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VILLAGE BACKDROP: BLEAKFLAT



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VILLAGE BACKDROP: BLEAKFLAT

Lost to the north of nowhere, far beyond the reach of trade routes and prying eyes, a rocky bluff rises from barren soil. Here, deep amidst the frozen tundra, a ruined castle has been refitted into a tiny village. Ten hovels, whose rural architecture suggests structures five centuries old, surround a refurbished tower, and in this tower lives the mayor of Bleakflat. Wise and capable, he tends to his villagers as a shepherd to his sheep.

The very presence of such a remote village is enough to arouse suspicion. There are no ore mines here, no nearby dungeons, no ley lines or trade routes. The people seem simple enough, but they are somehow able to fend off the wolf packs roaming the land, and are unperturbed by the massive bats which attack the rare unannounced visitor. How? The people of Bleakflat are under the protection of a vampire, the mayor of the village and the only citizen with rosy cheeks and warm smile. The villagers trade their blood for his protection and care, and in turn he tends his flock well.

Designed for use with the 5th edition of the world's most popular roleplaying game.

CREDITS

Design: Jeff Gomez

Development: Creighton Broadhurst

Art: William McAusland and Maciej Zagorski (The Forge Studios).

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Cartography: Maciej Zagorski (The Forge Studios)

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ragingswan.com
gatekeeper@ragingswan.com

BLEAKFLAT AT A GLANCE

Ruler Aldrich Hellbrooke

Government Overlord

Population 62 (61 humans, 1 vampire)

Alignments LE, LN

Languages Common

Lost to the north of nowhere, far beyond the reach of trade routes and prying eyes, a rocky bluff rises from barren soil. Here, deep amid the frozen tundra, a ruined castle has been refitted into a tiny village. Ten hovels, whose rural architecture suggests structures five centuries old, surround a refurbished tower, and in this tower lives the mayor of Bleakflat. Wise and capable, he tends to his villagers as a shepherd to his sheep.

The very presence of such a remote village is enough to arouse suspicion. There are no ore mines here, no nearby dungeons, no ley lines or trade routes. The people seem simple enough, if a little drained. They live off watery mutton soups, graze thin flocks of sheep on rocky fields, burn wood from the scattered groves and eat silent meals under poorly constructed rooves. But they are somehow able to fend off the wolf packs roaming the land, and are unperturbed by the massive bats which attack the rare unannounced visitor. How? The people of Bleakflat are under the protection of a vampire, the mayor of the village and the only citizen with rosy cheeks and warm smile. The villagers trade their blood for his protection and care, and in turn he tends his flock well.

Bleakflat is Aldrich Hellbrooke's human farm. He asserts total dominion over the people and leads with absolute authority. But he also treats his subjects well. He walks among them, jokes with them, cares for them and heals them. He invites his human cattle to dinner, tells stories to the children and teaches the adults how to read. By all accounts, he is a warm and just mayor, far more capable than the leaders of most normal villages.

However, this harmonious relationship is often strained. Aldrich hosts undead guests, who harass the villagers and admonish the mayor for his strange pastime. Aldrich's own daughter, the half-human Gaela, believes humans should be treated like the animals they are.

Insular and indoctrinated, the people of Bleakflat do not consider their precarious situation particularly unusual. They are wary of outsiders, whom they rightfully view as a challenge to their way of life. Very occasionally an adventurer happens upon the village and vows to "free" the people from their vampiric overlord. The villagers play along until the adventurer sleeps—then they end the threat with a knife to the throat.

VILLAGERS

Appearance The villagers are thin and pale, though fundamentally healthy.

Dress The villagers wear heavy wool and leather coats with thick trousers. Most outfits have high collars or scarves to obscure punctured necks from the exceedingly rare visitors.

Nomenclature *male* Aegar, Baern, Klyide, Maestin; *female* Gaela, Junip, Raella; *family* Burke, Girain, Goodabby, Laupren.

VILLAGE LORE

A PC may know something about Bleakflat, its history and surrounds. A PC making a DC 10 Intelligence check knows one or more pieces of information from the list below. A successful check gains all the information revealed by a lesser check.

