

HEROIC WORKS



The Molted Serpent

The Dark Eye



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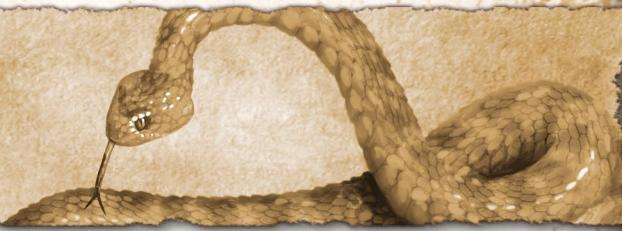


This paragraph contains additional tips for the GM.

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The Molted Serpent



“Know your own imperfections! Only then you can learn from those you teach, and together reach true knowledge.”

—His Grace Melchior Arenbruch, from a guest lecture at the University of Methumis, autumn, 1037 FB.

“Enlightened shepherds deserve divine knowledge. Fools do not.”

—Her Grace Arba of Silas, High Tutor of the Temple of Hesinde in Vinsalt, modern.

The Adventure at a Glance

Genre: Detective Story, Urban Adventure

Prerequisites: Helpful, pious heroes who have good reputations and know their way around a city.

Location: City of Vinsalt, Horasian Empire

Date: Hesinde 1038 FB

Complexity (Players/GM): Medium/High

Suggested Hero Experience Level: Experienced to Competent

Useful Skills

Social Skills

Combat

Living History

GM, you are allowed to take some time to sort your thoughts, too, just like the players.

The Heroes

This adventure is designed for heroes with experience levels ranging from *Experienced* to *Competent*. The opening narration allows you to adjust the challenge. We advise against using *Inexperienced* heroes. The heroes should also have good reputations to be deemed trustworthy investigators. Also, *The Molted Serpent* focuses on crime and intrigue and takes place mainly in an urban setting. Wilderness specialists might enjoy the role playing challenges, but the party should feel comfortable in cities. A strong sword arm never hurts.

The Story Thus Far

Verian Fock, the Grand Master of the Scholarly Parlor in the Temple of Hesinde in Kuslik, died of old age two years ago. He headed up the largest library in Aventuria for 50 years, and the matter of his succession turned into an unexpected political issue within the Church. Candidates for succession included *Arba of Silas*, the old head of the Temple (64; small and stout; ruffled mane of brown hair; thick glasses; traditional wrap gown; see pages 7 and 12), and a Lowangen Blessed One named *Melchior Arenbruch*. Melchior held the radical belief that the holy library, including its secret knowledge, should be open and available to everybody.

The duties of Grand Master of the Scholarly Parlor went to somebody else, but Melchior stayed on in the Horasian Empire as a traveling teacher and charismatic preacher. Soon he had gathered a growing crowd of supporters called the *Fellowship of Learning* (see page 4). Blessed Ones, philosophers, private tutors, teachers, and even master crafters and artists—many joined him in calling for open teaching. Some served at his side for only a short time, while others formed a close-knit fellowship.

The *Fellowship of Learning* ruffled the authorities' feathers more than once. Arba of Silas can ignore Melchior's popularity no longer. As *Elder*, she leads a ruthless secret society known as the *Initiated of Kuslik* (see page 12), which works towards a Hesindocracy in which knowledge is protected jealously and the ignorant are lead by those with knowledge. The *Initiated* believe that the common people should be kept ignorant, which is why Arba can no longer tolerate Melchior's activities in her Horasian Empire.

Background

Adventure Synopsis

The Molted Serpent finds the heroes in the colorful Imperial metropolis of Vinsalt during the winter of 1038 FB. While searching for the killer of a Blessed One of Hesinde, they soon uncover a plot that threatens to topple an influential church leader. In the meantime, the heroes must avoid becoming suspects themselves while dodging attacks from an infamous guild of assassins.

This adventure is rather flexible as to outcome. We suggest that you read the entire adventure before running it, to become familiar with the plot. Try to anticipate your players' actions, but be prepared to be surprised by their ideas. Above all, don't panic—as

...What Will Happen

To eliminate Melchior and discredit his Fellowship, Arba commands the Initiated  *Pieno Florigan* (see page 13) to infiltrate Melchior's fellowship, earn his trust, and then kill him. In Boron of 1038 FB, Pieno fulfills his assignment and flees towards Vinsalt. A short time later, one of Melchior's followers recruits the heroes to track down Pieno and drag him before the court.

Suffering from remorse, the fugitive goes into hiding in Vinsalt, but his presence is discovered by the provincial governor of Kuslik, Comto  *Thûan della Gribaldi* (51; stout; curly black hair; pockmarked skin; strong hands; see page 13). As a Master of the *Initiated* himself, Thûan jumps at the chance to depose his rival Arba and take control of the secret society. He has Pieno killed and then plants clues that incriminate Arba in the murder. The heroes find Pieno's body but become suspects themselves. Their search for the true killer of Pieno draws Arba's attention. The old schemer tries to erase all clues leading to herself and casts suspicion on the heroes.

The Aventurian Herald

Issues #160 - 162 of *The Aventurian Herald*, the official magazine for *The Dark Eye*, presents articles from various Aventurian newspapers regarding the death of Verian Fock as well as his successors' struggles. Similarly, articles on Melchior's activities and murder appear in issues 171 and 172. These make excellent handouts to set the mood or serve as aids for the heroes' investigations of characters and situations, but they are not required for running the adventure. This book contains all necessary information.

Glossary

Connetablia Criminalis Capitalae: law enforcement authority in the city of Vinsalt.

Initiated of Kuslik: secret scholarly society.

Limoncello: sweet-sour lemon liquor.

Nandus: son of Hesinde and Phex; demigod of Insight, Education, and Knowledge

Visitator: investigator with the Connetablia Criminalis; possesses carte blanche authority.

Xeledon the Taunter: son of Hesinde and a mortal; demigod of Mockery, Chance, and Lies.

Xeledon School: elite guild of assassins.

Search for the Killer

The adventure begins a few days after Melchior's murder. This scenario does not reveal where the peoples' teacher actually met his death. We suggest it occur in a small town or village near Vinsalt, but Melchior cannot have died in Vinsalt itself.

 *Elysia ya Berîsac*, a noble-born healer (22; 5'5"; black hair; pageboy-cut; broad brow tattooed with a lotus) followed the victim from the beginning and was a close friend. For two years, she refused the privileges of her rank and traveled the Horasian Empire at Melchior's side. She and Pieno were lovers, which is why the murder is especially shocking to her, and she wants Pieno to stand trial for his crime. She is following his trail to Vinsalt when she meets the heroes.

