Tzimisce warns, and Jürgen's plan—whatever it is—cannot hope to create victory out of defeat. The war is far from over, he warns, unless something is done. After dispensing this opinion, Vykos leaves the scene, advising that bystanders cannot always observe passively if they cling to survival.

The characters are probably reticent to accept what they believe is Myca's poisoned gift, particularly since Vykos wishes nothing in return. They may even take his warning as a threat and want to investigate his claims. The best hope of uncovering the

truth lies with Jürgen's Nosferatu agent, Akuji. If the characters do not approach the Nosferatu, she comes near the coterie after noticing Myca's dubious departure from Jürgen's fortress. Knowing that he is a manipulator, and remembering his previous attempts to befriend the coterie in Jürgen's court, Akuji wants to know Myca's plans. The Nosferatu approaches the coterie with questions. "What does that viper want?" she demands more than inquires.

The Nosferatu is intent on investigating Vykos' claims herself, but she hopes that the coterie has some additional information to share. If the characters choose to tell her of the Fiend's additional warnings about Jürgen's chance in the coming conflict, it only intensifies her desire to travel north to uncover the truth. She isn't inclined to have any company, but she can be convinced—especially if she knows a particular character to be skilled in woodcraft or other useful talents.

SCENE THREE: ENTER THE WARRIOR

The next week features a series of small skirmishes around Kronstadt. The knights face off against small parties of Bratovitch and Vlaszy revenant warriors, as well as marauding *szlachta* war ghouls and other opponents. There seems to be little sign of the mass mobilization that Vykos mentioned. Jürgen's troops even enjoy a temporary reprieve when the Tzimisce forces mysteriously withdraw. The Cainites welcome this break, taking the time to strengthen their position despite the withdrawing mortal Germans, but they quickly grow worried. They wonder why Rustovitch has not ordered his troops to keep up the pressure, which has been relentless for months. Another week passes, and there still are no signs of the tyrant's armies. Soon, Jürgen's troops grow restless and weary. Tensions are high and tempers flare.

For Akuji and any characters who accompany her north into the mountains, the story is very different. Once past the last lines of the Teutonic Knights, the woods and hills become more ominous still. Ghouls and revenants are more and more frequent, as are packs of marauding hellhounds that hunt the characters like hares. Akuji is able to gather only limited intelligence on her own. The revenants speak openly to one another that Rustovitch rides south to face the Germans in combat. She also spots many encampments of Tzimisce forces that are obviously making ready for a large-scale assault.

If someone with better local contacts accompanies Akuji, they may piece together some more key facts. The Tzimisce are organizing into several different forces. One of these is characterized by great mobility, including fleshcrafted steeds and sleek hellhounds above heavier forces. Whether the characters are able to uncover this information is at your discretion, but a few Intelligence + Investigation rolls (difficulty 8) might be in order.

Either way, Akuji returns to Kronstadt with news two weeks after she left: *Voivode* Vladimir Rustovitch is, indeed, on the march in a last effort to obliterate Lord Jürgen's troops.

THE SPOILS OF WAR

The sight of Vladimir Rustovitch atop his mountainous horse is enough to instill fear in kine and Cainites alike. Backed by his creatures, Rustovitch commands awe and terror. In his haste to

reach Lord Jürgen, the Fiend travels unworn paths that take him through small farming communities. The last thing the peasants living there witness is Lord Rustovitch and his ravenous armies as the creatures consume them whole.

Lord Rustovitch's trek through the region's farmland is a deliberate and ruthless mission. To fuel his troop's bloodlust and charge them with fresh vitae, Rustovitch descends upon the farming communities. He orders his monstrous fiends to ravage the human and animal hosts in the communities. Rustovitch's hellish armies rob the land of its life, and, should Jürgen's troops travel through these paths, they see that nothing remains but broken, bloodless corpses. As they gorge, Rustovitch's warriors slowly transform what was once a vibrant countryside into a still landscape, virtually devoid of human life. Such is the case wherever Rustovitch treads to fulfill his vengeful mission.

Rustovitch knows that he is pressed for time. Already troubled by his inability to dispose of the treacherous Tremere, many Fiends sense a growing weakness. Lord Jürgen's assault has worsened worries. Transylvanian whisperings have made their way to Rustovitch's ears, via his network of spies. Vladimir knows that the rapacious Voivode Noriz hopes that a prolonged conflict will detain him indefinitely. Noriz prepares and awaits word from the war. If Rustovitch fails to return soon, Noriz will mount a campaign among his Tzimisce allies to usurp Rustovitch's title. Obviously, this threat worries Vladimir. The Fiend lord is desperate to return home as quickly as possible. Myca Vykos knows this, and he plans on using it to his full advantage. If he needs to, Vykos reveals this information to sway the coterie to his solution. Myca believes that this knowledge may convince the characters to recognize the validity of his plans, thus helping him facilitate a beneficial truce.

THE FIENDISH HUNGER

The characters and Jürgen's forces have but the passing of one night to prepare for Rustovitch's arrival. If he hasn't done so already, Jürgen personally requests that any combat-worthy members of the coterie join him on his raid against Rustovitch. If the characters pass on Vykos' warning, Jürgen acknowledges the risk but asks in return what choice he has. "I can either strike now and take victory, or remain in these walls awaiting defeat."

The next night, the *voivode* enters the scene harsh as a winter wind. Hungering for blood, Rustovitch's hellhounds butcher Jürgen's scouts. In the face of this horror, Jürgen's troops could understandably surrender. Yet the Ventrue lord commands respect and awe of his own. This is the moment that he's been waiting for, and Jürgen mounts his war horse and heads a small, elite force in a sortie to cut through the waves of hellhounds and warghounds and get to Rustovitch. Jürgen and his most skilled warriors dispatch the war dogs with surprising efficiency, cutting through them as they would bothersome weeds. This sight invigorates his warriors who stand in trenches of their own making. Some leave their burrows and bravely confront the hellhounds when they make their initial approach. Other knights join their leader to confront whatever threatens his unlife. Jürgen's party of knights cuts deeper and deeper into the Tzimisce horde, toward the Fiend at its core.

Whether the characters accompany Jürgen on his charge, remain in Kronstadt or chart their own course, they should not escape the horrors of Rustovitch's fleshcrafted armies. While Jürgen and his

knights slaughter the largest number of the hound scouts, some manage to pierce Jürgen's force. Typically, these monsters meet their ends before soldiers, but many make it into Kronstadt. The coterie could well encounter one or several voracious beasts that won't hesitate to charge. Although a dangerous confrontation can ensue, the characters should not face their destruction at this early stage of the battle.

PRIDE'S FOLLY

Despite a brilliant effort, Jürgen's troops are unable to get to Rustovitch himself. Although the knights rout the ghoul hounds, larger, more powerful beasts bog them down. This time, Jürgen's knights are unable to do more than hold these attackers at bay. Gradually, the night draws to an end. Jürgen must decide his next move or face the peril of an even more merciless foe: daylight. Jürgen decides that his forces must break for Kronstadt and await the next night, when their foe will surely be lured within striking range.

Unfortunately, the night is not quiet at Kronstadt. At first it seems that only the initial wave of hellhounds would trouble the city. After Jürgen and his best knights rout them and go on pursuit, the night becomes quiet for several hours. Then, only a few hours before dawn, a massive second assault falls upon the city. Wave upon wave of hellhounds explode out of the hills, accompanied by Vlaszy knights on fleshcrafted horses. Commanding the force is Kara Lupescu herself, and she forces the ghouls and Cainites guarding the city to fall back to Bran Castle. A good number of Germans are caught outside the castle gates and harried north. In fact, the Vlaszy assault isn't aimed at taking the city, but at cutting off Jürgen's retreat. Scouts and fleeing troops bring Jürgen's sortie word of the pincer maneuver.

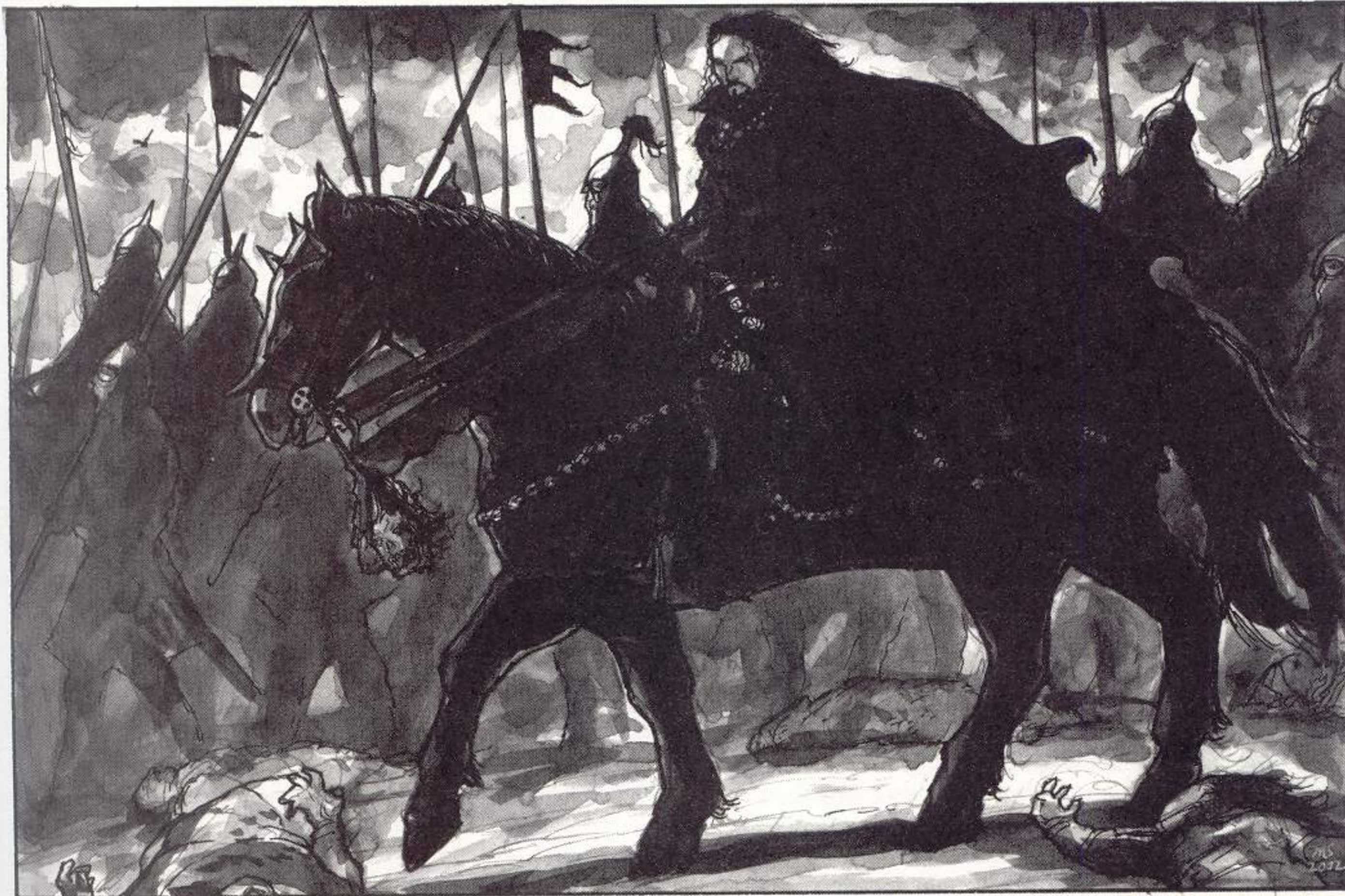
Just where the characters spend this wild night depends on them. They can very well accompany Jürgen on his raid and receive the disheartening news that their retreat is blocked. If they choose to remain in Kronstadt, they should be part of those harried north — perhaps after a skirmish with Lady Kara. It would be most dramatic if they were to tell Jürgen of the trap he has fallen into.

Jürgen has carelessly played into Rustovitch's hands. The two Tzimisce war parties are slowly closing in, and there appears to be no escape. When the Hellhounds attacked, Jürgen let his pride take command. He fought valiantly, but he foolishly overextended himself so that he has been cut-off from his stronghold. Still he is quick to realize his mistake, and Jürgen orders his troops into defensive positions. He then tasks his advisors with finding an escape route. The only one, they inform him, takes them into Tuzföld, a desolate woodland area where few Cainites or kine are. Yet with the coming of day, Rustovitch is not likely follow, since they could all perish under the sun. Jürgen's advisors also inform him that there is an abandoned village and a keep in Tuzföld, which they can use for shelter. Jürgen orders the knights and warriors to make for the woods.

TUZFOLD WOODS AND CLEARING

There seems to every reason to panic. Jürgen and his knights are cut off from reinforcements with a Tzimisce horde moving in. Fog hugs the cold night earth, and the inhuman howls of Fiendish *things* echo through the night. Many of the Cainite warriors, with long years of experience battling the Tzimisce in these parts, whisper that the sounds are dark incantations, products of Tzimisce blood magic. Scouts report that the troops are truly cut off from Kronstadt with only

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Tuzföld to shelter them. Despite all this, the knights maintain impressive discipline. Jürgen's charisma and the long years of training that all of these soldiers have endured makes them act together and without hesitation. They make for the woods in well-maintained formations, cutting down what Tzimisce skirmishers get in their way. Even if they are doomed, they seem to say, the Fiends' victory will come at a heavy price.

Nestled among hills, Tuzföld's woods form a protective ring around a clearing that holds old farmlands and an abandoned village. The woods and central clearing earned their ominous name, meaning "land of fire" or "fire earth," after a plague afflicted most of the human and cattle population. The Magyar overlords ordered that everyone be put to death. The farmlands, the surrounding woods and the village, its now inconsequential name long forgotten, were set ablaze by troops of soldiers. Since this century-old tragedy, the scarred landscape remains an eerie testament to humanity's brutality. The woods retain a taint of death from the day that the fire ravaged the area. Twisted tree trunks and branches still claw at the sky, frozen in a moment of terror and tangled in new growth. Although there has been a rebirth, the new plants seem pale and oddly twisted in comparison to the rest of the countryside. Additionally, a thick layer of red ash covers the forest floor. It clings to clothes and stains anyone or anything that touches it.

Since the locals believe that it is cursed, Tuzföld is largely abandoned. Still, packs of lepers and other outcasts make it their home. In addition, a solitary Gangrel lives in Tuzföld's crumbling

fort, and the village's few occupants know to keep their distance. Unbeknownst to the coterie or to Jürgen, the Tuzföld woods and clearing are also the roaming grounds of the territorial and marauding Morrow. By cutting off all escape routes but one, Rustovitch has forced Jürgen to retreat into her territory. *Voivode* Rustovitch doubts that she will tolerate such an intrusion, and he believes that she will simply attack the *Ventru*. This should leave Jürgen easy picking for Rustovitch's monstrosities and make it clear to the frustratingly independent Gangrel that the *voivode* is the true lord and protector of these lands.

SCENE FOUR: FADED WARNINGS

Worn from battle, the coterie, Lord Jürgen and his troops survey the bleak landscape with a mixture of awe and consternation. The characters, forced by circumstances to Jürgen's side, worry as they pass the woods surrounding the large clearing. They rejoice to set their sights upon the tattered village — particularly the fort and nearby cemetery, the sight of the mass burials following the devastating fires that destroyed the village. When Jürgen approaches the abandoned keep, a Gangrel named Codrin rises like dust from the wreckage. The savage Cainite claims this place as his domain and demands that Jürgen and his troops leave the area. But with the pre-dawn light already evident on the eastern horizon, Jürgen is not interested in debates or pleasantries, and he declares that it is now his land until he relinquishes it. The Gangrel ignores

Jürgen's threats and after a spurt of debate, Jürgen becomes furious and impatient. With a swift wave of his hand, Jürgen orders his troops to dispatch the quarrelsome Animal.

Codrin puts up a good fight, but the German knights overpower him quickly. If the players do nothing to interfere, the Teutons cut him down after he manages to gut one of the ghouls with his talons. Lucretia lops off his head with her sword while four of her fellow knights hold the Gangrel down. Just before the killing blow, Codrin curses Jürgen as an invader and usurper.

If the coterie intervenes, it is possible for Codrin to escape. Doing anything more than delaying the knights enough for the Gangrel to run off (after again issuing his curse) is difficult in the extreme. Jürgen is in no mood for talk of compromise with this petty cur, not when he has his beleaguered troops to secure, and Codrin refuses outright to open his home to Ventrue. Jürgen is willing to allow the Gangrel to scurry off, assuming that he will fall to the Tzimisce sooner or later. His confidence in the players' characters is somewhat tarnished by their interference, unless they can convince him that releasing Codrin is actually tactically sound. If they come to blows with his knights, he takes a much darker view. Either way, Jürgen's soldiers find shelter in the keep.

The lord dismisses Codrin's curses outright, but the players may not be so fast to do so. If they have a chance to inspect the Gangrel's corpse (a neonate, his body does not instantly rot to ash, although it will quickly decompose in the daylight) or interact with him, make the players roll Intelligence + Alertness against a difficulty of 7 to recognize markings on the Gangrel. They match symbols that decorated Morrow and her companions when they traveled to Magdeburg. If the players fail their rolls, Akuji can recognize the symbols at your discretion.

Morrow's words seemingly echo from the surrounding woods. "Remember well that I am friend to none save my kin." Since he has previously used Morrow in his schemes, the coterie may realize that it was Rustovitch's intention to send Jürgen to Tuzfold. The coterie may inform Jürgen, but there is little that anyone can do now. The sun is rising, and all Cainites must find shelter before daybreak.

ACT TWO: FINAL RETRIBUTIONS

This act brings to an end the conflict that began in *Shadows at Court*, as it unravels in two nights. The first night involves a bloody battle between Jürgen's and Rustovitch's forces. While this battle is raging, Myca Vykos reappears and warns that Morrow and her Gangrel hordes are approaching Tuzfold at a furious pace. Myca then attempts to enlist the coterie to his side.

The second night involves Morrow and the Gangrel packs. They arrive on the scene like a tempest. They tear through everyone and everything standing in their way. What was a brutal battle becomes outright carnage. The characters stand in the middle of the chaos, perhaps the only Cainites able to halt the devastation.

SCENE FIVE: THE CORNERED BEAST

When night finally crawls over day, Rustovitch's forces mount their offensive. Jürgen's ghouls have spent the day preparing defensive positions, and the rising Cainites join them to secure the stronghold and face the enemy. Fueled with a burning hatred, Rustovitch's inhuman beasts trample through Tuzfold's woods, sometimes to their disadvantage. Some *szlachta* and remaining hellhounds carelessly impale themselves in their haste to reach their prey. Using the jagged woods to their advantage, Jürgen's forces counter Rustovitch's onslaught with an impressive defense. The ghouls spent much of the day felling trees to create fortifications, and Jürgen readies his forces to make sorties to repel the Tzimisce as they traverse the dangerous woods. Jürgen's plan is for furious strikes against the advancing enemy, followed by quick withdrawals behind fortifications.

Desperation has spread like an infection through the Ventrue camp. Even Jürgen begins to wonder if this will be his final stand. Still, drawing on unknown sources, Jürgen maintains his stamina and determination. He refuses to even consider surrender, and even though he makes no direct request of the characters, they can sense that Jürgen would greatly appreciate their support, particularly if some characters have useful abilities. If they choose to help fend off Rustovitch's hordes, the characters must contend not just with fleshcrafted horrors, but the petrified trees that shake menacingly in the wind.

