



The Mark of the Beast

THE SECOND CHAPTER IN THE CHRONICLE OF THE COPPER CROWN

AN ADVENTURE FOR **Symbaroun**

Introduction

WELCOME TO THE MARK OF THE BEAST, an adventure for Symbaroum meant to introduce players and Game Masters to the town of Thistle Hold through a series of gruesome murders.

The Mark of the Beast is a classic type of adventure, with a beginning, a middle and an end. The text is structured according to a number of scenes which are likely to emerge as the player characters strive to unravel the murder plot. But as always, the GM must be prepared to improvise. In order for Ambria and Davokar to come off as living and breathing, it is imperative that the players' initiatives are allowed to influence both the course and the final outcome of the adventure.

The Game Master's Introduction

THE MARK OF THE BEAST is an adventure that features numerous agents besides the player characters. The basic plot is simple, but dealing with the situation may prove a challenging task.

The murderer known as the Flayer is a changeling named Alahara, whose goal is to keep his beloved Gorak alive. Gorak has been infected by an artifact that he stole from a tomb in the forest of Davokar – a withered human cranium wearing the crown of a king. Within the skull the corrupt spirit of the long dead king lives on, vindictive and full of hatred.

Alahara is fighting a losing battle, taking drastic measures in the hope of saving his beloved, or at least postponing the inevitable. While studying his books on sorcery, the changeling has read that the consumption of certain human glands may cure or alleviate symptoms of corruption.

Sorcery aids Alahara in other ways too, not least through the ritual *Blood Shrouding*: he dresses up in the skin of others and wanders the streets on the hunt for glands.

Below is a description of the story's main characters. The Game Master needs to understand who they are, what they want and what they are prepared to do to get there. This will serve the GM well when the player characters, as expected, do the unexpected in their attempt to save the day.

HURIAN-LO APAK, THE KING'S SKULL

During the era of Symbaroum, a long line of emperors and local rulers came and went. For a period of time the region now dominated by Davokar was governed by numerous regional kings. One of these was named Hurian-Lo Apak.

King Hurian was neither the greatest nor the smallest king at that time, nor was he the cruelest (then again, he had a lot of insane rulers to compete with in that category). Despite being a capable sorcerer he ended his days like most of his colleagues: in a crypt surrounded by his most precious belongings. But for the venerable King Hurian, death was not the end but the start of a long, long wait.

The Mark of the Beast and The Promised Land

The Mark of the Beast is an independent sequel to the tutorial adventure in the core rulebook.

It is not necessary for the player characters to have made it through the Promised Land to be able to take on this adventure, but it will add to the experience.

The bitterness over an all too premature death combined with well-developed mystical skills made his spirit cling to the lifeless body, waiting for a second chance to rule. That chance appeared when the treasure-hunter Gorak entered his crypt.

GORAK, BLIGHT-MARKED FORTUNE-HUNTER

Along with his friend Alahara, Gorak led an expedition to an ancient tomb deep in the forest of Davokar. The grave proved to be from Symbaroum's early days, a remote resting place for a barbarian king, as well as a virtual gold mine of treasure. Gorak was especially fascinated by the mummy king himself, especially his crown. Unfortunately, the copper crown had merged with the skull wearing it, so the whole cranium had to be removed and brought along. Adorned and burdened by the tomb's treasures the expedition returned to its point of departure, Thistle Hold.

Back in town the members of the expedition lived like kings for a while. The boastful Gorak even showed mayor Nightpitch the king's skull during a drunken evening at the Salons of Symbaroum. Rumors began to spread about elves being sighted within the town walls and soon thereafter the expedition members began to die in more or less spectacular ways. A couple of them managed to flee south but were later hunted down and killed by the elves (or by the characters who played the Promised Land). Gorak and Alahara went into hiding, taking the king's skull with them.

BAUMELO, FALSE WITCH HUNTER

There are many small villages along Davokar's southern border. Among the population of these, the black cloak Baumelo became known as a vicious witch hunter, especially after he burned the village of Anamark to cinders when hunting a blight-marked resident. In another village close to Davokar, Glimmervann, the charismatic cultist Odako lived with his followers. There the black cloak's hunt for abominations ended, as the cultists ambushed him and thrust a handful of daggers into his back.

Shortly thereafter, when Glimmervann was visited by a blight-marked treasure-hunter who rambled on about a whispering skull and a catastrophic expedition led by Gorak and Alahara, Odako and his followers devised a plan.

Odako was already acquainted with Gorak, since they had discussed the possibility of preparing and launching an expedition together. So he and his not so merry men travelled to Thistle Hold hoping to get a closer look at the talking king's skull, and they did so dressed up as Baulemo and his

witch hunters. Dressing like this allowed them to move freely and interrogate those involved without interference, since next to no one dares get between a notorious witch hunter and his prey.

MASTER VERNAM, AGENT OF THE IRON PACT

Thistle Hold is a vibrant city and things are quickly forgotten, even when it comes to a series of gruesome deaths where all victims had been part of the same expedition. When the victims of the Flayer appeared, one after the other, no one made a connection between the curse of the king's skull and the new wave of murders. That is, no one except the tutor Master Vernam, who had been informed of what happened during the adventure the Promised Land by his allies: the elves of the Iron Pact.

Adventure timeline



The Early Days of Symbaroum

King Hurian-Lo Apak is buried



About a year ago

Gorak and Odako meet



About 8 months ago

Gorak's expedition reaches the tomb



About 6 months ago

The expedition members live as kings in Thistle Hold
The members of the expedition start dying
Gorak goes into hiding



About 4 months ago

Odako kills the witch hunter Baumelo and assumes his identity



About 3 months ago

The last surviving members of the expedition are caught by the Iron Pact (*The Promised Land*)



About 1 week ago

Alahara kills for the first time in Thistle Hold



Two days ago

The false Baumelo (Odako) enters Thistle Hold

Classic Opening

An alternative for classic gaming is that the player characters get involved regardless of whether they have personal incentives to do so. If so, Master Vernam has seen the characters in a vision about the murders and written them a letter before he died.

Vernam's letter (described in scene 2.4) is then delivered directly to the player characters through his assistant Esbetha. A goblin messenger runs up to the them somewhere in the Hold, handing them a leather tube and holding out a hand as a sign that she wants to be paid (a single orteg or shilling will do). The goblin's happy grin exposes two rows of sharp teeth before she gives a short bow and runs off on new adventures. The letter rolled up in the tube will then lead the player characters to the home and workplace of the tutor.

ALAHARA, THE FLAYER

As the members of their latest expedition started to die, Alahara and Gorak found shelter from the Iron Pact in an old warehouse belonging to the Blue Moon trading house. Gorak was already plagued by corruption and in bad shape, unable to embark on any longer journeys.

Player introduction

FOR THIS ADVENTURE to become truly enjoyable the player characters need incentives, first for approaching Master Vernam and later for wanting to solve the murders. Preferably these incentives can be rooted in the goals of the gaming group.

In groups that base their gaming on the personal goals of the player characters and the ambitions they have as a team, the Game Master is tasked with working out the motives for finding Vernam and solving the murder plot, preferably together with the players. Here are some inspirational pointers:

- **Contacts:** Player characters with the trait *Contacts* can know about Master Vernam if they ask themselves (that is, the GM) "*Who do I know in Thistle Hold?*" and then succeed with the test. Characters with contacts in the Queen's Rangers, Ordo Magica or among witches and fortune-hunters are most likely to have heard about the tutor, but the Game Master can be generous with

About a week ago Gorak slipped out, killed two people near the Toad's Square and consumed their entrails. Alahara found him in a pool of blood and lured him back to the hideout, where he tied his beloved to the wall. The changeling swore to do anything to save Gorak from becoming thoroughly corrupt. And so the Flayer was born.

who gets to make the test since Vernam was well travelled and had many acquaintances. His diligent work trying to craft a peaceful coexistence with the elves is renowned and not always appreciated, so his name is also recognized within Ambria's army, the Sun Church and among the nobles.

- **The Iron Pact:** If the player characters have encountered the Iron Pack before (maybe in the tutorial adventure *The Promised Land*), many Ambrian scholars can refer to Master Vernam, since he "once served Ordo Magica but now behaves like an agent of the woodland elves".
- **A referral:** The characters may be referred to Master Vernam if they are searching for an answer to almost any kind of learned or mystical mystery. The person they are talking to claims not to know the answer but is very sure that the tutor in Thistle Hold does.

The Chapters

BELOW YOU WILL FIND a summary of the adventure's three chapters, following the course of the murder investigation – from the characters involvement (chapter 1), through their investigations (chapter 2), up to the final climax (chapter 3).

CHAPTER 1: THE QUANDARY OF MASTER VERNAM

The Player characters seek to visit, or are invited to see, Master Vernam, one of the most hired tutors in Thistle Hold. As they enter his academy they learn that the tutor has been murdered. If they have played through *The Promised Land* they will most likely conclude that the slaying is linked to an artifact found in the forest of Davokar, and that the tutor's death is connected to a series of other brutal killings in Thistle Hold.

