

## SHADOW OF LOCUST :: CITIES IN DETAIL ::

### SARNAK

#### *Political Structure*

Representative Democracy. Ruled by an elected (by women only) council of five women known collectively as the Directorate. They rule from the Administration Center within the Directorate Headquarter, a mammoth interlocking four-towered structure built set back into the steep cragged rock of the Forbidden Ridge. Here with their appointed Ministers matters political are debated, explored and presented. The Directorate Headquarters is a large open building where most officials have offices within. Men are not permitted within the Directorate unless in a role of cleaner. Men are not permitted to vote, let alone hold station. Men, if anywhere in Sarnak, are given a more cold response here than elsewhere in the city, it being the seats of power which nearly doomed their culture and people.

There are many Ministries that operate with the power of the Directorate who manage many portfolios through their aides. There is one Minister per portfolio, and each Minister has an Assistant Minister and a Secretary Minister, beyond that legal aide and general staff are employed to keep each Ministry running smoothly.

*Ministry of Trade;* Trade has picked up since the Loss of the Northern Eye with the danger of the Sea of Gold, for now the Ministry of Trade is doing its best and keeping the aloof nature that has seen it receive only the crème of trade that it deems necessary, or at least that is how the Minister sees it, Assistant Minister Velta ka Norno carrying on a lot of the more mundane trade matters that are waxing. Supporting itself on resources, its exports are still numerous feeding many a city of Miir and beyond. Locally the Sarnak market is very strong and draws traders from as far away as Sełkai. Current Minister of Trade - Rinda Rînæchâr, Current Assistant Minister of Trade - Velta ka Norno, Secretary Minister of Trade - Celimé Vortsêh. The Minister is very aloof from her duties seeing only the bankers of SełKai and other prominent notable traders as possible partners. Extremely bigoted she finds men contemptible and rarely speaks with any bar those who are the well known. As such her Assistant Minister Velta ka Norno is the currently busiest Assistant Minister, picking up after her rather narrow-minded peer. She is well versed in administration and diplomacy, both good skills to have without a Minister in charge.

*Ministry of Arts;* is a subtly important body that keeps Sarnak the city within in beauty, unlike the bleak counterpart of the Ministry of Security whose stark walls great visitors with disdain. Much as the walls serve to keep outsiders out, the interior serves to keep insiders within. Gardens are its specialty and a strong element of tapestry that does its best to brighten the atmosphere. Current Minister of the Arts - Yhera Minor, Current Assistant Minister of the Arts - Miso Khilandîm, Secretary Minister of the Arts - Vanya Auros. While the Ministry of Arts may be seen by some as a contradiction in terms when one first enters the city, within, is found an organized conceptual distinction of districts and themes. Aloof and absorbed by art is how this Ministry appears, drugged on aestheticism. Yhera Minor is an aging woman

with many years of experience and was once Directorate but stepped down to take on a more demanding role, which of beautifying their city with more time spent to this dedication than the Directorate was allowing her. Miso Khilandîm, current Assistant Minister attends large parties in which male harems accompanied with exotic drugs are common. All of these are done with little worry for persecution, the drugs somewhat frowned upon, but she manages her work. Vanya Auros, Secretary Minister has become a lapdog to Miso, mimicking her at parties, young, as she is - a noted landscape artist.

*Treasury*; which remains the most powerful Ministry within the Directorate Headquarters, who eke out what funds they deem necessary to other Ministries and organizations. Though the Treasurer does not abuse her status, she definitely does not want for friends or support. Current Treasurer - Demidice Kuran, Current Assistant Treasurer - Isola Urrai, Secretary Treasurer - Melyra Tamirynath. Soft in words, strong in budget, Demidice runs the Treasury without flaw, always budgeting within frameworks and reaping more for her money than considered possible - a busy, honest and dedicated Treasurer. Isola Urrai is a Danarchan exile originally born in Sarnak who left her father's 'care' by murdering him. Intervention on the part of Sarnak was a major diplomatic achievement some fifteen years ago. Melyra Tamirynath, the Secretary Minister, is daughter of the current Minister of Agriculture, Khera Tamirynath. Melyra noticed the change in her mother at the age of thirteen, but remained quiet and removed herself from the household and her mother at an early age. She has entered politics as she fears what her mother is doing, all those nights when she'd listen in to the Order discussing...

*Ministry of Justice*; and law within Sarnak is a developing ministry as more and more land cedes to Sarnak's slowly expanding land. Perhaps only a third the size of Stroane, Sarnak lies in a strategic zone and as such has been in development of judges for crimes within its borders. Current Minister of Justice - Carecarya Annestiril, Current Assistant Minister of Justice - Aryeril Mesantellë, Secretary Minister of Justice - Irquen Naryamar. A floundering Ministry, struggling to not let Ministry of War and Security eclipse them. Carecarya Annestiril is a half-elven woman tormented with demons, inspired by the hallucinatory addiction to crushed Zopic leaf she fears that the child she abandoned after childbirth in the woods has returned to haunt her and lives in her house. Aryeril Mesantellë runs the collection of taxes and organization of judges and courts but fears the instability in her Minister, but fears more losing her position over the affair. Irquen Naryamar is an ambitious woman with her eyes set on the Minister's position. She is a strong political speaker with influence among the judges, weak as their position may be.

