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1 Varushka



?Bar your door, and do not open it before sunrise.?

Varushka is a land of dark magics and dark tales. Monsters lurk in the sunless spaces of the forests that lie across the broken hills like a blanket woven from shadows. Those who keep to the roads and keep to the rules can travel safely. Those who choose their own path find that the rulers of Varushka do not tolerate a challenge to their authority. Power comes in many forms in Varushka, sometimes brutal and uncompromising, sometimes subtle and unnoticed. Boyars guard their dominions; their Schlacta, their iron fist, enforce their will. Wise ones instruct their people, keep them safe by ensuring they know how to follow the rules. Itinerant wizards, the Volhov, keep dangerous company and make everyone?s business their own.

The people of Varushka make hard decisions and compromises to prosper in this difficult land. Their toil has seen them grow rich from the wealth to be had here, and their caution has seen them grow wise to the dangers that lie in wait. Dour by day, they celebrate by night - but only the foolish unbar their doors before dawn.

They are the iron in the Empire?s laws; unyielding, uncompromising, they do what must be done to keep the Empire strong. They are the Empire?s bones, who endure all and still prosper.

1.1 Five things about Varushka

- **Do not let your eyes fool you.** Appearances are deceptive, take nothing for granted.
- **Respect your elders.** The old possess wisdom that you will need to survive here.
- **Do not leave the road.** Only the human habitants of this place wish you well. Breaking the rules can have terrible consequences.
- **Prepare for difficult choices.** Often the only choice is the lesser of two evils.
- **Do not tolerate fools or wastrels.** Tolerance builds complacency and invites disaster.

1.2 What the Varushkans are not

- **Evil.** The Varushkans can be authoritarian, uncompromising and intolerant but they are law-abiding, not sadistic, bloodthirsty or needlessly cruel. Their rule is hard but the real monsters lie outside their walls.
- **Cossacks.** Varushka draws on Eastern Europe and Russia but it is also inspired by Germany, dark fantasy and the Brothers Grimm. The Cossacks and the stereotypes that accompany them are not part of the setting.



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2 Varushka people



Ties of family are extremely important in Varushka
Varushka is a hard country. Life here is a struggle; the summers are short and the winters are long. The land is wild and resentful ? it resists taming and sends monsters to threaten those who would settle here. Varushkans are stoic and grim in the face of this adversity, only letting down their guard when they are able to secure their door against the dangers of the night.

Stories claim that the draughir lineage began in Varushka in a valley beset by terrible famine. A boyar made a deal with a powerful Winter eternal to save her people but in the process they were transformed into monsters who feasted on rotten meat and the flesh of the dead. Traditionally the Varushkans have a great deal of respect for the pragmatic instincts of the draughir and for their ability to survive, while simultaneously keeping a close eye on them in case their monstrous appetites overwhelm them.

To endure the predations of the land, the Varushkans have become guarded and wary. Most live in vales, wide valleys where the roads in and out can easily be watched. To survive here requires constant protection from the terrible dangers that infest the land. If those who provide that protection sometimes exact a grim toll in return, that too is the Varushkan way. Varushkans have little time for fairy stories where everything ends happily ever after ? they are a people well used to making hard choices.

Prospering in Varushka depends on following the iron laws of the land. Those who depart from the road or otherwise break the rules risk bringing ruin to the doors of their family and loved ones. At times those who display the briar lineage have been distrusted, a common prejudice assuming that their wilful nature makes it difficult for them to follow the rules. However the Imperial Synod in Autumn 383YE, the Synod rebuked all citizens telling them it was a failing of Pride to judge a briar for what they are rather than what they do. Varushkans are a proud people and have taken the lesson to heart and no longer permit their neighbours to distrust or suspect briars based on lineage alone.

Isolation is a fact of life here. Dangerous wilderness, where darker powers hold sway, lies between the vales. The Varushka have built roads to join their settlements and learned ways to ward those roads against the fell creatures that stalk the night, but no warding is perfect and some evils cannot be kept out by magic alone. The people know that if they grow weak or soft, if they forget the lessons of their past and the blood that was spilled to learn them, then those dark powers will reach out to claim them.

The malevolent entities that dwell in the dark woods of Varushka come in many different forms. The weaker ones, which the Varushkans call Wolves, can be driven off by strength of arms alone; but the most dangerous, called Sovereigns, require more subtle ways to deal with them. Varushkans have learned to prize wisdom dearly, for understanding is essential to dealing with the threats they face. Sometimes these threats can be defeated and destroyed but more often they must be endured. And sometimes they must be bargained with; for no matter how distasteful, it is a truism that it is better for one life to be lost than all.