Adding to that, the chapter introduces the notorious Black Cloak Baumelo, or in reality the cultist Odako who has murdered Baumelo and stolen his identity – all with the aim of acquiring the king's skull for himself.

CHAPTER 2: TRAILING THE FLAYER

In the second chapter the player characters get involved in the hunt for the killer, on their own accord or as a work for hire.

For player characters who have played the core book tutorial adventure, *The Promised Land*, it should be evident relatively early what is causing the murders. The murderer's victims can offer the player characters valuable clues, and witness statements provide further assistance. But finding the Flayer and putting an end to his killing spree is not easily done.

CHAPTER 3: THE WILL OF A KING

When the player characters finally have uncovered the plot and traced the killer back to his hideout, the hardest part still remains: ending the Flayer's reign of terror.

This too has its intricacies. And when the murderer has been taken care of, yet another question begs an answer: what should the characters do with the cursed cranium!?

The Quandary of Master Vernam

AT THE START of the adventure the player characters are in Thistle Hold or are just arriving. They have an incentive to visit Master Vernam and will therefore become involved in the murder mystery. The first scene introduces the false witch hunter Baumelo, and after that come scenes describing the murder of Vernam and the examination of his office.

Scene 1: Divine Complications

A GIRL COMES DASHING through the crowded streets; she bumps into one of the player characters and lands on her bottom. Close on her heels half a dozen men dressed in black come running, some of them with weapons drawn. The girl rises and grabs the character she bumped into, begging for her life: *"Don't let the witch hunter take me!"*

The henchmen form a half-circle in front of the characters, demanding that they hand over the girl. Behind them a large crowd of spectators gathers, many of them agitated and condemning. They point at the girl saying things like: *"There she is, the abomination, the Flayer!"* Others are more hesitant: *"Can it really be her, who has skinned all those people? She looks so ... normal ..."* Some know-it-all explains: *"That's what's so horrid with corruption sickness, it can hide where one least expects it."* Some solemn spectators nod agreement.

The leader of the hunters take a threatening step forward, repeating his demand: *"In the name of the Black Cloak Baumelo, give us the heretic or be branded heretics yourselves!"*

The girl, who calls herself Tenid, claims that her neighbor has accused her of witchery in an attempt to lay claim on her henhouse. She admits to being skilled in the art of witchcraft, but denounces all accusations of having dealings with dark powers.

If the characters are about to hand her over, Tenid tries to break free; a successful test against *[Strong +3]* is required to maintain a grip on her.

Should the player characters refuse to obey, the henchmen draw steel and attack. However, they will only fight until the characters have proven that they can defend themselves, in this case until half of the attackers have fallen or been neutralized some other way. As they retreat the leader raises his fist and shouts: *"You just wait, Baumelo will hear of this!"*

Player characters who are priests or are knowledgeable about the Sun Church for other reasons may make a *Cunning* test to recall that Baumelo is a famous Black Cloak whose witch hunts have destroyed whole villages. Baumelo himself enters the stage in Scene 6.



Baumelo's henchmen (PC +1)

"Give us the heretic!"

The henchmen of Baumelo/Odako love the power granted by the witch hunter's name, but are not as fanatical when the opposition turns out to be for real.

Manner	Grinds their fists		
Resistance	Weak		
Traits	<i>Bushcraft</i>		
Accurate 13 (–3), Cunning 7 (+3), Discreet 5 (+5), Persuasive 9 (+1), Quick 10 (0), Resolute 11 (–1), Strong 15 (–5), Vigilant 10 (0)			
Abilities	None		
Weapons	Axe 4		
Armor	Scale mail 3 (Impeding)		
Defense	+2 (shield)		
Toughness	15	Pain Threshold	8
Equipment	1D10 shilling, a pouch of Black Root for chewing		
Shadow	Gray and black-speckled, like sooty wadmal (corruption: 4)		

Tactics: The henchmen attack one character each, except for the strongest looking character who gets two opponents to handle.

Scene 2: The Academy of Master Vernam

UPON REACHING THE ACADEMY a pale-looking woman meets them at the door, introducing herself as Esbetha, a junior tutor. She is noticeably shaken; her lower lip quivers. Once the player characters ask to see Vernam and have assured her that they have peaceful intentions, Esbetha quietly guides them up the stairs to the top floor. No pupils are moving around the house and if asked Esbetha answers that she has sent them home.

She stops at a wooden door and turns towards them: "What you are about to witness is ... horrifying. I've seen it, right before you came." The door swings open and there is blood everywhere. The skinned body of a man hangs upside-down from the ceiling, and its entrails and skin lies below. One window is opened and bloody footprints lead out onto the roof.

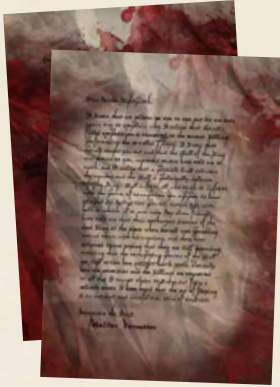
The player characters have at least three ways to start the investigation: the murder scene, the murderer's footprints or questioning Esbetha. A fourth option is to perform a ritual, if the player characters know any.

The Academy

The tall and narrow academy building of Master Vernam lies just north of the Park of the Elders. It is four stories high, with entry hall and offices at the ground level, and lecture rooms on levels two and three. The top floor contains two smaller rooms for private tutorship and Vernam's private office.

The events they are trying to get a grip on played out as follows:

- Master Vernam came to his room and sat down to do some work.
- A while later the elf Tara-Kel (Iron Pact member) came by to report that the king's skull had not been recovered and that it probably remained in Thistle Hold, hidden away.
- Tara-Kel left the residence and Vernam wrote a letter to Mayor Nightpitch. Then someone knocked at the window; it appeared to be Tara-Kel but was Alahara dressed in the elf's skin (see *Blood Shrouding*, page 24). Vernam let "Tara-Kel" in, and was soon strangled and slaughtered by Alahara hunting for glands and a fresh skin that would make it possible for him to enter Ordo Magica's tower and learn the ritual *Break Link*.
- In other words, it is "Master Vernam" who leaves the murder scene over the roofs, or more exactly: Alahara dressed in the skin and clothes of the late tutor.



Master Vernam's letter to Mayor Nightpitch can be found on page 25–26 and may be printed at your convenience.

SCENE 2.1: THE MURDER SCENE

There are a number of clues at the murder scene:

The body: Esbetha can confirm that the body hanging from the ceiling matches the physiognomy of Master Vernam. The skinned corpse is missing two digits on its left hand which makes it easy to identify (he lost the fingers while living with the witches in Davokar).

A successful *Cunning* test with the ability *Medicus* provides further information – Vernam was strangled before he was skinned; and although most of the entrails are there some glands are not: the adrenal, thyroid and pineal glands. According to some scriptures, these precise glands may contain energies that counteract corruption. Interestingly enough (to the hardened *Medicus*), all those organs can be removed without skinning the body, and yet all skin has been carefully removed, strip by strip ...

A passed [*Vigilant -5*] test reveals that the hair on the floor is brown, but an oil painting nearby depicts Vernam with black hair. Furthermore, a closer examination of the skin exposes an elf's pointy ears. Clearly, Master Vernam hangs from the ceiling, but the skin underneath is not the tutors. His skin is gone.

A successful *Cunning* test with the ability *Beast Lore* (Abominations) allows the character to remember having heard of a sorcery ritual called *Blood Shrouding*, with which a mystic can flay a body and assume its form for a day. This has probably nothing to do with the glands, but must serve some other purpose.

The Iron Pact Ring (artifact): A successful *Vigilant* test lets a character find a rusty ring of Iron, on the floor beneath Vernam's desk. The ring is bloodied and most likely tossed aside by the murderer while skinning his victim.

The inside of the ring is inscribed; the ability *Loresmaster* reveals it to be in Elvish (which is hardly

ever written). A character with *Loresmaster* at adept level can read the inscription: “*Nevermore*”. The character realizes that it is a ring of the Iron Pact, a symbol of a long dead alliance between the Elder Folk and an unknown number of human princes, aimed at fighting back the darkness spreading from Symbar. The scholar also realizes that the ring is a mystical artifact and the player should be shown the description of the item (found on page 24). The insight that the ring is an artifact and the knowledge of how to use it may also be gained with the ability *Witchsight* and a successful *Vigilant* test.

The letter for Lasifor Nightpitch: A letter lies on the floor, stained with blood but apparently written by Vernam and addressed to Mayor Nightpitch. What little is discernable reads as follows:

Dear Master Nightpitch,

I know that we seldom see eye to eye, but let me ... and that the skull of the King was shown to you, numerous sources have told me ... infects all who touch it, infects with the power of corruption. You appear to have escaped its destructive powers, maybe you never held it ... how the atrocities and the killings are connected to all this I cannot claim to know, but from a reliable source I have heard that ...