*Ministry of War*; deals specifically with matters martial away from home. Originally there was no Ministry of Security, but times of peace since the women took control called for separation. Their latest conquest was the submission of Falkenna and Count Dennik to the Directorate of Sarnak, propping the coffers of treasury with even more taxes. The Ministry of War specifically manages the standing army and can mobilize the navy with the Ministry of Security's aid in times of need such as the recent conquer of Falkenna. Squads routinely patrol the borders to the south, north and east on horseback, the Amazonian warriors no match for the unprepared invader. Current Minister of War - Merilenya Indórin, Current Assistant

Minister of War – Zîrâ Elahes, Secretary Minister of War – Thula Iolande. Merilenya Indórin, Minister of War was once the general of the standing army of Sarnak, and is herself an incredibly talented Amazonian warrior despite her age of sixty. With a quick decisive mind she relishes her role although resents somewhat the Ministry of Security's forays into her domain. Zîrâ Elahes, Assistant Minister does not add the surreptitious intelligence a woman like Merilenya could do with, but an even stronger brashness coming from a former commander of the army, crippled from a horse fall. Thula Iolande is a strong administrator and keeps the Ministry from falling over.

*Ministry of Agriculture;* is central to the strong, if arrogant export industry Sarnak has along with its ability to feed all within its borders. Rice, potatoes, cranberries, grapes, and other vegetables are grown on the terraces to the east in the Forbidden Ridge and south on the foothills of the Morbek Highlands. Current Minister of Agriculture - Khera Tamirynath, Current Assistant Minister of Agriculture – Anyante Varen, Secretary Minister of Agriculture – Achre Iraldrane. See information regarding Daedekemani.

*Ministry of Security;* manages the Shaitan, training these soldiers with more vigour than the core regiments of the Army. Reconnaissance, sabotage, assassination, the surreptitious is promoted among them as well as a high level of martial ability. The Ministry takes care of the running defense of the city as well, the collapsible bridge/war docks to the south and the navy, and its bleak and strong walls. Current Minister of Security – Vanda Xanes, Current Assistant Minister of Security – Francesca Xanes, Secretary Minister of Security – Myri Sinvoril. A family affair, the Ministry of Security is almost inviolate for any not related to Vanda or her extended families. And managing the Shaitan so well none seem to mind. Vanda is intelligent with foresight and the defense of the city is not just her only concern. She issues many an order to watch the neighbouring cities throughout Hæstra and is informed about events as they happen. Her triumph that sealed her authority was the risky decision of the assassination of the Katra of Stroane, which went without a hitch. The agent sent was her own daughter Francesca, who at that time was a rising talent within the Shaitan. Francesca played the country girl without fault and eliminated the Katra in bed and escaped without little worry. Confident, young and dedicated, she feels a little shadowed by her mother and acquiesces to often she believes. Myri Sinvoril, second cousin to Francesca though not as determined as her relations has proven to rise among her family to a position of respect and secrecy.

*The Directorate;* manage the senate as authoritative governing body. Second in power of voice are the Ministries. There is not the sense of modern oblique political structures vying for massive reorganizations of systems through rigorous and heated argument, but rather strong mutual discussion on the part of the women. The Directorate manage the affairs they were best elected to for with patience and long hours. Intelligent, strong and wise, the five represent the burning flame against prideful man, but whereas man consumes, their fire only illuminates and shines a way forward. The Directorate protects their city fiercely and always seeks to strengthen their position. If that means laying waste to patriarchal societal systems, so be it. Suggestions from all parties involved in the government are welcome, though wisdom always takes precedence off youthful brash suggestions. The Directorate intends to

build Sarnak up even greater from where it is, bringing in more trade to its doors, but it must compete with the Port of Izar. The Fall of the Northern Eye will change all this. The Directorate maintains the city in working order; clean, and untroubled by male bravado the city has a feeling of peace. The Directorate is Ami Coirë, Isil Yasteril, Osidred Indemanwë, Adjia Mannas, and Maredeen Aerond.

#### *Daedekemani Presence*

Unseen, the Daedekemani see their selves as holding the very lifeblood to Sarnak civilization without being in the seat of power. By means of infusing their selves to the original men who nearly brought Sarnak to doom many years passed, the Daedekemani swapped hosts, but not the political power. Best able to mask their powers of genetic manipulation behind a façade, the Dadekemani proved the Animists, the Agriculturalists who saved the dying crops and brought solid trade to the city after the poor management of earlier. This mask has served them well and the Daedekemani number the current Minister of Agriculture, Khera Tamirynath and the Assistant Minister of Agriculture, Anyante Varen.

Assistant Minister of Agriculture, Anyante Varen, is a recently new host for its Daedekemani. She organizes the Order of the First Leaf, a dedicated group of 16 Animists loyal to Anyante Varen and the Daedekemani first and foremost.

Khera is a towering woman of what some would say is forty. Yet records show she is clearly 67, but in a physical shape that belies her true age. Many comment on her wisdom and patience, seen often in a pushover role, yet who better for the job of tending plants. Khera, through her previous female incarnations, set many actions in plan for the future, namely the training of the Order of the First Leaf (of Shadow) that would at the appointed time release the first unlife plant on the upper waterways of the River Urij. Their skills have been passed down from woman to woman under secrecy & zealotry. They work for geneticists that have transformed them as much as themselves. The portfolio of mining was a suggestion early in Khera's long career. Intended to divert resources caverns were opened by the Animists under the guise of a long excavation. Monies collected, tunnels were opened to run close and parallel with tunnels under construction the River Urij by groups of Murlogi.

Khera's intentions are simple; she holds the food of Sarnak and trade. With the poisoning of the river, agricultural water will be diverted for the population and the crops will wither. Export will slow and economic pressure is now placed on Sarnak even under the increased trade. She is also to watch for potential problems, although leaves most of the rudimentary work to Anyante Varen. Khera is herself a powerful Animist/Geneticist whose master creation is the plant unlife, the parody of nature designed to infect nature with the Shadow. It's black poison seeping from ripe fruit into the banks of a major tributary of River Urij takes time, the plants' long since planted. Once that achieved, the Murlogi will break through the tunnels and amass for invasion. Meanwhile in the dried and out of business grape plantations have massive cellars invaded and filled with Murlogi. Both surprise attacks will occur simultaneously prior to the massive invasion to follow.

