



Cults of the Sundered Kingdoms

Player's Guide

Anthony Pryor



FROG GOD
GAMES



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Player's Guide

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**Now I am become Death,
the destroyer of worlds**
Skeeter Green



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Memoirs of a Rogue

As I had gained far too much notoriety as a result of an unfortunate affair involving Lady Marenne, two geese, and a high priest of Orcus, I finally decided that Bard's Gate had grown far too exciting for my tastes, and it was with relief that I booked passage on an especially disreputable merchantman bound for the city of Lowport. I'd made my choice in haste, for I knew little of the region — only rumors that it was a desolate and lawless place, sparsely populated and full of dangers. Upon my arrival in Lowport some weeks later, I set to learning what I could, only to find that it was indeed a desolate and lawless place, sparsely populated and full of dangers.

It seemed like the perfect place for one such as me, and so began a five-year sojourn during which I was happy to call the Sundered Kingdoms my home.

— From *Memoirs of a Rogue, Volume VII: To the Sundered Kingdoms*, by Titus the Grey

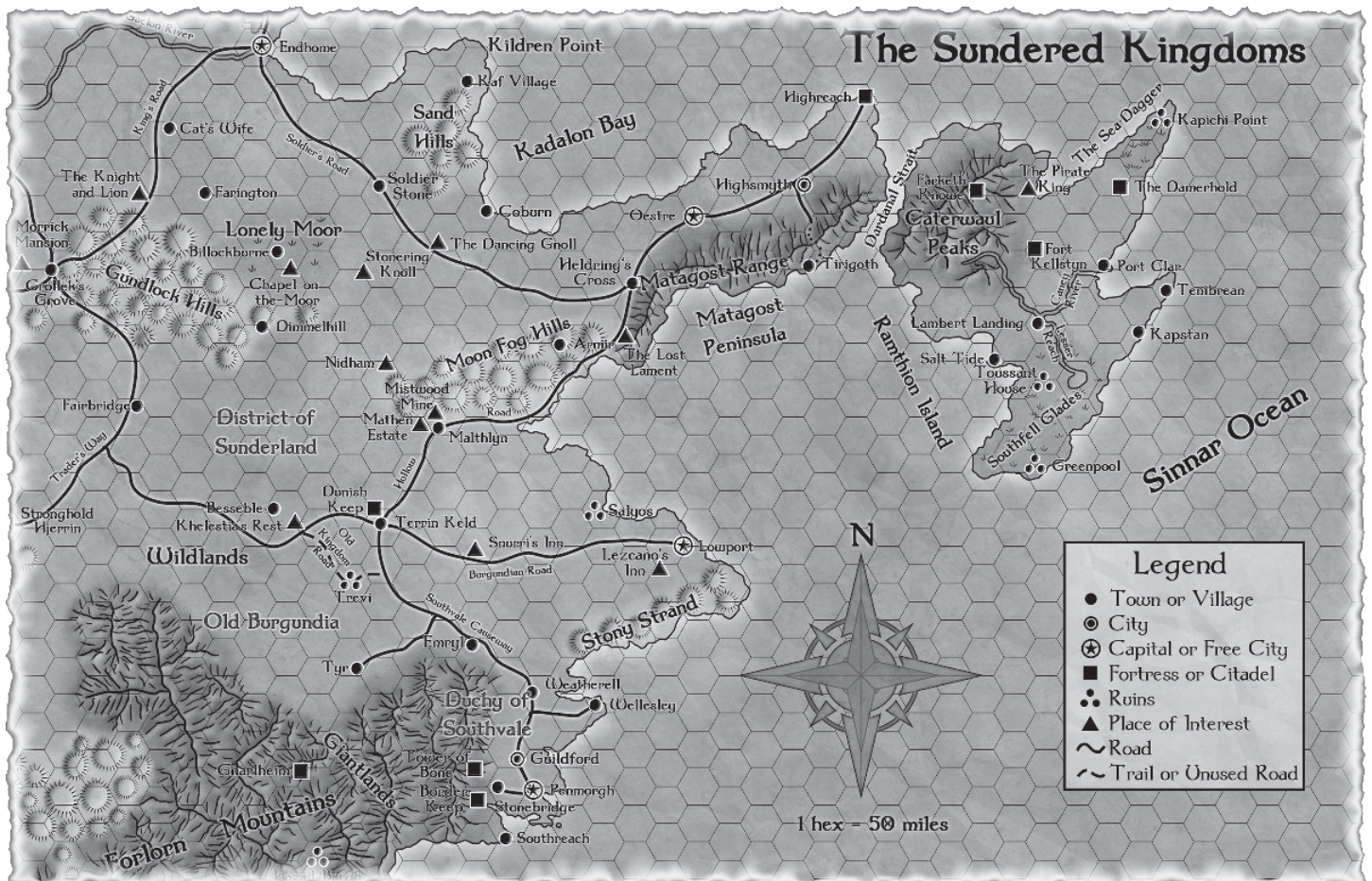
There is significant controversy over the true identity of the celebrated thief, assassin, and adventurer known to history as “Titus the Grey.” Some claim that he never truly existed, others that his multi-volume memoirs are a mish-mash of truth, exaggeration, and outright lies to the point that no one can tell the difference. Regardless, his description of Sunderland Province and its environs is one of very few coherent accounts of the region and therefore widely cited in scholarly works and histories. Though the reader is well-advised to take Titus's tales with a hefty grain of salt, his memoirs remain entertaining — and possibly useful — reading.

The Land

At first glance, the Sundered Kingdoms don't seem to be a good prospect for the aspiring adventurer. I'd caution all you young pups to keep in mind that appearances are often deceiving. It's true that Sunderland and its surrounding territories is a pretty bleak place, with vast stretches of grassland, thick and ancient forests, and weathered hills that look as if they haven't felt the touch of a civilized tread in centuries. But look just beneath the surface and you'll see far more — you'll see the glint of gold and the hint of lost treasures, just sitting there waiting for someone brave or foolhardy enough to seek them.

The region commonly called the Sundered Kingdoms lies primarily within the confines of the District of Sunderland, an old designation that has little real meaning in these lawless times. Adjoining regions — the Matagost Peninsula, Old Burgundia, the Duchy of Southvale, and Ramthion Island — are also included in the region. Sunderland, however, comprises the largest portion of the Sundered Kingdoms, and it is a dry, largely inhospitable place where inhabitants cluster in small settlements to protect themselves from hostile humanoids and dangerous predators.

Water can be scarce here, and most rivers are seasonal, diminishing to trickles or transforming to mud in the dry season, and forcing animals to cluster around watering holes. Only near the forested slopes of the Gundlock and Moon Fog Hills (which have their own perils) is the land especially arable, and can host small farms or vineyards. Even where there is water — the Lonely Moor in central Sunderland being one example — the terrain is treacherous, and harbors dangerous creatures of all sorts.



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Erskaelosi



Foerdewaith



Heldring



Kaf



Ramithi



The People

Outside the cities, Sunderlanders are tough and independent, used to dealing with their problems directly and not expecting a king or lord to step in and fix things for them. On the other hand, this makes them a provincial, superstitious, and untrusting lot, as likely to welcome a stranger as you are to welcome a viper in your bath. To be sure there are hospitable Sunderlanders, but they're usually the ones who run the inns and waystations, or the merchants and community leaders who realize that they need the outside world. But on the whole, we found the locals less than helpful, unless we spread our coins around generously. And even then they remained surly, acting as if they were doing us a favor just by tolerating our presence.

Most of the folk of the Sundered Kingdoms are humans of Foerdewaith extraction, since the armies of Foere crossed the region many times in pursuit of conquest. Left behind in the wake of numerous wars, these folk managed as best they could, toiling under the rule of kingdoms from Foere to Burgundia to Oceanus, and making their own way when those kingdoms fell or withdrew. Today the Foerdewaith stock remain a rugged, resourceful people, but long isolation and the cruelties of history have made them wary of outsiders and slow to give their trust.

Others dwell here as well. The Erskaelosi barbarians wander the southern plains, and have a reputation for thievery and dishonest dealings, though they themselves claim they're no more unreliable than anyone else. The Heldring arrived as fierce marauders, and have since evolved into the relatively peaceful folk of Southvale, among the few truly hospitable folk in the Sundered Kingdoms. The Kaf, on the other hand, are a grim, dour people confined to the Kildren Peninsula.

With the invasion of Ramthion and the Matagost Peninsula by the legions of Oceanus, it's more common to see folks of Oceander ancestry in those regions, though they are few and tend to stick to more heavily populated areas. There is also a steady stream of folks from other lands, especially in the near-lawless city of Lowport, where the growing popularity of wagering on the bloodpits has drawn many foreign tourists, travelers, and investors.