A successful *Cunning* test with the ability *Alchemy* lets a player character use vinegar and other fluids to wash the blood away so the whole text appears:

Dear Master Nightpitch,

I know that we seldom see eye to eye, but let me once again try to explain why I believe that Gorak's failed expedition is connected to the current killings, performed by the so called Flayer. I know that Gorak sought you out and that the skull of the King was shown to you, numerous sources have told me as much, and I realize that a possible link between the murders and the skull is politically delicate.

The King's skull infects all who touch it, infects with the power of corruption. You appear to have escaped its destructive powers; maybe you never held it which, if so, was wise. My elven friends have told me that their soothsayers dreamed of the dead king at the time when Gorak was parading around town with his cranium, and they have returned to me saying that they are still dreaming, meaning that the corrupting powers of the skull are still active here in Thistle Hold. Precisely how the atrocities and the killings are connected to all this I cannot claim to know, but from a reliable source I have heard that the art of flaying is an ancient and baneful one, born of darkness.

Nevermore the Dark, Master Vernam

Vernam and the Iron Pact

Master Vernam was allied to the Iron Pact, one of very few among humans and unique among Ambrians: this was his true reason for stepping down from a position of power in Ordo Magica. To Vernam the fight against the corruption of Symbaroum comes first, and he could not serve the order wholeheartedly while at the same time fighting for the Iron Pact. He remained a member of Ordo Magica, because of its vast knowledge but also because he hoped that he – however unlikely – would be able to convince more wizards that the struggle of the Iron Pact is righteous. Had he succeeded it would have meant a great victory in the battle against the Dark.

SCENE 2.2: THE FLAYER'S ROUTE

As mentioned, the window is ajar and bloody footprints lead away from the body.

A successful *Vigilant* test shows that the window and frame are unharmed. It must have been opened from inside; Vernam probably let the killer in.

From the scene of butchery a trail of bloody footprints leads back to the window. A [*Vigilant* -5] test makes it possible to track the trail out onto the roof: the killer has stopped to wipe his feet.

The trail leads along the rooftop, and acrobatically over to nearby buildings. Close to the Toad's Square the killer has climbed down and his footprints are lost among hundreds of others. He could have continued on the roofs, so there must be a reason for his descent, something of importance near the square.

SCENE 2.3: INTERVIEW WITH ESBETHA

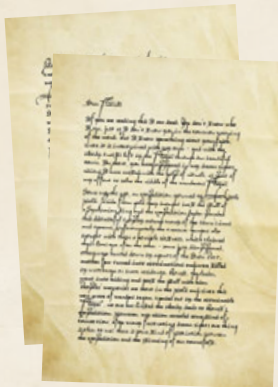
Besides the killer, Esbetha was the last one to see Vernam alive, and it is likely that the player characters want to know if she has noticed anything that can help them.

Esbetha has the following to say about the day's events: Master Vernam came home after running some errands and seemed to be his usual, calm self. He tutored a couple of students after which he closed the door to his study – also his usual routine. Sometime later she heard a loud bang, and Esbetha asked about it through the door. Master Vernam told her not to worry; it was only a window beating in the wind. After that all was silent and it was not until an hour later, as she went to his room with wine and biscuits, that she found her employer murdered and skinned.

Since then, Esbetha has been sitting in her room by the entry hall and she is sure that no one has entered that way; a bell tinkles as the front door is opened.

A successful test against [*Vigilant* -1] reveals that Esbetha is hiding something. A passed [*Persuasive* -3] roll or questions about the rusty iron ring from the murder scene makes her add to the story:

Some time after Vernam had shut himself in his room but before the bang, an elf came to visit. She does not know the elf's name but recalls having seen her before. Esbetha does not even try to hide her profound dislike of elves and Master Vernam's dealings with them: "He was a member of their sect, or whatever they call it; I knew it would come to this, sooner or later!" By sect Esbetha means the Iron Pact and if asked why she detests elves she answers that they are unwholesome nature-worshippers, and that anyone who regularly visits the temple of Prios shouldn't need to ask.



You will find the letter to the player characters on page 27 of this adventure.

SCENE 2.4: VERNAM'S LETTER TO THE PLAYER CHARACTERS

If the Game Master wishes, the following can be added to the investigation: a letter from Vernam to the characters, to be delivered in case of his demise. This may not fit all game groups and is not required for the adventure to be played. Some players might perceive its content as blatant and feel that it undermines the mystery in the name of unnecessary exposition.

But for other groups the letter can be seen as a perfect embellishment that functions as a deeper and more dramatic sounding board for the adventure. Only the Game Master, who understands his players, knows if it is suitable or not to include the letter in the story.

Esbetha suddenly looks up and says: "By the way, I have something for you". She walks away only to return with a sealed letter. It carries the seal of Master Vernam. She says that he gave her the letter about a week ago (the day of the second Flayer-killing). He left no specific instructions, only that it should be "given to the first persons who come to visit me after my death". Esbetha did not think much about it at the time; Vernam was very eccentric and this was not nearly the strangest thing he had asked of her. The letter reads:

Dear Friends,

If you are reading this I am dead. You don't know who I am, just as I don't know you in the common meaning of the word. But I know something about your faith, since it is intertwined with my own – and with the bloody tracks left by the Flayer through our beautiful town. In short, you have appeared in my dream sights, visions I have evoked with the help of rituals, as part of my effort to solve the riddle of the murderous Flayer.

Some months ago, an expedition returned to Thistle Hold. Aside from gold they brought back the skull of a Symbarian King and the expedition leader paraded this distasteful trophy around many of the town's inns and taverns. Unfortunately the treasure-hunters also brought with them a horrible sickness, which claimed their lives one after the other – some just disappeared, others were hunted down by agents of the Iron Pact, another few turned into abominations and were killed by watchmen or brave residents. Gorak, the leader, went into hiding and took the skull with him.

Peoples' memories are short in the Hold and since this new wave of murders began, carried out by the abominable "Flayer", no one has linked the bloody deeds to Gorak's expedition. However, my vision revealed some kind of connection; after many frustrating dream sights one thing is clear to me: there is some kind of association between the expedition and the skinning

of our townsfolk. Alas, I also realized that my own death was a crucial step towards solving the riddle. And so, my unfamiliar friends by faith, are you. The how's and the why's are unintelligible to me, but hopefully you will be able to figure them out.

If ever we meet in the world beyond you'll have to tell me everything about the events to come. Till then I can but ask you to forgive me for placing this burden on your souls. What's ahead of you I would not wish for my greatest enemy, let alone persons who likely would have been my friends, had I but lived to greet them.

Master Vernam

SCENE 2.5: MYSTICAL PATHS TOWARDS UNVEILING THE MYSTERY

Below you will find a summary of what rituals may be effective in solving the murder mystery, and specific suggestions on what they can reveal regarding Vernam's murder.

For clarity, it should be noted that the rituals *Heretic's Trail* and *Summoning* cannot be used at the murder scene. *Heretic's Trail* requires that the mystic has met the blight-stricken in person and *Summoning* requires blood, hair or an object with sentimental value to the summoned.

Fortune-telling

The Mystic may, with a successful *Resolute* test, ask a yes/no question regarding the adventure. Questions about the past are easy to answer; it is harder for the GM to know what will or will not happen. If uncertain it is recommended that the GM responds "unclear, ask again" so the player may rephrase or change the question.

Necromancy

The player character may ask Master Vernam yes/no questions and the GM answers with knocks (1=no, 2=yes), one question per successful *Resolute* test. Questions that are hard to answer can be met with silence, giving the player a chance to rephrase or change the question. If the mystic gets possessed by Vernam, the tutor's last wish will be to bring the corruption of the king's skull to an end.

One can also contact the elf Tara-Kel through the skin stripes, but she does not know more than Vernam about the killings. However, she obviously knows more about her own murder (see scene 4 for details). Tara-Kel is the second most recent Flayer-murder; the Corpse Examiner (4.1) has her body and there is a witness to the killing (4.2).

If the mystic is possessed by Tara-Kel, the elf's last and hateful wish will be that the player

character extracts revenge on the cowardly witness (Tara-Kel, like many others of her kind, had a hard time dealing with humans in general, with few exceptions).

Oracle

With a successful *Resolute* test the mystic may pose an open question; the GM is required to answer with the truth but not with the whole truth. The key to an effective use of *Oracle* in the game is to never give the player character exactly what he is after, but always provide something helpful. The answer can be a sudden vision or a name, depending on what the Game Master thinks may provide enough information without spoiling the entire mystery.

Examples of questions and answers:

- "Who killed Master Vernam?" - "The elf Tara-Kel" (Alahara was in the elf's shape when the murder was committed.)
- "Who wore the elf's skin?" - "The changeling Alahara"
- "Who's the next victim?" - "Harulo is next to die" (see scene 6)
- "Who is behind the killings?" - Many possible answers, but "King Hurian Lo-Apak" is recommended, followed by a flash image of the King at the prime of his life, wearing his shining copper crown, sitting on a throne in a hall full of subjects kneeling before the grim gaze of the ruler. King Hurian's hand rests between the horns of a lindworm that is chained to the throne, casually scratching the beast with long fingernails.
- "Where is the Flayer?" - it is recommended that the GM provides the current position of Alahara in response. If posed during the murder scene investigation Alahara visits Ordo Magica; later he goes to Blackmoor hunting for a new victim some distance from Gorak's hideout. Alahara makes short stops at the warehouse to feed Gorak the glands, but he never stays longer than necessary.
- "Where does the Flayer sleep?" - Alahara sleeps in different places and uses stimulants to sleep as little as possible. The ritual provides a vision of an inn, a shed and a muddy tunnel all as a sign that the killer does not linger in one place for very long.
- "Where is the King's Skull?" - the question results in a vision of a cellar where someone (Gorak) sits bound to the wall and the skull lies whispering on a broken pillar. A slender shadow is also seen (Alahara), that feeds, comforts and weeps by the captive.

