

OVER THE NEXT HILL THE HAMLET OF VARSELDORF



OVER THE NEXT HILL IS A MULTI-author series focused on small settlements that can be dropped into a campaign with minimal preparation. Each article in the series presents several detailed NPCs, points of interest, and loose plot hooks that can be developed during play. This installment of the series details Varseldorf, a hamlet whose homey citizens are merely feigning humanity.

OVERVIEW

The Weary Wagoneer inn provides a welcome respite to those weary of the long, desolate road. Its personable proprietors recommend travelers needing goods, services, and entertainment to eager tradesfolk from the local hamlet of Varseldorf. Those who bring on the villagers as hirelings*, however, will come to regret it. Varseldorf is a refuge to an ever-growing host of doppelgangers that are killing and replacing the town's human citizens. Despite the shape-changers' murderous actions, the PCs may have sympathy for their plight, as the doppelgangers have built a safe haven here where they can be free from oppression and discrimination.

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* David Gibson, Hired Hands: Expanded Rules for Hirelings,
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GEOGRAPHY & REGIONAL POLITICS

Varseldorf is an unassuming hamlet not unlike others that have recently sprung up along a major trade road at the edge of the wilderness. A handful of merchant stalls and a single inn are scattered along the main road, with the villagers' homes located far enough away to discourage overly-inquisitive strangers and drunken inn-patrons from disturbing their privacy.

The town lies at the edge of territory controlled by the iron-fisted Baron Burchard, who has taken on a personal crusade against bastardy. Nearly every misfortune that falls upon the barony is blamed on bastardy, either due to the gods' displeasure or the evil actions of bastards themselves. The baron has placed a death mark

on those born out of wedlock. His hatred has even driven him to persecute orphans and children of single mothers where there is insufficient evidence to prove a child's legitimacy. While the vast majority of his victims are innocent women and children, hundreds of doppelgangers hiding within human communities have been unwittingly caught up in his purge.

Hesitant to give up the lives they have built, but nonetheless fearing for their lives, a number of doppelgangers have united to create a secret colony of sorts in Varseldorf, at the edge of the baron's domain, taking the lives and identities of the local men and women and maintaining the marriages with their victim's spouses, so that their offspring would have the cover and protection of legitimacy.

SIGNIFICANT AREAS

1. Roadside Market

Located along the main road, the market provides contact with a regular stream of travelers. Here travelers and caravans can resupply and make repairs to vehicles and equipment. At one of the stands, Ambrosius Grob, a **doppelganger**, plays the role of elderly soothsayer, entertaining travelers with his prognostications. His ability to read thoughts and his unusually keen intuition (Insight +6) make him quite convincing, while allowing him to gather important intelligence and identifying marks.

2. The Weary Wagoner

A large inn providing the only warm meal and comfortable lodging within a couple days' travel. The proprietors, Ernst and Margareth Wirth, are both **doppelgangers**. One replaced the original husband, the other the wife, and the two doppelgangers now live together as a couple. The other doppelgangers look upon their relationship with distaste, but tolerate them because of the important role the Wirth's play in the community.

As the only inn in the area, the Weary Wagoner attracts many travelers, who can stop for a few drinks or stay for a good night's rest and a warm bath—heated and drawn at great expense. The Wirths are adept at extracting personal information from their patrons and identifying good targets for the other members of their community.

The inn is designed so that every room is connected to hidden passages that lead to a secret cellar below the inn. This allows the doppelgangers to surreptitiously invade a room and safely kidnap and replace the sleeping guest. More often, however, the Wirths pair travelers wanting hirelings with one of the hamlet's doppelganger residents, who may travel with a group for days or months before stealing away with their valuables or even their identities.

3. Villager Homes

A small number of modest cruck houses are set well away from the road, past a small woods that acts as a buffer to discourage travelers from riding or walking to their homes. There seem to be no working farms in the area. Whether all or only a few of the men are doppelgangers is up to the GM (see Leveling Advice, below).

4. Brotwolf Manor

Gir Brotwolf, Varseldorf's corpulent townmaster, lives in a crumbling manor home. He is a **doppelganger** and keeps the real Lord Brotwolf locked away in a secret cell below the manor. He has lived in Varseldorf since long before Baron Burchard's purge, attracted to Lord Brotwolf's idle and reclusive lifestyle, which provided an ideal cover and allowed the doppelganger to enjoy years of comfort living the lord's life. The lord's wife, Adela, suspects nothing. She never was close to her husband, and the doppelganger's indolent behavior mirrors her real husband's.

When Baron Burchard began his campaign against bastardy, Lord Brotwolf's doppelganger realized that by having assumed the identity of a married man and by having stayed in the marriage, his offspring were protected from the fate of most other doppelgangers. Sensing opportunity, he seized on the crisis to attract other of his kind to his village, selecting village men for the new doppelgangers to replace. All of Varseldorf's doppelgangers must share a portion of what they steal from their marks with him. Any apparent generosity on Brotwolf's part is motivated solely by greed.