Traveling in the Sundered Kingdoms

Travel through the Sundered Kingdoms is often an adventure in itself — given the wildness and vast extent of the landscape and the viciousness of its inhabitants, any party of adventurers should take especial care when setting off into the wilderness, particularly if they plan on spending nights out in the open. Those who do travel in Sunderland and its environs, either out of necessity or mad desire for fame and wealth, invariably travel in large and well-armed groups.

The roads provide some small measure of security, but in many cases they are nothing more than a convenience to predators — a place where prey congregates for easy access. Elsewhere, travel by an unprepared or inexperienced group is tantamount to suicide, for the land away from the roads is a true wilderness, albeit interrupted here and there by small pieces of civilization. Trackless, inhospitable, and filled with foes, the back country of Sunderland is a challenge even for veteran adventurers.

Roads

We followed the Burgundian Road for several days. In most places calling it a "road" would be considered generous, but we traveled anyway, slogging through mires and over holed, rough stretches that slowed us to a crawl. How anyone could have led a caravan down this glorified goat-track was beyond me.

"Who else thinks that we'd be better off just traveling overland?" I asked, one wet and particularly miserable morning several days out of Lowport. "This is easily the most pathetic excuse for a road I've ever encountered, and believe me that's saying something."

"Don't be too sure," Byrosh said with a very annoying grin (that bastard could find the humor in a pile of coffins, believe me). "You've never traveled on the Old Kingdom Road. Besides, you really don't want to see what kind of horrors you'll find away from the roads."

I snorted, rolling my eyes. I was young, you see, and thought that I'd seen it all.

"Oh really?" I said. "What sort of horrors would we find?"

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Byrosh's face froze suddenly as he pointed a trembling finger south. "That sort."

I looked, and was instantly sorry, for lurching toward us out of the dust were three of the largest trolls I had ever seen.

I loosed my scimitar and glanced back at Byrosh who was busy mumbling the first part of a protective spell.

"All right," I said in a disgusted tone. "You've made your point."

The Sunderland District is crisscrossed with roads in various states of repair — testament to its past as a prize in the struggles of empires. Today these roads are the main arteries of travel and commerce, plagued by thieves, raiders, and all manner of lurking dangers, and patrolled only rarely by the kingdoms that claim the region.

Much of the **Burgundian Road**, which runs west from Lowport, is in poor repair, unpaved and rutted, and frequently haunted by brigands, forcing travelers to go forth in large, well-armed groups.

In far better condition is the **Southvale Causeway**, a main thoroughfare from Southvale Duchy to the rest of the Sundered Kingdoms to the north (those who travel should expect to pay for the privilege, especially in the Burgundian town of Emryl, where the locals exact various fees and taxes, enriching the local nobles and merchants).

The mighty **King's Road** comprises an informal western edge of the Sundered Kingdoms, and much of its northern end is well-maintained by the city of Endhome, which relies on the route for trade with the south. Endhome also sends patrols down this road in an often-fruitless effort to keep it free of banditry and raids by humanoids.

Hollow Road, which skirts the southern edge of the shadow-haunted Moon Fog Hills, has seen much greater traffic in recent years due to the reopening of several silver mines in the region, and has actually received some much-needed repair.

Stretching between Endhome and the occupied Matagost Peninsula, **Soldier's Road** is both a vital trade route between the new territories of Oceanus and Endhome, and a potent lure for gnolls and other savage raiding tribes. Oceander and Endhome patrols are both encountered here as well, and tend to be suspicious of those traveling without proper identification or clear intentions (i.e., smugglers and adventurers).



Wilderness Inns and Roadhouses

With our unpleasant experience in Trevi behind us, the sight of Khelestia's Rest was a welcome one. The crowd of diminutive fey and the swarm of flapping sprites were no longer an annoyance — rather they were the heralds of safety, comfort, and recovery.

Khelestia herself ushered us into the common room, and her faerie-dragon, Shae, flew close at hand, clearly agitated at our condition. Khelestia summoned a brownie whose name I remembered was Goldsleeves, and he immediately saw to our wounds, patching cuts and scratches and administering soothing potions.

And so it was for several days as we recovered in comfort and security, protected by the fey magic that held hostile creatures at bay and made Khelestia's Rest such a pleasant island in a troubled, violent land. Unfortunately, despite this protection, Esteban still managed to succumb to his own nature and his childish inability to keep his hands to himself.

Among Khelestia's constantly rotating cast of fey helpers was an especially enchanting nymph whose name was as ethereal as she was, for after leaving, I could no longer remember it. We all fell in love with her, of course, for that is the nature of nymphs, and though I was still young I was sensible enough to know real love from fey enchantment, and also knew what kind of trouble I'd be asking for if I acted on it. Esteban had no such qualms — he was a hot-blooded man from a hot-blooded people, and once he had recovered from the beating we'd taken in Trevi, he was ready for what he called "recreation."

Unfortunately for him, this recreation consisted of being overly friendly with the aforementioned nymph, and after one or two polite refusals he grew angry, demanding that she pay attention to him. This was his biggest mistake, for a mob of fey quickly descended on him, and in moments he had been spirited away, leaving us to wonder and shake our heads sadly at his foolishness.

I shed few tears for the man — we'd been none too fond of him, and I quickly apologized to Khelestia and the fey for his behavior. After a time they forgave us, and all returned to normal. When I asked Khelestia what had happened to Esteban, she only smiled and told me that he would be away for a time, learning manners from some very harsh taskmasters. I shuddered and let the matter drop.

Almost every town of any size has an inn or tavern, but it is the wilderness inns that lie scattered around Sunderland that serve a vital role for those folk who must traverse the region's roads. Merchants, pilgrims, adventurers, and others usually travel in large groups, often with large trains of baggage and animals, a situation that makes roughing it a risky and often all but impossible task. That's where the region's inns and roadhouses come in — providing food, rest, stables, and some measure of security, though often at outrageous prices.

These prices are often justified, as maintaining what amounts to a small, self-sufficient fortification deep in a hostile land is an expensive undertaking indeed. Inns may be abandoned, change ownership and name, or mysteriously vanish altogether, making their presence anything but certain. Though the list is clearly subject to change, some of the better known inns throughout Sunderland are listed here.

The Dancing Gnoll

Location: Soldier's Road, south of the Sand Hills

Proprietor: Bruze Netalis

Located along one of the most widely traveled, heavily patrolled, and probably not-coincidentally hazardous roads in Sunderland, the Dancing Gnoll is a welcome sight to a weary traveler (its sign displays the grisly image of a captured gnoll "dancing" at the end of a hangman's rope). Boasting two huge common rooms and twenty sleeping chambers, and surrounded by a highly defensible stone wall, the Gnoll offers both comfort and safety. Innkeeper Bruze Netalis is a veteran of the Foerdewaith army who found retirement far too dull and bought the place from its previous owner twenty-two years ago.

Since then, Bruze has expanded the inn's facilities, strengthening its walls to such an extent that neither bandits nor gnolls have ever tried to test the place's defenses. He also sets a fine table, with fresh fish from Kadalon Bay, game caught by his own hunters and trappers, and exotic fruits and berries imported from many lands.

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None of this comes cheap, and Bruze charges 10 gp per night per person, plus 5 sp per animal. While travelers often grumble at the prices, no one has yet found a better place to stay on a cold, rainy night when the gnoll tribes are hunting.

The Knight and Lion

Location: King's Road, just north of the Gundlock Hills

Proprietor: Suzael Brightstar

Suzael is a half-elf who claims noble ancestry from both parents. Why, then, she is running a roadhouse in one of the more desolate parts of the world remains anyone's guess, but the Knight and Lion has proved so popular over the years, that few, if any, question her stories.

Built in a fanciful, pseudo-elven style, the inn is deceptively delicate-looking, and boasts defenses both magical and mundane that have kept hostile forces at bay for nearly 100 years. The establishment has ten small but comfortable rooms, and a modest stable overseen by an old druid known only as Matrika. The kindly Suzael charges on a sliding scale based on what guests can afford (ranging from 1 cp to 10 gp per night), but those who think to deceive her should be advised that she has an almost unnatural ability to determine an individual's funds or lack thereof, and con artists often find themselves locked out in the cold, permanently banned from the inn.

Suzael also seems to have an agreement with the fey clans of the Gundlock Hills, who warn her of any danger or unusual activity and provide her with foodstuffs to feed her guests. Suzael's menu is a bit bland for some tastes, as she sets a strictly vegetarian table, but the food is filling nonetheless. In contrast, Suzael serves some of the best wines in the region, and her cellars are stocked with vintages from several local Gundlock wineries. Her patronage is especially sought-after by the vintners of the region, and she has been known to engage adventurers to help out any local vineyards that face peril from bandits or monsters.