Once the invasions of the Murlogi come to fruition, Khera will feign blame upon herself and guilt over the terrible error in mining the mountains. It was her push to capture Falkena for the valuable mining resources since none were being uncovered

locally. She quickly maneuvers her Order of the First Leaf into action and is seen as a redeeming person by her peers, one of the integrity they believed she had.

#### *City Description*

*The Iris District;* on the northern side ironically is the gate to the north, viewing all who pass and enter. The concept is that the eye is sacred, that with a clear view of the facts can sound judgment be made. There is also more irony that the Ministry of Security resides the Shaitan in this district, replete with training headquarters, allowing itself to be well informed of those coming and going from the city.

Inns and alehouses catering for the more pronounced male traders are located off the main streets and always under the watchful eye of the guard, who quickly arrest for disturbing the peace.

*Violet District;* houses the barracks and grounds of the army. Two huge gymnasium-like buildings with additions built around the outsides of these massive open-air pavilions. Maneuvers are carried outside of Sarnak on the southern stretch of land beyond the River Urij. Many retired warriors and politicians take residence in this district as well. Built on a rise overlooking the bay many high and lavish apartments and villas have a commanding view, second only to the Directorate towers. Many late wine bars converted from old villas usually open all night to their female clientele. There is little here money can't buy as long as you know the right people first, and you have to be female... that goes without saying. Contrary to some colour co-ordination nightmare of the Ministry of Arts, the district's name refers to the vibrant sunsets it receives pressed against the slope of the Forbidden Ridge.

*Bay District;* Close to the Bay of Izar, this district boasts artisans and craftswomen continually developing and producing work and creations. Beside that the Bay District also hosts developing artists and craftswomen from the Bay of Izar in scholarship programs, apprenticeships, providing them with residence and income. Several bathhouses strictly for women line up before the walls of Sarnak, but the feeling of being cut off from the ocean in a city is a strange one.

*Rose District;* The most settled part of the city features as residential houses and apartments for Sarnak's working classes. Well provided for and strengthened in conviction with the presence of the navy. All entries from the south are carefully scrutinized by Sarnak's guard, who at night refuse entry of all arrivals (this unwritten rule is dropped after the increased trade). The Rose District is quiet and dependable to be stable. The city guard takes great pride in keeping it that way.

The War Docks are also a strong feature of this district, the navy with its own separate command center. Twenty-two strong galleons are kept ready here with dry dock workshops on the shore. Interlocked with the surrounding towers they form a strong anchor to the major trade route in from the south and the River Urij. The stone bridge over the River Urij is considered a strategic defense strategy of the navy and demolitions are in place.

*Marketplace;* busy as one would expect, and here perhaps are the most non-female than elsewhere in Sarnak, for where men will hesitantly come to trade under the appearance of their wives, rarely do all traders stay within Iris District and prefer to move out of the city before nightfall. Here traders from Kaitaine, Aquitar, Artha, Sełkai and even Eidolon come bringing goods, and will come more and more after

the fall of the Northern Eye, strengthening the city as well as opening it up more to corruption which seems to inevitably always dog progress.

Not a centered main area of tents and shanty town, but rather a tightly clustered warren of small shops and windows from which everything is sold in these sometimes rented spaces. The smell of fresh fish, herbs, spices, decorates the marketplace with the fresh cooked food offered by traders stopping by. Often considered an exotic forest of a maze.

The Marketplace consists also of the Commercial Docks, who continually load and unload ships to the moving and open warehouses lining the short street front.

*Gardens*; save a small park beside the Directorate Headquarters the only notable greenery is the Gardens. Considered a triumph of design and a travesty by others. A large and beautiful place of winding brooks over small underground streams, filled with birdlife. One thing that objectors to the design complain about is that the nature feels like the city still. Consisting of several blocks the Gardens remain a safe place at night, well lit and patrolled by guards.

*Lighthouse*; signals at night, manned by a rotating crew of men under female supervision. A squad of Sarnak army are always stationed here.

## A L K A R T E K

*Political Structure*

A loose collection of allied lords, but local records of Miir do little good to history of which the region is steeped in. Built on the ruins of the ancient centre of the Empire, so too are many of the lord-holdings and tradition can be traced if not back to the Empire, then at least several thousand years. The upheaval of the Kings of Orian some nine years ago has not lessened this tradition passed down through its sons and daughters.

Lord Nemeck knows of that deep sense of tradition and is torn over his choice of sons, one to take his place, the other to take over his... quest. Beyond his manservant Jad, none know of his secret, a secret he and his father were afraid to even bring out for their entire lives from its hidden stone room of preparation designed by its original Ahn Sye Nokora lord.

The Nemeck line has throughout history held claim to the lands surrounding the castle Alkartek and the last two generations have seen a return to the older style of courts and lords, but in working order. The death of Lord Nemeck is not seen as a politically destroying one as both his sons, Lord Constans & Lord Stjepan are strong individuals in their own rights. The politics of Alkartek are far from peaceful though. Old feuds still linger and power struggles are now more than ever prevalent as Lord Nemeck nears the end of his life.

Many positions not to those of noble birth are available in the court of Alkartek, chief among these;

*Lord Chancellor;* Demetrius, is as one would expect, as old as his lord. Demetrius is the chief advisor, who carries the seal and staff of Alkartek, who makes the decisions when Lord Nemeck is away or unavailable, by law able to make decisions in his stead. Demetrius is a childhood friend who chose the path of books and wisdom over that over leadership and warfare, but the years of mutual respect for his achieving friend turned to resentment as Demetrius carried the weight of the administration and serving Lord Nemeck. His position came to him not when his friend took over domain, but twenty years later. This resentment fell right into the hands of Daubon who arrived some 20 years ago. Shrewd, Demetrius plays life strategically, the seat of power his ultimate goal, even with intentions to betray the Andaras' loving Daubon.