Doppelganger Brotwolf will try to avoid meeting with adventurers, but will make a display of gracious hospitality if he cannot. The false lord is well practiced in deflecting questions, assuaging suspicion, and talking much while divulging little (Deception +8). He takes great care to protect both Varseldorf's secret and his hedonistic lifestyle. Those who get close to uncovering the truth have a tendency to disappear.

5. Abandoned Farmsteads

The farmsteads have been long abandoned as the doppelgangers have no interest in performing manual labor. If asked about the abandoned farmsteads, the villagers will claim that a terrible blight drove the farmers away from the hamlet forcing those who remained to support themselves with trade, hunting, and providing protection to travelers. If the party searches the old farmhouses, they will find in one of them the diary of Dorothea Schoner, a literate farm wife who has recorded her suspicions that Lord Brotwolf was possessed by demon of hedonism, and her growing suspicions that other men in the village were similarly possessed. The last entry states that she planned on bringing her suspicions to the attention of Baron Burchard.

PLOT HOOKS

Identity Theft

One of the party is kidnapped in their sleep. That character awakens bound and shackled in a root cellar. The GM should take that player aside and inform them of this, and allow them to play their doppelganger, attempting to either steal items of great value from one or more of the other players, or, if they are on the way to complete an adventure with the promise of treasure, the doppelganger should bide its time until it finds an opportunity to steal away with as much of the treasure as it can.

Since the doppelganger will not have had much time to read the character's thoughts, it doesn't know much about the character's or the group's history beyond the shallowest of information (party member names, their current quest, etc.). The doppelganger uses the weapons and armor of the character whose form it has taken, but uses **doppelganger** statistics instead of its disguise's.

The doppelganger has kept the kidnapped character alive, in case its new identity proves fruitful and it needs to read more of the character's thoughts. The doppelganger's human

husband or wife is aware of their spouse's true nature and is in on the scheme, and provides the kidnapped character with food and water, but does not help them escape.

The Concerned Wife

One of the village women approaches the party leaving a note asking to meet them in private. Brigitta Dinckel does not know the truth about the village in which she's lived her whole life, but she is certain that her husband, Gilg Dinckel, has been possessed or replaced with a lookalike.

Brigitta comes across as exceedingly paranoid, stating that her husband looks and sounds exactly the same, but has not been acting like himself over the past year or so. He used to like staying at home with her and their children, and tending the garden and his woodworking shed. About a year ago, however, he started working with some of the other villagers trading goods at remote villages. He is gone for long periods of time and when he is home, he is cold and distant. Brigitta offers the party 75 gp to come and take her husband into custody this evening when he's sleeping. There is a root cellar in their home where they can interrogate him.

The other villagers have noticed Brigitta's growing paranoia and how it seems to bother her husband, who would rather sell baubles in remote villages than be around her. They think that Brigitta is losing her mind and, to Brigitta's despair, most are sympathetic with her husband.

Gilg Dinckel is a **doppelganger**. He spends most of his time on the road infiltrating caravans and groups of travelers in order to steal anything of value. The real Gilg Dinckel is buried beneath the garden behind his home. The flowers grow unusually bright in the soil above his corpse—investigating reveals his half-decomposed body.

If the party speaks about her with the other villagers without first uncovering the truth about Gilg, Brigitta will "disappear" and Gilg will angrily approach the party, accusing them of having something to do with her disappearance. If the party does not immediately leave the hamlet,

a group of villagers forms a mob and attacks the party; half are human commoners, the other half are doppelgangers.

Saving the Bastard Son

Erminlinda Portner, a village farmer, approaches the party with a young boy of 10 years named Gernot. She quietly informs the party that the boy is the result of an adulterous relationship (with the doppelganger posing as her husband) and that she does not know where to find the true father. If her husband—or worse, the baron—finds out, she fears that he'll kill them both. She begs the party to smuggle her son out of the barony to a safe place. He is handy with carpentry and taking care of livestock, and she offers 75 gp for their aid.

Erminlinda knows that her husband, Conrad, is a **doppelganger** and her son, a changeling with some of his father's power, is close to the age when he will discover his true nature and be forced to join the other doppelgangers in the village in swindling and murdering travelers. She hopes that if he is taken away from the village, he will have a chance to avoid this evil fate.

If the party discovers and confronts Erminlinda with the truth, she still begs them to take Gernot with them and teach him to do good. She will also offer another 25 gp, truthfully saying that the 100 gp is all she has. Her own escape has not even crossed Erminlinda's mind, and she is unsure of

what she will do if Gernot escapes. She can be convinced of any course of action by a successful DC 15 Charisma (Persuasion) check.

If they take him with them, Gernot serves the party as a loyal, seemingly-human boy for about six months before he discovers its true nature and begins to yearn for contact with others of his kind.

LEVELING ADVICE

Any of the adventure hooks listed above are appropriate for any character level, but the GM should adjust the number of **doppelgangers** in a single encounter based upon the party's size and the characters' levels. It is recommended that characters be at least 3rd level before encountering this village.

DOPPELGANGER ENCOUNTERS

Average Party Level	Average Encounter Size
3–4	1 or 2
5–6	3
7	4
8	5
9–10	6
11	8
12–14	10
15	12
16	13
17–20	14