Snurri's Inn

Location: Burgundian Road, between Lowport and Terrin Keld

Proprietor: Snurri Boldheart

Snurri Boldheart is a dwarf of advanced years who nonetheless runs his inn like a well-oiled machine, overseeing a staff of halflings who tend to the inn's guests and keep its nine sleeping rooms and two suites spotlessly clean. Snurri also isn't adverse to picking up his axe and defending his place, either, as a band of mercenaries reinforced by a necromancer and his undead friends recently found to their dismay. Their armor and weapons are currently on display in the inn's common room, and only the most strident objections of Snurri's wife, Maedra, prevented him from mounting the necromancer's head above the fireplace for all to see.

The inn is plain but comfortable, and, as noted, it is kept scrupulously neat. Snurri has been known to fly into berserk rages at the sight of any dust or grime, though fortunately he does not take his anger out directly on his employees or guests, confining himself, instead, to ferocious outbursts of extremely creative profanity.

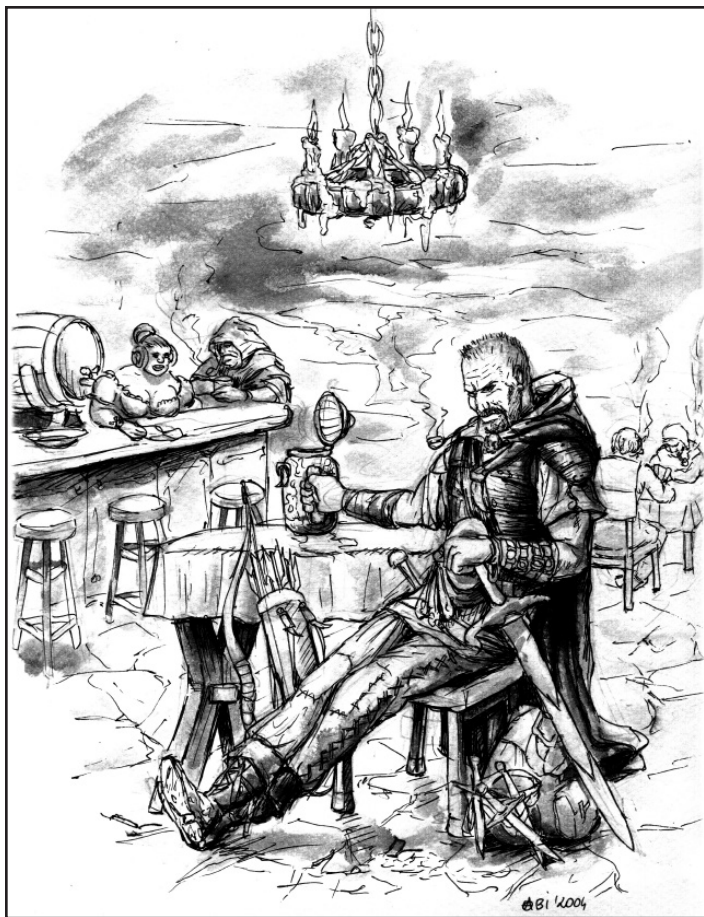
Rooms here are a relative bargain for the region: 4 gp per night for everyone, period. This includes one simple meal per day — an extra silver buys a second. The halfling staff are all extremely solicitous and polite, and despite Snurri's rages, they love their employer dearly.

Lezcano's Inn

Location: Eastern Burgundian Road, just west of Lowport

Proprietor: Father Lezcano Bredroga

Located a few miles outside Lowport, this fortified combination of inn and temple of Thyr represents a refuge for those who wish to avoid the city's rampant crime and violence. Good Father Lezcano, a humble friar serving in Thyr's name, offers shelter and comfort to anyone of good intentions who seeks them, and has established himself as a determined foe of both the high priest of Grotaag and Tyrant Baljulias himself, both of whom have sworn to destroy the place. So far their attempts have been repulsed, but most think it is only a matter of time before a final reckoning takes place.



The Lost Lament

Location: Hollow Road, between the Moon Fog Hills and the Matagost Range

Proprietor: Salim Gorvezal

Situated in a particularly ill-omened location on the eastern edge of the fearsome Moon Fog Hills, and backed up onto the desolate lower slopes of the Matagost Range, the Lost Lament is a dark and gloomy-looking stone structure with multiple gables and a heavy iron fence intended to keep out the local wildlife and overly inquisitive visitors. Salim Gorvezal and his pale, big-eyed children run the inn, quietly serving guests and tending to their animals. Rumor has it that Salim has a wife, though no one ever sees her — tales abound that she is a demoness, a vampire, an immortal sorceress, or various other fancies, but Salim himself is mum regarding her very existence.

None of this is to say that the the Lost Lament is a bad inn — it is, in fact, quite comfortable if one doesn't mind the dark, somewhat sepulchral décor and its gloomy surroundings. Rooms are almost luxurious and run from 4–8 gp per night. Food varies from simple and plain, to fanciful gourmet meals prepared by Salim's son, Reginald, who is said to be a genius in the kitchen.

Other rumors surround the inn — that those who sleep there have prophetic dreams presaging disaster, that Salim has a deal with the local ghouls or vampires and gives them every tenth guest (or twelfth, twentieth or hundredth, depending on who's telling), that he secretly worships the demon lords whose followers lurk in the hollow hills to the west, and so on. Most people pooh-pooh these rumors and insist that Salim is just eccentric, but this doesn't stop them from carefully locking their doors at night whenever they stay.

Khelestia's Rest

Location: Near the intersection of the Burgundian and Old Kingdom Roads

Proprietor: Khelestia Whiteraven

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Khelestia Whiteraven is a known witch of no small skill, making her status as an innkeeper a bit of a mystery. Her house is a deceptively small establishment on the edge of the Wildlands (some claim that it is actually larger on the inside than the outside), near where the Burgundian Road meets the rutted Old Kingdom Road, and is remarkable in that it is staffed almost entirely by fey creatures. The sprites, brownies, atomies, and pixies who help at the inn seem to do so out of genuine affection for Khelestia — anyone or anything who seeks to do their employer harm will face their wrath, and the outcome of such incidents is never pretty.

Khelestia also numbers among her allies several highly intelligent cats of apparent fey ancestry, a moondog named Tavi, and an iridescent purple faerie dragon called Shae. Needless to say, a visit to Khelestia's Rest is quite an experience, with guests tended to by fluttering faeries and tiny humanoids, occasionally inspected by cats of alarming intellect, and sometimes even engaged in conversation by the dog and the faerie dragon. Food is also provided by Khelestia's fey, and can vary from sweet fruits and berry cakes to freshly hunted stag or boar from some distant forest. Khelestia does insist that the fey let her guests sleep, however, and those who have spent nights there report that the place is especially pleasant and restful.

A night's stay at Khelestia's Rest can cost anywhere from 5–20 gp, as the fey also set the price based on how interesting the guests are. Khelestia sometimes overrules them if she thinks they're being overly cruel, but for the most part, lets them do as they please.

The Pirate King

Location: The north coast of the Sea Dagger, about 50 miles west of the Damerhold

Proprietor: Amalya Raen

Strategically located between the Ramithi stronghold of Farketh Knowe and the Oceander fortress of the Damerhold, this seaside inn is well-known as unofficial neutral ground where both Oceander and Ramithi are served without favor or prejudice. Innkeeper Amalya Raen

is a Foerdewaith woman who has no real quarrel with either side, and her even-handed treatment of native rebel and foreign invader alike has led to an unspoken truce that allows the combatants to meet here free of the threat of violence.

The Pirate King is a picturesque stone structure perched above the crashing surf below, and it remains a safer and far more secure place than most wilderness roadhouses. Amalya and her family maintain the inn and serve excellent basic fare, and the Ramithi and Oceanders who have come to love the place take special care to keep it and its guests safe from harm, lest their peaceful refuge from conflict be damaged or destroyed.

Patrols

"You there!" shouted the Oceander captain as his adjutant took his helm and bloody sword. "Who are you and what is your business on the Soldier's Road?"

I must admit that the man's manner rubbed me the wrong way. Had we not just stood shoulder to shoulder and defeated a bloodthirsty band of gnolls, sending them off in shrieking panic? Such a thought apparently never entered the captain's mind as he glared imperiously at me, awaiting my reply.

"What's wrong with you?" he demanded. "Are you capable of speech? Or are you both deaf and dumb?"

Behind me Torvalda growled as her grip tightened around the haft of her axe. I shot her a warning glance and replied to the Oceander as politely as I could.

"We're just travelers," I said. "Bound for Southvale from Endhome, ambushed on the road by gnolls. And my thanks for helping us drive them off, Captain."

The man seemed unimpressed, glancing at our weapons and battered armor. "You seem more like troublemakers to me, out to loot tombs and rob innocent villagers of their livelihoods. I think you all should come with us, so we can sort out exactly who you are and what you're up to."