The heroes spend the night at the *Red Rooster*, an inn that later lives up to its name. If the heroes do not already know each other, they might become acquainted here, perhaps over a cup of limoncello or a game of boltan. Eventually they might notice Elysia among the guests, especially for her facial tattoo. If approached, the medica declines company at first, asking to be left alone. Heroes who choose to drink must make checks using *Carousing (Resist Drug Intoxication)* with modifiers befitting their enthusiasm, or else suffer 1 level of *Stupor* for the next six hours.

Red Rooster Menu and Prices

Wheat Gold (beer), tankard	8 kreutzers
Goldrock Red Sky (dry, heavy red wine), cup	7 halers
Limoncello, small cup	25 kreutzers
Sweet millet gruel with fruit or nuts	2 halers
Cheeseboard with bread	5 halers
Prince Therengar Noodles with chicken	9 halers
Bed in the dormitory	8 halers
Bed in a double room	3 silverthalers
Single room	4 silverthalers

A Selfless Deed

Seeking shelter from the mild, cool air of the Horasian winter night (no snow for two weeks, and no rain for days),  *Curon* the stableman (33; broad shoulders; chiseled face; red nose) climbs into the hayloft, as he often does, to get drunk and smoke some ilm leaf. He soon falls asleep, and bottle and pipe fall from his hands. This, unfortunately, sets the stables ablaze.

Each hero must make a *Perception (Notice)* check (+1 if still awake) to notice the fire in time. If the checks fail,

they only notice when a companion wakes them up or a commotion begins outside. Anyone botching the roll might sleep through the whole thing. QL determines the point at which the heroes can react. Heroes act in QL order.

- **QL 1:** Escalation Level IV – the stables are completely engulfed in flames, the fire is spreading to the inn, and Curon is dead.
- **QL 2:** Escalation Level III – the stables are burning and Curon is in great danger, but the fire is not threatening the inn (yet).
- **QL 3:** Escalation Level II - the hayloft is burning, and Curon is in danger.
- **QL 4+:** Escalation Level I - the fire has only just started.

Controlling the Fire

The heroes have a chance to not only fight the fire but earn bonus AP, too. At the end of the adventure, divide this bonus AP evenly among the participants. Heroes who refuse to help do not earn any AP. If the entire group chooses not to help, the adventure ends here (and the adventurers should think about whether they are actually heroes...).

Extinguish the Fire (5 AP): to extinguish the fire with buckets of water from the nearby well, make a cumulative group check using *Feat of Strength*, 15 minutes. The number of attempts allowed depends of the escalation level (Level I = 7, Level II = 5, Level III = 3, Level IV = the stables cannot be saved, the inn is at Level I). No more than six people can participate in this check. A *botch* raises the escalation by 1 level.

Gather Helpers (2 AP): not everybody is as brave as the heroes. With a *Fast-Talk (Hard Sell or Manipulate)* check, they can gather QL helpers (*Feat of Strength* at SR 4, 13/12/12) to assist with extinguishing the fire.

Save Somebody (3 AP): saving a person trapped by the flames involves a check using *Willpower (Resist Threats)* to enter the burning building, and then a check using *Body Control (Running)* (failure incurs 2D6 DP (ignoring PRO) per CR) to get them out. All checks suffer a penalty of 1 per escalation level. Curon cannot assist with an attempted rescue, even of himself (state unconscious; he's already suffered 2D6 damage per escalation level (33 LP), and dies at level IV).

Tend to the Wounded (2 AP): heroes can use *Treat Wounds*, healing magic, or suitable liturgical chants to help the wounded. They find themselves working alongside Elysia, who is impressed by the party's selfless courage.

Elysia's Plea

After the fire has (hopefully) been extinguished, the innkeeper hands out a free round of his best wine to wash the smoke from the throat and the terror from the bones. After things settle down, Elysia joins the heroes at their table. She tells the story of Melchior Arenbruch (see sidebar) and the Fellowship of Learning, and how, a few days ago, Melchior was stabbed by a seemingly loyal follower named Pieno Florigan. The killer, who had joined the Fellowship only three months earlier, had never acted suspiciously. To all appearances, he was a skilled teacher who always spoke well of his soon-to-be victim. The two never even had a minor disagreement, and Elysia still cannot understand why Pieno killed him. She doesn't hold out hope of finding him, so she asks the heroes for their help.

Pieno fled the scene of the murder, and witnesses saw him headed out of town. Elysia thinks he returned to Vinsalt because he knows the city and has friends there who will hide him. As a native of Vinsalt, Pieno studied at the city's warrior school. He is mainly interested in philosophy and astrology, but his greatest passion is riding, which he loved teaching to others.

There are members of the Fellowship who would kill Pieno on sight, but this goes against Melchior's philosophy. Since Elysia wants to bring him to justice (and more importantly, understand his motives), she has been trying to track him down. A successful check using *Empathy (Discern Motivation)* with a bonus of 1 reveals that Elysia seems to be hiding something. If asked, she admits hesitantly that she and Pieno had become lovers mere days before the murder.

If the heroes agree to take up the search, she hands them a written description of Pieno (see page 13) and offers to teach the heroes some of her skills. If the heroes want money instead, she offers 15 ducats from her savings (which have suffered over the last two years).

If many people were injured in the fire, Elysia stays behind to care for them first but promises to follow the heroes later. If she was hurt in the conflagration, she cannot accompany the party anyway, and her plea is even more desperate.



Elysia accompanies the heroes and assists them with her skills (she's an *Experienced medica*). Her knowledge of Horasian culture might prove helpful, too, especially if the heroes are foreigners.

Melchior's Teachings and the Fellowship of Learning

Melchior Arenbruch (961-1038 FB; eyeglasses; lotus tattoo on brow and back of the right hand; small mouth) made his mark on the Horasian Empire by spreading his philosophy of mutual learning. The core tenets of his philosophy are that everyone is both teacher and student, and people can reach perfection together. Transmission of knowledge should require no payment, but the student can offer to instruct the teacher in return.

While Melchior lived, opinions began to differ among his most devout followers. Some viewed themselves as stewards chosen to pass on knowledge. Others made radical demands to open all sources of knowledge, from temple libraries to academic writings and guild secrets, and make them public. The Fellowship is deeply shocked by Melchior's sudden death, and conflict will soon erupt over his legacy. As for which faction becomes more influential, or whether the Fellowship will even survive, only the future can tell, and it might be years before the dust settles.