DC 15: Aldrich Hellbrooke, the good-natured mayor of Bleakflat, has absolute control over the populace.

DC 20: The Girain household contains strange occult artefacts from across the centuries.

DC 25: Aldrich is a vampire who feeds upon the villagers, and tends to them as a shepherd to his flock.

WHISPERS & RUMOURS

While in Bleakflat, a PC may hear one or more rumours. A PC making a DC 10 Charisma check learns one rumour from the table below. A PC exceeding this check learns an additional rumour for each 5 points by which he exceeded DC 10.

D6	RUMOUR
1	Mardread Burke is touched by the gods, and secretly wishes to destroy Aldrich.
2	Gaela looks for any excuse to murder a villager.
3*	The stone mask in the Girains' basement is haunted by a violent poltergeist.
4*	Aldrich dominates the villagers using his dark powers.
5	Aldrich is the weakest of his family.
6	Aegar Goodabby has more sway over Aldrich than the mayor realizes.

*False rumour

NOTABLE FOLK

Most of the population are nothing more than hardworking peasants. A few, however, are of interest to adventurers:

Aegar Goodabby (location 4; LE male human **commoner**) Aegar is an exemplary villager, eager to listen to his master's musings but wise enough to keep his advice to a minimum.

Aldrich Hellbrooke (location 1; LE male human **vampire**) Aldrich Hellbrooke is the mayor of Bleakflat, though he prefers the term shepherd. A vampire, Aldrich sees his flock as his responsibility. He warmly cares for them, ensures they are happy and well-fed, even jokes with them, but does not mistake them for his equals.

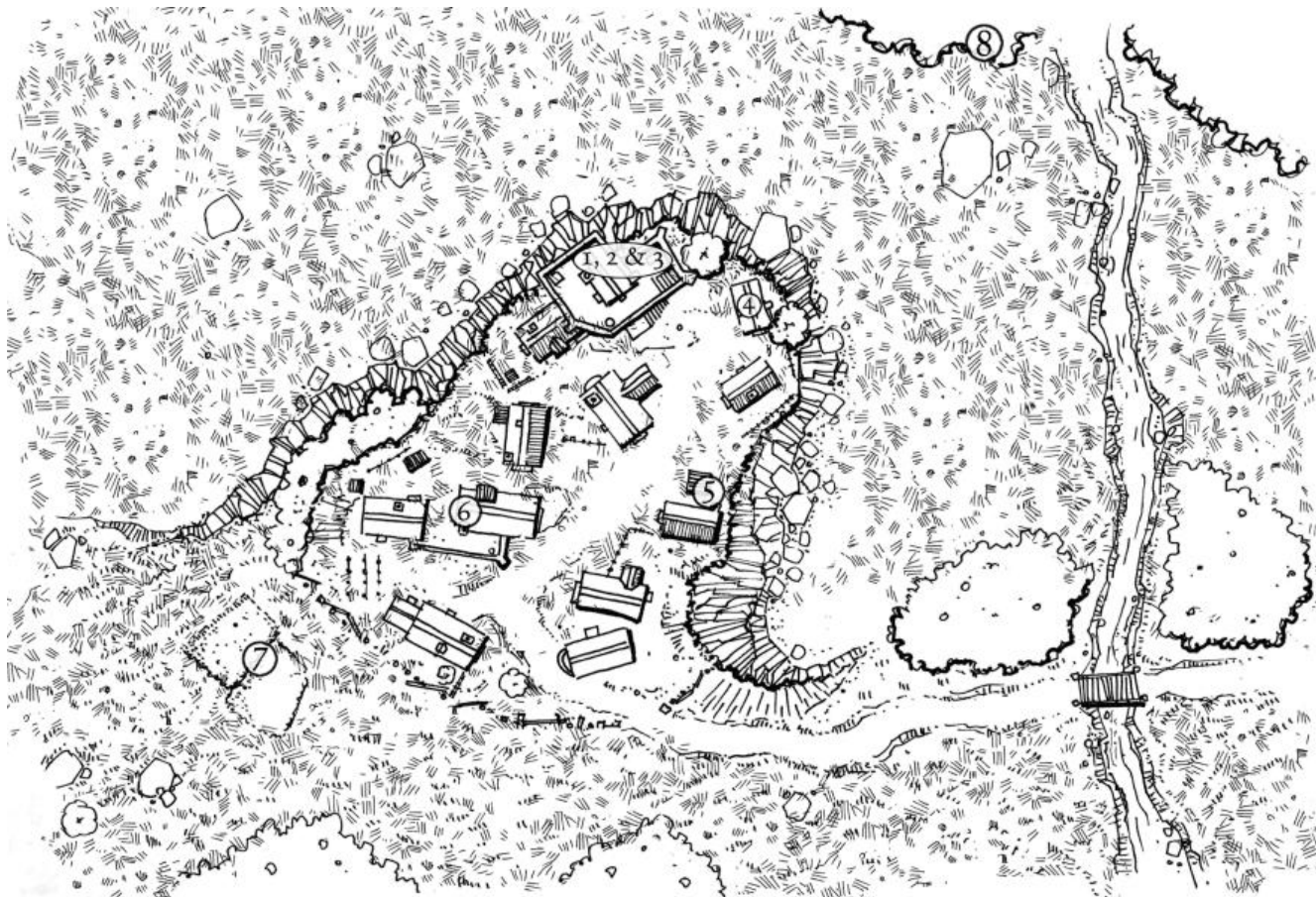
Gaela Hellbrooke (location 1; CE female half-human **assassin**) In a moment of weakness and loneliness, Aldrich took a human to bed. Gaela is the result, a half-human, half-vampire child of 14 with the temperament of a beast. Gaela shares none of her father's patience with humans, but must defer to his judgement. After Gaela has passed through puberty, Aldrich will turn her.