My hand curled around a concealed throwing dagger. I was still willing



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to use diplomacy, but right now nothing was off the table. "Oh come now, Captain. I'm sure we can reach an understanding without an ugly confrontation."

The Oceander's expression softened somewhat and the captain smiled wanly. "Perhaps if we were to assess you a slight road fee and receive assurances of your good intentions, we can come to an understanding."

I sighed. It was a cost of doing business. Besides, in our injured state I truly doubted we could take on an entire Oceander patrol.

"Very well," I said. "How much would you consider fair?"

Not all dangers in the Sundered Kingdoms arise from monsters or hostile humanoids. Even those tasked with keeping the peace can imperil travelers. Armed parties, usually light cavalry, ride along the roads near cities like Oestre and Lowport, safeguard caravan traffic along the King's Road, or patrol other vital routes, seeking to keep the local bandits and humanoid tribes in check — usually with only limited success.

While the Endhome and Oceander patrols are carried out by relatively well-disciplined military units, other patrols vary greatly in self-control and skill. Outside Lowport, for example, mercenary guards are almost as bad as the outlaws that they are supposedly there to counteract, extorting gold from every passing caravan and shaking travelers down for valuables. Not even the allegedly well-trained Endhome or Oceander troopers are immune from charging "road tolls" and related fees, as Titus the Grey and his companions discovered to their dismay.

Humanoid Tribes and Raiders

The gnolls' attack was heralded by the ululating cries of their hyaenodons, a tactic that they clearly intended to terrify us, but which in reality warned us and gave us time to prepare. When the gnolls descended on us, snarling and foaming like rabid dogs, we stood well-armed and ready to fight.

Nevertheless, it proved a challenging battle, for most of our unfortunate hirelings perished in the first moments, torn asunder by the gnolls' savage four-footed beasts. Byrosh unleashed a torrent of flames that caught the advancing beast-men squarely, and the dry air was filled with the scent of burnt fur and flesh. Then they were on us, but Torvalda's axe was thirsty, and three more of the foul things fell before it. As she fought, I moved and struck as quickly as I could, slicing at tendons, stabbing exposed necks and abdomens, hamstringing, wounding, then dancing away.

It was a near thing despite our efforts. Akli the priest was hard-pressed, uttering healing prayers at one moment, swinging his iron-shod staff the next, until he fell, treacherously struck from behind by a gnoll's club.

All seemed lost in that moment, for Byrosh had fallen as well, and Torvalda was wounded in a dozen places. It was then that I heard harsh shouts and the sound of hoofbeats striking the rough paving stones of Soldier's Road. I looked up to see a squad of armored cavalry charging toward us, swords drawn, polished steel breastplates shining, their leader resplendent in the colors of the Empire of Oceanus.

The wild and inhospitable nature of the Sundered Kingdoms is, in fact, a terrible forge that hammers out weakness, leaving behind the strongest and most ruthless of creatures — creatures such as gnolls, orcs, and ogres. As human civilizations rose and fell, armies marched and cities burned, the humanoids of the region moved in to fill the vacuum, ruthlessly taking advantage of the chaos sown by others. Today they remain one of the most persistent threats in and around the Sunderland District.

For the most part, these humanoids live in autonomous, seminomadic tribes, moving from place to place and gaining sustenance through hunting, gathering, raiding nearby settlements, and preying upon passing traffic on the roads. Rule is inevitably by the strongest, and most of these groups scratch out a minimal existence only a hairsbreadth from starvation. Their bloodthirstiness is therefore a function, not just of their inherent savage violence, but also a deeply-ingrained survival mechanism, created by countless generations of deprivation. In addition to those listed below, other humanoid and monstrous creatures can be found throughout the region — kobolds, goblins, giants of all sorts, athach, troglodytes, etc. — but the following are the best known and most frequently encountered.

Gnolls

Gnoll clans are the scourge of the arid northeastern areas, where resources are scarce and only the strong survive long. Gnolls are scavengers and opportunistic hunters, traditionally following the herds of small Sull bison and red-tailed deer, and making temporary camps at waterholes, among small copses, or inside cave complexes. The advent of major human settlement and roads changed their lives permanently, and now the gnolls have added the role of resourceful raider to their hunting traditions.

Today, gnolls hunt in packs consisting of several family groups, invading human settlements, preying on travelers and caravans, and attacking domestic sheep and goat herds for food and sport. They are generally not interested in plunder, though some have finally learned that it can be bartered for useful trade goods. Some tribes engage in slave raids, keeping captives in thrall and working them to death, then feasting on their remains. Some unscrupulous traders have forged uneasy agreements with gnoll tribes, providing them with supplies, weapons, and tools in exchange for plundered treasure and slaves.

Most gnoll clans keep hyenas, and, in some cases, the larger and fiercer hyaenodons, as guards and hunting animals. These creatures are treacherous, however, and will sometimes turn on their masters, killing them and then loping off into the wilderness. Usually however, the gnoll beast-masters keep their pets happy with a combination of rewards, punishments, and even druidic magic.

Some tribes have fallen under the command of outside leadership, controlled by especially powerful spellcasters, demons, or even warlords, who buy their loyalty with promises of food, prey, and territory. Gnolls are not always the best choice as minions, for their bestial nature makes them chaotic and ill-disciplined, but non-gnolls with strong personalities can sometimes turn them into a serviceable fighting force.

More "advanced" gnoll clans that trade are often better-armed than their fellows, with steel weapons, leather or metal armor, and even a small number of enchanted items. These clans represent a special challenge, and often find themselves in conflict with heavily armed patrols from Oceanus or Endhome. Humans caught trading with these gnolls are punished severely, usually on the spot and without trial.

Orcs

One of the most adaptable and persistent of humanoids, orcs have inhabited the Sundered Kingdoms for countless millennia, and remain there in large numbers today. Their long history has led to significant diversity in their ancestry, and orcs of several different varieties can be found: common orcs, greenskins, ghost-faced orcs, blood orcs and even — it is rumored — the fearsome black orcs, servants of the dread demon lord, Orcus.

Orcs are common in some areas, though they are especially numerous in the moorlands of south-central Sunderland, where they build semi-permanent villages in hidden or highly defensible positions. Cunning trackers and outdoorsmen, the orcish warriors take pains to learn all the secrets of their surrounding territories, and when hunting, try to funnel their prey into bogs or marshy regions where they become trapped and can be killed at the orcs' leisure.

Orc tribes number between a dozen and a hundred individuals, with names like the Broken Bones and the Pigskulls. They usually carry crude insignia based on their tribal identities, and are ruled by the biggest and strongest of their number — often orogs or even ogrillon. These tribes frequently war with each other for control of particularly valued territories — especially those with the easiest access to roads.

Some, more "enlightened" orc tribes have struck deals, forming rudimentary alliances, combining forces and sharing plunder. Unlike the gnolls, orcs like treasure and often decorate their huts and caves with the spoils of their raids. Some orcs also practice basic metallurgy and leatherworking, crafting crude weapons and armor, but for the most part, they prefer to steal items that others have made.

Ogres

Groups of ogres may be found throughout the Sundered Kingdoms, but are especially likely to be encountered in more rugged regions



such as the Wildlands, the Gundlock Hills, and the lower reaches of the Forlorn Mountains. These are often family groups — male, female, and their immature offspring — but sometimes several groups combine into a gang, or allow solitary ogres to join them for a time. These groups lair in remote locations such as rough ravines, caves, or swamps, where they build primitive shelters and store the remains of their prey for later consumption. Most of their victims' possessions are carelessly tossed in midden heaps, unless an especially bright piece of jewelry or shiny bauble catches an ogre's eye. They do not normally take weapons or armor, preferring to fight barehanded, or, at best, with a functional rock or club.

Though they are primitive and largely disorganized, these ogres are nevertheless a constant threat, for they have few qualms about attacking anything they consider to be edible — which, in their eyes, is just about anything living, including other ogres. Occasionally, larger parties may draw the attention of several groups of ogres, who would then attack in an uncoordinated but extremely dangerous pack.

Cities

There are few enough cities fit to be called such in the entire vastness of the Sundered Kingdoms. Those that do exist hug the coast for dear life and subsist on trade with each other and foreign lands. They range from the sophisticated calm of Penmorth to the filthy chaos of Lowport, with the crowded streets of Oestre somewhere in between. They're a nice enough change from the tiny communities of the plains and the wilderness, but in their own way they're just as dangerous. Out in the grasslands you might find yourself attacked by a gnoll warrior or stalked by a lion — in the streets of Lowport you're as likely to be press-ganged into service on a pirate ship or murdered for your shoes, while in Oestre you might end up being thrown into prison for saying something bad about the Oeandors or making fun of the Governor-General. In either case, keep your guard up and don't get too comfortable.