The country is harsh, and the forest is haunted, but the people are unbowed.
The wealth of the land is what makes the dangers of Varushka worth facing. Veins of ore lie close to the surface, the trees provide valuable amber and timber, while the forests and rivers teem with beasts. Danger is never far away, but the land provides commensurate reward for those who are careful and wise enough to endure its predations.

The Varushkan people are often considered pessimistic by outsiders. They expect the worst, and they prepare accordingly. Yet they also possess an irrepressible spirit ? they endure hardship but they refuse to give in. They take fierce pride in their ability to prosper in a dangerous land. They carve out homes for their families from the darkest woods, and reap rich rewards for daring to live where lesser folk would falter. No one can know the joy of small things like a Varushkan, for nothing is given them: they have fought for everything they have.

At one point, they were two peoples ? the Vard and the Ushka. The necessity of living in a harsh land first blurred and then removed those distinctions centuries ago, and they are absolutely one people. The only exception is those Varushkans who are born with a white birthmark somewhere on their bodies. According to legend, this mark shows the child as having a strong connection to the ancient Ushka, and the shape of the birthmark may give a hint as to who the child may have been in a past life. Children born with such birthmarks are often a little fey and unpredictable, feeling a strong instinctual connection to the dark forests and are said to possess a natural talent for bargains ? a ?*silver tongue flows from a silver mark*.?



Costume and photography by Sarah Loughlin

2.1 Names

Varushkan names are primarily Slavic in flavour.

It is common for children to initially be named with something more akin to a nickname, a substitutional name, that it is often thought will not attract the curiosity of those Evils that constantly threaten the Vales. These names are short and often dismissive in tone, to keep the children safe. Normally the child will be granted their proper name sometime between 7 and 11 years old, as they begin to develop towards adulthood. It has been known for these names to last long into adulthood though, mostly much to the bearer's annoyance.

Adult names are normally three part - a first name that carries meaning itself, a second name that is patronymic or matronymic with -ovich, -ovna, -in, -yn, -ov, -ev, --eva, -ova, -ina or similar suffixes added to one of the persons parents' names. The third name that is usually the family name, though sometimes this is derived from the Vale's name especially when unfortunate circumstances have struck the family.

N.B. Whilst real world Slavic names may be given to specific genders, Empire is a gender blind setting and people of any gender choose any name they like that is appropriate to their nation.

2.1.1 Naming resources

Wikipedia has an excellent list of names, along with the historical meanings.

2.2 Further Reading

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3 Varushka culture and customs

3.1 Family



A respect for family is central to Varushkan culture. Varushkans commonly use familial titles to show respect and friendship. Friends may call each other cousin, or even brother, sister or sibling if they are particularly close. Calling someone aunt, uncle, or bibi indicates a significant degree of respect and acknowledges someone?s seniority and authority while grandparent, grandfather, or grandmother is usually used for the oldest and most respected members of the community. Individuals honoured in this way are usually treated just like any other family member.

Old age commands respect in Varushka. Older relatives who pass their wisdom and experience down to the younger generations are treasured. To the Varushkans, long years both grant and demonstrate wisdom. Fools die young, and their strength does not save them. Varushkan folklore includes countless stories where the young hero gets into trouble after ignoring the advice of their elders.

Often this tradition of the older generation passing their wisdom to the younger is demonstrated in the form of an apprenticeship. Rarely formalised, it is especially common with magicians and priests. An older individual takes a younger one "under their wing" and imparts their wisdom while engaging in day-to-day activities. The younger individual, for their part, helps the older in any number of ways, often serving as an assistant or conversational foil, for example.

3.2 Parting

Varushkans have a tradition of gift giving before and after a significant journey. When a Varushkan leaves their family for the first time, there is usually a ceremony to mark the occasion, a celebration that culminates with one or more gifts. Travellers sometimes do not come back, or come back changed, so when family return from such travels, there is a second celebration where the returning traveller is expected to give gifts in their turn. Traditionally the gifts given to a departing family member are usually practical, while gifts given by the returning family member are usually decorative mementos of the traveller's journey.