*Seneschal;* commander of the servants, who used to answer to the Lady of the House, but now answers to the Lord Chancellor through Lord Nemeck. Seneschal Agall is corrupt to the core, sold out on his lust for the serving girls. He was nearly removed but for Demetrius' willingness to let his improprieties go unnoticed for his willing commitment to report to Demetrius. Agall fears Daubon, but should more fear Demetrius who will remove the troublesome Seneschal after Lord Nemeck dies.

*Lord Adjudicator;* chief judge of Alkartek's lands with a strong knowledge of law to officiate it and deal out punishments. Galrode is empowered with might and hubris. His position once held law, honour and justice, but after the bitter defeat to the Ktra of Stroane he found his position held only the façade of his true feelings. It is only over the last decade he has slipped towards the influence of Daubon and the rites to Andaras.

*Chancellor of His Lord's Lands and Purse*; collector of taxes, adjudicator of the treasury, the honourable Malvion is nothing more than a junkie living in a dream world. Supplied with imported Ezrin flowers, his loyalty to his dealer, Daubon is absolute.

*Lord Bishop*; of Mynistra, Vartan is a pure man, though somewhat ordinary. His faith is pious and his heart a map for well meaning. His service draws a good turnout and he is well respected. Beyond his faith his hobbies consist mostly of studying the ancient ruins within Miir. Unfortunately for him Daubon looks down upon him.

*Lord Trainer*; a title appointed to Daubon's arrival in Alkartek some twenty years ago. A well-respected former knight of Miir whose name still lingers on the words of families today, respected for his leadership, skill on the battlefield and honour. Lord Nemeck chose him on the advisement of the Lord Chancellor eager to manipulate the trainer for Nemeck's two sons to his own gain. Little did the Chancellor know Robersin was one step ahead of him, the trainer was already in the palm of another. Daubon is a strong knight who though with no control over the garrison, or other knights commands a great respect. His skill is still beyond many, even if his age is more than twice the two boys he trains. Daubon and Robersin are both Daedekemani, even if the trainer is newly birthed. His skill remains not just with the weapon but also in his constant reconfiguration of body and mind by the Daedekemani. Few know Daubon is 75 years of age. Beyond the Daedekemani the knight known as Daubon secretly worshipped Andaras and continues to do so, his ceremonies to Andaras an underground activity for nobles and victims alike, orgiastic and perverse, they serve only to trap others, such as Lord Constans, Lord Nemeck's strongest son in the eyes of the Daedekemani who long ago whittled away which was the stronger.

#### *The Ahn Sye Nokora's heritage in Alkartek*

The Nemeck family's name was once of the High Guardians themselves, personal bodyguard to the Emperor. Secretly Lord Nemeck has been grooming both his sons in different pursuits without being exclusive to see which would best excel to takeover the burden and almost curse of their family. For only the Nemeck line has ever known of its loathsome curse.

The Order of the Silver Sword has dominated the house line of the seat in Alkartek since the establishment of the Empire under Aldaron, his house bodyguard, elite warriors trained in the yarkbalka, one of those of the High Guardian.

In 1626 TEI Zanar Inquisitors led the disbandment of the Ahn Sye Nokora. For the next millennia and half again the title & attire was passed down the Laan line of Nemeck from son to son, and sometimes daughter where necessary, a very fragile link of the line to the past. All descendents were given the mantle and secret knowledge to the room where not only the Superior Yarkbalka was housed, but the armour and livery of the Ahn Sye Nokora. Over time the title of High Guardian feel and tumbled in records, fading from importance with the Empire. It took until 3980 before artists saw it fit to realize at least the sword as a symbol among a one hundred year rule of Nemeck descendents using the weapon. Seen in moments of war in art, a charge on a wood panel or a tapestry. Many of these art works remain in the Alkartek castle, some hoarded away, some on display in out of the way corridors where no one looks much any more.

The current Lord Nemeck was thirty when his father passed away, a week earlier passing on the sword to his son before a hunting trip, his father impressing upon him the legacy of the sword, the order it once belonged and the proud tradition of Nemeck's to carry the sword from the glorious Empire to now. He gravely passed on the quest, that his son must become the best he can, to wield the Yarkbalka and not fall under the curse attached to it.

Circa 5000 TEI it appears the Yarkbalka was cursed. The Storm Wizard who also removed the lens attached by Ondoval in 1609 TEI entrapped the sword with a singular demon. The demon is unable to project beyond the sword. His will attaches the wielder only when grasped and then the demon is even more crippled, unable to ever harm the wielder through his actions. The demon can slip into the mind of the wielder and be privy to thoughts deep and secret, and moreover can illicit surreal landscapes to evoke the wielder into conversation... if the demon willed it. Mostly the demon, which goes by the name Halé, observes. He knows his freedom is dependent on the quest of the wielder, that being to restore the Ahn Sye Nokora to its proper place. Moreover unless held by a Laan Lord of the Nemeck line he finds himself in torpor while held by one not of the line, something he's done his best to influence. Halé knows the entire lineage and secrets of the Nemeck line for well over 1500 years. The demon's ability to transport the wielder into a realm of the demon's imagining is something requiring much of the demon's already restricted power and it is something he uses sparingly.

The Storm Wizard imprisoned the demon within the sword as part of penance to the line of Nemeck that shirks from its duties and grew a habit of hiding the sword for fear of personal reprisals from Zanar and other orders. One of the few orders to have the sword still within the original line, the Storm Wizard took the sword and removed the lens long before he imprisoned the singular demon of the Essence, that came around 5000 TEI after nearly one millennia of the Nemeck line hiding the sword which the Storm Wizard so freed from the taint of the Jerak Ahrenrath. The demon in short also serves as a historian and curse.