Mardread Burke (location 6; LG female human paladin 2) At 16 years old, Mardread is filled with ideals and righteous fury. The gods have granted her divine power, and she secretly wishes to overthrow her undead dictator. Aldrich hopes this is just a phase. If not, Mardread will find herself on the dinner table shortly.

NOTABLE LOCATIONS

Most of the village comprises peasant homes. A few locations, however, are of interest to adventurers:

1. **Kraegor's Keep:** This ancient ruin is the home of Aldrich and Gaela Hellbrooke. It has been refitted, but still looks ancient.
2. **The Blood Bath:** Fed by hot mineral springs, the blood bath lies beneath the keep; here Aldrich relaxes with his guests.
3. **The Dining Hall:** The keep's underground dining hall, decorated sparsely in crimson banners, seats up to 20 visitors.
4. **The Goodabby Home:** This hovel is the ancestral home of the Goodabby family, long seen as Aldrich's favourite humans.
5. **The Girain Home:** Unlike the rest of the village, the Girain family worships Aldrich as an occult vampire lord. Their basement contains dozens of unusual artefacts.
6. **Haegar's Stables:** Haegar keeps several dozen horses in the stables as feed for the giant bats roaming the countryside.
7. **Abandoned Farmland:** Once Bleakflat's lifeblood, the farmland has fallen into disarray since Aldrich became mayor.
8. **Bleakwood:** This silent, muted wood is home to the elk and boar which comprise the wolf pack's primary prey. Aldrich and his guests sometimes roam the wood, at night.



NOTABLE LOCATIONS

1: KRAEGOR'S KEEP

Little remains of Kraegor's keep. This once mighty fortress is fallen into ruin, the fallen stones used as building blocks for the surrounding hovels. The last remaining dungeons and passages are the home of the vampire Aldrich Hellbrooke (LE male **vampire**) and his daughter Gaela (CE female half-human **assassin**). Across four centuries, Aldrich has renovated the inner rooms and corridors, drawn curtains across the main windows and converted cells into a small library and painting room. Aldrich tries to avoid extravagance, and his living space is certainly not as grandiose as the vampire castles of his kinsmen. He sleeps in his room during the day, invites villagers over for supper at night and always tends to his flock.