The Varushkan people cannot afford to suffer the foolish or indulge the lazy for long. The slothful, the ignorant, the arrogant and the petty criminal ? anyone whose presence is no longer tolerable ? receives an unlooked for parting ceremony, receiving the traditional departure gifts of a travelling cloak, a sack, a meal of bread and cheese, and a stout staff before effectively being exiled. Such individuals either learn harsh lessons in self-sufficiency or die in the wilderness between vales. The luckiest fall in with a group of travelling Navarr, while others end up joining a new community, become bandits or leave Varushka forever. While some hold grudges against the vales that threw them out, those who learn from their experiences and become better people feature strongly in Varushkan folklore.

One particular parting tradition is performed on the eve or the morning of battle, or before an especially long or perilous mission. Most often a spouse or lover, but sometimes a close friend or parent, spends time braiding the hair of the loved-one who is leaving into an intricate weave, working charms of protection in as they go. The hair is not untied until they are together again. Those without long hair are often ceremonially presented with a hank of braided animal hair, or knotted yarn, which will be carried until the pair are reunited and untie it together. In much of Varushka this is also performed for the beloved dead as they set off on their last journey - some folk-takes refer to the shame of going from this life with loose hair and thus unloved.

3.3 Hospitality

Anyone who lives in Varushka for long learns to be naturally suspicious of strangers. The land has many dangers and some can take a pleasing form if they choose to. Despite this they traditionally offer a warm welcome to any who stay after nightfall. Varushkans rarely let their guard down around strangers, but they know that treating them well is the best way to ensure prosperity and avert danger.



Artwork by Joanna Bendle

Treating a stranger well is the first step to turning them into an ally, and encourages them to respond in kind ? pitching in with the cleaning, the cooking and so on. More importantly, treating a disguised monster well traps them in the role of well-behaved guest. As long as they are not mistreated, they are bound by the rules of hospitality, and they cannot harm anyone. There are several cautionary tales of Varushkans who forget the importance of these customs and bring terrible suffering down on themselves and their families.

Bringing your own food and drink and sharing it with your hosts is a cultural expectation as well as common courtesy. Visitors who break the traditions of hospitality by being rude or taking their hosts for granted may be offered a drink or a meal ?for the road?. This phrase is a pointed warning that your behaviour is offending your hosts and the visitor who does not mend their ways faces immediate ejection. Depending on the circumstances a wise visitor

might decline the offer and ask instead for a bed for the night. A foolish visitor who accepts the offer or carries on causing offence faces expulsion into the dark night.

3.4 Celebration

Day is the time for hard work. Celebrating before the sun touches the treetops implies indolence and invites the land to punish you accordingly. Few celebrations are ever held during daylight and as a result many Varushkans appear dour and parsimonious at first. In fact, they reserve their merrymaking for nightfall when feasts, drinking, dancing, toasting, storytelling and singing abound. Varushkans love dark bread and honey, and many meals start or end with it. Honey is also used to brew mead or create sweets, and bees are a powerful symbol of Prosperity, wealth and the family. Stzena are part- or full-time musicians employed by many towns and villages to play and compose music for local celebrations.

Festivals and feasts are a common feature of Varushkan life; among the most widespread observations are the **Feast of the Loom** and the **Winter Market**.

3.4.1 The Feast of the Loom

In the remote and isolated vales of Varushka, superstitions and traditions that date from the earliest days of the Imperial Faith -and perhaps before - persist in hearth magics and festivals. One such tradition is the Feast of the Loom, a winter celebration that traditionally begins at dusk on the first night of the Winter Solstice, when Varushkans gather around the hearth to share food, drink, songs and stories (in particular, this song). Any Stzena present often begin the proceedings by performing, though their role throughout the night is more to encourage the participation of others than to provide continual entertainment themselves.

The Loom after which the festival is named comes from one of the traditional tales told at this festival. Many vales have their own version, which tells of three sisters whose children wander too far from their house and lose themselves in the woods. One sister tries to draw them back by lighting fires on the edge of the forest, one makes noise with bells, rattles and signing, but only when the third sister brings her loom, and weaves the children's names into cloth with scraps of their clothes and hair do the children remember their families and return home. Taken literally it is told as a children's story to warn against the dangers of straying into the dark forests; allegorically the children are thought to represent to lost souls in the Labyrinth. At this time of year, some Varushkans still cling to the primitive superstition that the labyrinth is passing closest to the mortal realm and that songs and tales told of the departed will be heard by the souls of the Virtuous dead, and hasten their rebirth. It is traditional in some vales for a simple loom to be hung near the Hearth, where are all welcome to weave scraps of ribbon, cloth or hair into a rug or blanket over the course of the Festival.