CEASELESS BATTLE

Jürgen's strategy is effective in the short term, but at a great cost. Each sortie pushes the Tzimisce back, but costs him some troops and gains him little time. The Fiends swarm into the clearing toward the

THE TORRENT OF BLOWS

For those engaged in the sorties of the defenses of the keep, the relentless dangers of a crowded battlefield are far more treacherous than a Cainite duel. Enemies typically surround the characters and blows descend unpredictably from every direction. Death is sudden and frequent. For this reason, the standard combat rules must reflect the dangers of open warfare. The *Dark Ages Companion* includes a complete listing of these rules from pp. 41 to 49. To summarize, characters engaged in mass combat have as many actions (running, attacking) as they possess Dexterity dots. Any attack is resolved with a difficulty rating of 6, and each success indicates that a nearby creature or opponent is defeated (but not necessarily killed). Each turn and for every character, all mortal, ghoul or Tzimisce creature attacks are resolved simply by rolling five dice with a difficulty of 6. This pool includes the totality of attacks directed specifically at a character and random blows, sword slices or arrow launches that inadvertently hit the character. Damage is resolved by doubling the number of successes in an attack and turning the result into a dice pool. Because of the dramatic nature of Cainite conflicts, this method of rapid combat resolution is not recommended for characters facing Cainite adversaries.

fortifications twice during the first night. The first time, they become bogged down in trenches and pits prepared during the day and must withdraw. The second time, a mere hour before sunrise, they avoid the pits and breach an important line of fortifications. Thankfully, Jürgen is able to call back the knights on sortie to attack the Tzimisce flank, and he then charges out with Lucretia and his ablest knights from the fort. Caught between two units of charging cavalry, the Tzimisce monstrosities are cut down. The Ventrue quickly fall back to the keep, which they have left almost undefended, and secure their fortifications anew. Many of the surviving Germans cheer this victory with great gusto, but Jürgen and Lucretia look at each other knowingly. It is clear to them that Rustovitch is using sorties of his own to whittle down Jürgen's forces in anticipation for something greater.

The coterie should have no choice but to become involved at one point or another in the combat. Martial characters end up in the heat of the battle at least once, either as part of a sortie into the woods or manning the fortifications. Less combat-ready characters should nevertheless face combat. Lone hellhounds and *szlachta* war-ghouls can very well make it through the German lines and corner those hoping for shelter, for example. If the characters have a rivalry with Kara Lupescu, this can be a time to face her in final combat.

Any character engaged in a combat sortie into the Tuzföld woods must navigate through the trees carefully to avoid the serrated edges of broken and twisted branches. The dangerous makeshift blades of fallen branches and dead trees lay everywhere. Players of any characters who are forced to flee the woods from chasing opponents must roll their Dexterity + Athletics (difficulty 7) if afoot or Dexterity + Ride (difficulty 8) on horseback, or suffer one level of lethal damage. This damage can be soaked, but the difficulty for doing so is 8. Players must make this roll each turn in which their characters run. If a player botches her roll, she should roll again. A success on the second roll means suffering three levels of damage instead of one. A failure or a second botch means the character manages to stake herself on a branch and becomes immobilized. To ensure that the characters are aware of the risks of running, the deadly nature of the Tuzföld woods should be emphasized.

THE WANING OF NIGHT

In the aftermath of the second assault on the Ventrue fortifications, the armies swarming Tuzföld begin to dwindle. Decapitated and shredded ghouls and horrors hang limply from branches, while the forest's floor is littered with mutilated corpses and limbs. While the brutal night draws to a close, no clear winner stands on the battlefield. Still, the advantage rests with Rustovitch, who has kept Jürgen's soldiers in their keep in the abandoned village and whittled away his forces.

SCENE SIX: THE LESSER EVIL

A second night of conflict afflicts Tuzföld's corpse-ridden woods. Rising at dusk, Jürgen surveys the day's work undertaken by the remaining ghouls among his troops. They have further strengthened the fortifications, giving the lord some measure of hope. Sensing that their morale is breaking, Lord Jürgen rallies his battle-weary forces for a speech. Standing atop one of the abandoned

keep's turrets, Jürgen holds his sword in the air and makes his weary knights a promise. If they can only fight furiously for another night, he will provide reinforcements. If the troops manage to push Rustovitch from the Tuzföld woods, Jürgen will be able to send a scout to request assistance. Jürgen continues his speech, saying that they have gone too far to look back. Jürgen also declares he will strike a bargain with Hades itself to repel these Fiends, who belong not on this field, but in the depths of Hell.

With this speech, Jürgen's knights and ghouls begin to chant his name. The low rumbling of their voices quickly overtakes the clearing. The trees rattle in symphony with the fearsome chant, and the coterie has no doubt that Rustovitch's forces can hear the damning war summons.

For a second time, Jürgen manages to stir his forces from the precipice of defeat. Captivated by their leader's drive, some of the knights now believe that they are on the brink of victory. Still, the characters are doubtful; they know that determination alone will do little to prevent the coming slaughter. Jürgen's troops are surrounded in an uninviting and unfamiliar place. Short of a miracle, they are all doomed.

Presenting these worries to Jürgen only ignites his anger. Jürgen hears no notions of compromise. Even Jürgen's closest allies cannot change the Ventrue's stubborn mind. In fact, they have few arguments with which to do so since Rustovitch does not seem interested in anything but the annihilation of the German vampires. Already one hour into the night, the coterie wonders why Rustovitch has yet to strike, since he clearly has the advantage. Even Jürgen wonders silently what infernal designs the Fiend is brewing. Despite their concerns, Jürgen's troops wait patiently for the slow, growing rumble of Rustovitch's trampling armies.

THE LURE OF BLOOD

The ghouls' other task in the daylight hours was to gather as many sources of vitae as possible to feed the remaining Cainites. Since animals are scarce in Tuzföld, sickly kine children and adults who found shelter in the abandoned village were mostly all that the ghouls could round up. Furthermore, once dusk comes, any of the ghouls so grievously wounded as to be useless become added sources of vitae and are thrown into a pile like butchered cattle. Upon giving the signal, Jürgen's Cainite soldiers

THE GANGREL BROOD

The Gangrel force storming Tuzföld is far smaller than an army and composed of Gangrel and wild creatures under their control. Counted separately, Jürgen's knights and Rustovitch's hordes easily outnumber the Gangrel, even with the assistance of the forest's natural predators. Morrow has the help of three Gangrel packs beside her own, but in total, there are only 14 clan members. Yet for non-Gangrel in particular, distinguishing between Cainite and wild beast is nearly impossible. Since they swarm the woods from every angle, it is also challenging to determine the number of animal allies supporting the Gangrel. Conservatively, they have at least 100 larger animals (mostly wolves, stags and boars) as well as countless rats, bats and stinging insects at their beck and call.

tear into the mound of flesh, making no distinction between man, woman, child or beast.

The characters witness this horror. Those who are disgusted must fight their primal hunger to bask in the gore. Lord Jürgen looks on and notices any characters who are hesitant. "Don't deny what you are!" he screams from his perch while devouring a helpless child. Jürgen does not particularly enjoy feasting on such easy prey, but he believes that he is a superior creature and that the situation calls for desperate measures.

Witnessing a horde of hungry Cainites gorging themselves on blood, even the vitae of leprous kine, is too much for most Cainites to see without participating. To strengthen this temptation of the Beast, the characters are probably hungry since their last feeding was likely unsatisfactory. Sources of vitae have been scarce since the onset of war. Characters near this mass blood feast are tempted to frenzy. If they resist, they must make a Self-Control roll against a difficulty of 6 plus one more for every point that their current blood pool is below 4. Even if they avoid the scene, a heavy stench of blood moistens the air, making the characters' resistance more difficult. Although the feast is relatively short (five to eight turns), it seems like an eternity. The sounds of vampires as they rend flesh and bone likely forces the coterie to join the debauchery, and the difficulty to resist may be increased. Characters with Instinct instead of Self-Control probably don't resist at all. (Those who try roll against a difficulty of 10.)

VYKOS RETURNS

After the armies kill the villagers, Myca Vykos infiltrates Jürgen's camp and approaches the coterie with a mission. First he tells the characters that Morrow is fast approaching the area with her pack allies. If Codrin escaped, then he reports that one of Morrow's brood has brought her the news. If the knights killed the Gangrel neonate, Myca says that Rustovitch's agents brought Morrow the news of Jürgen's incursion. Morrow is furious, and she has the support of several Gangrel packs in this region. Morrow's participation in this war will only prolong the conflict.

At this point, the coterie should remember that Morrow is not going to take either Jürgen's or Rustovitch's side. When he learns that Rustovitch has yet to attack, it is obvious to Myca that the Fiend has held off hoping that Morrow will kill many of Jürgen's troops. Learning that Morrow is approaching, the coterie may suspect the same. Once she is engaged in battle, the territorial Gangrel is unlikely to distinguish between Rustovitch's and Jürgen's troops, leaping into combat and attacking both armies with equal intent.

THE PLAN

Vykos is banking that the coterie's understanding of this conflict is equal to his own. Morrow is not going to forgive either Jürgen or Rustovitch for their intrusions, and she won't let either escape from the woods if she can help it. Although there's no absolute guarantee that either of the lords will fall, neither is there any guarantee that they will not. Vykos thinks that Rustovitch is more likely than not to survive, but he feels that it will take a miracle for Jürgen to fight his way out. Even if he does, his position will be terribly weakened, and other *voivodes* are waiting to take Rustovitch's place if the Fiend should fall. Even if the characters are Rustovitch's spies, things should

appear dire: Noriz and others won't let him get away with the massive waste of resources of the war without a victory to show for it.

There is one hope, he says. Morrow's assault will bog down the Fiends and Germans, giving them a common foe, if only briefly. That may incline the lords to listen to a compromise solution. Vykos claims that he can offer an alternative to a prolonged conflict, a means for Jürgen to keep some power in this region without risking potential annihilation. But to do so, he needs the coterie's help.

He asks the characters to lure Jürgen away from his camp before Rustovitch reenters the battlefield. The characters can use whatever excuse they wish, but they must trick him before another battle begins. If the coterie suspects that Vykos intends to destroy Jürgen, he tells the characters that he does not want further bloodshed, just a piece of the pie. Killing Jürgen would ultimately hurt Vykos, since Rustovitch would end up the sole power in this region. By allowing both forces to survive, Myca hopes to manipulate Jürgen and Rustovitch, and with the Dracon's backing, carve a niche for himself. If the characters express doubt that Rustovitch would agree to this plan, Vykos claims that the Tzimisce lord is not in a position to refuse. Myca knows the troubles brewing in Transylvania. Furthermore, Myca tells the characters that Rustovitch will support this plan since the *voivode* will view Myca as a vassal, even if it is only in appearance.

YEA

Presented with this option, the characters have to act swiftly, even if they loathe helping Myca. Their best bet is to enlist either Lucretia's or Akuji's aid, since they alone can probably not lure Jürgen from the battlefield. First, the characters must convince either of Jürgen's aides that Vykos' plan is Jürgen's sole salvation. Akuji feels that the Venture lord is blinded with rage, so the main hurdle with her is her reservations about Vykos. To reassure the Nosferatu that Myca's plan is sound, the characters can ensure Jürgen's safety by keeping close watch over him. If Vykos considers treachery, the characters can promise that they will intervene. Lucretia needs to be convinced that the tactical situation is hopeless despite Jürgen's promises. She is most receptive to arguments that point to the overall strategic weakness of their troops in Hungary without the mortal support network of the Teutonic Knights. Now that Hungary has expelled them, how can Jürgen hope to get sufficient reinforcements to stave off the Fiends for any length of time? Promises to protect Jürgen also sway her.

Unless the characters blunder their attempts to provide reassurances, Akuji or Lucretia (or both) support the idea. The characters can then set the plan into motion by conjuring a plausible lie to lure Jürgen away, backed by Akuji or Lucretia. The characters take Jürgen to meet Vykos who waits in shadows. Once he realizes what is going on, the Ventrue is angry, particularly with the trusted vassal who has tricked him. After he calms down, Jürgen listens to Vykos. Vykos proposes that Jürgen support his bid to create a buffer state using his Obertus order. Doing so would hem in the Tzimisce and allow Jürgen and Hardestadt to continue their agendas in western Hungary and the Holy Roman Empire with a much-reduced threat of interference from Transylvania. The influence of the Dracon, Vykos promises, will keep Rustovitch back.

After this presentation, Jürgen declares that he needs a few solitary moments to consider this idea. The characters must return to the abandoned keep and await word.

NAY

Faced with the characters' refusal to help, a desperate Myca attempts to trap Jürgen. In the eventuality that the coterie would object, Myca fostered two spies in Jürgen's camp. While the Ventrue lord prepares his troops for battle, Vykos orders the soldiers to capture Jürgen. Fearing for Lord Jürgen's safety, the characters keep a close watch over Jürgen, and they witness the two traitors attempting to subdue the Ventrue. With the coterie's help, Jürgen defeats the soldiers and demands an explanation. At that moment, Myca surfaces and makes a final attempt to convince everyone that his plan is the only option. At this point, the characters may have already warned Jürgen of Myca's scheme. Jürgen is weary, but he listens to Myca. Thankfully, Vykos is a clever and experienced orator. He convinces Jürgen to have a consultation. Additionally, three of Jürgen's best soldiers keep Myca constrained. After Myca has been rendered harmless, Jürgen moves away in seclusion with Vykos to consider his plans.

SCENE SEVEN: THE TRAMPLING

The final scene of *A Call to Arms* unravels at a dizzying pace. The Gangrel forces arrive on the battlefield and charge Jürgen's armies. To Rustovitch's surprise, the Animals also turn their

savagery against his armies, who lie in the woods, some distance from the abandoned village. Sensing that his opportunity to destroy Jürgen is waning, Rustovitch orders his monstrous armies to make their final push against Jürgen's forces held up in the village keep.

The scene in both Tuzföld woods and the village clearing is frightening. Confused by the Animals' arrival, Rustovitch's ghouls and drone-like beasts struggle to determine which foe they must attack. The result is catastrophic. In minutes, creatures that could suffer multiple battering and sword slices are defeated after single strokes. Furious, Rustovitch searches for his prey, hoping to end this conflict with Jürgen's head on a lance.

Meanwhile, the Animals are taking charge of the battle. Using their command of local beasts, the Gangrel swarm the battlefield. Huge black clouds of corpse-flies rise up, laying eggs in the eyes and skin of the walking corpses in the battlefield. Bats and owls swoop out of the woods, adding to the chaos. On the ground, rats swarm over ghouls and Cainites while boars and stags charge madly into Ventrue and Tzimisce alike. Packs of ravenous wolves pick off any enemy who dares break rank. To make matters even worse, most of the vampire knights have tried to conserve their blood since the battle began, and few have spared any to strengthen the bond with their ghoul warhorses. Suddenly they find these loyal creatures bucking and running wild, driven over the edge by the deadly whispers of Morrow and the other Gangrel. The only Cainites who are able to stem the tide are those skilled in Animalism, so the Tzimisce have an advantage, but it hardly makes a difference. Among the packs of true wolves, the clouds of true bats and the very mists



A CALL TO ARMS

of the woods hide powerful Gangrel who strike at any Fiend who makes headway against the assault. It's almost impossible to tell Gangrel from beast in the chaos.

During the battle, the Gangrel euphorically embrace their Beast. Their tactic threatens to force every Cainite to a similar state of mindless brutality. Morrow also participates in the fray, but she controls her actions with surprising clarity. Despite her anger, Morrow skillfully directs her beasts and Gangrel allies. Save perhaps Rustovitch, no one is a better fighter on the field.

CAUGHT IN THE SWARMS

The scale of this battle is vast, and the coterie has practically no way to avoid taking part. The Gangrel do not discriminate, and unless the players come up with a truly inspired stratagem, their characters must spend at least some time in the chaos of the assault. And chaos is the word. Disciplined knights frenzy left and right, horrific Tzimisce war-ghouls shriek in terror of their own, and mighty elders stalk each other despite the carnage. Emphasize the sheer terror of the situation and constantly throw threats against them. Some possibilities:

- **Corpse Flies:** A black cloud of insects descends on one or more of the characters, swarming into her eyes, mouth, nose and all soft tissue. The character is blinded (+2 difficulty on all actions) until she can drive the creatures out of her eyes by rubbing them out for two turns and leaving the cloud. The sensation of the insects crawling down her throat also forces a check against frenzy (difficulty 4, two successes needed). Any character who suffers such an attack can expect to have maggots hatch in her undead flesh over the next 24 hours. This causes no damage, but waking with your throat full of burrowing larvae can be very disconcerting.

- **Bats:** Clouds of bats plague the coterie like giant mosquitoes. Although these nocturnal flyers do not damage a character, they render anyone caught in their sphere virtually blind (+2 difficulty for all actions requiring Dexterity). The only way to dispel these black swarms is to use fire, which is being used by soldiers in the dark woods, or to find shelter in an abandoned house. The bats do not follow into cramped quarters.

- **Arrows and Spears:** The chaos of battle means that there is a constant barrage of arrows and spears flying in every direction. Players whose characters have to make their way through a battle must roll their Dexterity + Dodge against a difficulty of 6, lest those characters suffer a level of lethal damage. Players must make this roll each time their characters cut through a battle. This dodge counts as an action for the turn.

- **Mad Horses:** Characters who mount a steed during battle may lose control of their beast since the Gangrel usurp mastery of all animals on the field. Characters are thrown from their horses, and must make a Dexterity + Athletics roll against a difficulty of 7 to land on their feet. Otherwise they fall awkwardly and take two levels of bashing damage. On a failed Dexterity + Dodge roll, the vampires also risk being trampled. Victims suffer four levels of bashing damage from the thrashing. Each subsequent turn, the players must roll Dexterity + Athletics for their characters to regain their footing. Failing means that they must either dodge or suffer an additional loss of health. This vicious procedure continues until the character successfully escapes or is mauled into torpor.

For attacks from larger animals, use the profiles provided on p. 102.

It is possible for characters with Animalism to repel the creatures under Gangrel control. These characters can use Noah's Call (Animalism 2), rolling their Charisma + Survival (difficulty 8). With three or more successes, the characters can convince the attacking beasts not to harm them long enough for the beats to choose another convenient target. Characters may also use Cowing the Beast (Animalism 3), but players must roll at difficulty 8 and collect seven successes instead of five. This increase reflects the Gangrel influence over the creatures.

OPPORTUNITY AT LAST

Despite the unyielding chaos, Vladimir Rustovitch cuts a swath through the rampaging armies, bearing his greatsword. "Jürgen!" he screams to summon his dreaded foe from hiding. "Show yourself, craven leech, and make battle!"

Rustovitch's anger commands attention, and it is more terrifying than anything on the field. The Fiend skillfully slices his way to Jürgen's keep. There he confronts the characters, who are waiting for Vykos and Jürgen to return. "Where are you hiding him?" Rustovitch barks at the coterie. Simultaneously, Morrow emerges from the sea of shadows. The characters stand between a growling Rustovitch and a murderous Morrow. She is seconds from leaping at Rustovitch, and unless the coterie intervenes, a battle of titans will take place.