Despite its dilapidated state, the keep is relatively welcoming. Villagers are invited to speak with Aldrich any time they choose, either for pleasant conversation or to bring his attention to any dangers. On the many cloudy days, Aldrich walks the streets, keeping up on events and tending to the sick or injured. It is because of Aldrich's diligent care that Bleakflat remains safe and secure.

In recent months, however, Gaela has disrupted the order which has endured across four centuries. Gaela, filled with ideas from Aldrich's more powerful guests, believes the villagers should be more thoroughly subjugated. Violent, unpredictable and eager to humiliate the villagers, Gaela none-the-less understands she must stay in her father's good graces (for now). Aldrich promises to turn her once she finishes puberty, and then she is free to live as she likes.

2: THE BLOOD BATH

Beneath the ruins of Kraegor's Keep, through twisted natural tunnels oozing sulfuric crimson sludge, boil the blood baths. Rank and acrid, these fuming pools of red liquid are used as relaxation spas by Aldrich and his guests. While polite conversation is made at the dining halls, the blood baths see the true wheeling and dealing of vampire politics. Most common are requests for aid against pesky adventurers, but the vampires also share arcane knowledge and prepare betrayals.

Though they are sometimes invited, the humans of Bleakflat cannot stomach the scent. This is a place for those with immortal stomachs, and human visitors find themselves sickened or worse.

3: THE DINING HALL

The Hellbrooke clan is a wide and powerful vampire cabal connected by a single common progenitor: the (permanently) deceased Barbaneth Hellbrooke. Though the sect is to be feared, Aldrich is perhaps the weakest and least respected of this

prestigious bloodline. He is constantly ridiculed for his human "farming," and takes no steps to build his strength. None-the-less, he is a Hellbrooke vampire, and far more powerful than mere mortals. Relatives often come calling for one reason or another, and they are hosted in the dining hall.

Within the dungeons of Kraegor's Keep, out of reach of stray sunbeams, a large armoury has been refitted as a dining hall. Dusty and grand, flanked by crimson tapestries and copper chandeliers, the dining hall is set with a magnificent oak table with seats enough for 20. When the room is full, it contains some of the most powerful undead in the realm.

When Aldrich expects guests, he lights a candle for each guest in the highest window of his tower. For each candle, a single human from below is "invited to dinner." The villagers are both waiter and meal, offering their necks until they can no longer stand. The feedings are not as gentle as Aldrich's, but Aldrich ensures no feeding gets out of hand. Guests must obey the rules of the castle, which means leaving meals with enough blood to stagger home.

4: THE GOODABBY HOME

If Aldrich had favourites (and he insists he does not), it would be the Goodabby family. Soft spoken, pliable and eager to please, the Goodabby family has served Aldrich for centuries. Luckily for Bleakflat, the Goodabbies also passed down marked intelligence and wisdom through the generations. They do well for the village at Aldrich's ear.

Aldrich speaks to Aegar Goodabby (LE male human **commoner**) as a master speaks to his dog. The vampire works out problems aloud, and tousles Aegar's hair when the pet needs attention. Aegar answers rhetorical questions, nods understandingly and occasionally offers a humble piece of advice. When this advice is helpful (more frequently than Aldrich realizes), the vampire laughs in delight at the simple marvels of "human intuition."

5: THE GIRAIN HOME

The Girain family is an odd bunch, devoted to Aldrich but strangely obsessed with his darker nature. While the other villagers treat Aldrich as a mayor and protector, the Girains' adulation borders on worship. They collect strange items from Aldrich and his guests: discarded shoes, lost buttons and even fallen hair. They also comb the surrounding area looking for relics of the people who lived here centuries ago. The Girain basement is an occult repository, complete with ancient masks and carved totems.

While this bizarre idolatry bothers the other villagers, Aldrich finds it nothing more than amusing. He puts on small shows for the Girains and speaks to them in archaic tongues.