*Daedekemani Presence*; though minimal is not subdued, but rather firmly in the seats of power, or ready to inherit the seat of power. Andaras has no plan for Alkartek or its family and beyond keeping an ear to the ground is confident the city is nothing more than a small bastion of old knight glory that will not stand up to the genocide. But the Daedekemani does. NOTE: The Daedekemani knows nothing of the history of the Yarkbalka. That Lord Stjepan is given the sword by his father on his death bed is something they will never find out, but suspicions do rise as Robersin, late in Alkartek's new reign will go to Alkartek and notice the sword depicted on the frescoes. More questions are asked.

Driven by the Shadow within them a thought passes among them and coalesces into an idea, which then becomes action is becoming more and more pronounced although still out of sight of Andaras, the Daedekemani are only briefly aware of what they are doing. Methodical to a scientific level of dissection the Shadow within them has pushed them northward. Robersin the Priest of Andaras who rouses the fearful within Niév brought the Shay night Daubon into his fold some time ago, already a loyal believer and resident of Niév on many occasions, the wandering

knight served well as diplomat and information gatherer. He proved not just the strong well-meaning knight, but also a clinical and capitalist one, with skills far beyond the call of his duty. The Daedekemani has grown what was there and kept it strong for over thirty years of being. The body is stronger than it ever was and the mind is a honed blade.

Robersin heard on the grapevine of Lord Alkartek's desire for a trainer to his twin sons twenty years ago, deigning it fit for his interest, the perfect motion to set forward methods of destruction to Miir. Robersin had already with much success had the ruins and standing stones across Niév pulled down for consumption into the city. This was a perfect time to take position over one of the strongest castles in Miir. Passing on the favour of Daubon, the two worked out the means of order. Daubon would become the most favoured trainer for his sons in Miir, he would remain respected and above board in the eyes of everyone and make few waves. He would train both boys and weed out the weaker and take the stronger and plant the true teachings of Andaras to the boy to prepare him to take the throne of his father, his brother expelled from the land. The invasion comes and Alkartek takes pre-emptive action by tearing down many of the standing stones and ruins of which Alkartek is renowned for and reconstitute it by building more stone walls to the castle making it almost impenetrable to any mounted or walking aggressor.

Daubon did well, he successfully mounted with Robersin his campaign of becoming noticed (something both were well aware of the possible danger, but saw beyond to anonymity again) by Lord Nemeck and soon he was in front of both boys. Daubon quickly found there was corruption sown already, and took it upon himself to excise what was required. Lord Chancellor Demetrius found a more than worthy opponent in Daubon. By teasing his resentment out the Lord Chancellor exposed more of himself than he'd wished. Daubon has ever since held that proof firmly in mind, though only had to use once as threat. Daubon soon allowed the Lord Chancellor his room, and even invited him into supposed plans of conspiracy for power - all false made to entice.

Daubon trained the boys hard and vicious, baiting the stronger. Physically this proved to be Lord Constans on all accounts, while his slightly younger brother, Lord Stjepan took to the books more and more, something he excelled more than by his brother who attended these education studies less and less, to the point where Daubon proposed successfully to Lord Nemeck, that he should take over full training of Constans who was proving to be a strong tactician and that the knight needed more time to refine these leadership roles. It was at this time early in the boys' life Lord Nemeck realized he had to choose between the two over his land, and could see the favouritism with Constans already. He acquiesced. The same went for Stjepan who grew to resent the sparring matches where he was constantly put down for being lesser.

Daubon sought to unravel the proud, if feudal, relationships among Lord Nemeck's peers and slowly introduced to his prodigy the rites of Andaras. Charismatic and outgoing, Constans at his teenage year, soon was attracting many who saw him as the next Lord to inherit the lands - pleasing him became a priority and those who didn't were ousted. This happened to Lord Lycus who witnessed only one of the rituals to Andaras in the group, but found it more than enough. Most of the young adolescent

lords and ladies have grown to this cult that meets in secret to enact perverse rites. The first human sacrifice the cult will make is a serving girl who disappears to propel Lord Nemeck into death... the rape and murder of the woman will prove fodder to imprison Lord Stjepan.

The real reason the Daedekemani have found several of the Miirian cities of interest is their close proximity to power foci, the Standing Stones of Nilôm, and many other Empiric and pre-Empiric fragments that serve to protect against the Shadow. Once these stones have been bound to a centre of life they have only to call in Selas Vey to weave powerful enchantments on the city, and soon the flux will spark but not the spark of anti-Essænce, the Unlife, opening up wells of shadow the size of cities to further dominate Hæstra. Should Andaras know this, his reaction could be dependable upon when he learned, either favourable or not.

*City Description;* Alkartek is a sprawling castle that has swollen beyond its banks to a city beyond its walls, albeit not as permanent as some more defined cities. Alkartek castle sits stocky upon a high of a sweeping low rise, striking with towering stained white granite and marble that has bled down the nearly invisible rows and columns of the construction. Wide, squat turrets interspersed by just as tall walls long and rectangular, with an inner castle built in much the same way but capped with a few towers. Over 15 metres high at base, the castle towers some 60 metres but appears much taller than it is due to its location on the rise. Beyond the castle a city has been in existence, mostly vestigial, for nearly one thousand years, but the structures are more than often impermanent, with only a few stone dwellings. The road leading to Alkartek winds sinuously up the grassy plains before the broad castle, one almost misses the brown sludge of a city below it. Originally the marketplace was held in the courtyard outside the inner castle, but in the last few hundred years it has moved outside although special events and celebrations are still carried out within the courtyard. At least one thousand are permanent residents in the dwellings built pressed up against the castle and about the marketplace like some cyst. Many of these residents are old soldiers and knights who have taken up other pursuits or retired.

The streets are not paved, although the road leading through the market into the castle is one of the ancient Emerian Empire highways paved with flagstones. The drainage from this highway seeps into the lower side of the hill and to those poorer than those on the higher northern side, although all dwellings and shops perpetually sink in mud save summer.