Only three true cities of any size exist in the Sundered Kingdoms, and all of these are near the Sinnar coast: Sunderland's capital, Penmorth; Oestre, the leading city of Matagost; and the filthy pirate-city of Lowport. The city of Endhome easily surpasses any of these, but is beyond the Gaelon River, and technically, considered to be outside the Sundered Kingdoms. The former crown-city of Trevi could once boast the title of jewel of these lands, but is now a humanoid-haunted ruin, while Tyr calls itself a city, but in reality, is little more than a vast, armed camp.

Penmorth

Weeks of deprivation in the trackless reaches of the Wildlands had left us all bruised, battered, and in extreme ill-temper. When Byrosh suggested we spend some time relaxing in Penmorth, none of us had either the strength to object or any good alternative suggestions. Tyr was a dreary place that I wholeheartedly wished to avoid, while Oestre was too distant, and I'd already had my fill of Lowport's hospitality. It was with more of a sense of resignation than anything else that we packed our bags, saddled our horses, and rode dejectedly into Southvale.

Once we'd arrived in Penmorth and secured comfortable lodging at the King's Head Inn, I began to relax somewhat, for, at least initially, Penmorth proved to be the very place we needed to recover from hard weeks of adventuring. Located in the most secure and stable region in all the Sundered Kingdoms, Penmorth won't win any prizes for its civic monuments or picturesque views, but it is damnably calm.

At least on the surface.

I suppose it was inevitable that it all end in spectacular fashion, as it so often does with folks like me and my friends. Now that we were feeling better, we had actually started to lay plans for our next endeavor and were spending time in a particularly disreputable dive called the Black Chalice. When Esteban got into a dispute with some burly local over the same woman (or perhaps the same gnome or something — gods only know with Esteban) and the local's friends joined the fray, we had no choice but to defend our companion, and, to make a long story short, the interior of the



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Chalice ended up in ruins, while we ended up spending the night in a cell.

We expected to be released the following day, assessed a small fine and sent on our way, but it was not to be. We were instead roused out of our cell at an unconscionably early hour, dragged to the Merchant Guild hall, and presented to a stern-faced man whom we were told was one Gebhart Berizon, Guildmaster of Penmorth.

My heart sank, for I knew as well as anyone that the guilds ran the city, and if we were meeting their supreme leader, the situation had to be especially dire.

"We've heard of you and your friends," he said, without preamble. "We've heard that you are professional troublemakers, that you've been causing havoc in the hinterlands for quite some time now, and that you were responsible for a fire, explosion, and the release of several dangerous wild animals in the streets of Lowport."

"Whoever told you that is a baseborn liar," I replied. "We're innocent travelers on our way to..." I faltered for a moment, trying to think of a suitably distant destination. "To Courghais. Yes. Courghais."

Berizon smiled at that. It was a thin, cold, humorless smile.

"That's unfortunate," he replied. "Because if you were those troublemakers I'd heard about, I might have had employment for you, helping me rid the city of a criminal organization known as the Adderfang Guild, and you'd have earned an official pardon for your offenses. But as you are not actually these troublemaking adventurers, I'm afraid that I'm going to have to impose the harshest punishment possible under the—"

"I'm sorry," I interrupted, raising a hand. "Did you say we started a fire in Lowport? I thought you said Endhome. In that case, well, yes, we are those troublemakers you've heard about."

Berizon gave me a satisfied nod. "Well, I'm glad we finally got that cleared up. Now, would you like to hear more about my proposal, or shall I just sentence you to death immediately and save us all some time?"

The capital of Southvale Duchy is a sprawling city and, with a population over 23,000, is easily the largest in the region after Endhome. Officially under Oceander rule, Penmorth continues to be a dominant force both socially and economically, and its preeminence has helped keep the province at peace for many years. Though ostensibly ruled by Mayor Lem Mastlan, it is known to all that the powerful Merchant Guild truly controls the city, and through it, also dominates trade in the region.

Penmorth's history hasn't always been peaceful. Given control of the fortress city of Parthos three decades ago, provincial officials were unable to govern, and soon lost control of the city to the tyrant, Gathos the Cruel, who renamed the city Lowport, an indignity which still stings the civic pride of Penmorth to this day.

Visitors to Penmorth are welcome, though they are expected to keep the peace, or at least prevent any violence from spilling out into the streets. The law is enforced at least in part by the intimidating paladins of the Order of Iron, based in the temple of Muir. Many business opportunities exist for the enterprising merchant or adventurer, and some businesses likely to be encountered here include:

The King's Head Inn

Probably the finest establishment in town, the King's Head is run by the Burgundian, Henri Balfour and his family. Old and well-appointed, the inn was the scene of an infamous plot of old by loyalist noblemen to kill the king of Burgundia. Each of its six sleeping rooms contains four beds, and cost 4 gp per night per person. Food is served by the skilled cook, Lobelia Goodwife, and includes hot breakfast, cold lunches, and dinners with entrees such as wild boar, stew, soup, and a variety of fruits, salads and compotes, reasonably priced at 2sp per meal. The King's Head is a popular destination for foreign merchants and wealthier visitors, who sometimes wish to hire adventurers or guards.

The Black Chalice Tavern

On the other end of the hospitality spectrum from the King's Head, the Chalice is an especially infamous destination that draws a rough crowd — criminals, guild thieves, and ne'er-do-wells of all sorts. Food and drink are plentiful and largely awful, but good enough for the price. A nightly fight between factions is all but guaranteed, and betting on such contests is a popular pursuit. Those seeking to employ anyone for nefarious purposes

can easily find candidates here. The Chalice is also popular with freelance dungeon delvers seeking patrons, rumors or adventuring parties.

The Order of Iron

One of the strictest orders of paladins in all known lands, these grim warriors of Muir are headquartered in a great, windowless fortress of stone with a single iron door, symbolically always kept open to signify their goddess's open and accepting nature. Led by the stern Lady Astrid Dugganey, the paladins dispatch missions into the darkest heart of the Sundered Kingdoms, seeking out evil and chaos wherever they find it. While friendly with other faiths, they only allow strict Muir worshippers into their order. In some cases, they may work with non-Muirites, engaging good-aligned adventurers and mercenaries to assist in their vital work.

Palskann's Outfitters

In addition to its status as the most stable and peaceful city in the Sundered Kingdoms, Penmorth also serves as temporary home to adventurers and dungeon delvers. A comfortable, reliable base for exploration and travel in the adjoining Wildlands, the city has developed a number of businesses that aid in the provisioning of adventuring endeavors. Palskann's Outfitters, owned by a friendly halfling woman and her family, is a typical business that caters to adventurers. She provides all sorts of adventuring gear — sturdy clothing, boots, belts, backpacks, rope, 10-foot poles, preserved foodstuffs, maps, tools, and even weapons, arrows, and sling bullets (though she leaves armor to more skilled craftspeople). Her prices are fair, though quality is often questionable, as she gets her supplies from various third parties. She is also a valuable source of rumors, local news, information about other adventuring groups, and word of who is hiring freelancers.

Lowport

There is a saying that the best place to hide a book is in a library, a leaf in a forest, and a criminal in a city. This is doubly true for the city of Lowport, a lawless place ruled by a ruthless warlord. Lowport was once called Parthos, a fortress-city built by the ancient Hyperboreans and rebuilt by the ambitious Kingdom of Foere, then occupied by the armies of Oceanus in the wake of the sack of Trevi.

In recent years, the city has fallen on hard times. It was abandoned by the Oceanders, dumped in the lap of the rulers of Penmorth, and was finally conquered by a barbarian warlord called Gathos the Cruel, who completed the once-proud settlement's humiliation by renaming it Lowport. Gathos himself has since died on the blades of a rival, the half-orc gladiator, Baljulias, who immediately seized the throne, naming himself Baljulias "the Great" and commencing a rule of even greater chaos and bloodshed. Today, the place teeters on the brink of anarchy, and true rulership extends little beyond the length of a blade.

All of this makes Lowport a promising destination for those who wish to disappear or avoid the authorities, and after my misfortune in Bard's Gate, I hired onto a leaky merchant galleon, bound for the Sinnar Coast. After a few short weeks I was in Lowport, a haven for criminal classes, and for rootless adventurers, wanderers, corsairs, and rough folks of all varieties, and within hours I knew that I would fit in perfectly.

Lowport is a rough, lawless city that easily lives up to its name. For the past three decades, it has been run by force: first, under the ruthless Gathos, and, now, by his successor, the even more bloodthirsty Baljulias.

The only real law in Lowport is that of the sword, so almost every criminal activity takes place openly. Murder, kidnapping, smuggling, slavery, and piracy are all considered perfectly fit careers for Lowporters. The city's network of criminals and corsairs is extensive, with some ships originating as far away as Bard's Gate and even the distant Razor Coast, but woe unto the pirate captain who reaves too close and attracts the wrath of Oceanus or Endhome. Such individuals invariably end up fed to the sharks and replaced by captains who are more likely to follow Baljulias's edicts. Otherwise, the city is wide open to any activity that one can get away with.