In the event that the characters moved away from the keep, this scene can essentially unravel anywhere in Tuzföld. Rustovitch charges toward the characters either because he recognizes them as spies or as Jürgen's allies. Vladimir suspects that the characters know Jürgen's whereabouts, and he does not relent until they reveal his location.

KNOWLEDGE BEST USED

Only the information that Jürgen is negotiating with Myca Vykos stalls this confrontation. Using their persuasive powers, the characters have to convince Morrow and Rustovitch that they have a solution to end the war. Once the characters present Myca's plan for the creation of a buffer state, Rustovitch and Morrow postpone their confrontation. Even so, Morrow does not see how such an arrangement serves the Gangrel. She demands that all the territory surrounding Tuzföld fall under the exclusive dominion of the Gangrel. Rustovitch listens but ultimately, he is doubtful that Myca Vykos and Jürgen are really in negotiations. The *voivode* believes that the coterie is simply stalling to save Jürgen, who is making his cowardly escape. Even if the characters are secretly Rustovitch's spies, Vladimir doubts their motivations. Neither side calls off their troops, and the sounds of slaughter in the woods punctuate the icy standoff in the keep.

THE PROPOSAL

Fortunately, Lord Jürgen makes his reappearance just as Rustovitch prepares to scour the keep. Upon seeing Jürgen with Myca, Rustovitch draws his sword and leaps from his horse. In retaliation, Jürgen shouts, "Sheathe your sword, dog!"

The coterie now stands between three battle-ready adversaries. Morrow, Rustovitch and Jürgen shout insults at each other. Only the intervention of Myca and the coterie prevents the

discussions from degrading. Myca makes his proposal known to Rustovitch and Morrow. Similarly, Jürgen announces that he supports this plan.

The only way to convince Morrow to consider Myca's plan is to emphasize that the creation of a buffer state will put an end to this war. Since they have no real interest in laying claim to her territory, Rustovitch, Jürgen and Myca concede to whatever Morrow demands. As for Rustovitch, he agrees only with the assurance that Vykos swears an oath of fealty. By agreeing to this deal, Jürgen has lost his bid for a chunk of Transylvania. On the other hand, Jürgen makes a demand of Rustovitch. Jürgen wants the *voivode* to recognize Acre as his domain and withdraw the Vlaszy knights from the Second Kingdom. Having gained what he wanted from his gambit in Outremer, Rustovitch agrees.

During this negotiation, the leaders use the characters as proxies. Jürgen and Rustovitch are particularly loath to speak directly to each other. The hatred they feel prevents them from fully acknowledging each other's presence and showing respect. Rustovitch only agrees to this truce because of his problems with the conniving Noriz, who hopes to usurp control of his empire. The longer Rustovitch delays, the more he risks losing everything.

If necessary, Myca whispers sweet words to each leader to facilitate the coterie's diplomatic efforts, reassuring each lord of his loyalty. He tells Rustovitch that he is his loyal vassal, while telling Jürgen that his alliance with Rustovitch is superficial at best. Myca

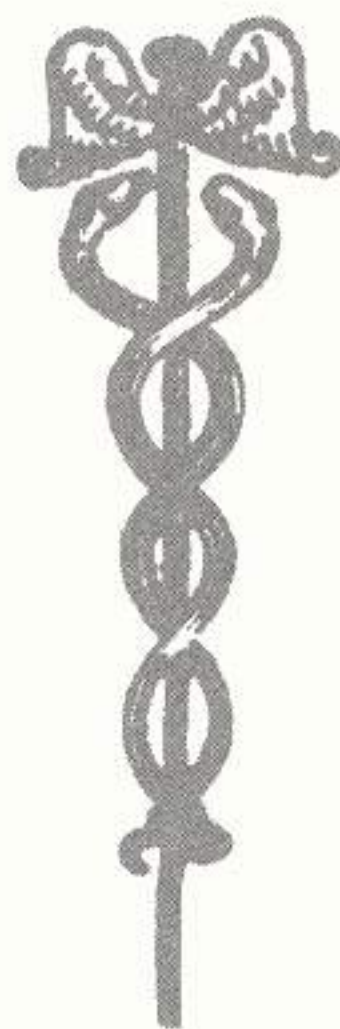
is part of the Obertus, and the group's ideologies conflict with Rustovitch's beliefs. Preferably, have Vykos arm the coterie with these arguments so that the players remain at the center of the diplomatic action.

After she has gained assurances from Myca, Rustovitch and Jürgen that they will respect her territory, Morrow departs and orders her fellow Gangrel to cease their battle. She gives all Cainites until the end of night to depart Tuzföld, after which she threatens to return to finish her job. Once each lord has agreed to all the demands, a fragile peace is carved and the pounding sounds of battle give way to silence.

EPILOGUE

Tired and bloodied, Lord Jürgen and his forces return to their holdings in Brandenburg. The war is over for now, and the Ventrue lord must rebuild his forces and ready his next assaults. Vultures circle around him, but he secures his borders and makes ready for further campaigns. One setback is not enough to deter such a vampire. Rustovitch for his part is able to counter the moves of Noriz and shout his victory over the Ventrue. But southern Transylvania is not so secure. The Tremere remain a thorn in his side, German and Magyar settlers still abound, and the Arpad Ventrue return to the fore.

The War of Princes has just begun.







Chapter Four: Dramatis Personae

There is no man that hath power over
the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath
he power in the day of death; and there is
no discharge in that war.

- Ecclesiastes 8:8

CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT

The characters presented in this chapter are the architects of *Under the Black Cross*. Be they friend or foe, these vampires have considerable impact on the tumultuous developments that shape Acre, Magdeburg and Hungary. To warrant treatment, the characters in this chapter have at least a single memorable encounter with the coterie. Characters with whom your players' characters have only passing contact or who are potent elders do not have full game statistics. This allows you to portray them as you see fit, rather than hewing to rigid statistics.

BRUJAH

HANIFA BINT NASIR AR-RASHID, THE RIGHTLY GUIDED

(Appears in *Ashes of Outremer*)

Background: The daughter of a scribe in Aleppo, Hanifa grew up as a proper Muslim woman. Veiled and covered, she helped with the household work behind her father's shop while he dealt with the learned men who called for his services. At night, he taught her to read, so that she could better understand the words of God as recorded by the Prophet (peace be unto him). At the call of the *muezzin* she worshiped Allah at the local mosque with the other women. When she was an adult, her father married her to a coppersmith, a gentle, pious man named Walid ibn Othman, by whom she had a daughter.

This idyllic life came to an end when the Greeks invaded Syria and laid siege to Aleppo at the command of Emperor Basil II. Her husband and daughter died of starvation before the Hamdanid governor surrendered, and her family was killed in the ensuing massacre. She herself was taken and made the whore and slave of several Byzantine soldiers. She existed this way for two years, praying to Allah for the release of death or madness, but He granted neither.

One summer day, an order came that the army was being rotated home to Anatolia and that another would take its place. That night, the soldiers debated whether they should take Hanifa with them, sell her to their replacements or cut her throat since she was used up. They drank and gambled, eventually falling asleep beneath the images of their idolatrous icons.

Confident in her submission, the soldiers had forgotten to bind Hanifa for the night. When she realized that they weren't coming for her, she resolved then and there to have her revenge and then find the peace that Allah denied her. Stealthily, silently, she first stole a dagger from the belt of a snoring Greek, then cut his throat. One by one, moving like a ghost through the shadows cast by the moon,



she killed all the Byzantines who had tormented her. The deed done, she kept the knife for one last purpose: She would return to the house that she and her husband and daughter shared and kill herself. There, amidst the rubble and burned timbers, she prayed for Allah's forgiveness and plunged the knife into her belly.

She lay there, her blood draining over the stones that had once been her home, when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Unable to turn or look, she heard a voice say that this was not her time, that her fire was needed for future wars against the infidel. And then she felt the bite at her neck.

Her sire, Nasir ibn Mansur, taught her well the ways of war. He took her anger and loss and instilled in her an unending desire to defend and avenge her people. He taught her the ways of the *Ashirra* sect of vampires and of her new family, *Bay't Mushakis* (which the *Franj* call Clan Brujah). Eventually, he left her to travel west, where the *Franj* were trying to retake al-Andalus. He left her in the Levant, with a mission to defend God's children from invaders. This has been her unchanging mission ever since, although she has never her sire again. Over time, she has gathered a small coterie of like-minded Cainites from several clans. With the coming of the crusades, she knows that this is the mission for which Allah had intended her.

Image: A plain woman who shuns adornment, Hanifa cuts her hair short to keep it out of the way in battle. Tall for her sex, her build has grown muscular in the years since

she took up the sword. But her body is lithe, not heavy, and speed and stealth are her greatest weapons. Her green eyes are those of a hawk, always searching for prey. Hanifa still wears a simple veil.

Roleplaying Hints: You took your personal revenge centuries ago, and now you take it for others who cannot. But unlike the *Franj* or Seljuks, you are not a barbarian. You do not kill wantonly. You prefer to protect and shield, rather than maim or kill. In the time since Aleppo, you have even stopped hating Greeks, since you've seen how the *Franj* knights have treated Orthodox Christians and seen more than your fair share of sinners who go to mosque. Now you are willing to deal with reasonable vampires of any faith as long as the cause of justice is served. Your own faith in Allah and His Word as revealed to Muhammad remain strong.

Haven: Hanifa and her coterie make their haven in the Lebanon Mountains east of Acre, in a cave in a small hidden valley. They have other, temporary havens scattered throughout the Second Kingdom, the locations of which they change regularly to maintain security.

Secrets: Hanifa has gathered much valuable intelligence about the vampires of the Second Kingdom. She knows of many secret havens and informal relationships. Among other things, she understands that there is bad blood between Etienne and his sire, Varsik. Etienne is a fair overseer of the local Damned, and she would rather he remain the prince of Acre.

Influence: Hanifa has some influence among the younger Cainites of Syria and Palestine, especially those on the Road of War. Many look to her as a mentor, and it is she who helps them mold wild fanaticism into a useful determination.

Destiny: Hanifa barely misses destroying the Lasombra Maria d'Agostino during the capture of Acre in 1291. After the last of the crusades, when the Turks come to dominate the Islamic world, her fire burns low and she enters torpor in her beloved Aleppo. She rises again during the Arab War for Independence in 1917, becoming a terror of the Turkish army. Hanifa, beloved daughter of Nasir, meets Final Death and diablerie at the hands of an Assamite hired by a Turkish commander.

Clan: Brujah (*Bay't Mushakis*)

Sire: Nasir ibn Mansur

Nature: Defender

Demeanor: Fanatic

Generation: 8th

Embrace: 998

Apparent Age: late 20s

Physical: Strength 3, Dexterity 4, Stamina 3

Social: Charisma 3, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2

Mental: Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Dodge 3, Intimidation 2, Leadership 3, Subterfuge 3

Skills: Archery 2, Etiquette 2, Melee 4, Ride 2, Stealth 3, Survival 3

Knowledges: Academics 3, Hearth Wisdom 3, Investigation 2, Linguistics 3, Politics 2

Disciplines: Auspex 1, Celerity 4, Fortitude 2, Potence 3, Presence 3

Backgrounds: Allies 3, Contacts 3, Resources 2, Retainers 3, Status 1

Virtues: Conviction 4, Self-Control 3, Courage 4

Road: War 6 (The Road of War, or *Tariq el-Harb*, is the Muslim version of the Road of Chivalry. For full treatment, see *Veil of Night*, pp. 140-142.)

Willpower: 6

CAITIFF

ALBIN, THE GHOST OF MAGDEBURG

(appears in *Shadows at Court*)

Background: Albin was born in a small village a day's travel from Magdeburg. Sadly, he was the victim of a severe case of the mumps that left him unusually small and weak for several years. During this time, Albin bore the abuse of a father who taunted him about his shortcomings.

When Albin was just 13 years old, a plague ravaged through his village, taking the lives of his siblings and mother. Albin's father survived the ordeal, but it left him crippled and weak — and at Albin's mercy. The teenager reveled at this role reversal. He began torturing his father who responded with taunts. After years of abuse, Albin's final revenge came when he repeatedly plunged a dagger in his father's heart and set the family home aflame.

Leaving his native village for Magdeburg, Albin traded one hell for another. The city was no kinder than his family had been. He spent months trying to find work, but he ultimately had to survive on only the pity of strangers and what he could scavenge. Eventually, he turned to stealing from the city's wealthiest merchants and nobles. Albin lived in dank cellars and cesspits, but other urchins discovered his secret hideaway. Once again, Albin became the victim of abuse when stronger boys beat him and usurped his shelter. He couldn't stand it any longer, and he attacked his tormentors with a blunt knife. Albin only managed to harm one boy before the others beat him into submission. Battered and broken, Albin waited for his rivals to deliver the final blows.

Instead he saw a vast shadow move over them. One by one, the boys who had taunted Albin died screaming. Albin closed his eyes and begged for a quick death. A voice he believed to be the Devil himself refused to render it, and Albin awoke a creature of the night. For years, he could not

understand what he had become, not until he encountered Cainites and learned that he was not alone. Yet again, Albin became the wretch of his kind — this time of the shadowy world of vampires. Magdeburg's Cainites ridiculed Albin for fearing what he had become rather than reveling in his predatory powers. They nicknamed him the Ghost because he carried on more as a shade than a vampire. While they feasted on *kine vitae*, Albin drained rats and stray dogs.

Albin came to the attention of Lord Jürgen when the Ventrue began investigating the city. The Ventrue lord's advisors recommended that he dispose of the pitiable creature. Yet rather than heed their harsh advice, Jürgen discovered that the Caitiff had an unsurpassed knowledge of the city and an uncanny ability to skulk about unseen. Jürgen approached Albin and offered him a position as his personal spy. Albin accepted the offer immediately, anticipating that he would gain respect among Magdeburg's vampires. Unfortunately, Magdeburg's other vampires still see him as a wretch who is now all the more distasteful because he reports all to the prince.

Albin seethes with resentment. Jürgen treats him like a slave and never forgets to remind him that his existence depended solely on Jürgen's mercy. Albin has spent years suffering in silence, but the Tremere know very well the nature of hatred. Alexia of Nicosia approaches the Caitiff with an offer: Betray Jürgen in exchange for the secrets of blood magic.

Image: Albin was quickly approaching manhood as of his Embrace, but he was still a short and skinny wretch. Although his body seemed younger than 13, Albin's face bore the lines of a man who had already lived a life of hardship. Albin's skin was also cadaverous, the blue veins beneath his pallid flesh easily visible, while his posture was hunched, a result of malnutrition and hard work.

Roleplaying Hints: They all hate you, and you hate them back. Keep quiet and watch, never letting on that you conspire against their haughty unliving selves. Strike when the time is right.

Haven: Albin nests in one of the towers along the wall of Jürgen's keep in Magdeburg. Although it could shelter others, the tower is abandoned by all save the Caitiff.

Secrets: Albin has gathered many interesting facts over his years of service. His greatest knowledge is the physical arrangement of Magdeburg. There is no building in the area — not even his lord's keep — that can keep him out.

Influence: Albin has Jürgen's ear when he conveys information, but not a hint of influence when he gives an opinion.

Destiny: Imprisoned at the bottom of an abandoned well at the end of *Shadows at Court*, Albin escapes



around 1230. Jürgen tries to find his erstwhile spy for a few years but never does. Little does he know that Albin brings Jürgen's secrets to Lord Hardestadt.

Clan: Caitiff

Sire: unknown

Nature: Rebel

Demeanor: Loner

Generation: 9th

Embrace: 1191

Apparent Age: mid-teens

Physical: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2

Social: Charisma 2, Manipulation 3, Appearance 1

Mental: Perception 4, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 3, Brawl 2, Dodge 4, Larceny 4, Subterfuge 3

Skills: Animal Ken 1, Etiquette 1, Herbalism 1, Melee 2, Stealth 5, Survival 3

Knowledges: Hearth Wisdom 1, Investigation 2, Linguistics 1, Politics 1, Seneschal 2

Disciplines: Auspex 1, Obfuscate 4

Backgrounds: Contacts 2, Herd 3

Virtues: Conviction 2, Instinct 4, Courage 2

Road: Devil 6

Willpower: 4

FOLLOWER OF SET

LUQMAN IBN WAHID AL BASIM (A.K.A. "DUQAQ IBN JAMIL"), HIDDEN SERPENT

(Appears in *Ashes of Outremer*)

9th generation, childe of Akh-Netep

Nature: Monster

Demeanor: Judge

Embrace: 871

Apparent Age: early 30s

Background: Born the eldest son of a wealthy spice dealer in the great port of Alexandria, Luqman ibn Wahid al Basim came to enjoy a life of sybaritic pleasure. His parents, otherwise good Muslims, granted the every whim of their beautiful boy: the father because he was weak before his wife; his mother because she could not bear to be denied her son's emotional or physical love. All was forgiven. Any sin, any cruelty, any waste or wantonness. He paid the consequences for nothing.

After the (suspicious) death of his parents, Luqman inherited the business and proceeded to run it to ruin. Bad investments combined with his spendthrift ways and dissolute lifestyle left his coffers nearly empty. Worse still, he began to sell family possessions, not to raise money for the business, but to buy the favors of a beautiful courtesan who called herself Asiya but was actually a Follower of Set



named Akh-Netep. He went through all he owned, and Asiya turned her back on him as soon as the last coin passed from his hands. To get her back would take money, so he set to work for the first time in his life. With honeyed words and the last of his family's reputation, he became the partner of a trader. He soon murdered the fool and took over his business, transforming a small concern into a prosperous empire built on exotic spices, the finest slaves and all the goods that the rich of Alexandria wanted to get their hands on without their neighbors knowing. Luqman was wealthy and Asiya was his alone. She was pleased with his progress, and she revealed the wisdom of Set to him. A few years later, he accepted the god's blood.

Since then, Luqman has worked the will of Set from al-Andalus to Ader and Constantinople. Honing the skills he learned as a merchant and from Akh-Netep, he has become a master of honeyed words and innuendo. In the Second Kingdom he has taken the role of "Duqaq," a Syrian Toreador scribe who works to conciliate between the various factions. His secret goal is to guide the Fifth Crusade's army to Egypt in order to drive the Muslim vampires from that ancient land. He supports Prince Etienne and even serves as his aide, since the Ravnos is a relatively liberal liege. Although fired by misguided Christian faith, Etienne lets Acre's vampires be, and that is how Luqman likes it.

GANGREL

SIR MICHAEL OF DURHAM, GRAIL KNIGHT

(Appears in *Ashes of Outremer*)

10th generation, childe of Edward

Nature: Penitent

Demeanor: Defender

Embrace: 1070

Apparent Age: early 30s

In the first years after the Norman Conquest, King William's knights pushed north, establishing Norman rule over the whole of Anglo-Saxon England. Michael FitzArnold took up rule of a small group of villages north of the River Wear and built for himself a wooden motte-and-bailey castle. Neither more lenient nor cruel than his Norman brethren, Michael was notable only for the depth of his piety. He commissioned several churches in the villages and gave generously to the local abbey.