The following services and sales are offered; Armourer, Two Bakers, Brothel (the brothel has become a lure to the mercenaries from Stroane looking for entertainment), Butcher, Carpenter, Inn, Moneylender (on behalf of the bank of Selkai, who resides in one of the few stone dwellings outside the city with its own guard), Two Taverns, and the market which varies in goods from week to week with the constant, if small, stream of travelers including many minstrels who also perform at the court of Lord Nemeck.

Alkartek has an unsavoury side to it, namely the mercenaries unpaid from Stroane. Bullying, uncaring, disgusting, rude, most of them follow this trend to perfection. It has proved a good cover for thieves to slip into the city that can boast in summer nearly 6000 visitors a week.

## P E L L E R N

*Political Structure*; Pellern remains a poor run-down community, although its fortunes are set to change, but also may usher in the final death of the city. Currently Lord Dreygen is still in power, married to the young Lady Wintessa, but after the fall of the Northern Eye, that power shifts quickly to the most suitable and dependable person, Lord Dreygen's daughter, Lady Willona. Lady Wintessa will not retain control and will be ousted by her daughter backed by the Lord Chancellor, Captain of the Guard and the Seneschal, most of who resent the promiscuous wife of their previous lord. Lady Willona's marriage to Lord Stjepan Nemæck of Alkartek does little to change this as the Captain of the Guard makes a call based on what he sees with the Lord and finds him wanting.

*Lord Chancellor*; chief advisor to Dreygen and his daughter, carrier of the staff and seal of Pellern, Mandrodor Ethânaikad, was is sixty-nine years of age, yet his mind as sturdy as ever. Never the quickest of wits or the brightest of candidates, Mandrodor is loyal, didactic, studious and constant. The Lord Chancellor is content with his station.

*Seneschal*; head of servants answering to Lady Wintessa under duress (although this changes after the fall of the Northern Eye), Taval Manerna, hails from Danarchis where he learned his skills before traveling south to Sarnak only to find interest in Pellern, a young country woman he married. Referrals from past positions acquired him the position of Seneschal that Taval has maintained for 8 years. Always pressured into betraying his wife by the Lady Wintessa, Taval has sadly watched many a young boy under his supervision supply her needs to his disgust. He will be re-energized with the appointment of Lady Willona after Lord Dreygen's death.

*Lord Adjudicator & Captain of the Guard*; Luse Invarath, is a young and strong knight with a proud tradition and heritage within Pellern. Though his line has fallen on the harder times along with the rest of Pellern, Luse was ambitious enough to sweep both Lord Adjudicator & Captain of the Guard. Provisioned with maintaining security and dealing out justice, Luse has excelled in the face of total collapse, and he has kept much a semblance of stability to Pellern and its lands. He is secretly in love with Lady Willona, her some 7 years younger.

*Chancellor of His Lord's Lands and Purse*; collector of taxes, adjudicator of the treasury, Cáno Lindur, has grown soft, unable to take something from those who have nothing. To cover this benevolence, Cáno has made small deals with smugglers and brigands by providing them with free passage and information about travelers for a fee that they can cover. His association after the Winter 6053 with the Amethyst League grows and he arranges much information to be passed to them.

*Lord Bishop*; of Mynistra, Talo Rai runs the small church to Mynistra within Pellern with great difficulty. Attendance is low, his sermons have lost impact, and monies to finance and operate the church are difficult to acquire and Talo is reluctant to continuously petition his fellow brethren for funds.

*Lady Willona*; Daughter of Lord Dreygen to his first wife, an intelligent and silently defiant young woman. She loathes her stepmother, Lady Wintessa, and considers her nothing more than a court whore. As it stands she is useless, her stepmother firmly in control of her destiny and has arranged marriage to a lord of

Alkartek without her knowledge, something that will urge her defiance more and prepare her to take over after her father's death.

*Lady Wintessa;* Daughter of Lord Dennys of Bornay, an unhappy and young woman, second wife to Lord Dreygen. Her bitterness has turned to arrogance and she is wanton, beating serfs and carrying on affairs with servants and other lords and passing travelers. Her decadence is leading her down a tragic path, however, and she will be contacted by Lord Constans in the future and brought into the fold of Andaras. She is hated by all those in attending of administrative position in Dreygen's court.

*Daedekemani Presence;* before the fall of the Northern Eye the presence of Daedekemani is negligible within Pellern. Now and then minions pass through collecting information, but Pellern is hardly a cornucopia... but all that changes after the fall of the Northern Eye.

The severe earthquakes and other calamities that rock the land also unearth some bountiful booty, more gold for one, albeit a small stream, enough to get Pellern back into the black, while something more interesting could reap great rewards for them in the future, that being a deep strain of White Eog. Lady Willona arranges to have her 'husband', Lord Stjepan, sent away, using his ability as diplomat in trading the White Eog.

This is noticed in Sarnak and the Daedekemani put in place operations for Pellern, one of the many unconscious acts that they routinely enact. The White Eog could severely cripple the Daedekemani and so Daubon uses Lord Constans to introduce Lady Wintessa into Andaras' orgiastic rituals, something she slides easily into. From there Lord Constans does his best to take Pellern, even considering the option of enticing his brother over to the darker side of life if necessary.

*City Description;* Pellern, located on the old Imperial highway between Relian to Bentara, has seen better years. Its buildings attest to that, mostly because the forlorn faces appear to be inherited. Built on sound supports the city sits on the northern side of the tributary of the Alana River, from where the ore used to arrive from the Imperial Bridge to the south. Miners still trickle in from the Mountains of Gold with small caches of gold to sell on the fading trading marketplace in Pellern.