Entertainment is similarly brutal, with gladiatorial combat between slaves or professional fighters gaining in popularity. Officially banned in

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most parts of the old Foerdewaith empire, battles in the bloodpits attract audiences from across the city, and even some more “civilized” fans — nobles and wealthy individuals from Oceanus, Endhome, Bard’s Gate, Foere and more distant lands — sometimes travel here (under heavy guard, of course) to witness and wager on the mayhem.

Physically, Lowport is a maze of tottering buildings, like a great organism that has sprouted from the rambling old fortifications. Few people know the city’s complete layout, and visitors are advised to hire trustworthy local guides, though fully dependable folk are hard to come by in this place.

Baljulias rules the city with an iron fist from his opulent quarters in the old fortress, assisted by a crew of violent orcish and human cutthroats and his “spiritual advisors,” the human priest, Othothulva, and the orcish cleric of Grotaag, Chak-rak, both of whom consider violence and mayhem to be vital parts of their faith, and also feel that they can best express their devotion by accumulating as much gold and as many slaves as possible.

Though businesses in Lowport tend to appear and disappear overnight, there are a few well-known establishments of interest to adventurers.

The Bloody Cutlass

Drinking and rooming establishments in Lowport come and go, but the Cutlass has managed to somehow hang on over the years, becoming the most reliable destination for those who wish for a place to stay while within the city’s labyrinthine confines. Innkeeper One-Eyed Sue, a former pirate captain and professional killer, keeps order in a world of chaos, decreeing only that fights always be fair, and that the winners are responsible for cleaning up any blood or entrails left behind. Her staff of thuggish pirates, guild thieves, and professional gladiators is always on hand to enforce her rules, and will not hesitate to remove (sometimes permanently) any unwanted patrons. Rooms here are expensive, but Sue guarantees their security, a promise that she manages to keep despite the low character of her guests.

Zaagra’s Bloodpit

Lowport’s gladiatorial arenas are an important source of income for the city, and none are better known than Zaagra’s. In this underground complex, four separate pits can accommodate hundreds of spectators while Zaagra’s clerks take bets, tally profits, and pay off the handful of big winners each night. Almost any kind of combat can be seen here — one-on-one, team battles, fights with wild animals and monsters, even magic duels (Zaagra and his employees are indemnified against any fatalities among his spectators, as the danger is considered just another aspect of the excitement). Zaagra himself is a big, barrel-chested man of uncertain age and ancestry, with a loud laugh and a true love for competition. He is also a ruthless gangster, ready to eliminate any competitors who rival his popularity at a moment’s notice. Zaagra is always looking for guards, enforcers, and, of course, contestants for his bloody, brutal competitions.

Mariner’s Labor Exchange

This grandly titled enterprise takes its name from the official building where it is housed, which once served a legitimate function in the old days when the city was called Parthos. Today, it is a clearing house for pirates, where sailors can hire onto various ships and captains can obtain new crewmembers. In this case the term “obtain” is very broad, for the Labor Exchange also employs press gangs — groups of thugs who scour the city looking for individuals whom they can “recruit,” usually with the help of clubs and rope. New arrivals in the city are particularly vulnerable, for they don’t usually have friends or allies to keep them safe. Many an adventurer has arrived in Lowport one day only to find him- or herself shipping out on board a leaky corsair the next.

Oestre

After the bloody anarchy of Lowport, the relative calm of Oestre will probably come as a pleasant change. Don’t be fooled — you can die just as quickly and just as dead in Oestre as in Lowport. It’s just that the rules

here are different. Oceanus runs the place, and they’re no pushovers, especially if you think you can get away with flaunting the governor-general’s authority or openly breaking the law.

My companions and I arrived there reluctantly, given our past disagreements with Oceanander authorities. We nervously passed the city gates but were not stopped. We took rooms at an undistinguished inn, then made our way with all discretion to Corvidan’s Shop, where our employer had insisted we meet.

Corvidan was most pleased to see us, but seemed nervous, and quickly shuttered his establishment as soon as we were inside. We promptly provided him with the cache of scrolls that we’d obtained in the Gundlock Hills, and gave him a brief account of our adventures there. Handing over the promised gold, Corvidan noted to us that we had largely confirmed his theories about the cults of Sunderland and their origin, but added that we had raised still more questions in his mind.

“I have another job for you, if you’ve an interest,” he said. “I’ve discovered evidence that one of those damnable cults has infiltrated the inner circles of this very city.”

This, of course, piqued our interest — not necessarily because we gave a damn about what cults had infiltrated what inner circles, but because there might be more loot in it for us. I asked what he meant.

“I’d like you to investigate some highly-ranked nobles and their merchant friends,” he said quietly. “They’re all members of the same social club, and I suspect that the club is nothing but a front for recruiting new members into some secret society.”

I raised my eyebrows, thinking that investigating an exclusive social club would also present ample opportunities to line our pockets with wealthy members’ riches.

“What’s this club called?” I asked.

Corvidan smiled grimly. He had me hooked and he knew it.

“Ever hear of the Sons of Sefagreth?”

Oestre is the prime city of the Matagost Peninsula and, as such, is the center of Oceanander power in the region. A well-fortified city protected by two curved, concentric stone walls, Oestre is centered on the massive marble edifice of the Lord’s Palace and the temple of the God of Commerce, Sefagreth. The city has grown more crowded in recent years with the influx of Oceanander colonists, and affordable housing is hard to come by. The city compensates for this by maintaining a good number of inns and rooming houses, and competition between them keeps prices reasonable.

The city’s populace is quite learned, and it is home to several libraries, scriptoria, and institutes of learning, including an arcane college and an institute of history and science. In general, Oestre’s people are also generous and well-mannered, though there is a tendency toward conspicuous consumption and the ostentatious display of wealth. Many rich Oestreans belong to exclusive clubs and societies with names like the Sons of Sefagreth, the Golden Eagles, the Lords of Commerce, and the Favored Ones. Many rumors swirl around these groups, with some claiming that they engage in secret rites and even demonic worship. Most dismiss these tales as jealous rumormongering, but a few believe that there may be something there worth investigating.

Some better-known establishments and businesses likely to be encountered in Oestre include:

School of Arcana

A small but distinguished institution, this college has been in Oestre for most of the past century. Five full-time professors under Headmistress Tarishal Rennek provide instruction in basic arcane magic to a student body that rarely exceeds twenty. The school is housed in a complex of buildings not far from the Lord’s Palace, and the city’s leaders are known to select their magical aides and advisors from among the school’s alumni. It is said that there is a great trove of powerful magical items in the school’s hidden vaults, and that Headmistress Tarishal has in her keeping several very dangerous artifacts of a chaotic and evil nature.

Historical Society Archives

A dedicated group of scholars from a number of universities combined their resources nearly a decade ago to try to assemble a definitive collection of important documents and artifacts related to the history of the

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Sundered Kingdoms. To this end, they have collected and cataloged items dating back over five millennia, including stone tablets created during the reign of King-Chieftain Aracor, Hyperborean parchments, ancient elven volumes bound in dragonskin, rare histories, and chronicles about the kingdoms and battles of the past into an assembly that is all but priceless. The archives are open for inspection, though visitors must pay a fee and do their research under the watchful eye of the staff and well-paid guards.

The Sons of Sefagreth Hall

One of the leading social clubs for wealthy Oestreans, the Sons of Sefagreth are officially dedicated to the betterment of their city, helping the less fortunate and preserving valuable ancient historical artifacts. In reality, the group's members seem to spend their time attending lavish galas, dinner parties, and fêtes of all kinds, while occasionally paying lip service to their mission and currying favor with the mayor and governor-general. Some in Oestre accuse the Sons of being nothing but a front for rich people to show off their wealth, while others accuse it of worse offenses, including secretly worshipping demons — accusations which its members laugh off as wild rumormongering by rivals or churlish peasants who have nothing better to do. Nevertheless, the rumors persist, whispered in taverns and alleys, and the Sons of Sefagreth continue on as they always have.

Towns and Villages

Yes, the people in the Sundered Kingdoms are pretty inhospitable, unless you happen to be staying at an inn where their livelihood depends on keeping you safe and happy. Our reception in the small village of Dimmelhill, on the edge of the bleak region called Lonely Moor, was relatively chilly, for it was the height of the dry season and what little fodder remained was carefully hoarded and not to be shared with strangers.

Unable to find lodging, we were forced to camp outside town, under the wary and suspicious gazes of the Dimmelhillers and beyond the rather feeble wooden palisade that the locals had erected to keep out the odd orc and goblin raid. We passed the first night in grave discomfort, determined to press on into the moors the following day, in search of the Black Stone tower that we'd heard so much about.