One chill autumn evening, just past sunset, Michael was riding home from a tour of his lands. A knight bearing a blackened shield blocked his path and declared that only a knight of valor might pass him. Michael accepted the challenge and, with spear and sword, they joined battle. The contest was short, for Michael was no match for his



opponent. Unhorsed at the first pass, Michael rose to his feet to gallantly concede when the black knight rapidly strode up, punched him to the ground and stabbed his throat in one fluid motion. Realizing with horror that his death was to feed a demon, he tried to resist when the creature cut his own wrist and fed the blood to Michael. He tried to resist, but could not, and instead drank heartily of the heady vitae.

His sire, a Saxon Gangrel named Edward, abandoned him that night without a word. Knowing that he could never return to his former life, Michael fled into the wilderness to be as far from men as possible. Feeding only when absolutely necessary, he prayed fervently for forgiveness of the sins that had caused God to curse him so. He tried to do good as he wandered, defending isolated villages from the depredations of ravening Cainites and Lupines in the night. Eventually, he encountered a vampire who was not a monster, but instead a noble knight. This knight, Kenneth, told him of the Order of the Bitter Ashes and that his salvation lay within the walls of the Castle by the Lake in Scotland. Accepting the offer, Michael became a squire of the order. Eventually, after long periods of prayer, meditation and testing, he drank from the Grail itself and passed its grueling test. His skin now glows faintly, and he can stand the power of the sun for brief periods of time, but he rarely makes use of these gifts.

Michael is in the Levant on his first independent mission to find relics to bring back to the Order. When he learns of the fragment of the True Cross, he makes it his mission to ensure that it does not fall into undeserving hands. Ambivalent about Gauthier de Dampiere and his band, Michael concentrates on helping them escape before deciding what course to take next.

MORROW THE SAGE

(appears in *Shadows at Court* and *A Call to Arms*)

Background: Unlike most of her Cainite cousins, Morrow has no knowledge of a life outside the world of night. When she was a child, Morrow was abandoned after a brutal barbarian invasion devastated her parent's farmstead. Death found her in the form of Arnulf, the already ancient Gangrel who stalks through Eastern Europe. At first, he considered feasting on her, but the prospect of a small child unspoiled by life among humans enticed him. Arnulf decided that he wanted to raise Morrow, granting her the Embrace once she reached maturity.

At the rare gatherings of Gangrel in those nights, other Animals acknowledged only the inconveniences of raising a living girl. Arnulf, however, saw it as an opportunity to cultivate the ideal childe — a solitary, self-sufficient vampire with superior skills. In no time, Morrow proved to be a formidable, independent spirit. Even years before her Embrace, Morrow would hunt and track unaided by heightened senses and Cainite vigor.

After two decades of raising Morrow, Arnulf decided to proceed to the next phase of his tutelage. He put Morrow through a test. She must survive on her own for several weeks in a small territory, while Arnulf himself worked against her. Morrow had a difficult task trying to outwit Arnulf, whose experience and skills were far superior. Still, Morrow's survival instincts were unparalleled. She moved through the forest like a fox, dug for roots and ate what grubs she could find. When necessary, she hid from Arnulf, now her predator. On the fifth night, Morrow and Arnulf faced each other. Arnulf had trapped a hare and was waiting for Morrow to come upon it. Morrow knew what was waiting, so she fashioned weapons before she approached.

She was unable to land a single blow, but Arnulf showed little restraint, tearing at her flesh. At that moment, Morrow tried hard to find a shred of humanity in Arnulf's eyes. She found only rage, for he knew no other path than struggle. He was about to deliver a deadly blow when Morrow reached for her makeshift dagger. She plunged it into her beloved teacher's neck. Immediately, Morrow pulled back, horrified that she had been capable of such brutality. With this sign, Arnulf charged Morrow a second time. The next night, she awoke alone and undead.

Years after the Embrace, Morrow understood what Arnulf had tried to achieve. She respected the reasoning behind her mentor's actions, but she also believed that there was another way for the Gangrel. Morrow headed south and slowly garnered a reputation as a fierce warrior. This reputation helped Morrow in her quest to gather fellow Animals. Morrow realized that if the clan was to survive the encroachment of civilization and the Cainites that it hid, Gangrel had to have ways to cooperate. She encouraged Gangrel to form packs throughout the Balkans and Hungary, and she watched over great gatherings of the Animals. Morrow became known as the Sage, a moniker she was awarded for her ability to use reason as efficiently as she did her Beast. Even Arnulf attended some of her gatherings, although he never stayed long.

Lord Jürgen's bid for domain in Transylvania spells troubles for the area's Animals. For many years, Morrow and the Fiend Vladimir Rustovitch have had an understanding: Each stays out of the other's affairs. This truce has stood unchallenged for years, and they have even managed to cooperate against the Tremere on a few occasions. When Jürgen moves his troops in the region, Morrow senses that her land's stability is at risk.

Image: Embraced as she entered full womanhood, Morrow is a fine physical specimen — muscled and powerful. She has frenzied many a time over her unlife, and she bears the animalistic characteristics of her Gangrel blood with pride. Long, lustrous fur covers most of her body, her ears are pointed like a wolf's, and her eyes shine like a great cat's. Morrow disdains clothing of any type.



Roleplaying Hints: You are part warrior-woman, part mother-figure, part force of nature and all beast. You run the woods and hills and hunt where you may, but you have little patience for the self-indulgent isolation of some Gangrel. The Animals must run in packs and support one another if they are to survive — and if that means that they must all submit to you, so be it.

Haven: Morrow has no specific haven, being nomadic like many of her clan. She considers several areas hers, however, and she defends them against all incursions. The most important of these is the ancient wood where Arnulf Embraced her — an area now called Tuzföld.

Secrets: Morrow knows many of the secret passes and sheltered ways through the Transylvanian Alps and the Balkans.

Influence: Morrow is one of the most respected Gangrel in the region. Under her guidance, the unique Gangrel packs of the region became highly territorial and agreed (in theory) to help one another in times of crisis. Only at the calling of Morrow or another elder would a substantial number of Animals come together, but small clutches of three or four packs did cooperate against the Tzimisce, Eastern Ventrue and Tremere over the years.

Destiny: Morrow's actions in *A Call to Arms*, bringing down not one, but two powerful noble Cainites, only add to her reputation. In the years to come, she will stand as an important figure shaping the beliefs of those who follow the Road of the Beast.

Clan: Gangrel

Sire: Arnulf

Nature: Survivor

Demeanor: Judge

Generation: 7th

Embrace: 887

Apparent Age: early 20s

Physical: Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Stamina 5

Social: Charisma 4, Manipulation 3, Appearance 1

Mental: Perception 4, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 4, Athletics 3, Brawl 5, Dodge 4, Empathy 2, Intimidation 4, Leadership 3

Skills: Animal Ken 5, Herbalism 4, Melee 2, Stealth 6, Survival 6

Knowledges: Hearth Wisdom 4, Investigation 2, Occult 1

Disciplines: Animalism 6, Auspex 2, Fortitude 4, Potence 2, Protean 5

Backgrounds: Contacts 3, Herd 4, Status 5 (among Gangrel)

Virtues: Conviction 4, Instinct 5, Courage 4

Road: Beast 8

Willpower: 9

LASOMBRA

MARIA D'AGOSTINO, DAUGHTER OF GENOA

(Appears in *Ashes of Outremer*)

8th generation, childe of Pietro

Nature: Innovator

Demeanor: Autocrat

Embrace: 977

Apparent Age: late teens

Born to the family of powerful merchants in Genoa, Maria Isabella d'Agostino grew up with the sensibilities of one born to rule. Genoa was beginning its growth as a trading power, and the wealth brought to House d'Agostino bought her servants, rich clothes of silk from Constantinople and all the things that she grew to regard as her rightful due. The success of her family showed its natural right to rule, and the d'Agostinos were leaders in the resistance against Fatimid raiders and in the city's commercial expansion.

Although she was taught that a woman's proper place was as a wife, mother and household supervisor, Maria was fascinated with trade and the arts of commerce. She showed an aptitude for mathematics and business, which was considered unseemly by many in her family. Her father, however, indulged her, not the least because she was a more apt pupil than her dolt of an elder brother, Rogerio, the nominal heir.



UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

But a stroke felled old Don Carlo one summer's night, and Rogerio became head of the house. Viewing his sister as just another commercial property, he arranged for her marriage to the heir of the powerful Fieschi family in return for trading concessions in Constantinople. Brother and sister had a fierce fight in the family library that ended with Maria stabbing Rogerio through the heart with his own dagger. Rushing to the sound of their master's scream, the servants restrained her and turned her over to the authorities. Within days, the magistrate had pronounced a sentence of death by strangulation.

The night before her execution, she was visited by Father Pietro in her cell. While she made her confession, he spoke softly to her, telling her that there was no great sin in what she did, since fate had placed an inferior ahead of her and all she did was to take her rightful place. He claimed that he had the power to restore her to the place that God meant for her and to put her among Europe's natural rulers, if she would only agree to further the interests of a new family, one that lived in shadow.

She agreed eagerly, and Father Pietro left without a further word. The next day, instead of being taken to her execution, she was released and restored to her home and servants. It seemed that a sailor from Sardinia had confessed to the murder and already been put to death. The contract with the Fieschi was broken, too. Wondering how the debt she owed this mysterious family would be paid, she buried herself in her work of running the family businesses. Of "Father Pietro," no one she asked knew a thing.

Yet he returned a few months later, surprising her in the study where she had killed her brother. He reminded her of her debt but reassured her that she was merely assuming her rightful role within her new family, the Lasombra. Held by his soothing words and a dominating presence, she stood paralyzed as his teeth sunk into her neck and drained her lifeblood. She then drank eagerly of his.

In the decades since, Maria has come to believe that that night was the beginning of her real life. In the years that followed, she made ghouls of her whole household, ensuring their loyalty. To maintain a proper image, she took a husband from a minor merchant house and made a thrall of him as well. When the years passed and her apparent youth began to draw questions, she faked her death and, ruling from the family crypt, placed another ghoul as her "heir."

Eventually, the elders of the clan felt that her talents would serve them best elsewhere. They sent Maria to establish a branch of her family's trading empire in the Second Kingdom, arriving in 1199. She has been there since, supporting Lasombra and Christian interests with all her skill, from the family home in Haifa. Her contacts within the Genoan quarter of Acre and other trading ports along the coast are unparalleled.

NOSFERATU

AKUJI, THE TALE-WEAVER

(appears in *Shadows at Court* and *A Call to Arms*)

11th generation, childe of Kristoff

Nature: Defender

Demeanor: Autocrat

Embrace: 1002

Apparent Age: mid-30s

Akuji was born in the North African deserts with a wanderer's spirit. As a child, she spent much time with her father, who ran a caravansary. With him, she met travelers who came from all corners of Africa. Often without her father's knowledge, she wandered into the strangers' tents and listened to their tales of afar, longing to travel to new places herself. As a young woman, she settled for being a storyteller, delighting the villagers with tales of faraway places borrowed from traders who visited her father. She knew that her parents were to arrange a marriage for her, and she dreaded assuming her "womanly duties" and giving up hope of adventure. The fates had other plans, however, and Akuji caught the eye of Seje, an impulsive trader from the Levant. When his caravan left the settlement, Akuji was hidden among his private things.

For several years, Akuji and her lover traveled North Africa. During each trip, Akuji remained hidden. If the other traders in the caravan had learned that a woman



traveled with them, they would have banished Akuji and Seje. While Seje made his living selling goods, Akuji would sneak to nearby villages and towns to recount stories. Eventually, Akuji gained a reputation, and many villagers would pay to hear her tales.

Akuji and Seje quickly amassed wealth, and they dreamed of one day marrying and owning their own caravan. Another trader who had jealously noticed Seje's growing coffers began spying on him. After discovering Seje's secret, he threatened to reveal Akuji to their elders. In return for his silence, the man demanded that Seje pay him a portion of his money. Seje refused and a scuffle ensued. During the fight, other traders came to witness the commotion. While trying to protect Akuji, Seje turned his back to his opponent's blade, who took the opportunity to stab Seje through the heart. Seje died immediately. Horrified, Akuji fled and ended up in the port city of Ceuta.

Akuji wandered the city. She made a living selling tales that had grown as dark as her mood. Kristoff, a European Nosferatu in the city on his master's errand, saw Akuji and noticed that she was filled with sorrow. It was as if she had lost the will to live. Although she drew breath, her spirit was destroyed. Sensing that her only passion was amassing stories, Kristoff approached Akuji with an offer. Disguising his true face, the Nosferatu proposed giving her a new life filled with secret knowledge in a land far away. Fascinated, Akuji accepted.

Over the next few years, the two traveled north into Christian Europe. Kristoff tested his protégé, seeing if she was resourceful enough to find her own way on several occasions. Though not without her failings, Akuji proved an apt pupil. She learned Latin, Occitan and German, and she found ways to survive as a Moor and a woman in a Christian man's world. When Kristoff finally revealed his horrific face to Akuji, she barely balked. It was just another condition to which she needed to adapt. With his liege's permission, Kristoff Embraced Akuji.

Her transformation was torment. Her bones writhed and grew misshapen while her skin bore puss-filled boils. Akuji tried to hide her disfigurement by wrapping herself in layers of robes as she had in the desert. It was a price she was willing to pay in return for the power of the Blood.

Kristoff's master was a vassal of the Ventrue elder Hardestadt. She traveled to the great Patrician's lair in 1020, when her sire was ready to release her and present her. It was there that she met Jürgen, a childe of Hardestadt. The ambitious and reckless Ventrue reminded her of her late lover, the tragically murdered Seje, and she made it her business to get to know him. It took almost a century, but the two came to trust one another. In 1115, Akuji became Jürgen's vassal with Kristoff's approval. She has been watching his back ever since.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

RAVNOS

ARAM HOVANNES, DEVIL OF ARMENIA

(Appears in *Ashes of Outremer*)

7th generation, childe of Varsik

Nature: Rogue

Demeanor: Penitent

Embrace: 1000

Apparent Age: mid-40s

Aram was born in Armenia to the family of a small trader near Lake Van. From his earliest days, he was on the road with his father's caravan, learning the ways of the merchant. From Kievan Rus through Persia and Palestine to the wonders of Constantinople and as far west as Rome, he had an education that few boys could ever dream of. His father, a pious man, taught him reading and numbers and instilled a love for the true Christian Church, founded first in all the world in Armenia. But the purity born in the mountains around Lake Van did not seem to spread to much of the world. Corruption was everywhere he went. In Byzantium the Church was subordinate to profane emperors, while, in the West, it was busier selling offices than seeing to the spiritual needs of its flock. And blaspheming Muslims taxed Christians and Jews heavily, even though they were supposedly fellow "People of the Book."

Aram proved to be a superior merchant, first as his father's second-in-command, then as master in his own right upon the old man's passing. But the cynical world he met when he first journeyed with his father wore him down. Why be idealistic when the world then takes you for a fool? Why trust an offered hand when its brother prepares to strike you down? Gradually, Aram came to the conclusion that he *was* a fool. If the remainder of the world was out for itself first, the so would he be — and he would win.

The key that made Aram so successful in his new philosophy was the mask he wore. He appeared to be even more pious, more learned, more devout than before. Gold flowed freely from his hands to the churches of the region, but the gift hid his negotiating skills, which landed him contracts that allowed him to charge exorbitant prices for little value in return. With a prayer on his lips, he sorrowfully informed naïve priests of obscure clauses that allowed him to default on his deliveries even though they, sadly, still had to pay his expenses. His swindling was magnificent. No one doubted that he was a pious man who was also a victim of circumstances — not even the great trader Varsik himself.

Varsik and Aram met in Damascus one evening as Aram prayed in the Armenian Church of St. Basil. Varsik had heard of Aram's mercantile skills and piety, and he wanted to see for himself if the stories were true. They talked, and Varsik was impressed — and so was Aram,

who could sense that Varsik had *something* he wanted. They met for the next week each night at Varsik's house over cups of coffee, talking of trade and religion, of history and the coming end of the world. Aram was at his deceptive, predatory best, telling Varsik what he wanted to hear while concealing his selfish core until he could at last learn *what* it was that Varsik seemed to be offering. At last, Varsik revealed the truth about himself, Bashir, the Ravnos and the coming Day of Gehenna. Aram was a pious, virtuous man... would he not join the Bashirites in their holy quest to prepare the world for God's Coming? With the slightest gleam of victory in his eyes, Aram nodded yes.

Since then, he has served Varsik as his right-hand man, doing his work in Jerusalem and elsewhere faithfully and well. For over 200 years, he has hidden his true intentions from his sire, waiting for the right moment to strike and claim the power he desires.

That moment draws nigh.

ETIENNE DE FAUBERGE, PRINCE OF DIRT

(Appears in *Ashes of Outremer*)

Background: From his earliest days in the Savoyard town of Fauberge, Etienne has known that he was unworthy in God's eyes. Sin was all around him. It lay in the greed of the miller who kept more than his portion of the grain, the lust of the lord who coveted a peasant girl as a plaything and the sloth of the priest who couldn't be bothered to wake from his drunken sleep to say the morning Mass. Was not Etienne himself born of his parents' lust and condemned for their act of Original Sin?

With the weight of his and all the world's evil on his back, Etienne attended Church twice a day, every day, spending hours in prayer, begging forgiveness. It was only in prayer that he could find joy and passion, even if it meant another beating with his father's knout for laziness. The blood and pain became his gift to God, an offering to expiate even a small portion of his sins. His father's greatest torture was preventing Etienne from taking tonsure in a monastery and dedicated himself to prayer alone.

When a preacher arrived in Fauberge with news of Pope Urban II's call to crusade, Etienne was beside himself with joy. Here was the chance to do a great work in God's name in return for the forgiveness of sin and a guarantee of Heaven. Over his father's objections, he enlisted as a man-at-arms in his lord's service and sailed with the army to the Holy Land in 1095.

What he saw there shook his faith to the core. The army was there at the command of the pope to free the land of Jesus from the grip of the infidel. The priests had said that the end of the world was nigh and that there wasn't much time. On the way to the Levant, he saw drunkenness and whoring and other forms of sin, but he thought the purposes of the crusade pure and virtuous in

its end. But, when Antioch fell in 1099 and the army fell to raping, looting and murder, he was aghast. The crusaders were doing not God's work, but the Devil's. The magnitude of the evil wrought by the crusaders nearly drove Etienne mad.

The evening of the city's fall, Etienne tried to stop some Pisan soldiers as they robbed the house of a Jewish merchant. He chastised them for their faithlessness and called them back to God's service, but their answer was to strike him down and beat him until he could stand no more. There, as if to make a mockery of all he believed, they slit the throats of the Jew and his family one by one, forcing Etienne to watch. Laughing, they left him amidst the corpses.

As Etienne wept and begged God's forgiveness, a stranger offered him cool water and helped him bury the dead and prayed over them with him. This man, an Armenian calling himself Varsik, spoke to him of God, piety and the coming Apocalypse. When Etienne wanted to know more, Varsik said that they would speak again over the coming nights. And they did, the Armenian telling him of the true history of the world, God's plan and Etienne's role in it. Eventually, as the winter wind blew cold from the north, Varsik revealed his true nature and offered Etienne a chance to do God's work as an immortal. Without a moment's hesitation, Etienne accepted the Embrace.