Melchior's teachings will be discussed in the plazas and salons of the inquisitive Horasian Empire for years to come, but any resolution is beyond the scope of this scenario, and you are free to decide the outcome for yourself. Those who support Melchior's teachings, even if they might interpret them differently, come to call themselves *Melchiorites*. Like many philosophical trends in the Horasian Empire, this movement will bear strange fruits and be *en vogue* for some time, but no profound social changes will arise as a result. For flavor, personalize an NPC scholar with a worldview based on the teachings of Melchior.



services in support of the governance of the Horasian Empire.

Special: Headquarters of Crown Convent and Imperial Administration, cultural center for opera and clock making, Firdayon palace, ruins of Old Bospharan, pumping station for water supply, various monasteries, Anatomical Institute (mage academy; healing, white magic), Academy of the Arts of War and Living (warrior school), Horasian-Imperial Cadet Academy, School of Dance, Circle of Stone and Iron (school for mechanics and architecture), Academia Horasiana (university), Cosmological College (astronomy, philosophy, and mathematics), Law Seminary (law school).

Mood in the City: learned, ambitious, modern, sometimes merciless, proud of its culture and its past, historically aware.

City of a Hundred Towers

Vinsalt at a Glance

Population: 60,000, plus several hundred dwarves and elves

Ruler: Lord Ralman of Firdayon-Bethana, who rules with (and sometimes against) the powerful patricians.

Temples: Temples of all Twelve gods (two each of Travia and Phex), main temple of Nandus, temples and shrines of various demigods.

Commerce and Trade: Many different products of trade, craft, and manufacturing, many banks,

The metropolis of Vinsalt is the largest city in the Horasian Empire, and among the largest in Aventuria. 500 years ago, this "City of a Hundred Towers" was built over the ruins of the ancient imperial city Bospharan, making it both one of the oldest and youngest cities in the Horasian Empire. Vinsalt's inhabitants embrace the spirit of *renascencia*—which combines the remembrance of history with a hunger for progress—and the city sees itself as the herald of a new age.

The collision of glorious past and onrushing future shapes the lives of every inhabitant of the city. Works of wonder, like the Vinsalt Tower Clock, the water towers of the walled North City, and the chain ferry across the Yaquir, can be seen everywhere. Visitors marvel at the artisanship of its manufactories and stand in awe of exalted buildings like the Vinsalt Opera, the Lord's Palace, and the Temple of Praios, which exist side by side with weathered statues, ruins of ancient temples, and rotting tenements. Vinsalt is a city of opportunity where people forge the fate of a new age. It is a city of order, power, and achievements, but it is also a city of crime and conspirators.

Vinsalt in Play

This book could not hold a description of every important building, neighborhood feature, temple, and hidden cult in the city, and no writer will ever describe every tavern, inn, and shop on every street. The underworld's small-time criminals, smugglers, and gangs will have their brief moment of infamy, but even they will go largely unnoticed except perhaps by your gaming group. This scenario introduces only the locations that are important for the story, but you should view Vinsalt as the city of *your* opportunities. The sheer size and pace of living in this sprawling, many-faceted urban center lets you introduce the heroes to just about anything without conflicting with future products.

Looking for Pieno

The search for the fleeing killer requires a cumulative group check using *Streetwise (Asking Around)* with a bonus of 1 and an interval of 3 hours. To liven up the search, use scenes of your own devising. Of course, you can also allow the players to role play the search without relying on skill checks for everything.



We suggest you allow more than six checks (see page 8). The fewer the number of attempts, the greater the challenge for the heroes.

Moving Through the Streets of Vinsalt

The heroes don't have much to go on at first. They only know Pieno's name and description, and that he was born in Vinsalt and attended the warrior academy. Based on the heroes' QL total after each cumulative group *Streetwise* check, roll 1D6 on the following charts. Re-roll duplicate results.



If the heroes start with a high QL or skip levels, you can roll more than once.

Quality Level 1 to 5

1D6 Clue

1-2 Somebody knows Pieno, but has not seen him in years and knows nothing else.

3 Somebody directs the heroes to *Begeno Worrigan* (which sounds like Pieno Florigan), by accident. Begeno has been a sugar baker's apprentice for 15 years.

4 Up until about three months ago, Pieno could usually be found in the neighborhood of Old Bosparan.

5 A friend or relation of the informer attended the warrior academy with Pieno. They had a falling-out over a new style of warfare (an almost philosophical argument on the honor code of Rondra versus the reserved strategies of Nandus). Pieno argued on the side of the strategists, and the friendship ended over the dispute.

6 Pieno applied to become an officer, but something went wrong. Sometime after that, he started drinking.

Quality Level 6 to 9 (Partial Success)

1D6 Clue

1-2 Pieno lived in Old Bosparan until about three months ago.

3 Up until about three months ago, Pieno had a lover named **Ari** (20; pale; light blond hair; large bosom; rumor monger). She might still be a maid for the Drostenburgs. Pieno liked to hide there.

4 Pieno liked to frequent the *Heroes' Cellar*.

5 Somebody heard that Pieno was involved in an argument in the *Silver Bar* a day ago, but does not know what it was about.

6 Two days ago, Pieno obtained a horse from the Quendel stables and rode out.

Quality Level 10 (Success)

Pieno is staying with the *Widow Iriz*, who lost her husband and children during the War of Succession ten years ago. She rents the upper room to single men. Her house is in Old Bosparan, near the shop of the cartwright, *Yaquir Lightning*.



Vignettes and Added Details

“Vinsalt is confusing me!”

—Exclamation of a traveler from Kuslik

Sample Informers

■ **Tolek Cavalo** (38; 6'4"; Almadan; brawny; bald; relaxed; calm) is a nurse at the Anatomical Institute. Despite his size, he is easy to overlook.

■ **Beno** (51; hunchbacked; croaking voice), a cutler from Old Bosparan who shares his knowledge only for money. *Streetwise* -1 (with *Area Knowledge (Old Bosparan)*). Beno is the “herald” for the Queen, a feared lady of the underworld and a powerful mage. If the heroes attack him, they must face some thugs (see page 7).

■ **Argelona Grandoro** (19; Novadi heritage; neat and orderly but absentminded), a young woman from Neetha visiting the Law Seminary; she knows the city's nightly goings-on better than she knows the rooms in the law school.

■ A Blessed One of Tsa (56; spry; gray hair; weather-beaten face; scars on hands and arms; rainbow-colored gown) who changes her name daily and is always looking for a new location in Old Bosparan to build a chapel for the ever-youthful goddess.

■ **Pammi Grangorer** (33; short; red hair; shrewd) belongs to the *Graspers* (Vinsalt's city guards). She is cruel to those who are weaker than her, and cowardly when dealing with those who are stronger. She is corrupt and often roams the poorer neighborhoods with her gang. Sometimes she arrests specific low-level crooks as a favor to another criminal.