The Value of Rituals

It is very important that the GM rewards the players with something helpful when they make proper use of rituals: the players have chosen to spend Experience on rituals and that should not feel like a waste. Sure, the GM should also exploit the limitations of the rituals to maintain the mystery, but remember that even if the players learn who the Flayer is and why he commits these murders they still have to find and put an end to his horrible deeds. And that is a great challenge in itself - especially for a group of characters who have focused on problem-solving abilities.

Trailing the Flayer

THIS CHAPTER INTRODUCES a small adventure landscape, with a series of scenes that are likely to appear as the characters investigate the recent murders in Thistle Hold. The player characters may tackle scene 3 to 6 in whichever order they like, and they do not even have to face them all in order to move on to the third chapter and its grand finale.

The Tower of Ordo Magica

Aside from the Beacon, the seven stories high tower of Ordo Magica is the tallest building in town. It is located to the southwestern district, close to Nightpitch's residence, standing on a walled plot that also contains a garden full of strange plants gathered in Davokar. A spiral stair runs up the center of the tower from the entry hall. Through openings on the different levels you can see libraries, teaching rooms and dimly lit hallways. The ritual chamber is found at the top, behind a locked door to which none but the Masters have the key.

Scene 3: The Tower of Ordo Magica

SLY CHARACTERS WILL reach the conclusion that the killer – now in Master Vernam's form – can gain entry to places that the tutor had access to. If they ask about locations Vernam used to visit they are given four options. Only two of them are relevant for the adventure but the GM can use this opportunity to introduce the Hold to the players. Esbetha, or someone else, can testify that the tutor regularly visited the following places/persons:

- **The Salons of Symbaroum**, for food and drinks.
- **Father Sarvola at the Mission House**, since the tutor helped with the education of orphaned children and the cultivation of goblin juveniles.
- **Captain Marvello of the Town Watch**, who he visited to keep updated on the Flayer killings.
- **His Alma Mater, the town's Ordo Magica chapter**, to study rituals or read something in its library. The tower of the order, with its well-equipped ritual chamber, was Alahara's actual goal.

SCENE 3.1: DOORKEEPER GODALG

Gaining access to the tower of Ordo Magica can be easy, take time or not be possible at all, depending

on whom the characters are and how they choose to introduce themselves.

The elderly goblin Godalg is appointed to be the tower's doorkeeper and takes his job very seriously. His task is to greet everyone arriving to the chapter and do so with the main aim of not letting them in. All manner of people come knocking on the door hoping to “gain an audience with the Masters”, who in turn have no desire to be of service. Even the more prominent residents of Thistle Hold can be made to wait before meeting a Master, and none of them can be sure of having access to the Chapter Master, Cornelio.

Members of Ordo Magica are let in without question and are welcome to explore the tower. Player characters with a certificate from Mayor Nightpitch are also welcome (see scene 5). All others must display proper behavior. In order to gain entry, one needs an errand that appears reasonable to Godalg – which the characters have, if they stress that one of the current visitors may be a killer in disguise.

But for Godalg to disturb a Master, a *Persuasive* test is required. If successful, the player characters are immediately given an audience with Master Eufrynda. If failed, the goblin says that the Master will send for them when she has time to greet them, which proves to be about six hours later.

SCENE 3.2: THE LEDGER

The player characters may try to gain information from Godalg, which requires a valid argument and a test against *Persuasive* or [*Persuasive* -3], see below.

A successful test makes Godalg disclose that "Master Vernam" has been to the tower, but that he has left. The goblin did not think twice about the tutor's appearance. However, a quick comparison of Vernam's latest signature in the ledger (made by Alahara) with the one made earlier clearly shows two different writing styles. This strengthens the characters' arguments for meeting a Master. If they want to know what Vernam did at the tower, Godalg tells them to ask Master Eufrynda if and when they gain an audience.

With a successful test against [*Persuasive* -3] the doorkeeper claims to be fairly certain that the tutor visited the ritual chamber – the place for the ritual library and also for the tower's *Magic Circle*. Moreover, Godalg explains that only Masters can

provide entry to the chamber, thus the characters must wait for an audience to get in. Of course, Vernam could enter at his convenience, being a Master of the order.

SCENE 3.3: THE RITUAL CHAMBER

In case none of them is a Master of Ordo Magica, the player characters need the company of someone else if they want to enter the chamber. Characters who are granted an audience will get to meet and talk to the haughty, pipe-smoking Master Eufrynda.

Among the towering and cramped shelves there are copies of most rituals covered by the tradition of *Wizardry*. In a ledger Master Vernam's name can be found next to the title of a book containing the ritual *Break Link* (Alahara wants to sever the bond between Gorak and the king's skull). Eufrynda can explain the workings of the ritual – it cuts all mystical bonds to the target, also dispelling all rituals affecting it from a distance.

Scene 4: The Bloody Past

SOONER OR LATER the characters will show an interest in the previous murders. The best way to gain information is to start by talking to Corpse Examiner Ilantro, and Captain Marvello who is in charge of the district where the killings took place.

SCENE 4.1: THE CORPSE EXAMINER

Ilantro is the Medicus of the Town Watch. The murders weigh heavy on the elderly drunkard; he has never experienced anything like the Flayer victims before. He is happy to talk about the murders but gaining access to his journals is harder.

After some pressure he claims to have examined the corpses thoroughly, but that is not quite true: because of malaise and intoxication he has done a very poor job. He says that the bodies was identified by the skins found next to them, but withholds that the actual work was done by his assistant. He did a more detailed study of the first victim; in the later cases he never did much more than determine that they were also missing the three glands. All together, this means that the conclusions of the Corpse Examiner contain grave errors.

Ilantro has the following to say about when and where the victims were found:

Victim #1

Gerek, trapper, by the Toad's Square, north side of the Beacon, six days ago.

Actually skin from Gerek (whose body is in the Blue Moon warehouse) and body from Lenn, victim #2.

Victim #2

Lenn, treasure-hunter, in a shed opposite to the Salons of Symbaroum, four days ago.

Actually skin from Lenn and the body of Shanda, victim #3.

Victim #3

Shanda, barmaid at the Rose Garden, by her home near the North Gate, two days ago.

Actually skin from Shanda and the body of Teoman, victim #4.

Victim #4

Teoman, chimney sweep, in a backyard henhouse near Master Vernam's house, same day the tutor was killed.

Actually skin from Teoman and the body of the elf Tara-Kel, victim #5, whose skin was found next to Vernam's body.

Depending on what conclusions the characters made at the murder scene they may be able to correct Ilantro on some points and there are also new deductions to be made:

- The skins next to the bodies belong to the previous victims.
- Consequently, the first Flayer victim Ilantro examined was not the first victim; there is another skinned body to be found somewhere in town.
- The victim prior to Vernam was an elf.

Garrison

Both the Corpse Examiner and Captain Marvello can be found at the garrison of the Town Watch, close to the South Gate. Aside from the Head Quarters – where the Queen's Border Patrol and the northern division of the Queen's Rangers also have offices – there are stables, barracks and a clinic inside the walls. The gates to the area are open around the clock, not least because two of the barracks normally serve as dormitories for paying visitors. However, anyone who has a specific errand should address the gate guards, for instance if arriving in the hope of meeting one of the captains.

The Logic of the Murders

The first two, positively beastly murders were committed by Gorak who hungered for glands, hoping to slow down the corruptive process. After that Alahara took it upon himself to procure the “medicine” for his beloved, and with that the Flayer was born. When Tara-Kel started searching for the murderer as an agent of the Iron Pact she became a target. Master Vernam helped the elf and became a target himself. The fact that the tutor also had access to Ordo Magica was a welcome bonus, since a visit to the tower might provide Alahara with rituals that could free Gorak from the spell of the king’s skull (a false assumption, but Alahara is desperate).

A successful test against *Persuasive* gives access to the Corpse Examiner’s journals, by which the characters can come to yet another conclusion ...

Before the Flayer’s killing spree started, two persons were butchered in an ally by the Toad’s Square. Ilantro has not linked these to the Flayer killings, but characters who have tracked the murderer over the rooftops may see a connection – they lost the trail in that precise neighborhood. The two victims were ripped to pieces and not even race or sex was possible to determine, but they must have been killed simultaneously in the ally where they were found, nine days ago.