It was in the following years that Etienne discovered Varsik's plans for him, for he brought him to the city of Acre in 1120, which no Cainite had entered for over a thousand years. Convinced that Etienne's piety would let him pass the aura and recover the fragment of the True Cross reputed to be in its walls, Varsik ordered his childe to pass the gate. But the sin of his Cainite blood betrayed him, and Etienne could get no farther than the threshold of the gate before the pain became too great and the flames broke out on his arms. He was judged and found wanting.

Varsik still had a use for Etienne, though. He was fascinated with the mystery of Acre, so Varsik told him to claim it as his principality. No other Cainite had done so, so none would contest him. There, Etienne could watch the city and guard against any others recovering the artifact. Meanwhile, he would devote himself to penance and prayer, preparing himself for the day when he could overcome the aura and recover the relic for Varsik.

But the century since has eroded Etienne's faith — not in God, but in Varsik. The Apocalypse may be coming as Varsik's sire, Bashir, taught, but to put the relic in the hands of someone as profane as Varsik could not be God's will. Instead, Etienne has temporized, reporting no progress in his attempts to pass the aura. He has taken a page from his sire and become an information-broker, offering shelter to vampires in need, be they Muslim,

Christian or Jewish. He has used the years of truce to build up contacts with the Cainites of Syria, and he now enjoys substantial influence there.

Image: Etienne is tall, but thickly built. His dark hair is cut close, and his eyes often seem distracted by other thoughts or other sights. He rarely wears his armor, now over a century out of date, but instead dresses in the rough cloth of the pilgrim or penitent, his feet bare.

Roleplaying Hints: You have been a warrior, but that was not what was truly in your heart. Your only desire had been to serve God and cleanse yourself of sin in readiness for the Apocalypse that you knew was not long away. But now you see that you have sinned by becoming a vampire; that you are farther from God than you have ever been. And, no matter how close your fellow Bashirites say it is, the Apocalypse seems no closer. As a consequence, you are no longer anxious to solve the mystery of the aura. All will be revealed in God's time. Instead, you have found that you enjoy the role of information-dealer, and you are not ready to give up the contacts you have made.

Haven: Etienne's haven is an ancient caravansary just beyond the radius of the aura's effect. When the aura vanishes, he still does not feel worthy to enter the city, so he stays there.

Secrets: Etienne's extensive contacts in the Second Kingdom make him privy to many of the goings on there. He trades information with the Muslim agitator Hanifa bint Nasir, since both share a great distaste for those who sin in the name of God. He gives her the names of Christian Cainites who target Muslims, and she tells him of Muslim vampires who are too fond of Christian pain. Were elders on either side to discover this arrangement, it would be disastrous.

Influence: Etienne has influence by virtue of being the prince of Acre and the childe of Varsik, although it is not as great as one would think. Varsik is growing more and more displeased with him, and a prince who cannot enter his own city cannot command much respect, no matter how pious he is. Behind his back, the vampires of the area refer to Etienne as "the Prince of Dirt." Some devout Christian vampires have a better opinion of Etienne, respecting his ability to remain in proximity to the city that they cannot enter.

Destiny: Assuming that the events of *Ashes of Outremer* come to pass, Etienne remains as prince of Acre and becomes the vassal of Lord Jürgen. When the Arabs retake the city in 1291, his contacts among the Muslim vampires help him retain his title: In return, he converts to Islam. He survives the vagaries of war and invasion and remains prince of the modern Israeli city of Akko to this night, disguised as a pious Muslim beggar on the city's outskirts.

Clan: Ravnos
Sire: Varsik
Nature: Penitent
Demeanor: Celebrant
Generation: 7th
Embrace: 1099 CE
Apparent Age: late 20s
Physical: Strength 3, Dexterity 2, Stamina 4
Social: Charisma 3, Manipulation 3, Appearance 3
Mental: Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 4
Talents: Alertness 2, Brawl 1, Dodge 3, Empathy 4, Intimidation 1, Larceny 1, Leadership 2, Subterfuge 3
Skills: Animal Ken 2, Etiquette 3, Melee 3, Ride 3, Stealth 2, Survival 2
Knowledges: Academics 3, Law 1, Linguistics 3, Occult 2, Politics 3, Seneschal 3, Theology 2
Disciplines: Animalism 2, Chimerstry 2, Fortitude 5
Backgrounds: Allies 2, Contacts 4, Influence 3, Resources 4, Status 3
Virtues: Conscience 3, Self-Control 3, Courage 4
Road: Heaven 6
Willpower: 7

SILAS THE JUGGLER, COURTLY ENTERTAINER

(appears in *Shadows at Court*)

Background: Silas was born into a family of artists and entertainers. Enjoying the time he traveled, Silas matured quickly, learning how best to survive in the world as a wanderer. Eventually, his skills surpassed that of his family and friends, and although he loved them dearly, he knew that it was time for him to join another troupe. Solitary for a few months, Silas traveled throughout Western Europe gaining an audience of nobles. Eventually, the juggler's reputation preceded him and his skill came to the attention of a prestigious group of entertainers who performed for kings and queens. After observing his skill, the elite band offered him a position, which he accepted gladly.

For years, Silas traveled with his companions. The more he performed, the more he perfected his art. One night after a performance, Silas accidentally stumbled upon a theft at a French baron's court. Initially, Silas was horrified, and he planned on revealing the thieves to his patron. Upon discovering that the robbers were none other than his fellow performers, Silas was stunned. The juggler was even more shocked to learn that his companions were strangely bound to a mysterious woman whom they called Tropaz. As the thieves prepared to turn against Silas, Tropaz made her appearance and ordered that they leave Silas unharmed.



Silas realized that the woman controlled the entertainers like servants. Without him knowing it, Tropaz had put Silas through a series of tests, all of which he had passed. Claiming that he was a kindred spirit, Tropaz offered the juggler a chance to experience the powers at her disposal, and eternal life. Silas accepted after some consideration, and Tropaz proceeded to Embrace him.

He adjusted to his unlife with remarkable speed. After a few years, he became Tropaz's most loyal retainer. She even trusted him to form a small troupe of his own. Gathering two Ravnos comrades and a few kine servants, Silas headed north to pursue new avenues of conquest and rob larger coffers.

Image: To facilitate his deception, Silas often wears garish clothes and accessories, masking his identity. Upon first impression, one would not think Silas was a masterful thief. When presented with an opportunity to perform at Lord Jürgen's court in Magdeburg, Silas eagerly accepts. Little does the trickster suspect that he will become the victim of a mischievous ruse, greater than his own.

Roleplaying Hints: Your eternal sin is a delicious greed, just as it is your sire's, and you hunger for more and more precious items. But it is the taking that enthralls you, not the having. Once you have stolen something, it becomes little more than a trinket. You know full well that part of the reason your sire let you form your own

troupe was to prevent the two of you from coming into conflict by stealing from one another.

Haven: Silas travels in a series of small carts and wagons. His is well protected against sunlight and solid enough to withstand long trips over hard roads. The ghouls and other servants in his troupe protect him during the day.

Secrets: Most of all, Silas knows the fate of many an heirloom that has disappeared from vampiric and mortal court in Northern Europe. He has also uncovered several small conspiracies, trysts and intrigues while going through noble possessions, but these do not interest him overmuch.

Influence: Playing in Brittany, France and the Low Countries, Silas and his troupe have gained audiences within kine and Cainite courts. Unbeknownst to their benefactors, they rob their hosts with equal parts subtlety and glee.

Destiny: Despite his close call in Magdeburg, Silas continues to roam the courts of Europe and feed his Beast with theft. When he starts indulging urges to steal from churches and cathedrals, however, he bites off more than he can chew. The Inquisition catches up with him in the 1240s, and he meets his doom the next dawn.

Clan: Ravnos

Sire: Tropaz

Nature: Gallant

Demeanor: Jester

Generation: 10th

Embrace: 1108

Apparent Age: early 20s

Physical: Strength 2, Dexterity 4, Stamina 3

Social: Charisma 3, Manipulation 3, Appearance 3

Mental: Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 3, Athletics 4, Brawl 2, Dodge 4, Larceny 4, Subterfuge 3

Skills: Animal Ken 3, Crafts 2, Melee 2, Performance 3, Ride 1, Stealth 4, Survival 3

Knowledges: Hearth Wisdom 2, Investigation 3, Linguistics 2

Disciplines: Animalism 3, Celerity 1, Chimerstry 4, Fortitude 2

Backgrounds: Contacts 4, Herd 2, Mentor 3, Resources 1, Retainers 2

Virtues: Conviction 3, Self-Control 2, Courage 3

Road: Paradox 5

Willpower: 4

T OREADOR

ROSAMUND OF ISLINGTON, ARTISAN ROSE

(appears in *Shadows at Court*)

8th generation, childe of Isouda de Blaise

Nature: Celebrant

Demeanor: Gallant

Embrace: 1189

Apparent Age: Late teens

Rosamund of Islington has learned her elders' lessons — true power rests not with the blade, but with beauty and the cunning to use it. This motto embodies Rosamund, who, although she seems as delicate as a flower, is as hard and sharp as a steel blade. Freshly released from tutelage under her beloved sire, Isouda de Blaise (one of the so-called Queens of Love who oversee Cainite society in France), Rosamund is ready for the challenges of courtly existence. Isouda shares this enthusiasm, and she has made Rosamund an envoy to the new court of Lord Jürgen in Magdeburg.

The young Artisan is certain that kings rarely hold true power. Rather, Rosamund believes that one must look to a ruler's retainers to find it. Having already succeeded at several courtly games that Isouda prepared as challenges,



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Rosamund has her eyes on a far greater conquest: Lord Jürgen himself.

Before any other Western court, Isouda and Rosamund received an invitation to celebrate the establishment of Lord Jürgen's court in Magdeburg. This invitation presented Rosamund with the ideal opportunity to begin her seduction. Rosamund prepared by ordering the creation of a symbol of the Ventrue-Toreador alliance. This gift, a sword made of the finest metal and adorned with the most precious jewels, was inlaid with Ventrue, Toreador and Teutonic crests. Rosamund then sent warning that the Courts of Love would present Jürgen with a great gift, a sign of their esteem. Pleased to receive such news, Lord Jürgen prepared a special place at his side for Rosamund.

Aiding Rosamund's schemes is her beauty. The stately envoy is a stunning creature with long, flowing red hair. Isouda's Embrace caught Rosamund in the intoxicating transitional time of early womanhood, making her eternally young and enticing. Typically, she wears robes that perfectly match her bewitching emerald eyes. Rosamund has charmed several of Jürgen's knights, who whisper to Jürgen of Rosamund's loyal intentions. Lord Jürgen is not blind to the workings of the Toreador in courtly deceptions. Still, in a time of war, Jürgen needs all the allies he can muster. Additionally, even though he has doubts about the Courts of Love's intentions, he does not consider the young Rosamund to be a threat. She knows that he underestimates her, and she is determined to use it to her advantage.

Despite her skill, Rosamund is still young to unlife. She allows her attendant Lucius to traffic with Usurpers, thinking to use them as part of her manipulations. Unfortunately, Jervais uses this connection to undermine the bond between the Courts of Love and Lord Jürgen, if only temporarily. This treachery stalls Rosamund's efforts to win Jürgen's affections. More seriously, however, Rosamund discovers in Magdeburg that attraction rarely works one way. Jürgen is a magnificent specimen of Patrician chivalry: proud, strong, noble, beautiful and steadfast. The more time she spends in his presence, the less clear the line between seducer and seductee become. So strong is Jürgen's presence, that it stirs the intoxicating glimmer of life within Rosamund that is her Toreador heritage.

TREMERE

ALEXIA OF NICOSIA, USURPER AND RESEARCHER

(Appears in *Shadows at Court and Ashes of Outremer*)

Background: The daughter of a scholar's widow on the island of Cyprus, Alexia Mavromatis grew up among the books that her father left behind when the plague claimed him. A kindly priest for whom her mother

cooked and laundered had taught her to read, and she taught herself languages as she grew older so that she could read the mustiest and most worm-ridden scrolls. Within her father's library, she found knowledge that she knew would be called blasphemy: astrology, the orders of angels and demons, dark magics from the time before the Savior. To her knowledge, her father had never made use of this forbidden lore, but she could not resist. Knowing that her mother would tell the priests if she found out what was in the books and that the priests would burn them, Alexia stole what little gold her mother had and fled in the middle of the night with the most valuable books.

She traveled to the west of the island, where she planned to meet a scholar named Vatatzes, who had corresponded with her father occasionally. Arriving at his house in the evening, she learned to her joy that he was more than a scholar, he was a sorcerer! In return for the books and scrolls she offered, he agreed to make her his apprentice. He was harsh in some ways, Vatatzes was, but frustratingly slow at other times. At first, Alexia was happy to be learning the simplest of workings or arcane secrets, but soon her hunger for forbidden knowledge far outpaced her mentor's teachings. But what could she do?

Her studies continued this way for seven years. Vatatzes demanded absolute obedience and occasionally dropped a crumb of knowledge, until one evening when he summoned Alexia to his study. She had done well, he said, and she would accompany him on a journey. After many years of isolation, he said, he had received word from the European sorcerers who had trained him, the magi of House Tremere, that he was being summoned to their high chantry in the mountains of Hungary. She, as his apprentice, would attend him.

When they arrived at Ceoris, she knew immediately that there was a power there that her teacher did not understand. She noted that the elite of the chantry moved at night and had the dark power of predators about them. When the *vis*-master, Jervais, summoned them to his chambers and revealed the secret of Tremere vampirism, Vatatzes was shocked and repulsed. Alexia was intoxicated. She grabbed a ceremonial knife and plunged it into her teacher's back. Jervais smiled at the treachery and welcomed Alexia into the dark elite of House Tremere.

After a period of training at his side, Jervais tasked Alexia with returning to Cyprus to revive the Tremere chantry that her erstwhile teacher had let collapse while he pursued some esoteric research. Heading south with two other freshly released Tremere, and under a blood oath to her sire, she set about her work. The early years were difficult, and she had to engineer the destruction of one of her fellows, but by the 1190s she had established a small chantry with herself as its mistress. She became fascinated by stories of the mystic aura around Acre, and she used Cyprus' connection to the Second Kingdom to send agents



to the city. She even undertook the infiltration of the small chivalric Order of Cyprus to help in that work.

When he became an ambassador at large for Ceoris, Jervais called Alexia to his side to serve as his aide. She accepted her duty despite fears that she would lose her chantry. As part of his agenda, Jervais even had Alexia manipulate the hapless Caitiff Albin.

After the events in *Shadows at Court*, Alexia finds herself banished from Lord Jürgen's lands, something she greatly dislikes. When one moves about the circles of the various chivalric orders of the Holy Land, it is not a good idea to antagonize the Ventrue lord of the Teutonic Knights. Jervais sends Alexia back to Cyprus, and she is glad. By the time of *Ashes of Outremer*, she hopes to take advantage of the Fifth Crusade to learn more about Acre and perhaps regain standing with Lord Jürgen.

Image: Alexia is of medium height and build, with dark brown hair coiled tightly atop her head. She dresses in plain but serviceable clothes brought from Cyprus, and she is never without writing brushes and inks. Her fingers are perpetually stained from taking notes.

Roleplaying Hints: Thaumaturgy and the other dark powers of the Tremere are a boon to you, so much better than being a weak orphan surrounded by foolish priests.

You cannot see the sun again, but what loss it that? Jervais has brought you into a dark world that suits you just fine, and you are more than willing to do what it takes to eliminate any obstacles in your way.

Haven: Alexia's chantry in Nicosia is her main haven, but she stays with Jervais in Magdeburg and at Prince Etienne's caravansary in Acre. When the city's holy aura falls, she moves into Acre proper and takes residence in the house of a minor merchant, whom she makes her thrall.

Secrets: By the time of *Ashes of Outremer*, Alexia's blood oath to Jervais has lost its power, destroyed by time spent apart and what Alexia feels is her sire's foolish misuse of her talents in Magdeburg. She still respects her mentor and sire, but her loyalty is no longer absolute, and she has become skilled at false obeisance in order to convince him that the oath is still in force.

Influence: Alexia has a small clutch of Tremere apprentices in her chantry and several thralls within the chivalric Order of Cyprus. She is quick to establish additional mortal catspaws in Acre when the city opens up.

Destiny: If she survives the events of *Under the Black Cross*, Alexia matures into a true Tremere survivor. In the late 20th century, she masquerades as a researcher at the University of Milan.

Clan: Tremere

Sire: Jervais

Nature: Pedagogue

Demeanor: Survivor

Generation: 8th

Embrace: 1155

Apparent Age: early 20s

Physical: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2

Social: Charisma 2, Manipulation 3, Appearance 3

Mental: Perception 3, Intelligence 4, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 2, Dodge 1, Expression 2, Intimidation 2, Larceny 2, Leadership 3, Subterfuge 3

Skills: Crafts 3, Etiquette 2, Herbalism 4, Melee 1, Ride 2, Stealth 1, Survival 1

Knowledges: Academics 5, Hearth Wisdom 3, Investigation 3, Law 2, Linguistics 4, Medicine 2, Occult 4, Seneschal 1, Theology 3

Disciplines: Auspex 2, Dominate 1, Thaumaturgy 4

Backgrounds: Allies 3, Contacts 3, Influence 2, Mentor 4, Resources 4, Retainers 1, Status 2 (among Tremere)

Virtues: Conscience 3, Self-Control 3, Courage 3

Road: Humanity 6

Willpower: 6

JERVAIS BANI TREMERE, ENVOY OF CEORIS

(appears in *Shadows at Court* and *A Call to Arms*)

7th generation, childe of Malgorzata, walker on the Road of the Devil

Nature: Architect

Demeanor: Tyrant

Embrace: 1102

Apparent Age: mid-30s

Born in France, Jervais was determined not to follow in his father's footsteps as a scribe for nobility. When a magus sensed his talent to manipulate sorcery, Jervais began learning the Tremere's ways. Eventually, he became a servant of Malgorzata, who was then a ghoul. Five years after she was Embraced, Jervais' sire granted him his fondest wish by turning him into a vampire.

An avid student of the magical arts, Jervais became one of the Tremere's authorities on the magical element called *vis*. Jervais' knowledge and cache of *vis* made him enemies but he also gained power. Eventually, he graduated to the post of *vis*-master of Ceoris, a position that allowed him to secure a foothold among the Tremere. Jervais currently works as an envoy for his clan, and his task is to foster alliances that will support the Tremere against Tzimisce "persecution."

Jervais had heard reports of Lord Jürgen and his ambitions for Transylvania when he skulked in the Tremere stronghold of Ceoris. Indeed, the great chantry is very nearby the lands that are claimed by the Teutonic Knights in 1212, and Jürgen had placed a vampiric vanguard in the area as early as the late 1190s. Jürgen thus made a logical Ventrue to approach with ideas of an alliance against the Tzimisce. When Jervais learned of Jürgen's upcoming instatement in Magdeburg, he quickly took steps to gain access to the city. Using agents, Jervais learned of the existence of a Caitiff named Albin, who was unhappily bound to the Ventrue lord. Albin was eager to deal with the Tremere if they promised to help him break free of Jürgen. Jervais considered how to use the Caitiff to his advantage. Should he betray the Caitiff to Jürgen and gain the Ventrue's favor, or should he use the poisonous seed to fool Jürgen into an alliance?