Sample Locations

The *Academy of the Art of War and Life*, situated in a palace in Old Bosparan, is one of the most respected schools in the Empire. It trains its students to be cosmopolitan, educated aristocrats. Pieno has not been seen here for years.

The *Heroes' Cellar*, in Old Bosparan, is popular with adventurers and criminals and offers various drugs and weak poisons for sale (check using *Streetwise* with a penalty of 1). Innkeeper ■ **Racalla Trimioc** (58; large; gray-black hair; good cook) ended her education as a mage to travel the world, and later settled in her home town. Rumor has it that the infamous Queen of Bosparan wants the *Cellar*.

The gambling den *Silver Bar* is owned by a Thorwaler, ■ **Long Tjasse** (35; 6'5"; reddish beard; very short hair), who inherited it from his uncle Laske. Tjasse has rigged many of the games, and directs complaints to his cousin, a hero of the Boxing Hall.

The heroes are unlikely to find anything in the rundown dives that line the winding streets of the *Footman's Quarter*, but they might enjoy a brawl in the Boxing Hall or an old warehouse.

Quendel's Paddock is situated in rural Haldurias. The owner, ■ **Horatia Quendel** (47; brown curls; squinty eyes; likes to chew gulmond leaves), remembers Pieno renting a horse a while ago and riding out for two hours. He seemed honest and paid good silver.

Random Encounters

Roll on this chart every second time interval, or simply choose an event.

Random Event

1D6 Event

- 1 A mendicant of the Badilakans asks the heroes for a donation for the soup kitchen.
- 2 The heroes get caught up in a clash between journeymen and workers of a manufactory who let their fists and clubs do the arguing.
- 3 A bored, middle-aged noblewoman watches the most impressive or exotic hero from the safety of her carriage.
- 4 A young poet challenges a suitable hero to a spontaneous poetry competition (competitive check using *Fast-Talk* versus *Fast-Talk*, SR 7, 14/12/12). The hero names the stakes. If no hero is suitable, pick a different competition, such as singing, juggling, or acrobatics.
- 5 Two overconfident sons of patricians race each other in their light carriages. One loses control of his vehicle and skids toward a crowd of people. The heroes are in danger (Dodge or suffer 2D6+4 DP) or can save somebody else (check using *Body Control*; on a botch, the hero gets run over). To regain control of the carriage, a hero must climb up on it (check using *Climbing* with a penalty of 3) and take the reins (check using *Driving* with a penalty 1).
- 6 A young woman with tattoos and a feather-decorated hat gives away flowers she has gathered (and steals from careless victims). Make a competitive check using *Perception* (*Notice*) versus *Pickpocket*, SR 9, 12/13/13.

Botch

The heroes disturb some smugglers or perhaps anger a local gang of thugs that works for a rising underworld prince. [Heroes +1] thugs try to teach the strangers why they shouldn't mess with the Shard Market Dogs, Migo the Magnate, or the Swamp Shadows.



If the heroes are not very combat-oriented, use [heroes -1] thugs, instead.



If the heroes can fight well, increase the number of thugs to [heroes +2].

Thieves, Cut-Throats, and other Scum

COU 13 SGC 11 INT 13 CHA 12

DEX 13 AGI 13 CON 13 STR 12

LP 31 AE - KP - INI 13+1D6

DO 7 SPI 1 TOU 1 MOV 8

Unarmed: AT 13 PA 7 DP 1D6 RE short

Dagger: AT 13 PA 7 DP 1D6+1 RE short

Club: AT 12 PA 4 DP 1D6+2 RE medium

PRO/ENC 0/0

Advantages/Disadvantages: none

Special Abilities: Feint I or Precise Thrust I or Combat Reflexes I (INI +1)

Skills: Body Control 3, Empathy 2, Fast-Talk 4, Feat of Strength 5, Intimidation 6, Perception 5, Self-Control 3, Stealth 5, Willpower 4

Combat Behavior: Thugs gang up on targets and try first to eliminate the ones that appear the weakest. They do not hesitate to use captured heroes as leverage against their companions.

Escape: Thugs flee after losing half of their LP, suffering two levels of *Pain*, or seeing that their side is losing.

Equipment: 3D6 halers

LP Loss **Pain**

23 LP (1/4) +1 Pain

16 LP (1/2) +1 Pain

8 LP (3/4) +1 Pain

5 LP and less +1 Pain

Meeting the Elder

The heroes may call at the Temple of Hesinde to learn more about the deceased and his Fellowship, (or because they want to visit the repository of knowledge for their own reasons). Viewed from the outside, the four-story temple is rather plain, but its library is very impressive. During their visit, the heroes meet High Tutor Arba of Silas (one of the antagonists) without realizing who she is. It is important that the GM not place too much emphasis on this scene. Portray Arba as a teacher who is strict but has her students' best interests in mind.



Meanwhile...

Pieno is feeling remorse for his deed. Arba thinks he's in hiding, but he is actually getting drunk in a tavern in Old Bosparan. There he is approached by Comto Thûan, who knows the true identities of the members of the Vinsalt circle. Pieno does not remember their conversation, but Thûan begins to see a way to use Pieno to topple Arba. Calling upon his connections with *Niam of Bosparan*, an underworld boss who is well-versed in black magic, Thûan recruits an assassin named **¶ Sayodir** (38; half elf; black hair; green eyes; cruel streak) to eliminate Pieno in the style of the *Xeledon School*.

Sayodir manipulates the drunken Pieno into joining a barroom brawl that also happens to involve a thug named Ludolfo (who shares a prominent feature with one of the heroes—see below). Pieno fights well and humiliates Ludolfo and his drinking buddies.

A day later, Sayodir casts *Bannbaladin* to gain Ludolfo's trust, tells him that Pieno is spreading horrible lies about him, and then reveals Pieno's location. Before the heroes arrive at the house of Widow Iriz, the enraged Ludolfo kills Pieno and slips away. Some time later, Sayodir sneaks into the house and plants the symbol of the *Xeledon School* near the body.

The Killer Killed

Exactly when the heroes reach the widow's home depends on the number of intervals they required for the cumulative group check. The following numbers reflect the suggested limit of 6 checks.

Up to 3 checks (half limit): The heroes might meet Ludolfo on the street after the murder, but they have little reason to pay attention to him. If the heroes discover Pieno's corpse quickly, Sayodir has not yet had a chance to plant the symbol (he places it as soon as he gets an opportunity, but the heroes might notice).