SCENE 4.2: THE CAPTAIN’S TESTIMONIES

Captain Marvello has collected testimonies about the four Flayer killings in a special archive folder. Provided that the characters come off as trustworthy and claim to be investigating the murders they may look at the files for the victims who ended up like Vernam. The testimonies for the previous killings they have to ask for specifically, since the captain has failed to realize that they are connected.

Gorak’s victims and witnesses:

Victim: Gidia, dancer at the Salons of Symbaroum.
Statement: *“It was dark but the abomination was darker still. The victim screamed like a child, then came the sound, as if someone tore a body in two, as if it were made of damp sailcloth. I ran.”* – Alkered, sellsword

Victim: Bolgo, treasure-hunter

Statement: *“The man was huge, but the beast was bigger. First I mistook it for a bear but it sounded like ... like ... I don’t know. Maybe it had been human once, one such abomination? But they only exist in Davokar, deep in the forest, right?”* – Natan, homebound construction worker.

Alahara’s victims and witnesses:

Victim #1

Statement: *“It just lay there, in the ally opening. People must have passed it by thinking it was slaughterhouse waste. But I noted that it was freshly butchered and when I came closer I saw that it was human. I lost my dinner, then I called for the Town Watch.”* – Merkilo, Medicus

Victim #2

Statement: *“The body hung like a slaughtered animal; I thought it a strange place for tendering beef. But there was another man close by, a rough type, looked like a hunter so I didn’t think much of it. But the day after I heard about the murder and went to tell the Town Watch about my observations. What if it was the killer I saw, the huntsman? He looked like just anyone. Unbelievable that such darkness, such raging blackness, can be hidden within a human being.”* – Teodin, Innkeeper.

Victim #3

Statement: *“It wasn’t a body, more like a pile of meat, as if someone had torn the person apart one sliver at a time. I threw up and ran home. I threw up even though I’m used to skin and tanning acids. Still I vomited! On the way home I bumped into a woman who seemed as surprised as me. I tried to warn her about what was in the ally, don’t know if she heard me. Anyway, I ran straight to the Town Watch.”* – Delker, tanner apprentice.

Victim #4

Statement: *“It smelled strange and I got suspicious; why the smell of slaughterhouse from a henhouse? The Town Watch told me what was in there but I never saw it myself. Life doesn’t get better from seeing such things. I saw no one in the vicinity.”* – Albogd, spice peddler.

Scene 5: The Tale of Lasifor Rightpitch

THE PLAYER CHARACTERS know of one single person who has been close to the damned skull and still lives: Mayor Lasifor Nightpitch. This undoubtedly makes him into an interesting witness, possibly also a suspect.

An audience at Nighthome is not easily arranged, but can be approved if the characters have the letter Vernam wrote moments before his death. The guards at the gate can be convinced to disturb their employer, but only if the player characters tell them



the truth about their errand and succeed with a test against *Persuasive*.

If the test is successful, the guards will escort them through the gate and up the hill to the wooden residence. They have to wait on the front porch as one of their escorts goes to address the Mayor. But before long the doors swing open and they are welcomed inside.

Until Lasifor has time to greet them, they get to wait in a room with a large varnished table surrounded by ten chairs. After more than a little while the Mayor enters along with his constant shadow, the witch Yagaba. He gives her a short introduction, but after that the witch stays in the background, watching the characters in silence.

Mayor Nightpitch puts on a lighthearted face as long as the characters are polite and refrain from accusing him of being involved in the murders. Open allegations or threats mean that the meeting is over and that the characters are escorted out.

If asked whether or not he touched the skull, Lasifor squints towards the character and responds

with a question: *"Would I be sitting here today if I touched everything shown to me, or that I dug up in the forest myself?"*

Lasifor's tale of Gorak's expedition and what happened upon its return reads as follows:

Gorak claimed to know about a secret location in the woods and gathered a following that soon vanished into Davokar. The unfriendly changeling Alahara went along, devoted to Gorak as always, trailing his steps.

The remains of the expedition returned a couple of months later. They had not reached their original target – something about meeting an arch troll – but had instead found the tomb of an early Symbarian King. When they reentered the Hold they did so burdened with treasures. Gorak was most proud of the cranium of the dead king and its crown of copper, green from verdigris and merged to the skull. He paraded it around, talked to it and scared people with it, while his companions spent their grave gold.

About a week passed before one of the survivors transformed into a raging abomination; then they

vanished one by one. A couple of them were found dead, but most just disappeared into thin air. At the same time there were rumors about elves infiltrating the town, but that was never confirmed.

Gorak and Alahara most likely went into hiding and their final remaining companion became blight-born and slew a couple of watchmen before she was cut down. All in all, they were all gone in a matter of weeks.

What happened in the stable?

Alahara, who looked like Master Vernam, was bleeding from the leg after a fight with the victim. When Keitara arrived, the changeling used his trait *Shapeshifter* to shock her by assuming her appearance. After that, Alahara hurried to grab the glands but did not have time to get a new skin shrouding.

Scene 6: Another Murder

YET ANOTHER MURDER takes place, with the same bloody *modus operandi* as before. The victim is a stable boy called Harulo – he was all alone in the stable making him a perfect target for the opportunistic Alahara. By now, it is probably unofficially known among the authorities in town that the characters are working to solve the killings, which is why one of their contacts will call them to the scene.

SCENE 6.1: THE STABLE

The corpse is in a small stable close to the Toad's Square. The body hangs upside-down and is skinned from its feet to the waistline. It appears as if the killer had to hurry. Like before, the three glands are missing but there is no skin by the body.

Half a dozen Watchmen and the Sergeant Milos keep the gathering crowd at bay. The guards seem to know who the characters are and they are free to enter the murder scene. One female member of the Town Watch, witness to the murder, stands alone in the stable.

A couple of things are of special significance to the characters:

The Mayor is very anxious to have peace returned to Thistle Hold, and stopping the Flayer is therefore his highest priority. Hardly anyone in town says no to Lasifor Nightpitch, so if the characters come off as serious about solving the murders he can provide them with some assistance. In short, he composes a letter of introduction, instructing the reader to give the player characters all possible support in the hunt for the killer.

- A successful *Vigilant* test: there has been a fight in the stable and there is a puddle of blood on the floor, probably not from the victim. It is Alahara's blood and enough of it to use the ritual *Summoning*. See Scene 7 if the player characters (or someone who assists them) choose to summon Alahara.
- A successful test against [*Vigilant* –5]: a trail of blood leads from the scene, north towards the palisade. See Scene 7 on how to follow the trail to the murderer's hideout.

SCENE 6.2: INTERROGATIONS

The guard Keitara witnessed the murder, or at least the skinning. She heard the sound of a fight and ran to the stable where she saw a scholar with blood stained glasses carve into a body hanging from a beam. The killer looked at her and she came to a halt, mesmerized: the killer suddenly looked exactly like her!?

Keitara could not move but screamed for her colleagues. The Flayer stopped his work and left the scene limping; he was gone before anyone else had arrived. It looked like the murderer bled from the leg, but she is not sure – it was hard to tell since there was blood everywhere.

SCENE 6.3: THE BLACK CLOAK BAUMELO ARRIVES

During the ongoing investigation and interrogation, the witch hunter Baumelo arrives with his entourage. The false witch hunter leads the group, with the pale youngster Terr following behind on a leash. Next come the surviving henchmen from Scene 1, if any.

Baumelo recognizes the characters from Scene 1 and begs forgiveness for the harsh methods of his companions: “*They are used to thoroughly corrupt villages along Davokar's border, not with the complex conditions of a town.*” The henchmen glare at the player characters but obey their master.

After the apology Baumelo whispers something to the boy, who then starts inspecting everyone around

Asking for Assistance

If the player characters ask their contacts for assistance (for example to get help with rituals, tracking or relevant lore) the Game Master can handle it in two ways:

Make the aid into a *deus ex machina*, that is: let the contact solve the problem at the expense of the characters not receiving any Experience for the challenge; after that the story continues as usual.

Alternately, the contact may have a difficult demand for the characters, in the form of a task to be dealt with after the adventure. The task should not be in line with the characters' or the company's goals; it should feel like a burden. With this arrangement, the Experience due is held hostage by the counter request – the Experience for the challenge is awarded when the contact's demand has been met (together with Experience from challenges in that future scenario).

intensely, one at a time. When done he whispers something back.

The youngster is a psychic and was previously used by the real Baumelo the same way Odaka uses him now: his *Witchsight* ability makes him able to spot individuals and objects that are infected or otherwise tainted by the dark of Davokar.

Scene 7: The Flayer's Tracks

IT IS HIGH TIME for the player characters to find Alahara and put an end to the killings. This can be done in at least three ways. The most probable versions of events are covered by the scenes below.

SCENE 7.1: THE BLOOD TRAIL

The characters must succeed with a [*Vigilant -5*] test in order to trace Alahara from the stable to the hideout under the warehouse of the Blue Moon.

If they rejected Baumelo's collaboration offer they will also realize that they are being shadowed if they make a successful test against [*Vigilant -3*]. The shadows can be lost by taking detours and passing a roll against [*Discreet -3*].