But mostly the town is rapidly shrinking, families moving away from the sinking anchor that is Pellern. Much of the city is dirty, clogged with accumulated ore through the years and many of the buildings are vacant, left in a state of disrepair that does not encourage new landleasers. Old stores continue to open daily though, even if some never receive custom. Many of these establishments have weathered time and the tax collector enough to subsist in stagnant fashion.

Pellern is a dark city, its people, and its architecture, all bleak and smudged. Little hope is placed on Lord Dreygen, although respect goes without saying, but the people have no doubt that nothing will be changing soon.

All of this will change, however, after the fall of the Northern Eye. Once the danger has subsided, new gold veins are discovered at old mines, and more secretly, kept under wrap by the Captain of the Guard and his men, the discovery of White Eog. The gold brings a rush of people and money to the area and Pellern prospers, but

the White Eog rumours bring in the Daedekemani who also seed corruption encouraging thieves to join this new rush for wealth.

Pellern is not a walled city, but it is raised on old stone foundations, providing a moat of sorts around the city with the Imperial highway rising up and through it like large ramps. Built on the western side is the castle of Pellern, a small castle by Miirian standards, but strongly defensible with its own access to the mountain to the west and with countless other underground passages secret to all but family and close allies. The castle is made out of several strong towers that serve as the walls. An inner courtyard is a chilling reflection of the city. Worn and cracked cobblestone wind their way around a small charred piece of earth and two desiccated oaken trees, bare of any life. Beyond stairs rise up to the tiers of the castle floors. Guards and servants reside at the city entrance side of the towers.

## B E N T A R A

*Political Structure;* Nineteen years of age, and the Young Bryce Korel has already taken the reins of power firmly in Bentara after arranging his own father's death. Not only is he capable as a leader, he has destroyed the power structure that the sorcerer Ventine had built about and around his father's throat. In the last year, Bryce has had murdered or rendered neutral all advisors supporting Ventine and replaced them with a close collection of his friends, many of whom were also young lords, growing up with Bryce. Bryce's control over his city is growing absolute, and he is a beneficent ruler, looking after his people's interest. His disgust at the Amethyst League and other subversive organizations brings out his darker side, where he hesitates not in the least to do away with those that threaten the lives of others. Unchecked, over time he may well become the very thing he feared in Ventine.

*Daedekemani Presence;* With Ventine's rouse uncovered, the Dædekemani only use spies to watch this city, taking their plans elsewhere for the moment.

*City Description;* A keyland route from mainland Hæstra to Izar, Sarnak and the sea, Bentara is also the only city that trades with the dwarves of TorrBor. A city in Vornia, Bentara is coming of age under the guidance of Bryce Korel, whose many new projects and building developments are bringing renewed prosperity to his home.

Few sails grace the unusually rough waters of the Bay though, but caravans are steady in passing. Overlooking the town, every-watchful, the Temple of Mynistra... an enormous pillared marble building glows golden in the sleeping sun that nears passing under the high bluff on the other side of the estuary the Temple is built.

Guards in partial plate-mail greet the characters to the enwalled town, scaffolding and mortar showing the beginnings of a gatehouse. The recent charge of 2 bp per entry for visitors is aiding in helping grow Bentara.

The Imperial Highway leads to the centre of the town where it joins with the larger roads from the Port of Izar and Vornia. Bentara is far from the ancient rotting spires of Falkenna. While ancient in its own right there is much new construction in the town and many a new building in the early stages of completion. Townsfolk have nothing but good things to say about Bryce Korel, even with the rumours of the murder of his father. Indeed, Bentara is under the careful control of the young Korel who sees the potential of trade through his city with the poor conditions in the Sea of Gold, overland travel has quadrupled in the last month and there is every sign it is growing. New inns and shops dot the Imperial Highway, with a plethora of races and travelers. Dwarves, a rarity anywhere else can be seen with frequency here, pale short men wide and strong with eyes of black coal dressed in strange clothes and armour that is beyond the reach of armourers of the mannish races.

## F A L K E N N A

*Political Structure;* Falkenna has suffered a strong blow in the past year, reduced from its independent status to serving Sarnak as a satellite state. Not only was Count Dennik humiliated, but his knights also, which has given the Dædekemani an extra edge over the whole conflict. The city still survives under the heavy burden of taxes and Sarnaki presence though, although the opulence Count Dennik inherited and continued is now only enough to keep him well-off.

Falkenna is in a state of political change. While Count Dennik may have power over the city, he is under the thumb of the Sarnaki and his resentment is simmering, but the fact remains he cannot extradite himself from the situation.

Two Knightly Orders exist in Falkenna serving Count Dennik and the city, yet one is ancient and failing and the other new and prosperous. Both orders have priestly ties and are not fully military orders, although defense is prime in their respective rules. The Order of the Silver Heart is a distant descendant of the Order of the Silver Sword under Emperor Aldaron, while the Order of Eternal Return is a growing Dædekemani exercise specifically planned for the invasion. Both play important parts in the political arena. When the Amazons attacked it was the Order of the Silver Heart that initially rallied and was humiliated and defeated by the strong female warriors. The Order of the Eternal Return were prepared and knew of the impending attack and had a holy day of inaction prevent them from fighting. The Order of the Silver Heart lost more than half of their knights, and those remaining are still in a state of disarray, their wealth stripped by Count Dennik to pay the increasing taxes and their membership cropped. The Order of the Eternal Return played their part well, and Count Dennik's favour has shifted to this shadowy order.

Up until the takeover the Court of Count Dennik consisted of the preceptor of the Order of the Silver Heart and many of the other lords from the order. However, with the Preceptor dead and a squabble continuing over ascension among several of the knights, many seats have been stolen away by those knights of the Order of the Eternal Return.