Up to 6 checks (limit): The heroes meet Ludolfo. The widow found the corpse and ran out to summon the guards, giving Sayodir time to plant the evidence. Investigator **¶ Festo ya Corsi** (see page 9) arrives shortly after the heroes find Pieno's corpse.

More than 6 checks (over the limit): If the heroes meet Ludolfo, it is far from the house. The guards have already begun searching the scene of the crime and sealing off the area. Someone's testimony about the heroes' search might lay suspicion squarely on them.

There are Similarities...

Ludolfo shares a trait with one of the heroes. The GM decides what it is (maybe hair or eye color, a prominent piece of clothing, or a rare item) and gives the player more details. Ludolfo does not have much more in common with the hero. In any case: Ludolfo has a short temper and answers insults to his family with a knife between the ribs.

At first, describe the encounter with Ludolfo casually. Each hero makes a check using *Perception (Notice)* (with a bonus of 3 for the hero with the common feature, and a bonus of 1 for any companions). It should seem like little more than an amusing coincidence. Describe Ludolfo with more detail only if the heroes ask. If the heroes decide to follow him (see page 10), the widow finds the body and informs the guards, as above.

The Widow

¶ Iriz Parcenter (51; lined face; broad hips; friendly; believes in Travia; somewhat frightened) has lost her parents, husband, and children in the War of Succession, but she retains her pious joy of living. Tidiness is important to her, and any who honor it and the goddess Travia are treated like cousins.

The widow does not witness the murder because she goes out for a walk, leaving Pieno in the house. She sees Ludolfo coming around the corner of her house, but thinks nothing of it. However, she does remember the feature that Ludolfo shares with the hero...

The heroes arrive at Iriz' home as she returns from her walk, before she discovers Pieno's body. If the heroes are polite, Iriz shows them to Pieno's room on the upper floor and is with them when they find the body (the GM decides whether Sayodir had time to plant the symbol). She runs at once to summon the guards, saying that she will not remain at the scene of the crime for a single moment. The heroes can question her after she returns with Festo ya Corsi, but soon she begins to realize that something about one of the heroes looks familiar. Depending on the circumstances, this might point the finger of suspicion at the heroes.

The Scene of the Crime

Pieno lived in the two rooms on the upper floor of a small townhouse with a red clinker facade. Above Pieno's rooms is the attic, which contains only dusty mementos of Iriz' family. Both rooms were furnished by the widow and are decorated with saintly figurines and lace dollies. The first room—the scene of the murder—is the living room. An oblong bedroom lies beyond. The living room window is open.

A list of items found on Pieno's body appears on page 10. Pieno still has his purse, so robbery doesn't appear to be a motive.

Treat Wounds: Pieno died from several stab wounds to the stomach and chest. With QL 3, the heroes determine approximately how much time has passed since he died.

Perception (Search): With QL 1, they see no signs of a violent struggle. With QL 2 (if the heroes have entered the room carefully; QL 3 if not), they find drying bootprints on the floor that lead in and out. With a QL of 3+, they find the symbol (see below).

Follow the Trail: a check using *Tracking (Humanoid Tracks)* with a bonus of 3 lets the heroes follow the boot prints down the stairs to the front door. After that, the tracks become impossible to follow.

The Window: Pieno opened the window to let in some fresh air. Sayodir used it to gain access, but protected himself with the spell *Traceless* (QL 5). If a hero examines the window, the check using *Perception (Notice)* suffers an additional penalty of 1. If you do not want to rouse the players' suspicions by announcing the penalty, you can make a hidden check. With a successful check, the players believe that somebody entered through the window. An *Odem* spell can reveal magical traces of the dissipating spell.

Note that all of this information is only valid if the murder took place recently.

The Symbol

On a whim, Sayodir scratched the symbol of the Xeledon School (an X divided in two by a vertical line that represents a bodkin) on a small, wooden figurine of Hesinde painted green. The heroes find it with a QL of 3+ on a *Perception* check, as mentioned above.

If the heroes do not investigate the scene of the crime, each may still make a *Perception (Notice)* check with a bonus of 1 to spot the figurine out of the corner of their eye. It is standing on a small tea table, not far from the body.

A *Religions* check reveals that the X is a sign of Xeledon, son of Hesinde (a demigod who uses mockery to make mortals face their imperfections).

Make a *Streetwise* check with a penalty of 3: with QL 2, the heroes recognize the symbol as belonging to an infamous guild of assassins that calls itself the Xeledon School. With QL 3, they recall that the assassins worship Xeledon as the god of masques and the master of deceit.

For more information about the assassin guild, see page 10.

The Witness

▀ *Fran-Hardo Kapprott* (72; white hair; inexpensive but elegant clothing; former opera tailor), a neighbor, eventually tells the investigators that he saw a stranger coming from the house. He also remembers seeing the trait that one of the heroes shares with Ludolfo. If the heroes arrive at the scene of the crime much later, the guards might already be watching for it.

The Killer is Dead! Our Task is Done!

If the heroes think that Pieno's murder was just and their mission is over, use the guards' suspicions to help keep them on track finding the true killer. If Elysia is present, she asks the heroes to continue looking, as she does not believe in coincidences and thinks that there is some connection.



The Investigator

"The opinions of others have never been the measure of my actions."

—*Festo ya Corsi, modern.*

▀ *Festo ya Corsi* (38; bald; pointed chin; plate of amulet metal on the back of his head; decorated war hero) is an investigator with the *Connablia Criminalis Capitalae*, the oldest legal authority in Aventuria. They are known for their heavy leather coats with high, stiff collars, which is why the locals call them "leathernecks." Festo is a *Visitator*, an investigator with carte blanche powers and authority over the guard who can take on any case—and this case catches his interest. By chance, he is nearby when the widow runs from her house to summon help.

Festo grew up in Old Bosparan and suffered a severe head wound while serving as a cavalry officer in the War of Succession. He tries to treat (or at least lessen) the ongoing headaches and visions with intoxicating herbs and alchemic substances, and he usually tries to hide his scar beneath a broad-brimmed hat. He is a restless hunter who uses strange tactics and keeps strange acquaintances, and he constantly fears going mad. This makes him unpredictable.

Festo's first impression of the heroes depends on when they meet him, what he knows at the time, and how they behave. Their search for Pieno (and Festo will soon learn about it through his sources), the damning testimony of the widow and the neighbor, and maybe even the heroes' presence at the scene of the crime, can elevate the group to the top of Festo's

list of suspects. Festo is firm when dealing with them (he appears to have no patience with them at all) and lets them feel the power of his agency and the guard, if necessary.