An idea came to Jervais when he learned that a delegation of Toreador envoys was to come to Magdeburg with a gift. This prize, a sword, was meant to officially consolidate Jürgen's alliance with the Courts of Love. With this union guaranteed, Jervais sensed that it would be more difficult to gain Jürgen's ear. A sure way to encourage Jürgen to consider a Tremere-Ventrue alliance would be to undermine the Toreador's presence. Thus Jervais devised a plan to order the fabrication of a fake sword, and, with the help of Albin, replace it with the real broadsword.

Jervais has used his status as an ambassador to gain access to Jürgen's instatement. Once he has sown discord in Magdeburg's court, he is convinced that Jürgen will consider an alliance.

TZIMISCE

KARA VLASZY LUPESCU, FIENDISH KNIGHT

(Appears throughout *Under the Black Cross*)

Background: The only daughter of Ezbeth, a seductress of the Vlaszy revenant family, and the Slav warlord Nikolai Lupescu, Kara was born to fiendish greatness. As she felt the dark blood of her mother's line form within her, Kara took the blood oath to Vladimir Rustovitch, at the time an ambitious *boyar* on the frontier between Eastern and Western Hungary. She spent decades as his servant, learning the arts of war and courtly games with equal fervor. Like her mother before her, she faced off against agents of the Arpad Ventrue, luring some into accords that cost them their domains, and facing others on the field of battle. By the time Rustovitch granted her the Embrace, she was already a force to be reckoned with.

For the last century, Kara has served as her sire's main diplomatic envoy outside the *voivodate*. Of Magyar stock and well-versed in the ways of Christian chivalry, Kara can move through the courts of Western Cainites with little trouble. Much of the Vlaszy family is loyal to her, and they provide cadres of knights and clutches of courtiers that serve her well and parrot her suggestions to mortal dukes and kings. Rumor even has it that Kara engineered the kidnapping of Nova Arpad in the 1190s, which weakened the Ventrue position in Transylvania.

With the arrival of Lord Jürgen and his Teutonic catspaws, Kara becomes her sire's principle agent in all things diplomatic. She responds to the Ventrue's backhanded invitation to Magdeburg, and it is she who enacts the ceremonial declaration of war between Jürgen and Rustovitch. During the Fifth Crusade, she travels to the Second Kingdom to counter Jürgen's agents. Throughout, her greatest rival is the Ventrue Baron von Achern, and she longs to bring him low.

Image: Already beautiful at birth, her sire's fleshcrafting made Kara a stunning combination of sensuality and strength. She dresses as a knight among her own kind and as a noble woman if she needs to move among mortals.

Roleplaying Hints: You are of noble stock, and comport yourself as a warrior-queen or lady knight at all times. Let other Tzimisce cackle like debased fools, you will do what is necessary and rule as you were made to. Be cruel when it serves your purposes; be kind when you must; be true to yourself and your lord at all times.

UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

Haven: In Hungary, Kara lairs in extensive Vlaszy estates along the Danube. In Acre, she makes her haven in the caravansary until Acre opens. Then she finds shelter in a small house near the hospice of the Hospitaler Order at the north end of the city.

Secrets: Kara knows of many of her sire's intrigues in Hungary and elsewhere, since she enacts most of them.

Influence: Among the traditional Tzimisce of the Carpathians, Kara's influence is limited to carrying her sire's authority with her. She is a Magyar and thus an invader as far as many of the Romanians are concerned. Among the Vlaszy family, her authority is nearly absolute, however, and she has agents among all the mortal courts of western Hungary — including that of King Andrew.

Destiny: Assuming she survives the events of *Under the Black Cross*, Kara continues to fight by Rustovitch's side for many years. When the Tzimisce clan tears itself apart, she joins her master in the Sabbat. Eventually she is trapped by Lupines in Wallachia and torn to shreds.

Clan: Tzimisce

Sire: Vladimir Rustovitch

Nature: Judge

Demeanor: Gallant

Generation: 7th

Embrace: 975

Apparent Age: mid-30s

Physical: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Social: Charisma 3, Manipulation 3, Appearance 5

Mental: Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 2, Athletics 4, Brawl 3, Dodge 3, Expression 2, Intimidation 3, Leadership 4, Subterfuge 3

Skills: Animal Ken 2, Archery 3, Etiquette 3, Melee 4, Ride 4, Stealth 2

Knowledges: Academics 2, Hearth Wisdom 2, Linguistics 2, Politics 4, Seneschal 2

Disciplines: Animalism 1, Celerity 2, Fortitude 2, Potence 3, Presence 4, Vicissitude 3

Backgrounds: Allies 4, Contacts 4, Herd 5, Influence 4, Mentor 5, Resources 4, Retainers 5, Status 2

Virtues: Conscience 3, Self-Control 4, Courage 5

Road: Chivalry 6

Willpower: 8

VLADIMIR RUSTOVITCH, VOIVODE OF VOIVODES

(appears in *A Call to Arms*)

6th generation, childe of Koszczesyku

Nature: Plotter

Demeanor: Traditionalist

Embrace: 876



Apparent Age: late 30s

Voivode Vladimir Rustovitch epitomizes every Tzimisce strength. The tyrant is a brilliant strategist, able to command armies to do his bidding while simultaneously overseeing his retainers. Vladimir is a true leader, as comfortable wielding a sword as he is using political power. Though he prefers overt signs of authority, Vladimir is also an able manipulator when the situation calls for subtlety.

Vladimir carved out a dominion for himself nestled between western Hungary and Transylvania proper, using equal parts fear and strategy as his tools. Although he is hardly the eldest Fiend in the land, he has risen to become the *voivodate's* overall military strategist in these times of war and the undisputed lord of a large fiefdom of his own. He wears the title of "*voivode of voivodes*" with pride and sees himself as the temporal counterpart to Yorak, the Methuselah high priest of the Cathedral of Flesh. But Rustovitch has cultivated his share of enemies. His rise has displaced many of his elders, and the Tzimisce are not known to forgive slights.

If his rise to power was a testament to his tactical genius, the fact that he has remained there for several decades is a testament to his understanding of the power of intrigues. Beyond his armies, Rustovitch has spies scattered across Europe. Even the Obertus of Byzantium, among

them Myca Vykos, have provided information to him, and he for one is ready to put the ancient Obertus-Carpathian feud behind the clan.

The major chink in Rustovitch's armor, however, is the Tremere. Before he assumed leadership, he was one of the sole *voivodes* who seemed able to push the blood-sorcerers back. Now, that effort has stalled over the last decades. Ceoris still stands, and the Tremere get stronger every year. And while he struggles with the Usurpers, Vladimir has to watch his "friends" carefully. He knows that any number of *voivodes* can challenge him at an opportune moment. Under these circumstances, Rustovitch can ill afford a prolonged conflict with the Jürgen's forces in Southern Transylvania.

Fortunately, Rustovitch believes that he can work several factors to his advantage. He has his own agents among the mortal nobles who have invited the Germans into Hungary, for one thing. For another, he has a long-standing truce with the Gangrel in the region. By revealing the Ventrue lord's ambitions, he believes that he can use them to weaken Jürgen's defenses. He can then deliver a deadly blow to his weakened opponent.

MYCA VYKOS

(appears in *Shadows at Court* and *A Call to Arms*)

7th generation, childe of Symeon

Nature: Monster

Demeanor: Architect

Embrace: 1002

Apparent Age: mid-20s

With Constantinople's tragic fall, Myca Vykos fled his adoptive city determined to forge a path of conquest. Rather than start anew, Vykos works resolutely to revive Constantinople's vampiric splendor, acting as the major agent of the enigmatic Tzimisce Methuselah known as the Dracon. To this end, Vykos travels with his sire Symeon, hoping to establish a new arbor to cultivate his power. Recently, he has set his fiendish sight on a small portion of Transylvania.

Myca Vykos has spies scattered throughout southern Europe upon whom he can call to move with the speed of the wind. With eyes and ears virtually in every major European city, Vykos learned of Lord Jürgen's plans to establish his court in Magdeburg and challenge Vladimir Rustovitch's claim over eastern Hungary. On the Tzimisce side of the equation, he learned that Rustovitch was experiencing difficulties at home. In light of his inability to dispose of the Tremere, some of Rustovitch's Transylvanian compatriots were whispering accusations of incompetence. Noriz, a lecherous Transylvanian Fiend, planned on usurping Rustovitch's power at the first opportunity. Although he is certainly no friend of Jürgen or



the treacherous Tremere sorcerers, Vykos saw this as a chance to capitalize on Vladimir's misfortune.

Myca Vykos studied Lord Jürgen and came to the conclusion that he could not beat Rustovitch on the Fiend's home turf. His ability to remain in Hungary would depend on too many factors: the weakness of the local rivals, the support of the mortal king of Hungary for the Teutonic Knights, the continued influx of German settlers into the region, the quiescence of the Tremere and many more. Eventually, Vykos reasoned, Rustovitch would erode one or more of these necessary supports, and then Jürgen would need a solution. Vykos hopes to provide that solution and help himself to a Transylvanian fiefdom.

Thanks to his ties with the Dracon and the Obertus, Myca Vykos enjoys a certain immunity. He moves through territories privy only to the eldest Cainites because none think it worth risking the ire of his patron. Vykos travels by little-known routes and secret paths that yield entry to the most secure fortresses.

Vykos is cunning and patient. He is enlightened to the powers of deception and the folly of savagery. Vykos recognizes the power of brute force under certain circumstances, but he knows that it can achieve little but destruction. In the case of Hungary, Vykos is convinced that deception is the course to stay. He will bide his time, and, like a viper, strike a deadly blow at the apex of opportunity.

VENTRUE

DIETER, COUNT VON KARLACH

(Appears in *Ashes of Outremer*)

7th generation, childe of Wulfram

Nature: Monster

Demeanor: Tyrant

Embrace: 965

Apparent Age: mid-40s

Dieter sprang from obscure origins. He claimed that his father was a huntsman in Franconia, but no one was able to establish the truth of that — after a while, no one cared. On the battlefields of first the Liudolfing and then the Ottonian armies, he distinguished himself for his ferocity in battle. His rage on the field knew no bounds. In the personal guard of Otto I on the field of Lechfeld in AD 955, he stood against a dozen Magyar horsemen as they tried to capture the Imperial standard. In the end, he stood drenched in blood, surrounded by a dozen Magyar corpses. His bravery earned him ennoblement, and Otto himself awarded Dieter the county of Karlach, in the Austrian realm of Styria.

It was in his battles and early in his reign that the Ventrue took notice of Dieter. Upon taking his throne, he hung every tenth male in his fief to establish his authority. In his first 10 years, he raided against the Magyars continually, ignoring Otto's peace treaty with them. One evening, a knight called at his tower, claiming to be a Saxon noble. This stranger, Wulfram of Esseling, claimed to represent an order of the Empire's true rulers, those who built order with the sword and preserved it. He offered Dieter a place in the order but declared that Dieter must earn it first. Before Dieter could question or answer, Wulfram drew his sword and attacked. The battle was furious, and it lasted for what seemed an eternity, but the mortal eventually grew tired, his guard slipped, and Wulfram's sword plunged through his breast. As blood bubbled on his lips and his life drained away, Dieter heard Wulfram say, "You have passed the test, for none have withstood me so. Welcome, childe and vassal."

Dieter abandoned his fief in AD 999, when his ageless physique became the subject of gossip that was reaching Church ears. He became a wandering knight, serving in armies where needed: in the east against the Slavs, in the south against the Italians and in the north against the Danes. But the glee he showed in indiscriminate slaughter troubled his elders, for many of his actions went against the Ventrue ideal. They favored Hardestadt's childe Jürgen and held him up as a standard: It was inevitable that Dieter would come to hate him. At the time of the Fifth Crusade, he joins the forces of Duke Leopold of Austria just to have the chance to foil any schemes that Jürgen may be hatching in the Holy Land.

BARON HEINRICH VON ACHERN

(appears in *Shadows at Court* and *Ashes of Outremer*)

Background: Heinrich Oswald was the younger son of the baron of Achern, in Eastphalia near Magdeburg. As the younger son, he was not in line to inherit his father's territories, so his early years were spent in training for the priesthood at the royal capital, Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen, in German). There he was schooled in the classics and the history of those who ruled and conquered: Julius Caesar and the Emperors Trajan, Constantine and Justinian. His studies of the latter impressed on him the hand-in-glove relationship between religion and state. The Church provides divine sanction to the ruler and reminds the ruled of their place, while the nobility is the leading edge of the Church's growth when missionaries aren't enough.

But Heinrich's expectations for his life were reversed when his brother, Ottokar, was killed in a border clash with pagan Slavs. Now he was the heir and would rule, instead of supporting Ottokar as planned. He was knighted and taught the ways of war, for which he showed a natural talent. With Magdeburg as the center, Emperors Henry III and Henry IV launched campaigns and raids east against the pagan Prussians. Heinrich was often in the forefront, taking his duty to spread civilization and Christianity as a sacred quest. After his father's death, he ruled his barony with an equal devotion, wanting it to be a shining example to the rest of the empire.

To meet these lofty goals, Heinrich used cruelty as an educational tool. When a man of his fief committed murder, five were hung. When the grain harvest was short, he took his portion and left less for the peasants — for if he starved, who would defend the land?

In war, his ways were no less brutal. When a Slavic army finally surrendered after a long resistance, Heinrich drew upon the classics he had read and had all the males blinded, save for one whom he allowed to lead the rest back to their villages as a lesson. To Heinrich's mind, he had shown them mercy by letting them live at all and refraining from killing their families. It was this career of harsh rule in defense of civilization that brought him to the notice of the Ventrue.

The Embrace came in the fall of 1090, when Heinrich and his men were ambushed by a large Slavic war band. Separated from his command in the fog, he was shot off his horse by an arrow. When he awoke, it was to the searing pain of a knife as it peeled the flesh from his chest. He endured torture for a full day as the Slavs took their revenge, then left him tied to a tree in one of their sacred groves, a sacrifice to their hated gods. As the last dregs of life left him that night, a voice whispered in his ear, promising him life eternal, a chance to fulfill his mission, if he would only swear loyalty. "Will you?" Through split

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lips caked with dried blood, Heinrich swore and was Embraced by his new lord, Jürgen.

The many years since have been a time of learning for Heinrich, as he adjusts to his new existence in the night. His estates were left to his family, and he devoted himself to Lord Jürgen's service as his loyal vassal and agent. When the Teutonic Knights were formed in 1197 during the German Crusade, Lord Jürgen used Lucretia von Hartz as his main catspaw to control the order, but Heinrich was to wear the black cross as well. More importantly, however, Heinrich was sent to Hungary to whisper in the courts of the mortal kings. The Arpad Ventrue had botched matters, and von Achem's drive and willingness to do anything to win made him perfect to slip into the place that they had left vacant.

Image: A powerful knight, Heinrich is short, but barrel-chested. His black hair is in a bowl cut, streaked with iron-gray. Scars cover his body from battle and torture, and his nose has been broken at least twice. He rarely smiles, and he has a gaze that makes him look as if he is always sizing-up an opponent.

Roleplaying Hints: Civilization fell when Rome grew weak. It is up to the Germans to rebuild it, and they will do it through spreading order and Christianity — by example if possible, by sword and fire if necessary. And the Ventrue are the natural leaders of this effort, even if they must lead from the shadows.

UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

Haven: Heinrich rests in a crypt outside the royal Hungarian city of Esztergom when he is at home and in various Teutonic commanderies when he travels. When he travels to the Second Kingdom during the Fifth Crusade, he rests first in the caravansary of Etienne de Fauberge, then later beneath a house near the Tower of St. Nicholas in Acre itself.

Secrets: Heinrich knows much about the mortal intrigues of King Andrew of Hungary's court. He thinks he knows more than he actually does about the Arpad Ventrue and the Vlaszy knights of the Tzimisce, other players at court.

Influence: Among Ventrue, Heinrich has the influence of his sire to rely upon, which is no small thing. In Hungary, he has agents within the royal court and that gives him even more sway. He also serves as the *Ordensmarschall* of the Order of the Black Cross.

Destiny: Unless the characters manage to save him, Heinrich's fate is sealed during *Ashes of Outremer*.

Clan: Ventrue

Sire: Lord Jürgen

Nature: Defender

Demeanor: Autocrat

Generation: 7th

Embrace: 1090

Apparent Age: mid-40s

Physical: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4

Social: Charisma 2, Manipulation 4, Appearance 3

Mental: Perception 2, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 2, Athletics 3, Brawl 3, Dodge 3, Intimidation 3, Leadership 3, Subterfuge 3

Skills: Animal Ken 1, Archery 2, Etiquette 3, Melee 3, Ride 2, Survival 2

Knowledges: Academics 2, Hearth Wisdom 2, Law 2, Linguistics 2, Politics 4, Seneschal 2, Theology 2

Disciplines: Dominate 4, Presence 4, Fortitude 3

Backgrounds: Allies 3, Contacts 3, Influence 5, Resources 3, Retainers 4, Status 4

Virtues: Conscience 3, Self-Control 4, Courage 4

Road: Chivalry 6

Willpower: 7

LORD JURGEN, THE SWORD-BEARER

(Appears throughout *Under the Black Cross*)

6th generation, childe of Hardestadt

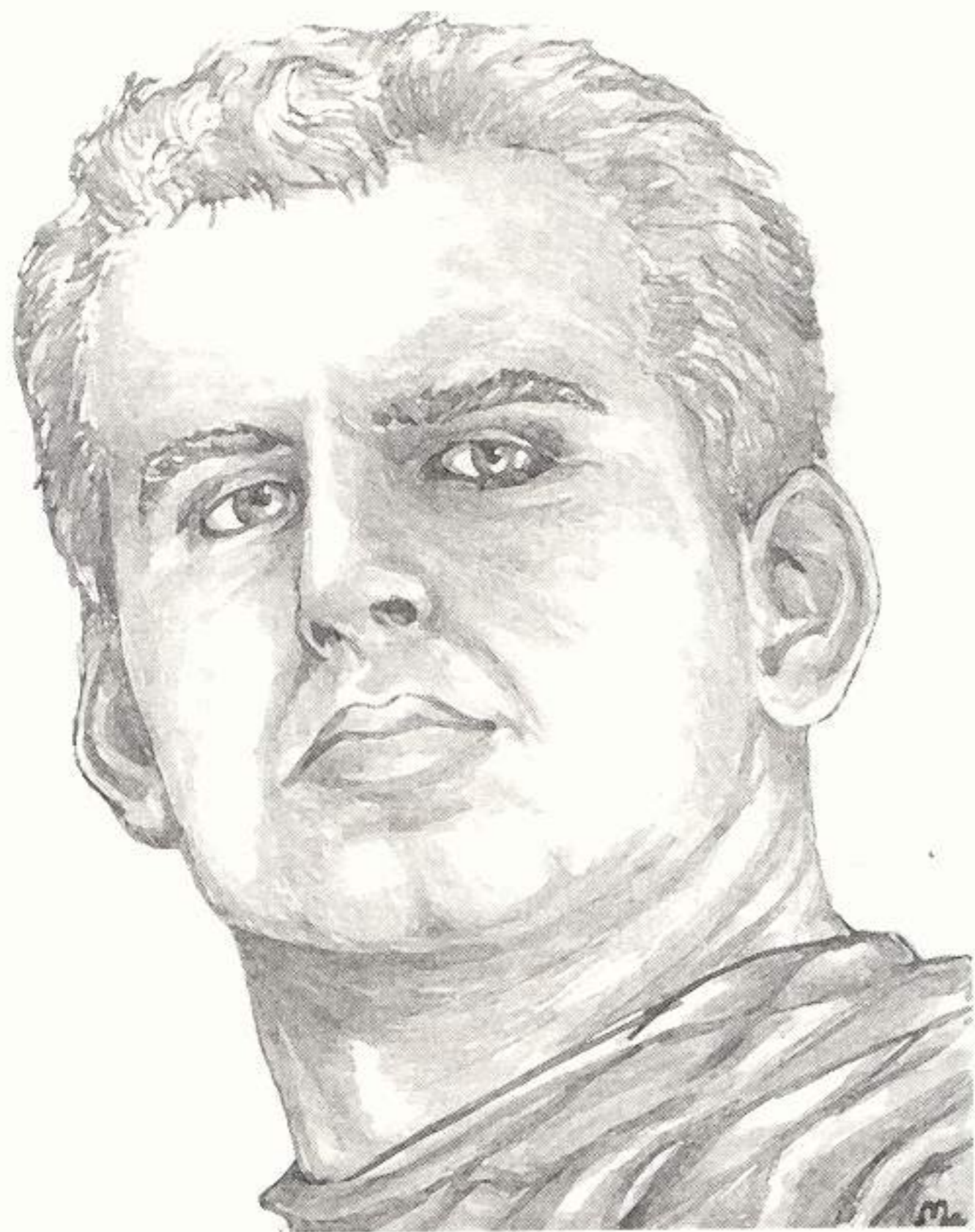
Nature: Survivor

Demeanor: Tyrant

Embrace: 989

Apparent Age: mid-30s

Jürgen was born into nobility, and he dreamed of becoming a king. Possessing a striking presence and a



cunning intellect to match his looks, his ambition surpassed that of all of his peers. He dreamed of conquests, and these portentous visions only grew with age. The more Jürgen saw and learned, the more he hungered. In his quest to acquire titles, Jürgen warred with neighboring lords. To the surprise of many observers, the young Jürgen was more than a match for his opponents. Skilled at court and daring on the battlefield, he was the perfect blend of brutality and honor. After each success, Jürgen only sought greater challenges. Rapidly, the young Jürgen came to the attention of a very different lord — one named Hardestadt.