Another political power within Falkenna that is a thorn in the side of tradition is the Sarnaki presence. Aryeril Mesantellë, Assitant Minister of Justice has been given jurisdiction for the present over maintaining Falkenna's taxes, and making sure they are delivered to Sarnak. She is in a difficult position of shuffling duties between cities while the Directorate debate over whom to appoint permanently in the city. She oversees with commanders of the Amazons those soldiers stationed in Sarnak who have taken residence in the old guard headquarters near the centre of town.

*The Order of the Silver Heart:* Their Chapterhouse is still the grandest stone edifice in Falkenna after the Count's stone manor. It houses the lay-knights, squires, armourers, trainers and cooks of the Order, and even the small priesthood of Mynistra who have a small chapel in the centre of the triangular shaped building reflecting the Order's faith.

Though their library does show the links and mutations of this Order that descended from the original Order of the Silver Sword, much has been forgotten and none have threaded together the history of the Order. The Order of late has been a

prideful one, based on heritage, inheritance and complacency, and it was this that encouraged their downfall at the hands of the Amazons.

Currently there is a power struggle occurring in the flailing order. The Chaplain, Quartermaster and the Commander of the Knights fight with each other to claim the seat of Preceptor of the Chapterhouse. Interestingly the symbol/heraldry of the order is the spiraled hilt of a Yarkbalka woven about a silver heart on a forest green background.

The Order of the Silver Heart has an interesting relationship with Mynistra that tapers back several thousand years. The Order is a religious order and all knights worship Mynistra, and a dergy serves the order in Falkenna keeping in contact with Helberna, the seat of Mynistran worship. This is reflected in the Order's Rule which in summary consists of these main points: Love, Wisdom and Protection - Love for the people, and right to aiding those of good nature in friendship & brotherhood, Wisdom for temperance of hand and steel, and Protection for defending the weak against attacks. In all of these the Order has failed of late. The Order comprises of nobles from a hereditary line that stretches back as far as the Order itself, investing the male youth into the Order as squires. However, none of the knights are permitted to hold land and their allegiance is to Falkenna and the Count.

*Daedekemani Presence;* The Order of the Eternal Return surfaced 100 years ago in 5963, a monastic order worshipping Andaras. Though not welcomed with opened arms, the small order issued statements of inaction, their desire to simply perform their worship in harmony with the city and protect it when the needs arose. The worship of Andaras across Hæstra is something not prevented and the Order settled in Falkenna, bringing knights swearing fealty to the current Count and the city itself. The Order then slipped into a peaceful co-existence within the city, expanding a chapterhouse of an older building purchased and providing continual work to many of the city folk.

What is unknown to the current and previous Counts and all the folk of Falkenna is the Order's secret agenda. Founded by the Dædekemani Vedior for the intent of the Katra's invasion in mind, their plans have been pushed to the invasion proper. Vedior is assigned the task of monitor and breakwall against the any fleeing Sarnaki when the war comes. The Dædekemani are interested in genocide. His is the task to make sure it happens. A Laan lord by appearance who is said to have rode side by side with Daubon, the famed Miirian knight against the dark races.

Vedior is alone in his activities in Falkenna. When the locusts come, his is to use his knights, recently swollen by knights disillusioned under the Order of the Silver Heart as killing machines, augmented by genetics against any coastal fleeing Sarnaki. The city will also be razed, preventing travel along the Forbidden Ridge, caging all mortal and immortals alike. Vedior keeps to the chapterhouse mostly, although with the recent takeover by Sarnaki, foreseen but not well-received, he has appeared more in public with the Count, promising support and apologizing for the holy day of Andaras that so coincidentally fell on the day of the attack. The Order closed its doors to the Sarnaki though, and they literally fell through the gaps and escaped unharmed.

None of the knights in the order know of Vedior's true nature or that at each restrained and rather tame ritual is nothing but a farce. The true work is underground where Vedior's laboratory is the sculpting ground for when the knights sleep. Here he

subtlety modifies them genetically over time, enhancing not only physical attributes but mental. All knights tap into the power of Andaras through channeling, guided by Vedior.

*City Description;* Falkenna is an ancient city, with ties stretching back as far as the Empire under Aldaron when Falkenna was but a mining town that has sustained its efforts for thousands of years in the rich Forbidden Ridge mining diamonds, silver and salt.

The city is reached either by the Bay of Izar or the narrow and winding coastal road from Sarnak north along the Forbidden Ridge that towers steeply and sharply against the road cut low near the bay. The recent upheaval of the stolen eye has caused slips on the road and many a strange object washes ashore.

Falkenna lays directly on the road north and suffered more so than Sarnak in the upheaval, their ports destroyed by tidal waves and much of their shipping fleet reduced to timber.

A stonewall encircles the city, although the ocean side of the wall is no more, destroyed by the Sarnaki and tidal waves. Worn and weathered, the wall shows signs of cracks from the parapets that are patrolled by Sarnaki Amazonians. Gates and portcullis lead into a city of strange design, houses built with short spires clustered closely together abound the Imperial cobbled streets. The city has a tinge of dirt to it though, the closeness of the imposing Forbidden Ridge that leaves the city cloistered in darkness much of its early morning and the mining dust sweeping back on powerful offshore winds cakes the parapets and tiled roofs in a cloying gray dust.

The people here are troubled, unsure about their recent future and fearing the end of the world. There is resentment towards the Sarnaki as business has become less profitable since they took control of the city. The main road pierces through the city to the centre where the market is established every new day of Varin. The Chapterhouse of the Order of the Silver Hand fronts the market, a huge grand building of three sides, without windows, and nothing but two huge bronze doors at the apex of the triangle facing the market, decorated in 30 scenes of ten each facets of Mynistra.

The Count's manor is a large stone affair of six and more stories, taller than wide, with a single solitary spire of wide girth stamped onto the corner of the manor on the eastern side of the city, with a view of the surrounds. Inside the manor contains opulence reserved usually for kings. The Count lives well off but his funds have caused him to pull back on some city services, namely the guards who have retreated to defending the manor itself.