Festo always pursues his suspects, but not to the point of unreasoning hatred. If the heroes can convince him of their innocence, he drops all accusations. If they provide compelling evidence, they might win him over as a staunch ally.

Following a Doppelganger

The heroes have just met a real killer. Ludolfo's face is known in the neighborhood, and the heroes can find him quickly with a check using *Streetwise (Gather Information)* with a bonus of 1 (alternatively, if they followed him for a time when they first saw him, they can make a competitive check with *Streetwise (Shadowing)* versus his *Perception (Notice)* (SR 6, 11/13/13), instead). Whether the killer defends himself depends on the skills the GM thinks he should have. If interrogated, he tries to hide the following facts behind a hedge of insults and lies (competitive check of *Intimidation* versus *Willpower*, SR 5, using stats of 12/13/11):

• He killed Pieno.

• He last encountered Pieno yesterday evening in the *Silver Bar*, during a brawl. He later learned that Pieno was spreading ugly lies about his family, and he wanted revenge. He heard about these lies from a "trustworthy friend," but he can't quite remember this friend's identity. When pressed, he remembers only a "dark, slender guy" (Sayodir's elven heritage is so dilute that many ignorant onlookers never notice it).

• He has never seen the carved symbol before.

• These traits are only suggestions, and Ludolfo might have others, based on his background. And of course, this character could be cast as a woman named Ludolfa, instead.

Meanwhile...

Arba of Silas learns of Pieno's death by chance, and her instincts warn her to be cautious. She finds it unacceptable that an Initiated from her circle was killed without her knowledge or approval. Before she learns about the discovery of the Xeledon symbol, she sends her bodyguard, **Gurdo Kalamal** (who was trained at the Xeledon School; see page 13) to investigate. Sending Gurdo is a mistake, though she does not know this at the time.

The Molting

The heroes have found Melchior's killer (and maybe even the person who killed Pieno). But some pieces of the puzzle still don't fit (such as the mysterious Xeledon symbol that Ludolfo did not plant). This section presents lines of reasoning that the heroes might pursue.

The Mocker's Mirror Masques

To learn more about the carved symbol and the assassin guild, the heroes may make a cumulative check using *Streetwise (Gather Information)* with a bonus of 3 (4 hours). Alternatively, they can receive information piece by piece through role play and investment of time, using the encounters and events on page 7 as a guideline.

• **QL 1:** The heroes learn about the meaning of the symbol.

• **QL 6:** The guild of assassins is excellent. According to rumor, it hides in the heart of Vinsalt.

• **QL 10:** After surviving their tests, new assassins enter the service of whichever influential person financed their training. One cannot simply join the school, one must be *chosen*. It is said that the best Xeledonists can kill a person without actually having to move—they make somebody else wield the blade, instead. These findings hint that there might be more to the story.

To maintain the guild's aura of mystery, let heroes experience a taste of its strength and influence in the Horasian Empire, but don't have the assassins make an appearance in this scenario (of course, the GM can use them as a basis for other adventures).

Pieno's Belongings

If the heroes search Pieno's belongings—which might have negative consequences, if Festo sees them leaning over the body and rummaging through the room—they find his purse, which holds 13 silverthalers, 11 halers, a unicorn pendant (the symbol of Nandus), and a dagger (he wasn't able to draw it). The room also contains his light but robust traveling clothes, his long-sword, and, in a small box, his Warrior's Letter and 32 ducats worth of jewels.

A successful check using *Perception (Search)* with a bonus of 1 reveals a secret compartment under a floor plank. Concealed within, wrapped in dark cloth, is a green, hooded robe and a salamander mask (an *Alchemy* check identifies the salamander as a symbol for the element of fire).

A successful check using *Religions (Hesinde)* with a bonus of 1 reveals that green is the color of both Hesinde and

Peraine (Pieno wore the robe and mask at meetings of the Initiated; since only the conspirators know what they represent, the heroes can only speculate).

The Diary

Pieno kept a diary, which Elysia or the Widow Iriz might remember seeing. Alternatively, Festo learns about it from Iriz and asks the heroes where it might be.

The diary isn't in Pieno's rooms. He hid it at one of the locations he visited over the past few days. Depending on how difficult you want the investigation to be for the heroes, the diary could be in the paddock's stables or even behind a loose board in the privy of the *Heroes' Cellar*.

Pieno's diary contains clues to his membership in a secret society. The heroes find entries about his shattered dream of becoming an officer, his worship of Nandus, and a change that took place a few years ago, as follows.

Nandus is the riddle, not the answer. I have become a witness and I am confident. He leads me through the labyrinth to my destiny: I am Salamander.

Three months ago, Pieno wrote "*The Salamander crawls into the devious serpent's nest*," but in the entries made during the following weeks, it becomes obvious that Pieno grew to like Melchior. The last entry was made on the night of Melchior's death:

The mind has defeated the foolish heart. The mistress' will has come to pass and Melchior cannot harm us anymore. But why can't I find peace? The Salamander laughs, but the human sheds tears. I will stay away from the Circle and face my labyrinth.

The Opposition

If Gurdo notices the heroes, he observes them carefully before deciding to act (the closer they get to Arba, the sooner they gain him as an enemy in the shadows). Gurdo adheres strictly to his training and does not act openly against them. He uses the following methods.

A scaffolding comes crashing down while the heroes are passing an old building whose outer facade is undergoing renovation (Dodge or suffer 3D6+6 DP, ignoring PRO).

If the heroes are from Vinsalt, Gurdo riles up their old enemies, rivals, or disappointed lovers. If not, he tries to incite some bystanders. The heroes might recognize some similarities to Pieno's death.

The guards might be interested to learn that the heroes are slandering them around town (all lies), or maybe a tip leads to stolen goods being discovered in the heroes' quarters (planted there by Gurdo).

As a last resort, Gurdo laces the heroes' meals with tulmadron (see *Core Rules*, page 342). Alternatively, he might sneak into the heroes' quarters and put it in a magical potion or something similar.

Noticing the Shadow

Heroes investigating these incidents can make a competitive check using *Perception (Searching)* versus *Streetwise (Shadowing)*, with a bonus of 1 for the advantage *Unremarkable Appearance*. If it succeeds, reveal only the QL to the player. The next check receives a bonus equal to half of this QL. If this next check succeeds, too, the hero begins to think that someone looks familiar, but is not sure why. If the third check succeeds, the hero realizes that the same man was present at all of these mishaps. If the heroes have seen Gurdo before (for example, at Arba's side, as a scribe), they can try a SGC check with a penalty of 1 to try to remember who he is.