When this is done, the characters arrive at the warehouse and Chapter 3 starts.

SCENE 7.2: SUMMONING ALAHARA

The ritual *Summoning* can be used to summon Alahara since he left a puddle of blood on the last murder scene. If so, the player characters can decide for themselves when and where Alahara should be forced to meet up with them.

The summoning does not make Alahara less capable and he will bring backup along to the rendezvous, in the form of hired thugs (stats as Baumelo's henchmen, as many as the PCs). The stats of Alahara are in Scene 9.2.

If Baumelo is present he will start by assisting the characters in the fight against Alahara, then attack them as soon as it is evident that the changeling is about to fall. Baumelo is counting on him being able to find the skull by interrogating Alahara post mortem, with the ritual *Necromancy*.

The ritual *Heretic's Trail* can prove useful if Alahara manages to escape after the summoning; that way the player characters can follow him to the hideout.

SCENE 7.3: BAUMELO'S AID

If the characters have a hard time dealing with the situation on their own and do not think to use their contacts – or lack relevant contacts – they can employ the aid of Baumelo. He is happy to perform a ritual which lets him “follow the blood trail” (a

Baumelo interrogates Keitara with the ritual *Telepathic Interrogation* and gains the same information as the characters. After that he questions the characters as a group, without demanding a telepathic hearing – he already knows all he needs to know. Finally he suggests that he and the characters join forces and track down the Flayer together.

lie, see below). The trail will take both groups to the abandoned warehouse by the palisade, where Chapter 3 begins.

A successful *Cunning* test together with the abilities *Ritualist* or *Theurgy* reveals that Baumelo uses the ritual *Heretic's Trail*. The player will have to figure out for themselves how strange this is; *Heretic's Trail* requires that the mystic has met the abomination in person and “Baumelo” denies that he has!

Odako and Alahara

The questioning of earlier witnesses and the latest telepathic interrogation of Keitara has made Odako realize that the Flayer is Alahara and that they actually have met before. This happened about a year ago, when Odako had a secret meeting with Gorak about a potential expedition into Davokar. Also Alahara was there, proudly introduced by Gorak as his “personal assassin”.

False Deus ex Machina

To let Baumelo track Alahara can look like a classic Deus ex Machina, meaning that the Game Master uses non-player characters to solve a challenge which the characters cannot handle themselves. Do let the players believe that is the case. This “help” comes at a high cost, aside from the characters not getting Experience for tracking Alahara. When Baumelo exposes himself for what he really is, the characters will have to pay.

The Will of a King

CHAPTER THREE BEGINS when the characters have located the old storage of the Blue Moon trading house. The whole chapter is set in and under the building that Alahara has made into the hiding place – and jail – of his beloved Gorak.

Gorak is trapped halfway towards becoming an abomination and Alahara commits his heinous acts in a desperate attempt to stop the transformation. Also the king's skull is there, as a silent witness to the inescapable process.



Scene 8: Blue Moon

THE BLUE MOON trading house previously had a storage facility here but has abandoned it for a better location near the Antique Plaza. Technically they still own the building but they have no knowledge about the occult activity now taking place in the dilapidated wooden structure.

1. THE GATE

The warehouse door is locked from inside and opening it without alerting the undead Gerek requires a test against *[Discreet -1]*. Inside are empty crates and a stench of death.

2. WINDOW

At the back of the building a window stands ajar. Climbing up there requires a *Quick* test, but if passed one can enter without the undead Gerek reacting.

3. STACKS OF CRATES

All crates are empty.

4. CRATE (HIDING A STAIRWELL)

Under the crate at the center of the floor is a steep spiral stair leading down. From below one can hear the lament of a tormented man – or is it a beast? – and a soft consoling voice.

5. THE UNDEAD GUARDSMAN

A skinned, reeking corpse dressed in leather armor and armed with a crowbar and a short chain stands in the corner.

Gerek, undead

"Oooooouuuurghhh ..."

The undead is Alahara's first victim, a trapper named Gerek. Gerek's skin was found by the second victim, Lenn. In death, Gerek's remains were reanimated by the mere presence of the king's skull and he guards the warehouse as ordered by the wraith king Hurian. The creature will not attack Alahara or Gorak.

6. ALAHARA'S BED

Up on one of the stacks is a simple sleeping lair with a blanket covered in bread crumbs. In addition, two ritual books lay there, one tome on *Break Link* (stolen from Ordo Magica, who will offer a reward for its return) and another on *Blood Shrouding*.

Scene 9: The Sunken Watch Tower

A SYMBARIAN WATCH TOWER once stood on the location now shaded by Thistle Hold's palisade, close to the Toad's Square. The tower was razed hundreds of years ago, but not before its ground floor had sunken into the muddy soil to create a hidden chamber underground.

The Blue Moon trading house used to store shady goods smuggled from the depth of Davokar in the chamber, but nowadays the underground vault has an even more sinister function: as the prison of the severely blight-stricken Gorak and as the storage location of the sought-after and abominable cranium of King Hurian. In other words, the final confrontation between the player characters and the slaves of the king's skull will take place in the moldy dark of the vault!

SCENE 9.1: THE BROKEN HEART

An ancient staircase winds downwards. Upon reaching the bottom one can see a huge blight-marked man tied to the far wall with thick ropes. In front of him stands Master Vernam (in truth, Alahara), dabbing the monster's forehead with a piece of cloth. On the other side of the vault is a broken pillar, now serving as a pedestal for a mummified skull wearing a verdigris-covered copper crown.

The changeling tears off his borrowed clothes and skin and stands before the characters covered in nothing but blood. The fight is on!

Manner	Klicks his teeth
Race	Undead
Resistance	Ordinary
Traits	<i>Armored (II)</i>
Accurate 9 (+1), Cunning 7 (+3), Discreet 10 (0), Persuasive 5 (+5), Quick 10 (0), Resolute 13 (-3), Strong 15 (-5), Vigilant 11 (-1)	
Abilities	<i>Iron Fist</i> (adept), <i>Twin Attack</i> (novice)
Weapons	Crowbar 5, Chain with hook 5
Armor	Leather harness 4 (Impeding)
Defense	+2
Toughness	15 Pain Threshold 8
Equipment	None
Shadow	Deeply black, like a mere in darkness (thoroughly corrupt)

Tactics: Gerek attacks the closest intruder.

Alahara, the Flayer

"Nothing shall come between me and my love."

Manner	Speaks with clenched teeth
Race	Changeling
Resistance	Ordinary
Traits	<i>Shapeshifting</i> (adept)
Accurate 10 (0), Cunning 11 (-1), Discreet 15 (-5), Persuasive 5 (+5), Quick 13 (-3), Resolute 9 (+1), Strong 7 (+3), Vigilant 10 (0)	
Abilities	<i>Ritualist</i> (novice, <i>Blood Shrouding</i>), <i>Strangler</i> (novice), <i>Twin Attack</i> (novice)
Weapons	Two swords 4
Armor	None
Defense	-4
Toughness	10 Pain Threshold 5
Equipment	7 thaler, Ritual books (<i>Blood Shrouding</i> and <i>Break Link</i>)
Shadow	Black with scattered lights, like a cold and clear night sky (corruption: 3)

Tactics: Alahara uses his Shapeshifting trait when attacking the characters; to him Gorak's survival is all that matters. When Gorak finally transforms, Alahara stops fighting and walks weeping into certain death at the claws of his lost love.

Gorak, blight-born

"I can't stand this any looonGEEAAAARRR !"

Manner	Flailing, raging
Race	Abomination
Resistance	Challenging
Traits	<i>Armored (I), Natural weapon (I), Robust (I)</i>
Accurate 13 (-3), Cunning 9 (+1), Discreet 7 (+3), Persuasive 5 (+5), Quick 10 (0), Resolute 11 (-1), Strong 15 (-5), Vigilant 10 (0)	
Abilities	<i>Berserker (master), Natural Warrior (master), Man-at-arms (novice)</i>
Weapons	Claws 12/10 (short), two attacks on the same target
Armor	Tough flesh 6
Defense	+2
Toughness 15	Pain Threshold 8
Equipment	None
Shadow	A pulsating blackness, like boiling tar below a thin membrane that bursts as he transforms (thoroughly corrupt)

Tactics: The abomination breaks his bonds and attacks a random person. Alahara is also at risk.

Gorak is bound to the wall, his body twitching from corruption sickness. Two turns into the fight he dies as something claws itself out of his skin: a towering creature with bare muscles, with fingers transformed into knives of bone, and with outgrowths from the cranium, as if it wore a pointy bone crown.

When the abomination dies it transforms into a bloody heap that rapidly begins to rot. All that remains is the deformed cranium.

The King's Skull

On a pedestal in the dark lays a mummified cranium with a verdigris-covered crown merged to the bone.

Player characters with *Witchsight* or any mystical power may make a *Vigilant* test to hear a low, grinding voice through the sounds of battle. The words are unintelligible but stir the fire in the blood.