The next morning brought a surprising visitor — a local woman who said her name was Marias and who actually brought us a loaf of hard, black bread for breakfast. When we thanked her, she addressed us fearfully, her eyes full of tears.

"Please, good sirs and ladies," she said, her voice frail and trembling. "I'd ask a favor of you. My husband, Guthrin — as good a man as ever you'd want to meet — and our son, Ty — a sweet child who loves his mother and is obedient in all things — went a-hunting in the moors three days past. They swore they would stick to the Monk's Path and return promptly, but they've yet to return, and none of the other folk in the village have the courage to go search for 'em. They whisper that Guthrin and Ty are gone, snatched away by the moor-trolls or drowned in a bog. I beg you, good folk, to find them for me. I can offer you little, save the thanks of a grateful woman."

Of course my first response was to ask what was in it for us besides her undying gratitude, but before I could speak Torvalda piped up.

"Shush, good woman," she said, laying a comforting hand on Marias's shoulder. "If your kin live, we'll find them for you, and ask nothing save your good wishes in return."

I swore inwardly. We had other business, and the needs of an impoverished peasant in an unfriendly town meant little to me. But Torvalda had a big heart for all her gruff manner, and as Akli the priest and my other companions smiled, nodded, and joined in on the enterprise, I had no choice but to painfully nod and paint on a smile of my own.

I relate this story primarily to illustrate an important point — that to gain the trust and friendship of the backward, ill-mannered folk of the Sundered Kingdoms, one has to provide favors and services far in excess of what they offer in exchange. For when we returned two days later, leading the two muddy, exhausted, but very much alive villagers back to a loving wife and mother, we had clearly gained their friendship and

loyalty, but nothing concrete beyond another loaf of bread and a bag full of turnips.

In areas with traditions of strong central authority — the Duchy of Southvale, the Matagost Peninsula, communities near Endhome — townsfolk and villagers are much the same as they are elsewhere in the world, with the expected mixture of friendly and distrustful attitudes. Outside of these "civilized" regions however — on the dry plains of Sunderland Province and in the wilderness of Old Burgundia — the people grow more isolated, and many are openly hostile to strangers.

This is an understandable attitude given the region's long history of deprivation, military conquest, and raids by hostile outsiders. Strangers must work very hard to gain villagers' trust, and even then it might not be given fully. Nevertheless, even minimal trust and friendship with the inhabitants of the region's smaller communities can mean the difference between life and death for adventurers.

Small, vulnerable, and often deprived of vital resources, these towns are sparsely scattered across the plains and moorland. Some typical towns and villages in the Sundered Lands are described here.

Dimmelhill

A tiny settlement on the edge of the Lonely Moor, Dimmelhill is one of very few hamlets in the region. Its people tend small herds of goats, farm private plots of land, and hunt in surrounding regions, including the moors. Though many villagers can serve as guides and have considerable knowledge of the surrounding territories, Dimmelhillers tend to be surly and uncooperative (more so even than other inhabitants of the province) owing to raids by bandits and bad experiences with unscrupulous or violent outsiders. Gaining a Dimmelhiller's trust can be valuable, however, as they are willing to share their meager bounty and offer shelter to those who help protect their settlement or its inhabitants. Dimmelhill has no real leader, but the elderly Grandmother Biza is generally considered to be the real authority in town, with most villagers consulting her in important matters.

Tirigoth

A tiny fishing village that clings to the southern edge of the Matagost Range, Tirigoth rarely sees foreign visitors and remains largely oblivious to the outside world. Conflict has arisen recently when a band of dwarven miners murdered a villager, leading to a ban on dwarves within the town. Mayor Limper Karl and his sheriff, Callawagn, are both on edge, fearful of attacks and reprisals by outsider dwarves, and would be happy for assistance in the settlement's defense.

Billockburne

Boasting a population of 165, Billockburne is the largest village located in the wilderness of the Lonely Moors. Absorbed with their daily lives — mainly sheep herding, peat cutting, and a small amount of trade with other settlements in the moor — its inhabitants have little time for politics or the outside world, and a hunter named Tom Gorn serves as the town's only real official. Local Brisbane Scutt runs the town's only tavern, and with the proper inducement, might be persuaded to rent out a room or two. Otherwise, the locals are tough and independent, though for the most part, they tend to lack the region's typical distrust of strangers.

Malthlyn

A once-prosperous village located uncomfortably close to the Moon Fog Hills, Malthlyn boasts a palisade, small temples to both Freya and Stryme, God of Strength, and accommodations at the comfortable Ore Road Inn. Though Malthlyn suffered hard times when the local silver mine closed, its fortunes have recently improved with the mine's reopening and the return of commerce. Rumors coming out of the region, however, suggest

that all is not well, and that shipments have been interrupted by unknown forces, though these stories have not yet been fully investigated.

Cat's Wife

A small and unexpectedly friendly community located on the King's Road, about 150 miles south of Endhome, Cat's Wife takes its name from a popular local fable about a cat seeking to purchase a wife. Images of cats abound in the village, and the most popular local inn is the Cat's Rest, owned by the good-hearted Athele Brownlocks. At this inn, visitors can obtain lodging in comfortable rooms, each supplied with its own cat. Darker tales of werebeasts and the cult of Cybele persist, but are laughed off by burgher Silas Buntervelt and his fellow villagers, including the stern Karl Rustov, local priest of Thyr.

Lore, Legends, and Places of Mystery

A place with as much history as the Sundered Kingdoms is sure to attract a wealth of legends, myths, tall stories, and outright lies. Distinguishing one from the other is what we, as adventurers, have to do. When we ventured into the Wildlands in search of a warrior-king's tomb, for example, we discovered that we were chasing a piece of folklore, exaggerated in years of telling, distorted by time, and all but unrecognizable. Needless to say, we never did find that warrior-king's tomb, but we did find two murderous perytons and a band of hill giants, so the trip was not a complete waste of time.

As Titus and his friends found, not all of the legends and rumors of the Sundered Kingdoms can be taken at face value. Stories are recounted in taverns, repeated in frightened whispers, or told to children at bedtime. The following tales and rumors will be familiar to anyone who spends time in the Sundered Kingdoms, though their relative truth or falsehood will certainly require investigation.

The Cults

Throughout our travels in Sunderland and beyond, we continually encountered rumors of underground cults — secret societies that worshipped chaotic gods and extradimensional beings. Unfortunately, solid evidence of these cults was hard to come by and could easily be interpreted in multiple ways. Tales circulated in the Duchy of Southvale, for example, of a cult that worshipped the demon Baphomet and drew to it the beast-folk of the Wildlands — minotaurs, shapechangers, and even the strange therianthropes that we had encountered there. On the other hand, the mere presence of these creatures and their strange ruler was not evidence of more widespread incidents of cultish activities in the Sundered Kingdoms.

We also found proof — debatable proof, but proof nonetheless — of such activities during our investigation of the Sons of Sefagreth in Oestre, when we found robes and ritual objects associated with the worship of the demon lord. Soon after our discovery, we found ourselves beset by assassins wielding potent magic and enchanted weapons. Alarmed, we investigated our patron, Corvidan — unfortunately his shop had been utterly ransacked and he himself was missing. Almost every document and communication in the place was gone too, save for a single fragment of parchment which said, in Corvidan's handwriting: "Seek the obelisk."

Rumors abound of secretive organizations and cults, drawn by some unknowable outside force to the Sundered Kingdoms, that worship strange beings like Orcus, Pazuzu, Cybele, Dagon, and worse. Evidence of these cults is, as Titus suggests, sparse and open to conjecture, for proof of one cult is not proof of all the others.

What is known is that followers of (and creatures associated with) certain deities and beings, tend to cluster in locations throughout the Sundered Kingdoms. Even the ancient Hyperboreans spoke of finding





primitive tribesfolk affected by outside evil forces and worshipping “foul demons and monstrous creatures.” The Hyperboreans worked to exterminate the cults, but many believe that they have persisted.

Beastfolk are frequently encountered in the Wildlands and near the ruins of Trevi, and revere Baphomet, the god of minotaurs. Cybele-worshipping witches are rumored to stalk the swamps of southern Ramthion Island. Hostile fish-folk, and worse, congregate in the Dardanal Strait and whisper stories of ancient Father Dagon. Gnoll clans that venerate the demon lord Crocutus have gathered in the Sand Hills, and are rumored to be engaged in large-scale excavations there. Insane or grotesquely diseased humans have been discovered tending to slimes and oozes, feeding and raising them while singing the praises of the near-forgotten Jubilex. There are many such examples throughout the kingdoms, but many claim that cult activities there are no more frequent than elsewhere in the world.