3.4.2 The Winter Market

No season in Varushka can be said to be easy, but for the unprepared, Winter especially can prove fatal. When the air cools and the blizzards begin in the northern territories, it is only a matter of time before the roads become impassable, adding the perils of avalanches, deep crevasses and freezing temperatures to the ever-present fear of Wolves. Travel becomes difficult, and trade near impossible. For that reason, many Varushkans make an annual Autumn journey to the largest settlement nearby, to stock up on all that they need to see them through the Winter months.

Many vales hold a formal **Winter Market**, and take the opportunity to celebrate with their neighbours before returning to their homes to wait out the season. Traditionally shopping for food, furs, and textiles is done during the afternoon, with entertainment and sweets provided for children and hot spiced wine for adults. One tradition involves giving older children a pouch of money and a shopping list, and telling them they have exactly the right amount of coin for the goods they are to buy. Children quickly learn that the harder they bargain and the more carefully they shop, the more coin they have to spend on themselves, learning valuable skills in the process.

When dusk comes the market usually pauses while the area is warded against the night. Once that is done the children are usually tucked up in bed, and the Shadow Market begins. Some stalls - often those selling hot wine and food - remain open - others close, allowing their owners to devote themselves to revelry. Music and fire breathing are popular entertainments; puppeteers and storytellers change their daytime repertoire to suit darker and more adult tastes. In some vales the celebration lasts long into the night, the guests knowing that this may be their last chance for some months - or perhaps, forever.

3.5 Funerals

A funeral is almost always a sombre occasion in Varushka. The majority of funerals take place during the day, and are restrained affairs marked by eulogies spoken by the closest friends and families of the dead and a blessing from a priest. The body is then buried in a graveyard or corpse garden, wrapped in a shroud traditionally sewn together out of the sheets and blankets from the last bed they slept in before death. Graves are usually dug by the closest relatives of the deceased, rather than by any kind of professional.

After sunset, the tenor of the funeral changes. It is traditional to have a celebratory wake once the sun has set, during which an extra place is set for the dead. It is common for a Varushkan to put an amount of money aside with a trusted friend or a wise one to pay for the wake. The wake often lasts until sunrise, and includes the reading of the will and the distribution of the deceased's property wherever possible.

Varushkans remain buried for around five years, after which their bones are dug up and they are reinterred in an ossuary. The greatly reduced space taken up by an ossuary means that it is possible to store the remains of many more people in a single tomb which is much easier to protect than a sprawling cemetery. Ossuaries often have underground catacombs, and a comparatively small building can serve the needs of an entire vale.

3.6 Icons and Artistry

The virtuous animals are ubiquitous elements in Varushkan art, appearing on jewellery, heraldry, embroidery and decoration. They are especially common as belt buckles, or as symbols carved into belt leather, but also appear as charms worn on bracelets or medallions, or embroidered onto patches sewn onto a garment. Most Varushkan paintings or tapestries will include a virtuous animal, sometimes hidden away as part of the background, and ornamental icons or sculptures of appropriate animals are found in many Varushkan homes. Wood, woollen or felt toys in the shape of a virtuous animal are commonly given to a baby on their first birthday, in the hope they will watch over and protect the child as they grow.

The iconic image of the Varushkan nation is the eagle (an animal representing Pride) with an axe - specifically a woodcutter's axe rather than a battle-axe. One common version depicts a two-headed eagle with crossed golden axes in its talons, celebrating the martial power of the Northern Eagle and the Golden Axe. In the early years of the Empire, one or both of the eagle heads would be shown wearing a Varushkan helmet, but that image fell out of favour following the dissolution of the Iron Helms during the reign of Empress Mariika.

Symbols of warding are common components of Varushkan art, including eyes and faces that watch vigilantly for danger, stars and moons that represent the light that comes at night, images of torches and burning brands, and symbols of swords and shields that represent armed might. Symbols of the Way are also employed, especially the labyrinth which represents a hope that monsters will become lost and unable to find the bearer. Many Varushkans wear a talisman or amulet with a personal symbol that represents protection carved on it, and gifts of protective talismans are common.

3.7 Embroidery and Weaving

Most Varushkans have at least one article of clothing which has been carefully embroidered. Many use it as a clear demonstration of wealth, where it can't be displayed in the choice of fabric. Intricate embroidery is often used around the bands and hems. Most use a single, simple pattern that is repeated across the garment's hems, evoking the roads that thread across Varushka and the walls that keep its people safe. Some people take inspiration from their child names, especially where it is an animal. Others use simple depictions of the virtuous animals to draw attention to a specific virtue, or even variants of the symbols used by Imperial armies to denote a past allegiance.