In Jürgen's eyes, the Ventrue magnate saw the flames of ambition — stronger in this kine than in many of his loyal Cainite subjects. As a test, Hardestadt introduced him to the world of endless dark, and power beyond his mortal imaginings. Despite what he had just learned, Jürgen was unfazed. Rather he was fearless, aroused by the prospects of eternal life and limitless power. Finally, Jürgen had an opportunity to spar among equals. Hardestadt was so impressed by Jürgen's cavalier demeanor that he chose to Embrace him. Rapidly, Jürgen became Hardestadt's prodigy. The neonate's wit was Hardestadt's asset, allowing him to broaden his already considerable empire.

After years of loyal service, it was only natural that Jürgen would tire of subservience. With some limitations and a guarantee of fealty, Hardestadt allowed Jürgen to found a dark empire of his own. Lord Jürgen sharpened his skills as

a warrior and leader in the coldest and most remote regions of the Holy Roman Empire. Since then, Jürgen has looked for ways to expand his power. Much of the western portion of the Empire is already a warren of Ventrue domains, many of which swear fealty to Hardestadt. To expand his power, Jürgen had to look east.

He had spent time on crusade as Hardestadt's agent and learned two things in the Holy Land: the power of the military orders, and the difficulty of holding domain in the Levant. Therefore, when he had established himself as a vassal lord, he kept his eyes open for opportunities to use the crusading spirit in the more fertile territory of the empire's eastern frontier. The birth of the Teutonic Order, although not of his doing, provided him with the opportunity that he was looking for.

After 15 years of establishing his agents within the order, he is ready to move. The weakness of the Arpad Ventrue of Hungary is the final element he needs, and he is now ready to move his court to Magdeburg on the Elbe and from there conquer eastward. Hungary is the first step of a grand conquest.

LUCRETIA VON HARTZ, KNIGHT OF THE BLACK CROSS

(appears in *Shadows at Court* and *A Call to Arms*)

Background: Once a devout Christian who followed the First Crusade, Lucretia is not one to frown upon duty. Even as a child, Lucretia respected authority and believed it was important to give oneself wholly to a noble cause. With her Embrace, Lucretia has transferred her exaltation first to her sire and then to his liege, Lord Jürgen. She obeys him without hesitation.

Lucretia is not a weak-willed soldier. Rather, she sees herself as a true knight, loyal and strong. She practices her warrior's skills meticulously, she is honorable and respectful, and she would die rather than tarnish her reputation or her master's image. For this reason, Lucretia's will is unshakable. She stands dutifully by her lord's side, ready for any eventuality and expecting the worst from those who surround her.

Under Lord Jürgen's guidance, Lucretia von Hartz has gathered and trained an efficient force of loyal knights. She has become the *Gross-Komtur* of the Order of the Black Cross, Jürgen's shadow brotherhood within the Teutonic Knights. This reach makes her the prince of Magdeburg's single most valuable vassal.

With the establishment of Lord Jürgen's court in Magdeburg, Lucretia has gone to great lengths to ensure the smooth transition of power. She has either converted useful candidates to Jürgen's side, or she has ruthlessly disposed of potential rivals. Within Jürgen's order, there are few, save perhaps Akuji, whom she trusts implicitly. Still, if Lord Jürgen assigns his trust, she will respect his choice out of duty.

Image: Lucretia is as disciplined physically as she is mentally. She is built powerfully, but she is not concerned with taking care of her appearance.

Roleplaying Hints: You look down on anyone who fails to respect authority. You hate those who use trickery to achieve goals that should be won through honorable action. Although you are intelligent and respectful of strangers, you are quick to temper if you are insulted. Matters are worse still if the insult is toward your knights or your lord.

Haven: Lucretia has a haven within Magdeburg's keep, and she is welcome in many Teutonic commanderies across Germany.

Secrets: Lucretia knows all there is to know about vampiric activities within the Teutonic Order. She is also privy to most of Lord Jürgen's strategies.

Influence: The Order of the Black Cross, the vampiric and ghoulish order within the Teutonic Knights, is as loyal to Lucretia as it is to Jürgen. Perhaps even more so.

Destiny: Lucretia fights at her lord's side until the end. When Hardestadt eventually eliminates his too-ambitious child, her respect for authority shatters. When the Anarch Revolt comes, she is on the side of the young. She ends up among the Ventrue *antitribu* of the Sabbat.

Clan: Ventrue

Sire: Kuritz

Nature: Conformist



UNDER THE BLACK CROSS

Demeanor: Defender

Generation: 9th

Embrace: 1098

Apparent Age: early 30s

Physical: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4

Social: Charisma 3, Manipulation 4, Appearance 2

Mental: Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 3, Athletics 3, Brawl 4, Dodge 3, Intimidation 3, Leadership 4, Subterfuge 3

Skills: Animal Ken 2, Archery 2, Crafts 1, Etiquette 1, Herbalism 3, Melee 5, Ride 4, Stealth 2, Survival 2

Knowledges: Academic 2, Hearth Wisdom 2, Law 2, Linguistics 2, Medicine 3, Politics 3, Seneschal 3

Disciplines: Dominate 3, Presence 5, Fortitude 4

Backgrounds: Allies 3, Contacts 3, Influence 3, Retainers 5, Status 3

Virtues: Conscience 4, Self-Control 4, Courage 5

Road: Chivalry 8

Willpower: 8

OTHERS

Although *Under the Black Cross* is a story of war between powerful Cainites, others take part in the tale. At least one holy mortal knight has an important role to play, but the tale is also home to countless ghouls, mortal warriors and kings, as well as beasts more monstrous than Cainites.

MORTALS

Mortals remain largely the victims and resources of the Cainite combatants of *Under the Black Cross*, but at least one stands out as unwilling to be used. He is Gauthier de Dampiere, the Hound of the Lord.

GAUTHIER DE DAMPIERE, HOUND OF THE LORD

(Appears in *Ashes of Outremer*)

Background: There was no doubt that Gauthier, the younger son of the Count of Dampiere, would become a warrior and serve the king as his father had before him. Unable to inherit his father's lands, however, he would have to strike out on his own to find his fortune. Doing so should have been a simple task for him, for he quickly earned his spurs as a knight, showing himself to be a superior warrior and a devout Christian.

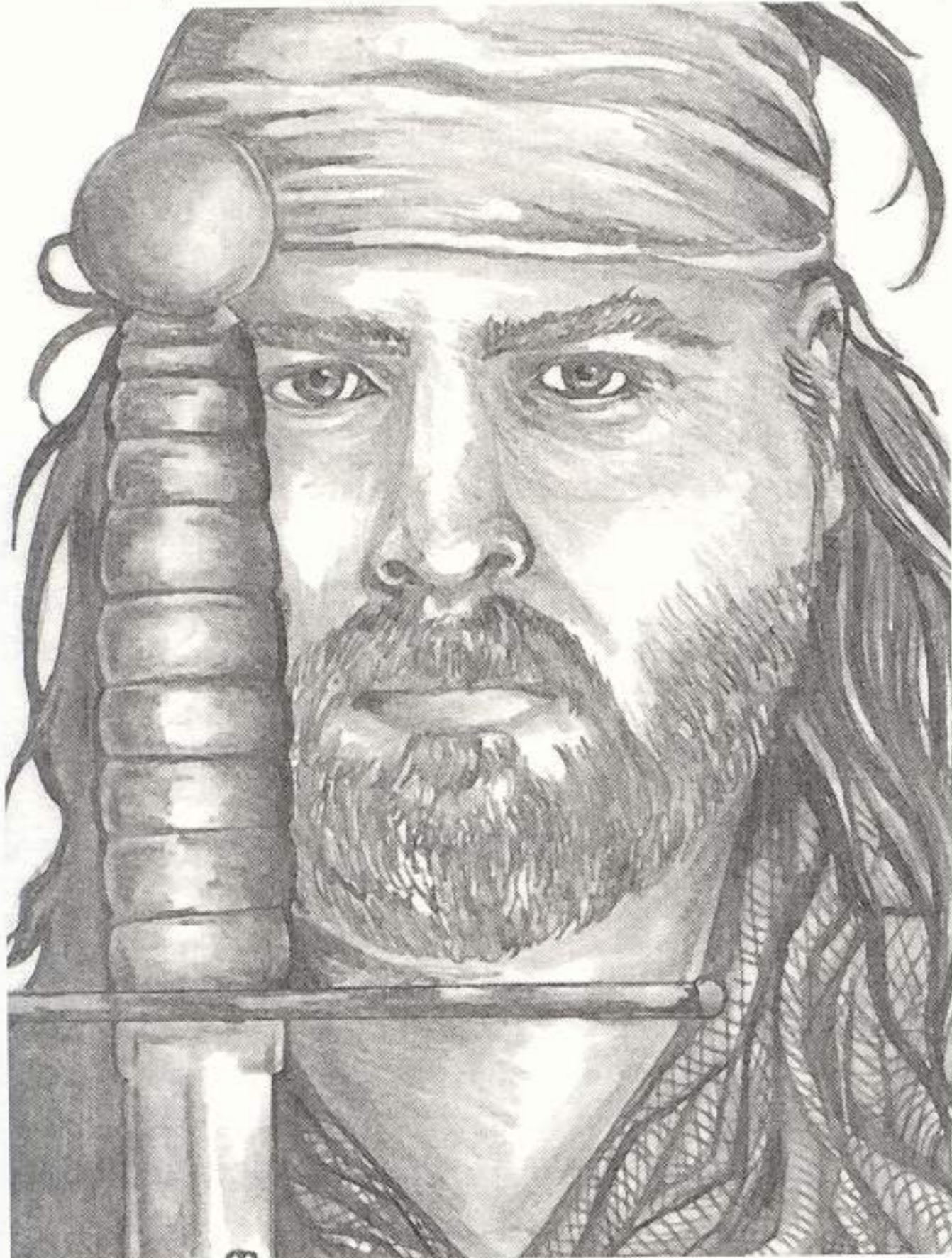
In fact, his devotion surprised his family. He not only declared that he would leave for the crusade, but that he would abandon all but his most necessary possessions and live the life of a poor knight. Following the Third Crusade to Outremer, he found an enemy far more insidious than the armies of Saladin and he despaired. Devils stalked the night, drinking the blood of men like leeches. After the

liberation of Acre, he prayed for guidance at a small shrine to St. Paul who had received God's Truth on the road to Damascus. With sudden certainty, Gauthier knew that this was his personal crusade. He could not rest until these monsters were destroyed utterly.

He has spent last several decades on this mission. First destroying isolated Cainites here and there as he tracked them down, then seeking to warn the world, particularly the Church, of the menace. In Venice and on the Fourth Crusade he encountered vampires powerful beyond his dreams, and he finally grasped the scale of the horror stalking the nights. He is certain that the current Fifth Crusade carries more devils in its midst and he returns to Acre to warn his fellow Christians. There, at the same shrine where he prayed for guidance over 25 years before, he comes to understand that a great relic is at risk. He must protect it at all costs.

Image: A man of average height, he sports a powerful build that has only barely slumped with age. His once dark hair is now almost wholly gray, a product of both age and the horrors he has seen. Missing are the last two fingers of his left hand, torn off in a fight with a vampire in Greece. His victory, however, made them badges of honor. Although age lines his face, his eyes are still bright with an inner fire. He still dresses the part of a poor knight, but he always carries his Damascene sword, an old trophy.

Roleplaying Hints: Your life has been sacrificed to this cause, but it has been worth every moment. Each



creature you left burned or staked for the sun is one less demon to prey on God's servants. But time is running out for you. Your life must surely come to an end soon, and there so many of them out there. That is why you have come to Acre to recruit brethren in this pure city to your cause. You find them among the Teutonic Knights and the Knights of St. Thomas. With them, the relic and the aid of the Holy Church, you can rest assured that your work will continue after you are gone.

Nature: Defender

Demeanor: Penitent

Age: late 50s

Physical: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Social: Charisma 4, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2

Mental: Perception 4, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 4, Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Leadership 3

Skills: Melee 4, Ride 3, Survival 2

Knowledges: Investigation 3, Law 1, Occult 2

Backgrounds: Contacts 3

Willpower: 10

Merits/Flaws: True Faith 3

GENERIC TEMPLATES

Roleplaying and characterization are obviously more important than specific game statistics in a storytelling game, but some hard numbers can make your job easier when the coterie enters combat or goes off in a direction that you didn't expect. The following templates should help with those moments. Use them to represent minor characters whom the players' coterie meets during **Under the Black Cross** or to quickly flesh out the preceding character descriptions. Keep in mind that these profiles are not complete. They include only the statistics that you are likely to need in a hurry, so feel free to expand and revise them as the need arises. If a minor character starts to take on a greater importance in your chronicle, don't hesitate to take time between sessions to work up full profiles.

GANGREL PREDATOR

Use this template for the fearsome Animals who accompany Morrow to Magdeburg and into Tuzföld. You can adjust statistics for individual Gangrel as you see fit, lowering some to represent neonates and raising others to mark Morrow's fellow elders.

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4, Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance 1, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 2

Abilities: Alertness 2, Animal Ken 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Dodge 2, Empathy 1, Hearth Wisdom 2, Herbalism 2, Intimidation 3, Stealth 3, Survival 3

Disciplines: Animalism 2, Fortitude 2, Protean 4

Gear: none

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

TEUTONIC KNIGHT

The Order of the German Hospital of St. Mary in Jerusalem attracts many of the best young knights of the Holy Roman Empire. Dedicated to God, fierce on the battlefield and driven to victory at all costs, they make excellent recruits for Jürgen and Lucretia. Use this template for Teutons whom the characters encounter, be they Ventrue agents or no. It can also serve for crusaders in the Second Kingdom (including Gauthier's followers) and Vlaszy revenant knights.

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Charisma 3, Manipulation 2, Appearance 1, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 2

Abilities: Alertness 3, Archery 2, Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Dodge 2, Etiquette 2, Hearth Wisdom 1, Intimidation 2, Melee 3, Ride 3, Seneschal 1, Stealth 1, Survival 2

Disciplines: Ventrue ghouls: Fortitude 1, Potence 1; Vlaszy revenants: Potence 1, Presence 1; Gauthier's companions: True Faith 1

Gear: War-horse, mail armor, shield, sword

BEASTS

Over the course of *Under the Black Cross*, the characters come face to face with the products of Tzimisce fleshcrafting, Tremere experimentation and the enraged call of the Gangrel. The following templates provide the basic game statistics for these beasts, but you are free to adjust them to suit your needs.

STAG

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Attack: Gore for five dice of lethal damage

Abilities: Alertness 2, Brawl 2, Dodge 2, Empathy 2, Stealth 2

Willpower: 3, **Health Levels:** OK, OK, -1, -1, -3, -5, Incapacitated

Blood Pool: 7

WILD BOAR

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 2, Stamina 5

Attack: Bite for four dice; gore for five (both lethal)

Abilities: Alertness 2, Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Intimidation 2

Willpower: 3, **Health Levels:** OK, OK, -1, -1, -2, -4, Incapacitated

Blood Pool: 4

WOLF

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Attack: Bite and claw for four dice of lethal damage

Abilities: Alertness 2, Athletics 1, Brawl 3, Dodge 1, Stealth 2

Willpower: 3, **Health Levels:** OK, -1, -1, -3, -5, Incapacitated

Blood Pool: 2

REAPER

The reaper is one of the many abominations in the Tremere arsenal of freakish creatures. Often released in the woods neighboring Ceoris, the reaper hunts at night. Although it fears fires and the clang of dueling blades, it is far from harmless. With scythes as forearms, the reaper is capable of shredding its victims with deadly accuracy. Difficult even for its masters to handle, the reaper is unpredictable and largely unintelligent. The reaper that Jervais sends to exterminate Albin at the end of *Shadows at Court* is the result of further experimentation. It has been mutated to follow a simple command, and its senses are sharpened to home in on a single prey. This causes the reaper continual pain. The only way it can end its maddening torture is by finding and dispatching its target. Jervais' reaper is a singular aberration. If it survives, Jervais may consider ordering the creation of additional, similar specimens.

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 5, Stamina 5, Charisma 0, Manipulation 0, Appearance 0, Perception 5, Intelligence 0, Wits 2

Attack: Claws 8 dice of lethal damage

Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 3, Brawl 5, Dodge 2, Stealth 3

Disciplines: Auspex 2

SZLACHTA WAR GHOUL

Szlachta ghouls are the workhorses of Rustovitch's armies. They are terrible and maddened warriors trained to kill anything that moves and doesn't bear the scent of their lord. Some are intelligent and even strategic, while others stalk about in a constant state of rage.

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4, Charisma 1, Manipulation 3, Appearance 0, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 2

Attack: Bonecrafted weapon for Strength +2 dice of bashing or lethal damage (depending on if the weapon is a club or sword); bite for 4 dice of lethal damage; armor plating gives +1 die to soak rolls.

Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3

Disciplines: Potence 1

Willpower: 4, **Health Levels:** OK, -1, -1, -2, -2, -5, Incapacitated

Blood Pool: 10

TZIMISCE HELLHOUND

Rustovitch uses massive quantities of specially designed hellhound ghouls for his armies. These preternaturally fast killers harry his enemies without

cease. They are typically albino and furless, with multiple sets of eyes.