Confronting the Shadow

To confront Gurdo, the heroes must first draw him out. Provocation has little effect unless the heroes threaten Arba, but attacking a high-ranking Blessed One is a terrible crime that is hard to justify, even with good reason. As the GM, only you know the traps your players might set for the assassin, and you know what will work best.

Gurdo would rather die than break his oaths by betraying Arba or his guild. However, on the inner side of his upper right arm, the heroes can find a tattoo of an X divided in two by a vertical line...

Optional Scene: The Serpent is Moving

Arba takes action if she must, and her preferred tools are more subtle than Gurdo's. She especially likes to poison by slander. She uses every dirty secret she can uncover about the heroes in the time available to denounce them and make them appear untrustworthy. Arba embellishes even minor faults to create harmful rumors, but she withholds the most damaging bits of information as insurance. If she seems about to be exposed, she tries to blackmail the heroes into maintaining their silence.

As an opponent, Arba is skilled in acting from the shadows and wielding knowledge like a dangerous weapon. Heroes who are no strangers to intrigue (*Fast-Talk 6* or greater) may make a cumulative group check (*Empathy (Sense Deception)*, 4 hours) to track down the source of these rumors.

Arba Falters

The heroes should have gathered the following clues so far: Pieno killed Melchior at the behest of a secret society to which he himself belonged, and Pieno's death is connected somehow to the assassins of the Xeledon School. Arba's scribe is one of these assassins and is behind several attempts on the heroes' lives. Arba supports a more radical philosophy than Melchior and has attacked him publicly for it more than once. Plus, she has a reputation for power-hungry ruthlessness. All of this evidence does not prove her involvement in the affair, but it does secure Festo as a powerful ally for the heroes, and the sheer weight of evidence causes Arba to appear hesitant and uncertain. Her enemies have been waiting for just such a moment, and Arba is forced to resign her position and answer to the Argelianic Court, the judicial branch of the Church.

The Heroes' Reward

The heroes earn 15 AP, plus an additional 5 AP to spend only on two of the following skills: *Empathy*, *Fast-Talk*, *Perception*, *Religions*, or *Streetwise*. Distribute any AP **garnered from fighting the fire** (see page 3) equally (rounding up, if necessary). If the heroes took advantage of Elysia's offer for tutoring, they each receive 5 AP which may only be spent on two of the following skills: *Etiquette*, *History*, *Plant Lore*, *Religions*, *Treat Disease*, *Treat Poison*, or *Treat Wounds*. The heroes also receive any material reward.

Long-Term Consequences for the Campaign

The Church of Hesinde buries the scandal surrounding Arba of Silas and orders the heroes to remain silent (the Servants of the Serpent are pragmatic enough to buy their cooperation with gold and knowledge). Arba does not appear in future adventures and her fate is not set in stone. The Church of Hesinde honors the principles of change, probation, and forgiveness, so it is likely that Arba will be demoted to Novice and exiled to a remote temple. Maybe she will become the heroes' new arch-nemesis, or perhaps they will encounter her later and find her reformed or embittered.

Less than a month later, **Lucara of Vinsalt** (44, 5'8", black curls, dark brown eyes, sensual) **succeeds Arba as leader of the Temple**. Born Lucara da Malagreia, this young church politician seemed destined for a bright future, but in the autumn of 1032 FB, her pathological ambition embroiled her in a conspiracy that led to her downfall. She spent the last six years living in humble lodgings on the Cyclops' Islands. Her experiences in exile as a failed conspirator have shown her the way back to her faith. Lucara performs her new duties with the

same enthusiasm that she once devoted to her cabal, but many in the Church still mistrust her and her new administration, and even thought she hasn't lost her skills in politics and intrigue, this time she dedicates them to Hesinde.

Comto Thûan prevails against his rivals and becomes the new Elder of the **Initiated of Kuslik**, but he belongs to too many other secret societies to put much energy into manipulating them. His attempts to use the Initiated for personal goals lead to increasing resistance, which paralyzes the dangerous cabal for quite some time.

Appendix – The Initiated of Kuslik

The Initiated is a power-hungry secret society of scholars, mages, and Blessed Ones of Hesinde. Its approximately 3 dozen members are organized into six *circles* based in Kuslik, Vinsalt, Teremon, and Punin. Only the masters know each others' identities and those of members of their own circles. Since the Fall of Bosparan, the Initiated's influence on the history of the Horasian Empire has ranged from monumental to almost irrelevant.

Arba of Silas

"This knowledge will be revealed when it is time. For you, it is not yet time."

Title: High Tutor (formal address: *Your Reverence*), Leader of the Golden Cliffs Observatory (formal address: *Erudite Lady*)

Secret Rank: Elder

Arba of Silas (64; small; stout; ruffled brown hair; thick glasses; traditional wrapping gown) was formerly the Astrologer to the Imperial Court, but now she leads the Temple of Hesinde in Vinsalt and lives by the motto: *"The less people know about the true nature of the world, the better they will sleep."* This conservative Blessed One is viewed by her Church as a strict warden of dangerous knowledge, but her definition of "dangerous" is rather broad. The secret she suppresses above all others concerns the night sky as revealed by the large telescope on the Golden Cliffs.

Arba is a ruthless and experienced schemer who acts with cunning and stealth. She managed to emerge relatively unscathed from her failed power-play during a recent struggle between Church and Empire. As the High Blessed One, she tries to avoid raising any new suspicions.

Comto Thûan della Gribaldi

"The first thing a sculptor learns is patience. This is a good lesson for politicians."

Title: Provincial Governor of Kuslik

Secret Rank: Master

Comto Thûan (51; stocky; black curly hair; pockmarked skin; strong hands) does not appear in this adventure, and the heroes most likely will never learn that he was involved, but he is an important driving force behind events.

This quiet, considerate diplomat is known as a generous patron of the arts and also a skilled sculptor in his own right. He was born to lesser city nobility and has come a long way, due not only to his excellent informants, but also because he belongs to several secret societies. He has wanted to remove Arba of Silas and take her place for quite some time now. As Elder, he desires tighter control of the Initiated so he can make use of their resources. He is interested only in becoming more powerful.

Pieno Florigan

"Nandus, divine herald of insight, guide me out of the labyrinth..."

Secret Rank: Initiated

Pieno (27; black hair; cleft lip; strong) is dead by the time the heroes find him. He grew up in Vinsalt and attended the city's warrior school, where he worshiped Hesinde's son, Nandus, who is considered a demigod of strategists in the Horasian Empire. Pieno liked to drink too much and never earned his commission as an officer. He turned to mysticism and soon joined the *Initiated of Kuslik*. He was a member of the Vinsalt circle when he died, although he never learned Arba's identity.