Few Varushkans venture forth after dark, so it is no surprise that the craft of hand spinning is an important and respected one. Many people spend their evenings at home, singing and spinning, and the craft of weaving, of bringing the many into one, is a well-respected art form, and the best pieces can draw visitors from miles around.

3.8 Further Reading

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4 Varushka look and feel



Varushkan dress is practical, but made from rich cloth beautifully embroidered.

4.1 Overview

Dour, stern, uncompromising, wise, cunning, prosperous, rich, powerful.
Varushkans like to display their wealth in their costume. Clothes are usually practical and well made but are made from cloth dyed in bright colours and then intricately embroidered with a dark thread. The use of fur is common, on cloaks, robes and mantles in a range of colours and styles.

Armour and weapons are always solid and well made. For most they are practical pieces made to serve, but the wealthiest Varushkans use ornate designs that serve to strike fear into their enemies. Talismans are widespread, used to help ward off evil.

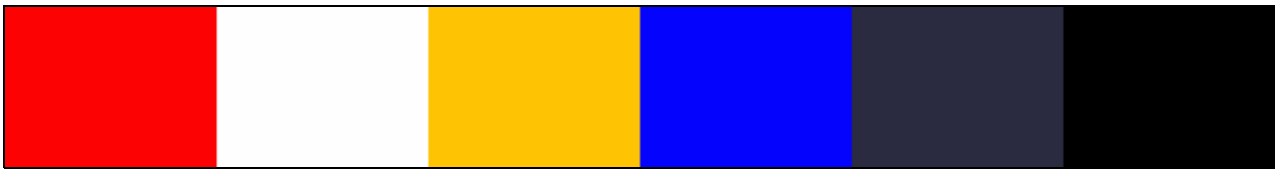
Also see Varushka costumes and icons and artistry.

4.2 Breakdown

Influences
Rus and Slavic costume.

Materials
Fabrics are usually a single colour, suitable for embroidery or decoration. Poorer Varushkans use practical and hard wearing materials like wool, felt, heavy cotton, leather - but the fabric is less important than the decoration. Fur is common, but is usually reserved for trim.

Colours
Bright vibrant colours predominate, with white, decorated with brightly coloured embroidery also common.



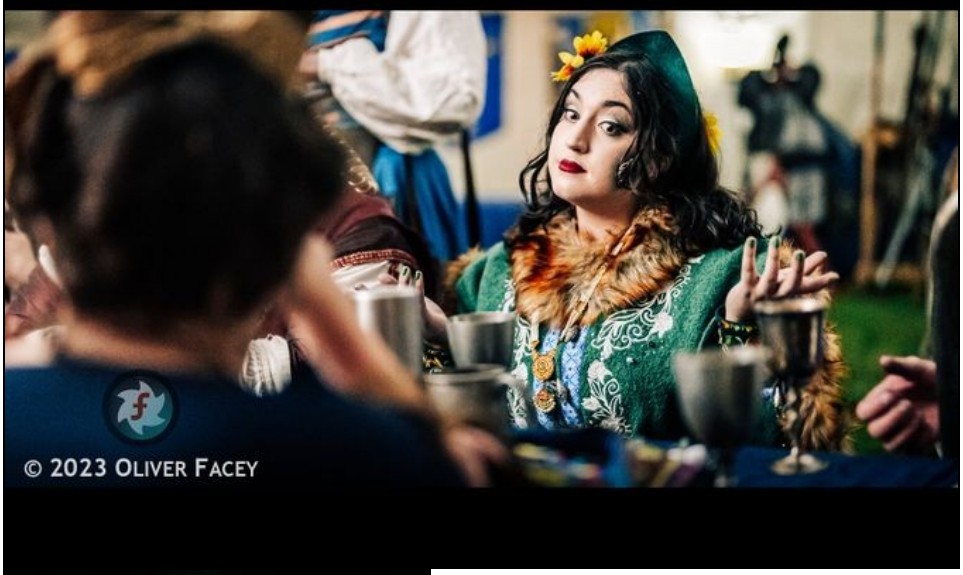
4.3 Clothing

The most common Varushkan costume is a white shirt, tunic or dress, often white or a light colour. This is usually intricately embroidered on the hems, red is traditional but other bright contrasting colours are seen. Garments are sometimes made from wool, but most Varushkans prefer a lighter material. These can be worn in layers for warmth, commonly with different garments in contrasting colours. Warm shawls in bright colours are handed down through families.