6: HAEGAR'S STABLES

Haegar Burke (LN male human **guard**) looks every bit the stablemaster. Nearly seven-foot tall, with bulging muscles and wide shoulders, he easily overpowers his horses. Not that overpowering them is too difficult. The horses are weak and sickly, with bleary eyes and leaking nostrils. They are unable to stand still, and constantly tug at their restraints.

On closer inspect, the entire apparatus of the stable is unusual. The villagers have little need of horses with no distances to travel nor hard labour to be done. Why are there so many, nearly a horse for every man, woman and child in Bleakflat? Why are the horses confined to small grazing areas? And why do the horses whinny in fear at night?

Answers are available to any willing to brave the cold after the setting sun. The horses act as feed for the massive **giant bats** roaming the lands. One by one, bats the size of dogs land on the shackled horses, drink their fill and then return to scouting for Aldrich.

7: ABANDONED FARMLAND

Before Aldrich's arrival, the people of Bleakflat did their best to scrape a meagre living out of the barren soil. Only hardy root vegetables grew here (potatoes, radishes and carrots), which, when stewed with stringy mutton, provided the base of all Bleakflat meals. Two farmsteads provided enough

food for the village, though convincing the rocky ground to yield anything was a daily struggle.

All that remains of the farms are ruins, barely distinguishable from the other mossy stones littering the countryside.

Now, Aldrich takes the care of his flock very seriously. His guests know to bring nutritious foods as gifts. Aldrich's wolves hunt the nearby Bleakwood, and bring excess boar and elk back to the villagers. After all, regular meaty meals are important for a healthy heart.

The primary ingredient in the villager's meal is, as it has always been, mutton. Sheep roam the old farmlands, seeking out stray blades of grass in the stony soil. The giant wolves which range the countryside do not hunt this prey, but instead act both as guard dogs and shepherds.

8: BLEAKWOOD

The Bleakwood is a thin but expansive forest which extends for nearly 100 miles to the east. Through all season, the trees and leaves take on a muted, grey colour offensive to the senses. This is the hunting ground of Aldrich's wolf packs. Food can be found here, if one has the wits and nose to find it. Massive elk chew grey leaves, and hairy boar sniff through the ground for edible roots. Both make for welcome meals for human and wolf alike.

The Bleakwood is a playground for Aldrich's guests. Something about the muted colours and twisted trees attracts the undead. Aldrich and his kin take long walks or flights through the wood, revelling in a living world which seems to mimic their dead one. Occasionally, the vampires transform into wolves and stalk prey. Though human blood is preferable, little compares to the savage thrill of the hunt. Though he does not admit it, Aldrich has a growing need for violent triumph after centuries of human farming.



LIFE IN BLEAKFLAT

Bleakflat is cold and barren, but safe. The villagers are warm with one another, and like to keep things simple.

TRADE & INDUSTRY

Bleakflat is totally reliant on Aldrich and his guests. While some materials and sustenance come from the local sheep and wildlife, most arrives on bat wings. Guests always bring food for Aldrich's flock, or valuable goods to trade for more useful items.