If there is indeed an overabundance of cults in the Sundered Kingdoms, how did they get there and why? Potential answers to this dilemma are as varied as the stories of the cults themselves. Some claim that the Sundered Lands are cursed, doomed to attract evil due to the violence and bloodshed that has plagued the realm for so long. Others believe that the Gods of Chaos, in a rare show of solidarity, united to gain access to this world and have unleashed their followers on this, the weakest and most chaotic of regions. Still other tales say the opposite — that the Chaos Lords are in competition with each other, seeing who can conquer the Sundered Kingdoms first.

Those who have given ancient legends a close reading suggest that the cults have existed since the days of the Ancient Ones, and they say, that when the Chiefs of Sull combined their powers to defeat King-Chieftain Aracor, something dire happened, though the specifics are not certain. According to this theory, the chiefs succeeded in defeating their rival, but in doing so unleashed fearsome forces, allowing the Lords of Chaos unprecedented access, and that this is the true source of the extensive cult presence in and around Sunderland Province.

The Moon Fog Hills

Our encounters in the Mistwood Mines had shaken us — despite all of our experiences up and down the Sinnar Coast, we had not dealt with the horrifying reality of what dwelt in the Moon Fog Hills. Even today I am loathe to speak of it. All I will say is that there are things there that dwell only in nightmares, and any treasure that might be found can stay there, as far as I am concerned. They say that the hills are hollow. Believe me — the truth is much, much worse, and that is all I will say on the matter in this present work.

Tavern tales, skalds’ epics, and sagas repeated around campfires speak of the great Hyperborean invasions millennia ago, when the first mighty empire strode across the Plains of Sull, bringing death, destruction, and the “benefits” of civilization to a benighted people. One region that the Hyperboreans never fully conquered was the area known today as the Moon Fog Hills. It remains a haunted place, named for the strange shining mists that arrive each night, eerily reflecting the moonlight.

The Hyperboreans were set back by the savage wildmen of the region, who seemed to appear and disappear at will. Try as they might, the invaders could not counter the wildmen’s strange abilities, even with the most powerful countermagic. In the end, the legend that the Moon Fog Hills were hollow, riddled with passages, and filled with evil sorcery sprang up, even as the wildmen themselves dwindled.

Today the story persists, drawing explorers, scholars, and fortune hunters hoping to uncover hidden riches in the supposedly “hollow” depths of the hills. There are many stories of what these individuals uncovered — monsters, mutant animals, savage cults, the degenerate remains of the ancient wildmen, and more — but so far no one has gained any of the wealth rumored to be hidden below. With the reopening of silver mines in the hills, a new spate of stories is making the rounds, drawing a new crowd of seekers, but they seemed doomed to end up the same as their predecessors.

The Ruins of Trevi

The region was every bit as wild and dangerous as we had been told. We were forced to defend ourselves almost every night, and our silvered weapons were soon tempered with the blood of savage lycanthropes — werewolves, wererats, and even a trio of ferocious female weretigers, all of whom escaped us, alive but wounded. And that is to say nothing of the well-equipped band of minotaurs who ambushed us one morning, and of the even more disturbing shape-changers whom we encountered. These creatures resembled humanoid lions, foxes, and even birds. I had never seen such things before, but priestess, Zarathe — our replacement for the unfortunate Akli — assured me that they were well-known in the region, and commonly called “therianthropes.”

It seemed clear that there was some greater power organizing these creatures, for we overheard some speaking respectfully of a leader whom they called “the Beautiful Contessa,” who had taken up residence in the ruins of Trevi. It seemed that once we reached the great city, we might actually discover this mysterious ruler’s true identity.

Trevi itself is truly a wonder, even in its decayed state. When one sees its sturdy stone walls, the remains of its broad avenues and graceful towers, its stately mansions and proud temples, palaces, and gates, it is both wondrous and saddening. Once we had slipped into the city, we had little time to appreciate its vanished grandeur, for we were quickly set upon and subdued by a heavily armed band of shapechangers.

Bound and helpless, we were transported to the remains of the grandly domed royal palace, where we were confronted by the individual known only as the Beautiful Contessa, a repulsive ogre mage wearing a crown with twin, rune-inscribed antlers and the rich robes of a priestess. She was the new ruler of the Wildlands, she told us — served by the beasts, the shapechangers, and the moon howlers. We would soon serve her, too, for her lycanthropic servants would infect us with their horrid curse, forcing us to remain in the Wildlands forever. Each of us was given a single choice

— that of which strain of lycanthropy with which we were to be infected. Desperately, I chose to become a weretiger, and the three feline sisters who had attacked us earlier approached me, their eyes glowing lustfully.

It was then that our newest member, Zarathe, proved her worth, shouting out a sacred word, calling upon her benevolent deity, and summoning an angelic, sword-armed being, seemingly crafted of pure, irresistible light. The creature only remained for a few heartbeats of time, but it was enough to stagger our foes as we freed ourselves and fled. How we escaped from those terrible ruins I cannot say, but without the priestess and her god’s intervention, we’d have been there still, serving the fearsome creature so ironically called “the Beautiful Contessa.”

We returned to Count Tarstel with our report. He grew pale as we described the terrible ogre mage, her followers, and her strange power over them, and then departed the Wildlands forthwith.

It’s said that the city of Trevi was once the jewel of Old Burgundia, and that its walls repelled attacker after attacker. Trevi’s star fell over 160 years ago, when the merciless legions of Oceanus finally overcame its celebrated defenses and laid waste to the entire region.

Since that day, the remains of the great city have gained a fell reputation, and the ravaged surrounding territories are known collectively as the Wildlands. Wild animals, beastfolk, lycanthropes, and other monstrous creatures seem unaccountably drawn to the place, banding together in loose associations to raid surrounding farms and villages, often slaying every inhabitant in bloody, moonlit massacres.

The Witches of Southfell

Though I’m loathe to admit it, in all the years I spent wandering throughout the Sundered Kingdoms, I never set foot on Ramthion Island. It’s a bad place, what with the Ramithi and the Oceanders fighting for control, though I found some of the legends downright intriguing. It’s said



that the entire south end is infested with witches — a cult of evil women who worship a goddess named Cybele and who hold secret sacrificial rites deep in the trackless swamp. Why they do this depends on who's telling the story, but all tales speak of a dangerous hidden society devoted to wicked causes and personal gain. Of course these are just the kind of rumors that draw adventurers, and if you're the sort to follow them, I wish you luck in your journeys. As for me, I find that swamp water is a good way to ruin a perfectly decent pair of boots.

This gloomy region of swampland at Ramthion's southern tip is the source of many legends and horrific tales, many centering on the dark Cult of Cybele and the mysterious doom of the town of Greenpool, still the subject of terrified rumor nearly a century later.

Especially common are stories of witches who steal babies from their cribs, and whose wizened fingers tap on windows in the night. The origins of these witches are uncertain — in some stories they emerged from the swamp, created by demons or evil gods, in others they were wicked women who sought out power through blood and suffering, and in still other tales, the witches were honest humans led astray by sinister forces. A few legends even claim that the first covens were founded by the wife of an influential noble, who used dark magic to make her family rich and powerful.

The nature of these witches' worship varies depending upon who is telling the tale, but in nearly all of them, the witches worship the powerful deity known as Cybele, the Magna Mater or the Goat with a Thousand Young. An ancient fertility goddess once propitiated with animal and human sacrifice, Cybele's cult was supposedly exterminated centuries ago, but in these stories her worship carries on in dark places throughout the region, especially in the hidden depths of the swamplands. There, witches gather to engage in secretive — and, in the more mature tales told in taverns and sung of in music halls, orgiastic — rites, where living victims, including children, are sacrificed in exchange for wisdom, magical power, and the ability to see the future.

A Hasty Farewell

I'd like to say that I left the Sundered Kingdoms with a heavy heart, but I'd be lying. It was self-preservation that drew me there in the first place, and it was greed, pure and simple, that sent me away. I'd been avoiding Lowport for quite some time — since my arrival, in fact — but when I took stock of the situation and discovered that, of my many companions, only Torvalda and I remained, I decided that it was time to finally say my goodbyes and move on. A reliable source reported that Captain Grimblade's sleek corsair the Avenger was in port, and I remembered a promise that she'd made me years before, that if ever I or my companions wanted to serve, she'd find a place for us.

And so it was, with the combined forces of Endhome, Oceanus, and Bard's Gate at my back, and a price on my head enough to make my killer a rich man or woman, I made my way back to the twisting streets of Lowport, Torvalda in tow, and together we signed on with the delighted Captain Grimblade and set sail for the even wilder and less predictable Razor Coast.

My time in the Sundered Kingdoms had not been safe, nor especially profitable, but it had brought me boon companions, danger, and excitement enough for several lifetimes, and for that I was grateful.

Of my adventures on the high seas and beyond I shall write in my next installment, Memoirs of a Rogue, Volume VIII: Blood and Swords on the Razor Coast.



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