Gurdo Kalamal

"We show people the shortest path to their doom. They choose to walk it themselves."

Secret Rank: Xeledon's Disciple

Gurdo (31; 6'; brown hair; unremarkable) is the illegitimate son of a noblewoman from the Imperial Court. She died giving birth to him, and her friend, Arba of Silas, supported him and sponsored his training at the infamous Xeledon School of Assassination. Later, Gurdo entered Arba's services as a scribe, bodyguard, and field agent.

Gurdo is not a member of the *Initiated of Kuslik*; he is loyal only to Arba. In accordance with the teachings

of his guild, Gurdo uses the flaws of his targets against them so as to divert all suspicion from himself and Arba.

Tip: You can have Gurdo be present as a scribe when the heroes first meet with Arba, but don't mention anything about him unless the heroes want to interact with him. He is *unremarkable* for a reason....

Gurdo Kalamal

COU 14 SGC 12 INT 13 CHA 11

DEX 13 AGI 15 CON 13 STR 12

LP 31 AE - KP - INI 16+1D6

DO 10 SPI 2 TOU 1 MOV 9

Unarmed: AT 15 PA 9 DP 1D6+1

RE short

Basilisk-tongue: AT 17 PA 7 DP 1D6+3

RE short

Throwing Stars: RC 16 RT 1 DP 1D6+1 RA 2/10/15

PRO/ENC 0/0

Special Abilities: Alertness, Area Knowledge (Vinsalt), Combat Reflexes I, Enemy Sense, Feint I, Improved Dodge II, Precise Thrust II, Quickload (Thrown Weapons), Riposte, Vigilance

Advantages: Nimble, Socially Adaptable, Unremarkable Appearance

Disadvantages: Negative Trait (Arrogance, Obligations III (to Arba of Silas and the Xeledon School))

Skills: Alchemy 5, Body Control 8, Climbing 9, Disguise 8, Empathy 10, Etiquette 7, Fast-Talk 8, Feat of Strength 5, Perception 7, Religion 6, Self-Control 11, Streetwise 9, Stealth 10, Treat Poison 10, Willpower 8

Combat Behavior: When Gurdo cannot avoid a fight, he tries to end it quickly. He prefers to use *Precise Thrusts* combined with *Feints*. His dagger is coated in arax, and he uses smoke bags to confuse enemies or otherwise cover his escape.

Escape: Gurdo won't sacrifice himself in a meaningless fight. Instead, he seizes the best opportunity to run away and prepare a counter attack.

Equipment: 48 silverthalers, arax (weapon poison), flint and tinder, gulmond (2 uses), Healing potion (QL +4, 1D6+4 LP), wirsel herb (3 uses), smoke bag (2 Levels of Visibility impairment within a radius of 10 yards)

LP Loss **Pain**

23 LP (1/4) +1 Pain

16 LP (1/2) +1 Pain

8 LP (3/4) +1 Pain

5 LP and less +1 Pain





The Molted Serpent

by Michael Masberg

A Blessed One has been murdered! Two years ago, a charismatic priest from the north caused a great stir in the Horasian Empire. He became famous for demanding that knowledge be made available to everybody and gathering a growing community of followers devoted to mutual enlightenment. Now the Blessed One is dead—murdered by one of his own disciples.

What caused his young student to turn against him? The killer's trail leads to Vinsalt, "City of a Hundred Towers." But the Imperial capital is much more than a colorful metropolis. It is also a den of conspirators and criminals, where nothing is as it appears. A dangerous plot unfurls against a backdrop of ancient monuments, mechanical wonders, and glorious temples, threatening everyone from the dirtiest alleys of Old Bosparan to the gleaming heights of political and clerical power.

Success and failure are two faces of the same coin in the city of Vinsalt, and a blasphemous murder is only the first in a string of events with far-reaching consequences for the Horasian Empire.



Genre: Detective Story, Urban Adventure

Prerequisites: Helpful, pious heroes who have good reputations and know their way around a city.

Location: City of Vinsalt, Horasian Empire

Date: Hesinde 1038 FB

Complexity (Players/GM): Medium/High

Suggested Hero Experience Level: Experienced to Competent

Useful Skills

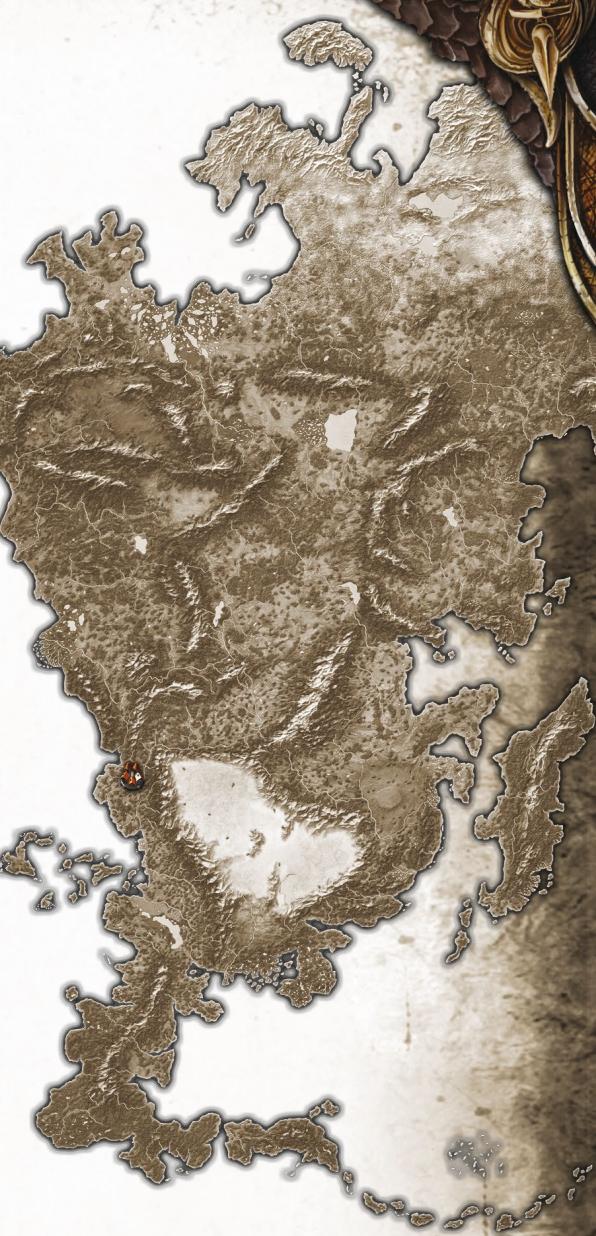
Social Skills



Combat



Living History



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