If someone who hears the voice has the ability *Loremaster (Master)* and passes a *Cunning* test, he or she knows that the voice speaks in ancient Symbarian and repeats the same phrase: "give me the blood, give me the victim, prove yourself worthy to serve." When the fight is over the skull goes silent.

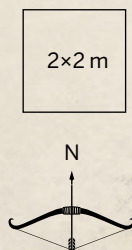
The King's Skull

Resolute 13 (-3)

Abilities *Bend Will (adept)*

Shadow The skull oozes blackness, as if it was a chalice overflowing with liquid darkness. (thoroughly corrupt).

Taktik: The skull gets involved in the battle by using the power *Bend Will* against the player characters once per turn. The King's aim is that only one creature will survive, hoping that the survivor will grip the skull and become susceptible to a possession attempt.



THE SUNKEN WATCH TOWER OF SYMBAROU

1. Spiral stair
2. Gorak
3. Alahara
4. The King's skull
5. Rubble

SCENE 9.2:

THE WITCH HUNTER'S DEMAND

If the characters failed to shake off Baumelo he now enters the scene. Should he already be in their company he will do anything to acquire the skull for himself.

If the battle is tough he will help the characters; Odako has nothing to gain from them falling too quickly, leaving him to fight Gorak without them. After the battle he will demand the skull, for "safe keeping" – he is after all a Black Cloak and a witch hunter. If that trick does not work he and his henchmen will try to claim it by force.

Baumelo, False Witch Hunter

"Hand me the skull."

The cult leader Odako, disguised as the witch hunter Baumelo, leads his followers with the aim of getting his hands on the king's skull.

Manner	Points at whom he is speaking to
Race	Human (Ambrian)
Resistance	Ordinary
Traits	<i>Contacts (cultists)</i>
Accurate 7 (+3), Cunning 11 (–1), Discreet 10 (0), Persuasive 15 (–5), Quick 9 (+1), Resolute 13 (–3), Strong 5 (+5), Vigilant 10 (0)	
Abilities	<i>Curse (novice), Leader (novice), Ritualist (adept, Exchange Shadow, Heretic's Trail)</i>
Weapons	Sword 4
Armor	Scale mail 3 (Impeding)
Defense	+3 (shield)
Toughness	10 Pain Threshold 3
Equipment	3 doses Pixie Dust (new elixir), shackles and chains, interrogation tools, 12 thaler
Shadow	Baumelo/Odako has performed the ritual <i>Exchange Shadow</i> , and uses Terr's lightly tainted shadow as his own: pale red with flaky segments (corruption: 4)

Tactics: The cult leader is only after the King's skull – all else is subordinate.

Surviving Henchmen from Scene 1

"This time you die!"

Manner	Clenches their fists
Resistance	Weak
Traits	<i>Bushcraft</i>
Accurate 13 (–3), Cunning 7 (+3), Discreet 5 (+5), Persuasive 9 (+1), Quick 10 (0), Resolute 11 (–1), Strong 15 (–5), Vigilant 10 (0)	
Abilities	None
Weapons	Axe 4
Armor	Scale mail 3 (Impeding)
Defense	+2 (shield)
Toughness	15 Pain Threshold 8
Equipment	1D10 shilling, a pouch of Black Root for chewing
Shadow	Gray and black-speckled, like sooty wadmal (corruption: 4)

Tactics: This time the henchmen will fight to the death, influenced by the corrupt skull of the King.

Terr, psychic

"I am not to blame."

Manner	Stutters, huddles
Race	Human (Ambrian)
Resistance	Weak
Traits	<i>Bushcraft</i>
Accurate 10 (0), Cunning 11 (–1), Discreet 10 (0), Persuasive 5 (+5), Quick 9 (+1), Resolute 13 (–3), Strong 7 (+3), Vigilant 15 (–5)	
Abilities	<i>Witchcraft (novice)</i>
Weapons	Unarmed 2
Armor	None
Defense	+1
Toughness	10 Pain Threshold 4
Equipment	None
Shadow	Terr appears to be gravely corrupted (warm blackness like the inside of a velvet cape; corruption: 6) since Baumelo/Odako has given his shadow to the boy, using <i>Exchange Shadow</i>

Tactics: Terr will not fight, except in self-defense.

Scene 10: The Skull of a King

IT IS PROBABLE that the player characters will end up with the king's skull (if Baumelo/Odako has does not seize it), and if so they have a precarious question to answer: what to do with it?

Hopefully they have come to realize that it is a really bad idea to touch the cranium so they handle

it with care. There are lots of people who can agree to safeguard the artifact, and other options are to destroy it or to keep it for themselves – both being very risky choices.

In the following a number of alternatives are described, along with what they entail.

Table: Dreams of the King

TIME*	DREAM CONTENT	EFFECT
1 week/1 month	Visions of the King on his throne	No effect
2 weeks/2 months	Like stage 1 with silent grumblings	No effect
3 weeks/3 months	Like stage 2 but grumblings grow louder	<i>Beast Lore</i> (abominations) lets one realize what awaits: a possession attempt is close at hand
4 weeks/4 months	Like stage 3 but the speech is loud and clear	A possession attempt according to Scene 10.1

*Close to the skull/the skull hidden away

SCENE 10.1: DESTROYING THE SKULL

To destroy the cranium is not very hard – it can be crushed, burnt or corroded just like any other skull. However, it is not quite safe to do so, even if no one actually touches the bone. The spirit of King Hurian Lo-Apak is thirsty for life and has not spent eternity in a tomb just to be vanquished in such a simple manner.

Luckily, this can be realized in a number of ways:

- *Witchsight* and a *Vigilant* test
- *Beast Lore* (abominations) and a *Cunning* test
- Rituals like *Fortune-telling* or *Oracle*

The player characters may ask for help if they are incapable of figuring this out themselves, but at the cost of revealing the skull to one or more new individuals. In any case, if they destroy the cranium the King will try to possess them. The possession attempt is performed on one character at a time until there is no one left, and the rules of the attempt are as follows:

The character with the highest *Strong* value is attacked first (King Hurian wants a stately and powerful vessel, worthy of becoming a Symbarian ruler). The victim has to succeed with a test against [*Resolute* –5] to not get possessed by the king. If successful, the desperate spirit strikes out against the next person (the second strongest of the assembled),

and so on. Should every possession attempt fail and the spirit runs out of bodies to attack it is finally destroyed for good.

SCENE 10.2: KEEPING THE SKULL

Keeping the skull is relatively safe, to begin with, as long as no one touches it directly. After a week in the presence of the cranium, the characters start having strange dreams that grow worse until they become a very real danger.

Should they try to hide it away the same thing happens, but it takes a while longer – the dreams start after about a month and escalates to dangerous levels after approximately four months. The final stage of the dreamlike attacks is an attempt by the skull to possess the characters, as if they had destroyed it.

SCENE 10.3: OFFER THE BLACK CLOAKS THE ARTIFACT

That the Twilight Friars study abominations and collect corrupt artifacts is a well-known secret, and they would gladly accept a request to keep the king's skull safe.

If the characters have encountered Lestra during the tutorial adventure the Promised Land it is her they meet in the monastery of the Black Cloaks. She does not like the idea of paying for the skull but will consider taking it off the characters hands for a smaller sum – 50 thaler, or 100 thaler if they succeed with a [*Persuasive* –3] test.

Once the Black Cloaks know that the player characters have the skull and understand what it is they will not let them leave with it. Any negotiation soon reaches a point where Lestra exclaims: “*this is what you'll get – and I would strongly advise you to accept it!*” If the player characters refuse to give in, a group of templars enters the room and takes the skull, offering nothing for it but the character's lives; the champions of Prios are much more interested in learning about abominations and the corruption of the wilds than they are in being well-liked by adventurers.

Possessed by a King

As the effects of the possession begin to show, the GM can take the player of the possessed character to the side and explain what has happened. King Hurian's goal, which then becomes a part of the characters goal, is to return to his tomb, take a seat on the throne and regain his long lost glory. This can be a nice complication when it is time for the company to experience the adventure *Tomb of Dying Dreams*. The possessed character can be played as usual but has a burning desire to reach the grave in Davokar. And once they get there, nothing else matters besides reaching the throne room ...

Concluding Mood Pieces

WHEN THE DUST SETTLES it might be fitting to provide the players with a sense of what future they have created. Also, depending on where the skull ends up, opportunities for continued playing will emerge – for example if they decided to hide it somewhere, give it to the Black Cloaks or to more or less willingly hand it over to the false witch hunter. Two of the mood pieces below can be used to round off the Mark of the Beast and also to set the tone for what is to come.

Furthermore, if someone carries and is bound to the ring of the Iron Pact (found at the first murder scene), that character will come to receive dreams sent by other members of the pact, dreams exemplified in the third mood piece.