LAW & ORDER

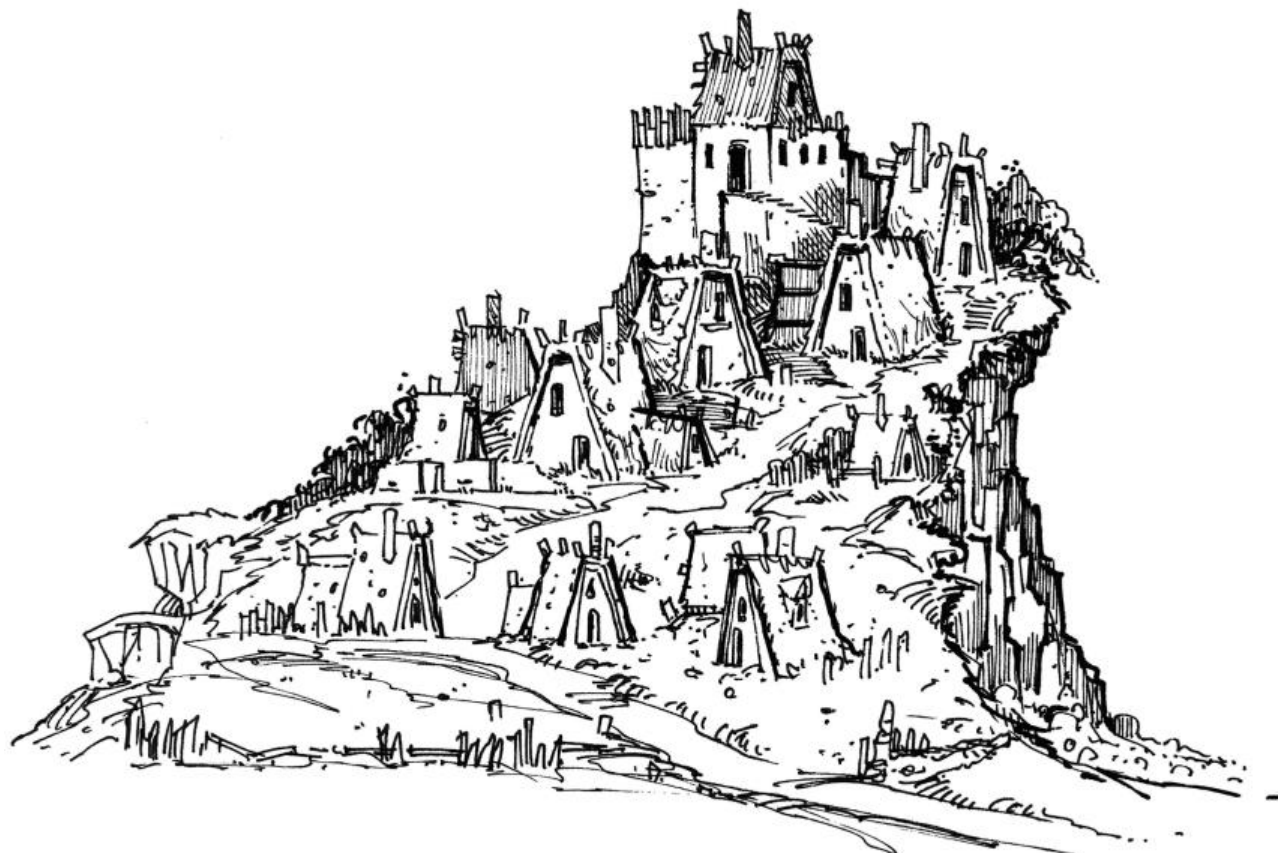
There is one law in Bleakflat, and there is one enforcer: Aldrich. The villagers are well aware Aldrich not only defends the village, but could easily destroy it. Villagers occasionally voice concerns or requests, but they do not push their luck.

Aldrich is a caring judge, but he does not tolerate disobedience or insubordination. Difficult villagers feel extreme social pressure to comply, and Aldrich may use his vampiric domination to nudge naysayers into line. Only rarely is a villager so incorrigible that he must be removed. These villagers are drained completely of blood, and their reanimated corpses are given as gifts to Aldrich's guests.

EVENTS

While the PCs are in Bleakflat, one or more of the below events may occur. Choose or determine randomly:

D6	EVENT
1	A pile of elk and boar carcasses appears in front of the butcher's house at night. Bite marks and paw prints indicate wolves have been in the village, but the villagers do not seem disturbed.
2	At sunset, 13 candles are lit in the tower of Kraegor's keep. A like number of villagers excuse themselves, enter the tower and do not emerge until sunrise.
3	On one overcast day, Aldrich comes down from his keep to heal a sickly child. He is warm and wise, using magic to remove the illness and soft song to comfort the mother.
4	Two of Aldrich's guests emerge in a huff from Kraegor's keep. They lash out at the villagers, then leave through the Bleakwood.
5	The howling of wolves keeps the PCs up all night. Hundreds of massive wolves circle Bleakflat, then disperse by daybreak.
6	Gaela and Mardread get into an argument which looks like it will come to blows (or worse), until Aldrich and Aegar separate the two.



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