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Stamina 4

Attack: Claw for 3 or bite for 5 dice of lethal damage; armor plating gives +1 die to soak rolls

Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Dodge 3, Intimidation 3, Stealth 2,

Disciplines: Celerity 1, Potence 1, Fortitude 1

Willpower: 4, **Health Levels:** OK, -1, -1, -2, -2, -5, Incapacitated

Blood Pool: 7

VOZHD WAR GHOUL

These mammoth composites are the living siege engines of Rustovitch's armies. Because they are heavy and lumbering, he uses these beasts only to crush entrenched enemies. They play a very limited roll in his final assault on Lord Jürgen.

Attributes: Strength 8, Dexterity 2, Stamina 6

Attack: Strike for eight dice of bashing damage (+ Potence); constrict for six dice of bashing damage (+ Potence); bite for eight dice of lethal damage. The *vozhd* has multiple limbs, and it can make multiple attacks. It gains an additional five dice to split among these attacks, although no single attack may have a higher dice pool than the ghoul's Dexterity + Brawl.

Abilities: Alertness 4, Brawl 2, Intimidation 5

Potence: Potence 6, Fortitude 4

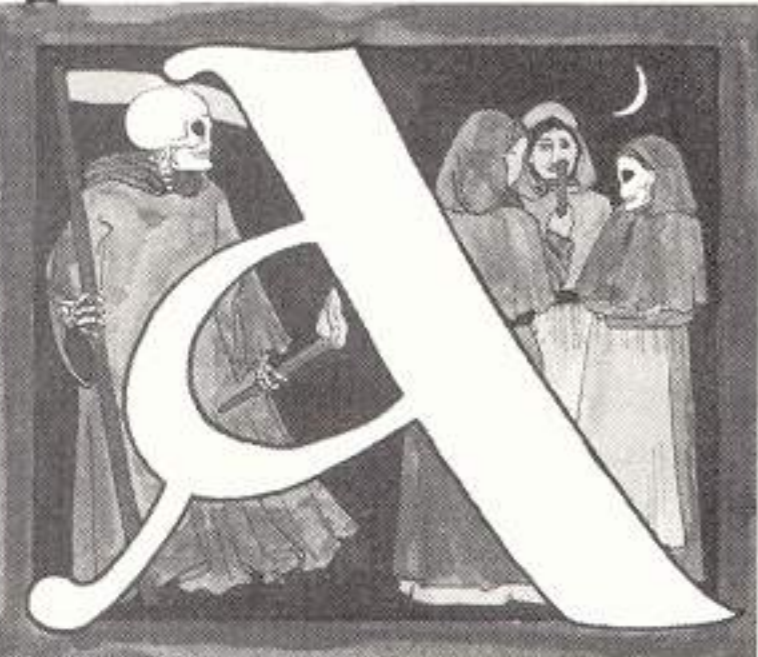
Willpower: 5; **Health Levels:** OK, OK, OK, OK, -1, -1, -1, -3, -3, -3, -3, Incapacitated

Blood Pool: 20

Notes: A *vozhd* consists of multiple ghouls fused together through koldunic magic and Vicissitude into one composite behemoth. Strength, health levels, dice for multiple attacks, Disciplines and blood pool all depend on the amount of "raw materials" used. This template represents a *vozhd* made of four ghouls.







Appendix: Endless War

*But what can war but endless war still
breed?*

-John Milton

MANAGING THE CHRONICLE

Under the Black Cross covers a span of almost 15 years, from the establishment of Lord Jürgen's court in 1211 (in *Shadows at Court*) to his withdrawal from Transylvania in 1225 (at the end of *A Call to Arms*). That is more than enough time for enterprising vampires to rise in status and enterprising players to cause you no end of trouble. The key to managing a chronicle such as this is to get the players involved and interested in the main plot (the Jürgen-Rustovitch conflict) and to keep them busy with events.

CHARACTERS INTRODUCTIONS

Each of the stories in **Under the Black Cross** has plenty of reasons for a variety of characters to get involved, and, once they do, that involvement can easily carry them through the whole chronicle. The introductory section of each story chapter goes into specific ideas. The following notes supplement those suggestions.

VASSALS OF LORD JÜRGEN

The major question you need to answer here is how the coterie came to swear fealty to Lord Jürgen. The answer defines how Jürgen treats the characters and how easy it is for them to get intimately involved with the political and strategic maneuverings that move the overall plot of **Under the Black Cross** forward.

Coterie with one or more close vassals start close to the action. Close vassals are those who owe fealty to Jürgen himself, not only as a prince and lord, but as an individual. They have a personal history with the Ventrue, and they feel close bonds to him. More importantly still, Jürgen himself feels a distinct obligation to them. Use either a preliminary story or the character prelude to establish this bond. Depending on the characters' age, they may have fought with Jürgen in the Holy Land, served in his personal retinue or some other close service. This category can also apply to characters who are not vassals at all, but old allies (like the Nosferatu Akuji). Characters who are this close (and their immediate associates) have the chance to truly be in the inner circle from the get-go. Jürgen turns to them for assistance almost naturally.

Formal vassals are characters who have sworn an oath to Jürgen or who recognize him as their lord, but do not yet have a personal relationship with the man. The coterie could have domain in the margraviate of Brandenburg and recognize Jürgen as their preeminent vampiric lord. They might be Teutonic Knights and see him as their *Hochmeister*. Characters in this ilk are likely to be closer to an intermediate character like Lucretia von Hartz or even Akuji, who can serve as their contact at court. Jürgen does not know them personally, but he has reason to count on them and protect them: They are part of his domain.

Finally, allied characters or envoys are roughly aligned with Jürgen without formal oaths of fealty. They may be representatives of a distant court (like Rosamund is of the Courts of Love) or members of an established religious hierarchy, such as the Cainite Heresy. With Jürgen inviting so many to his court, it's easy to justify the characters coming as long as they have a position to represent. Use the prelude to establish that status, be it as trusted aides to a distant prince, or independent lords of a small fiefdom. Jürgen may be weary of them at first, but he is also anxious to be seen as a secure lord open to alliances, so that should give them access.

AGENTS OF RUSTOVITCH

The other side of the allegiance coin is to play the agents of Vladimir Rustovitch. It is altogether possible, of course, to play outright vassals of the *voivode* and arrive at Magdeburg and Acre as his envoys, either accompanying or replacing Kara Lupescu. In that case, you can use the details of **Under the Black Cross** as a tapestry of events and have the characters impact upon them as appropriate. They might engineer the downfall of von Achem in *Ashes of Outremer* or take part in the final assault of Kronstadt in *A Call to Arms*.

If you want to hew more closely to the plot elements of the three stories, the players can portray spies for the *voivode*. Their mission is to infiltrate Jürgen's court and collect intelligence while they build influence. In the final analysis, the Tuzfold truce is in Rustovitch's interests as well, so their role may not change greatly while the details of play do. This option can be very exciting and full of tension, and you should work hard to develop the characters' cover story, since it will carry them through the chronicle. There are two basic types of spy to play: turncoats and plants.

Turncoats are characters already in Jürgen's entourage who are convinced to report to the Tzimisce for one reason or another. These characters tend to be very conflicted, perhaps resenting Jürgen for some slight and now selling him out. They may be sacrificing much of what they hold dear — and hence weakening their hold on the Beast — in the name of personal vengeance. Usually, such characters have some immediate thing to gain from their handlers (and Kara Lupescu is the best candidate for that role), such as the lives of mortals they hold dear, the return of estates in Livonia or some such. Such a character may well regret his choice and face the terrifying prospect of betraying both sides. One interesting variant is for a turncoat not to know at first that he is working for Rustovitch and reveal that fact later on.

Plants are those loyal to Rustovitch inserted into Magdeburg or another area. This isn't easy to do, but the *voivode* of *voivodes* is known for his spy network. Tzimisce can be fleshcrafted to resemble almost anyone, and there is no simple way to check clan lines. Also there are non-Fiends who recognize Tzimisce authority and would be willing to infiltrate the German camp. The key here is to create a convincing story, perhaps masquerading as Ventrue refugees from Constantinople or some such. That story should then be placed at risk several times during the chronicle, of course.

OTHERS

Characters who aren't strictly aligned with one party or another need to have some sort of personal connection to the gathering at Magdeburg and perhaps even later key events, such as the Fifth Crusade or the city of Acre itself. It's fairly easy to justify the characters' presence at Magdeburg (see ideas on p. 22), but giving them a personal connection makes them more invested in events and better able to interact with the crowd. A group of Cainite mercenaries who have fought in Livonia, for example, might well arrive in Magdeburg hoping for work and get involved from there. But if they once fought under Lucretia's command, or they owe Silas the Ravnos a debt, everyone has more material with which to play. In addition, if one of the characters hails from Outremer, then all the better. Use character prelude to add these details.

STORY SEEDS

Large gaps of time run between the main stories of the chronicle, and they are yours to fill. If you want to use **Under the Black Cross** as a relatively quick chronicle, you can simply call these gaps "downtime" and work with the players to determine what their characters are up to. Dole out a few experience points and adjust Backgrounds as you see fit.

The chronicle reaches its full potential, however, when the characters (and the players) get to experience the scope of the war. Of course, there is still some downtime, but instead of skipping from 1211

straight to 1217, you can tell a few stories of your own in between. It's best to base these stories on the players' ideas and preferences. If, for example, the characters develop a bond — or a rivalry — with Rosamund of Islington during *Shadows at Court*, then a story taking them to the Courts of Love in France would be in order. Characters of a more martial inclination may feel the call to travel to Transylvania to fight the Fiends or even to head to the Holy Land, where they might become involved with the characters from *Ashes of Outremer* before the Fifth Crusade gets underway.

The following section provides you with some other ideas for stories that you can use to flesh out the chronicle.

PROLOGUES (BEFORE 1211)

- **The Black Commandery:** Traveling through Armenia or Germany, the coterie comes under assault by a group of Teutonic Knights. Well-trained and better armed, the knights are a real danger — all the more so, when some turn out to be ghouls. Over the course of several nights, the characters face the dogged Teutons time and time again, until they must investigate matters. The knights' commandery is a small fortress overlooking a main road, and the characters may well manage to sneak in. The guard is not unskilled however, and more ghouls live in the fortress, including several women who act as nurses. The garrison seems distracted, however, by the imminent arrival of a dignitary of the order. It seems that a certain Lucretia von Hartz is to arrive this very night.

- **Scorched Earth:** Characters with a reason to be in Transylvania stumble upon the petrified forest of Tuzföld. Perhaps they must find a Nosferatu who is hiding among the local leper colony, or they are just traveling in the area. Regardless, they soon find themselves stalked by a young Gangrel named Codrin. Brash and territorial, he nevertheless proves useful when a raiding party of Tzimisce hellhounds comes through on the hunt. When the hounds pounce on the lepers and on the characters, he calls on the animals of the woods to help push them away. After the battle, the Gangrel and the characters part on good terms, but he warns them of the dangers of wandering through Gangrel domains.

FIRST INTERLUDE (1211-1217)

- **Dashria Avenged:** Early in the war, a strike force of Jürgen's ghoul knights enters an outpost called Dashria. The small settlement is nothing but one of Rustovitch's southern outposts. A minor baron of the Basarab revenant family calls the few shacks, small inn, lookout tower and storage shed home, along with a gaggle of mortal villagers. While the outpost sleeps, Jürgen's knights brandish a fiery cross. They enter the town like a tempest and massacre all inhabitants, slaughter the livestock and pile the decapitated corpses in the camp's center. They then set fire to all of Dashria, leaving only the mauled heads of three guards mounted on lances. The coterie may see this slaughter or stumble upon the remains of Dashria during one of its journeys. What the characters don't know is that the Basarab baron's young son survived the slaughter. As he grows to manhood, he swears revenge and becomes a powerful warrior in Rustovitch's armies. It's only a matter of time before he runs into the characters... or runs them through.

- **Passage to Haifa:** With King Andras heading to the Holy Land for the Fifth Crusade, the coterie wishes to follow. However, sailing for Acre is out of the question, so they must find passage to Haifa. The Frisian fleet that is scheduled to take the crusaders to the Holy Land is seriously overtaxed and behind schedule as well, putting a heavy demand on every available ship. Stalking through the port cities of Italy, Dalmatia, Savoy or Aragon, the characters find a captain of Egyptian heritage who is willing to take them to Haifa. All he asks is that they undertake a service for him en route. It seems that one of their kind has stolen a religious artifact important to him. When the characters arrive to discover that the thief is their "old friend" Alexia

of Nicosia and that the Setite heirloom is under study in her Tremere chantry, things get complicated.

SECOND INTERLUDE (1217-1225)

- **An Evening With Lady Arpad:** The characters find themselves on a list of select guests at Nova Arpad's keep in Mediasch, near Jürgen's territories in the *Siebenbürgen*. Once nominal prince of all Eastern Hungary, Nova has been keeping a low profile for much of Jürgen's sojourn in her territory, but tonight is a time for her to announce her return to involvement. The atmosphere of the Arpad stronghold is nothing like the austere militarism of Jürgen's Teutonic keeps. Instead, her home is a maze of sensual pleasures. The finest Eastern silks and European velvets coat surfaces, and wisps of exotic spices share the air with the sounds of talented musicians. Willing mortal vessels move through the assembled Cainites like an ambulatory buffet, giving of their blood and providing any service that the guests require. Ventrue and others with special tastes find them met without even having to ask. At some point, preferably when one of the players is very close to letting the Beast loose, Nova drops hints about Jürgen's weakness. With von Achem's destruction, she says, it's only a matter of time before the Vlaszy displace his agents at court. The Arpads could help with this matter, she says, but there will be a price....

- **Points East:** Throughout the war, the characters have seen Myca Vykos come and go with barely a concern. The influence of his patron, the Dracon, gives him liberty of movement in the war zone (something the characters may be jealous of as they dodge Tzimisce war ghouls and Teutonic Knights). But on this occasion, the shoe is on the other foot. Vykos comes to the coterie asking for assistance. An associate of his in the Holy City of Jerusalem has gone missing, and he needs to get to the city to investigate matters. His vaunted contacts are of no use in Outremer, so he turns to the characters — and their connections with Prince Etienne and others — to help him. He offers to return the favor in Transylvania when they request, and he can even be convinced to pay "in advance" as long as the journey is not overlong. When the group arrives in Acre, they receive word that Vykos' contact Alexius Simocatta has indeed vanished, and Hanifa bint Nasir warns them not to investigate the matter. The Fiend angered Alamut, she says, and to ask too many questions is to invite a response. Now can Vykos be convinced?

EPILOGUES (AFTER 1225)

- **Holy War:** Stories of war between demons in the Olt river basin reach receptive ears in the Church, and agents of Rome arrive in the region after the conflict is over. Among them is an aging Gauthier de Dampiere, accompanied by several brother-knights who are wise to the ways of night demons. They investigate the ruins of Milash, which has been razed by fire and war, and they try to discover the origins of the devastation. The characters hear of these investigations. How they react is up to them.

- **Visitor to Magdeburg:** Magdeburg is abuzz with rumors that Hardestadt is ready to withdraw his patronage of Lord Jürgen as punishment for his failings in Transylvania. A Lasombra named Ignatio Lorca, one of Hardestadt's chamberlains, arrives to meet with Jürgen and asks pointed questions from various members of his court. In actuality, he is not looking for reports on the Patrician's behavior at war, but evidence that he has lost control of his own vassals. The coterie has the chance to strengthen or weaken Jürgen significantly.

- **Noriz the Conqueror?** Word of the truce at Tuzföld reaches Noriz before the rest of the *voivodate*, and he hopes to make sure that Rustovitch never makes it back to tell the tale. Noriz engages the services of elite assassins to dispose of Vladimir and his weary forces. A coterie who worked for Rustovitch during the war might well face these assassins as well. Can the characters save the *voivode* of *voivodes*? Do they even want to?



AFTERMATHS

Jürgen's bloody campaign in Transylvania is not an isolated incident. After the shock of the so-called Bitter Crusade, the Cainites of Europe know full well that the bloodshed around the Olt river basin is only a sign of things to come. The War of Princes has begun in earnest. Beyond this generalized conflict, however, the specific events of **Under the Black Cross** have other repercussions, ones the coterie may well be associated with.

JÜRGEN'S AMBITIONS

For most of the war, it seemed like Lord Jürgen was on top. The prize of Acre was only a side benefit, but by the time of Tuzföld, it is essentially all he has to show for his 15-year campaign. Obviously holding the major remaining city of the Kingdom of Jerusalem is hardly nothing, but by 1225, that victory is eight years old, and when he returns to Magdeburg to find Hardestadt questioning his leadership, things look bleak for the Sword-Bearer. He is not one to accept defeat, however. After spending some time reinforcing his position at home, Jürgen is ready for new pastures. Transylvania may be too tough a nut to crack for the time being, but he wonders whether it is worth cracking at all. Indeed, the Tzimisce and other petty warlords of Livonia and Prussia are much closer at hand and perhaps even more vulnerable. By 1230, Jürgen's forces are on the move again.

RUSTOVITCH AND THE FEAST OF FIENDS

Like his Patrician rival, Vladimir Rustovitch faces a difficult reception after the truce at Tuzföld. Noriz the Corrupter is only his most persistent detractor in the *voivodate*. Despite his ability to push back the Ventrue and outmaneuver them in the mortal court of King Andras, many Tzimisce now openly scoff at Rustovitch's overall leadership.

Too young, they say. Too Western. They point to Ceoris, still holding strong, to the return of Nova Arpad, and finally to the appearance of Obertus monasteries along the Olt, and they call him weak. Indeed, Rustovitch's agreement with Vykos — and, through him, with the Dracon — galls the elder Tzimisce who remember their long war with the Methuselah who tuned his back on the Carpathians and built Constantinople.

Rustovitch spends much of the following years trying to reestablish his authority and subduing other *voivodes*. In many cases, he returns to his tried-and-true tactic of bold Trials by War, made all the easier by the large army that he had amassed to deal with Jürgen. But he also reaches an agreement with Yorak, keeper of the Cathedral of Flesh. This argument leads to Metamorphosist priests becoming a mainstay of Rustovitch's *voivodate* and to many of his rivals being fed to the cathedral itself. For this reason, this period of conflict in the Carpathians comes to be called the Feast of Fiends.

THE SECOND KINGDOM

Rustovitch and Kara Lupescu abide by the terms of the truce and withdraw the Vlaszy revenants from Acre. The raids from the hidden stronghold near Beaufort Castle cease, although it isn't clear that the stronghold itself is abandoned. Rumors hold that the Vlaszy have just turned their attention to raids into Syria. Etienne de Fauberge remains prince of Acre and a vassal of Lord Jürgen, although a less-than-traditional one. He convinces his Ventrue overlord that it is advantageous to keep Acre as a city open to many different Cainites, both Christian and Muslim. Jürgen agrees as long as the city remains his vassal. Etienne thus manages to balance his new overlord's demands with the demands of his own city, keeping Maria d'Agostino largely appeased by her trading privileges and maintaining contact with the *Ashirra*. He hears nothing of Varsik and Aram directly, but he suspects that they are plotting his downfall.

BLINDER THE BLACK CROSS™

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