ODAKO AND THE KING'S SKULL

There is a great risk that the cult leader Odaiko leaves Thistle Hold with the King's skull, in which case the following can be narrated:

Night falls over the village, Davokar's silhouette merges with the dark of the skies. The man puts his witch hunter's coat down and picks up the skull of the King. He touches the tips of the copper crown with a finger, pulls the hand back as one of them pierces his skin, still sharp after centuries in the grave. Sucking his fingertip he stares into the empty eye-sockets. Two faint lights dance inside, like distant stars. The lights mesmerize, enthrall, inspires. A grinding voice whispers. The false witch hunter stands paralyzed, listening. Then he twitches, and falls to his knees, the skull held high before him. He clears his throat and says with voice trembling: "Thy will be done, my King, my Liege."

THE HIDDEN KING'S SKULL

If the skull is allowed to endure, hidden by the characters or in the possession of someone else (Black Cloaks or others), the spirit of King Hurian will continue fighting for his rebirth. If so, the following mood piece may be suitable:

The skull lays hidden in the dark, safe from prying eyes and fingertips; the silence is as solid as the walls surrounding the hiding place. Suddenly there is a sparkle in the

darkness as two faint lights are lit in the empty eye-sockets of the skull, glowing like far away stars. Soon the sound of iron against rock can be heard. The rhythmic clanks grow louder and louder and finally the pickaxe breaches the wall. The light from outside is screened off by a pale face looking in; whose gaze meets that of the long dead king. "So this is where you've been captive, my King, my Liege ..." Greedy hands grip the skull, to free it from captivity. The cranium smiles its dead smile as it emerges from darkness, out into the light of the lantern.

DREAMS OF THE IRON PACT

A character who binds himself to Vernam's ring will be contacted by the Iron Pact. The agents of the pact soon realize that the tutor is dead and uses dreams to invite the new owner of the ring to a meeting:

The clearing is silent; the surrounding trees sway softly in a barely noticeable breeze. A lone shape sits on the moss-covered ground, meditating. On its right hand is a simple ring of iron. Rust marks and a deep incision from some earlier cut give the ring a crude, almost cruel appearance, not mirrored by the dream as a whole. The cloaked figure looks up and its elven eyes meet yours in a gentle but firm gaze. He speaks to you, though not with words spilling from his mouth; he calls for you, begs you to hurry. And remarkably enough, you instantly know where to find the clearing where the elf is waiting.

The events related to the pact ring can be further developed, depending on the payer's reaction. A character with sympathies for the cause of the pact will probably become allied to its members; someone who wants to use the ring for his own purposes will likely gain himself a number of very potent enemies.

The Iron Pact will do their best to win over the characters to their side, but they are by no means hesitant to pry the ring from their dead, cold fingers if it comes to that. Either way, they will not allow a non-member to carry one of the few, true pact rings that still exist.

Appendix

THE MARK OF THE BEAST features one new ritual and a new alchemical elixir that the characters may encounter while playing. You will also find a detailed description of the Iron Pact Ring below, including its powers.

New Rules

BLOOD SHROUDING, RITUAL

The mystic flays a dead person and dresses in its skin, one sliver at a time. After that, the mystic looks exactly like the dead person but has his own voice and his own eyes, which limits its uses. To trick an individual who was acquainted to the diseased and who talks to the mystic, a test against [Discreet←Vigilant] must be made. The effect lasts for 24 hours, then the dead skin falls off.

PIXIE DUST, ELIXIR

Pixie Dust is a glittering powder with the power to hide tracks. One dose is enough to make a trail impossible to follow with conventional techniques. Rituals are not affected. Pixie Dust is an elixir crafted at the adept level and costs 4 thaler if purchased from the alchemist who made it.

Artifacts

Symbolic Rings and True Rings

All members of the pact carry a ring of iron as a symbol of his or her membership, but few of them are true artifacts. Only the leaders of the pact and highly promising agents are honored with true rings.

THE IRON PACT RING

The rings of the Iron Pact were forged in dragon fire on troll-made anvils, as weapons against the corruption of Symbaroum. To the rings the Elder Folks bound the last remnants of the Pure Magic, before that too was corrupted. In the final battle against Symbaroum's darkness, the rings were carried by the leaders of the Iron Pact. Or so the story goes, when told by the elves to the few human members of the pact.

Now the dragons are gone, the trolls brutalized and not even all elves rally behind the age-old alliance. The true rings were never many and now they are fewer still. However, the power in those

that still exist is evident to all who have sworn the Iron Oath and subjected themselves to the strict law of the rings.

The Iron Pact Ring may only be bound to an individual using Experience, not by accepting permanent corruption. It does not stop the character from willingly accepting corruption, but punishes it harshly (see the Ring's Law).

Corruption Shield

The ring fully protects its carrier from corruptive surroundings, like the taint in Davokar's darkest parts or the blight transferred through bites and claws of certain beasts (the *Corrupting Attack* trait). The ring has no protective effect on corruption gained from the voluntary use of artifacts or mystical powers. On the contrary, the ring punishes the carrier for such choices (see the Ring's Law).

Action: Free

Corruption: None

Dream Message

Once during each night's sleep, he who is bound to the ring may send a dream message to someone else with a ring. They do not need have met before, but the sender must know that the receiver exists. The message appears as a slide show of images; no words may be communicated. The interpretation is up to the receiver.

Action: Free

Corruption: None

The Ring's Law

The ring punishes oath breakers. He who has bound himself to the ring suffers physical damage from all corruption he willingly accepts: each point of temporary corruption causes 1D4 in damage.

Dear Master Night Pitch,

I know that we seldom see eye to eye, but let me

know that the skull of the King
was shown to you, numerous sources have told me as

infected all who touch it, and
the power of corruption. You appear to have
exposed its destructive powers, maybe you never

held it in your hands, but I know
that the King was when he
was captured and is crying

precisely
the atrocities and the killings are connected
to all this I cannot claim to know, but from a
reliable source I have heard that the King is
and is a man of blood.

Dear Master Nightpitch,

I know that we seldom see eye to eye, but let me once again try to explain why I believe that Gorax's failed expedition is connected to the current killings, performed by the so called Slayer. I know that Gorax sought you out and that the skull of the king was shown to you, numerous sources have told me as much, and I realize that a possible link between the murders and the skull is politically delicate.

The king's skull infects all who touch it, infects with the power of corruption. You appear to have escaped its destructive powers; maybe you never held it which, if so, was wise. My elven friends have told me that their soothsayers dreamed of the dead king at the time when Gorax was parading around town with his triumph, and they have returned to me saying that they are still dreaming, meaning that the corrupting powers of the skull are still active here in Whistle Pold. Precisely how the atrocities and the killings are connected to all this I cannot claim to know, but from a reliable source I have heard that the art of slaying is an ancient and baneful one, born of darkness.

Nevermore the Dark,

Master Vernam

Dear Friends

If you are reading this I am dead. You don't know who I am, just as I don't know you in the common meaning of the word. But I know something about your faith, since it is intertwined with my own - and with the bloody tracks left by the Slayer through our beautiful town. In short, you have appeared in my dream sights, visions I have evoked with the help of rituals, as part of my effort to solve the riddle of the murderous Slayer.

Some months ago, an expedition returned to Histlehold. Aside from gold they brought back the skull of a Symbarian king and the expedition leader paraded this distasteful trophy around many of the town's inns and taverns. Unfortunately the treasure-hunters also brought with them a horrible sickness, which claimed their lives one after the other - some just disappeared, others were hunted down by agents of the Dragon Pact, another few turned into abominations and were killed by watchmen or brave residents. Gorak, the leader, went into hiding and took the skull with him.

People's memories are short in the hold and since this new wave of murders began, carried out by the abominable "Slayer", no one has linked the bloody deeds to Gorak's expedition. However, my vision revealed some kind of connection; after many frustrating dream sights one thing is clear to me: there is some kind of association between the expedition and the skinning of our townsfolk.

Alas, I also realized that my own death was a
crucial step towards solving the riddle. And so,
my unfamiliar friends by faith, are you.

The how's and the why's are unintelligible to me,
but hopefully you will be able to figure them out.
If ever we meet in the world beyond you'll have to tell
me everything about the events to come. Till then
I can but ask you to forgive me for placing this burden
on your souls. What's ahead of you I would not wish for
my greatest enemy, let alone persons who likely would
have been my friends, had I but lived to greet them.

Master Vernam

Thistle Hold

– the town of hopes and dreams

It is also a place where people are murdered or disappear without a trace. A beastly killer known as the Flayer is hounding the northern districts of town. Some say an abomination is on the loose. The situation grows even more tense as an infamous Black Cloak arrives, spreading suspicions far and wide. And when it becomes known that Mayor Nightpitch is among the witnesses the rumor-mill really starts to grind.

ENTER THISTLE HOLD, the town in the shadow of Davokar where hope flourishes in a bed manured with broken dreams and shattered prospects. *The Mark of the Beast* gives the gaming group a good reason to explore the streets and personalities in town, but will also take them along on a hunt for an elusive and brutal slayer – a slayer driven by the most ruthless power known to the world: love.

The Mark of the Beast is an independent sequel to the tutorial adventure *The Promised Land* and provides insights on how to deal with more complex battle- and problem solving situations. Other than that it contains a dozen colorful non-player characters, two maps, four handouts, a new ritual, two artifacts, a new elixir and much more to add to your Symbaroum campaign!

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