Varushkans of all genders frequently wear plain coloured ?hero trousers?, baggy down to just past the knee then strapped to the leg. Trousers may be plain or brightly dyed but are usually made from fabric of a single colour; the strapping is another opportunity for a bright contrasting colour, embroidery or both. Coats are more common than cloaks. The traditional coat has an asymmetric overlap across the chest, is nipped in at the waist but flares out below the waist to a full ?skirt?. The wealthiest wear coats in bright strong colours often with fur trim or embroidered hems. If dresses are worn they tend to have full, layered skirts, often with added aprons.

For jewellery the most common material is amber and silver. Hunters carry amulets and talismans designed to protect them from the monsters that might otherwise hunt them in turn.

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4.3.1 Decoration and Embroidery

Fur is used extensively to trim garments of all kinds including armour. When trims are added it tends to be in bands of colour around the upper arms and hems. The most distinctive feature of Varushkan costume is the intricate embroidery that provides a strong contrast. Embroidery stands out as a mark of the wearer?s wealth - and is most commonly seen in bands and hems not across whole garments.

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4.3.2 Hats

Varushkan hats may be simple embroidered round caps trimmed with fur (you can find a simple tutorial for making this kind of hat here), kokoshnik in the appropriate colours, or else pointed caps that fold over the head.

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4.3.3 Wise Ones

Wise ones have a distinctive look which marks them out from other Varushkans. They receive a lot of gifts from the people they help and many people choose to give hair locks in return for luck and answers. The Wise Ones might braid these into their own hair, or wear them in bunches on belts or tied to staves. Other talismans and totems similarly given are similarly incorporated into hair or clothing or worn as jewellery. Many Wise Ones will know the story of each talisman they wear.

Wise Ones also tend to wear blindfolds when they are conducting official business, and for some their blindfolds become an iconic part of their costume worn as head band or stole. They often make the most traditional of choices - long wrapover coats in the favourite colours of Varushka are common, and many take a ritualised approach to ageing - emphasising crow's feet around the eyes with colours, drawing attention to white streaks in the hair - even clothing is sometimes retained, patched and repatched to show its age.

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4.3.4 Volhovs

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4.4 Weapons and Armour

4.4.1 Armour

The traditional Varushkan armour worn by the schlacta, the professional soldiers, is tightly woven scale or lamellar. It is as likely to be leather as metal. Splinted greaves and vambraces are common. Helms usually rise to a point, often with a plume.

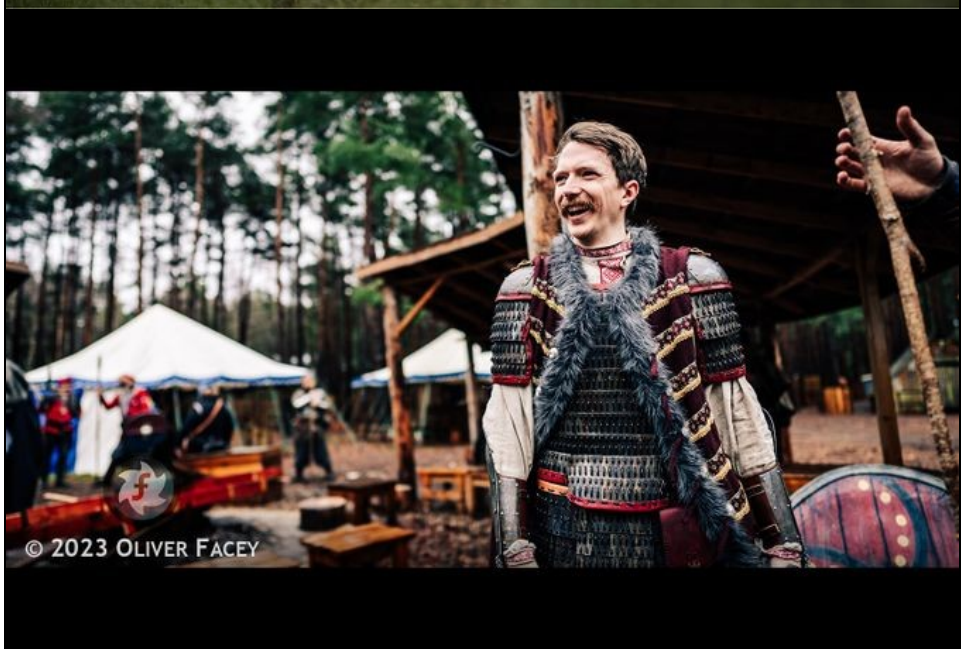
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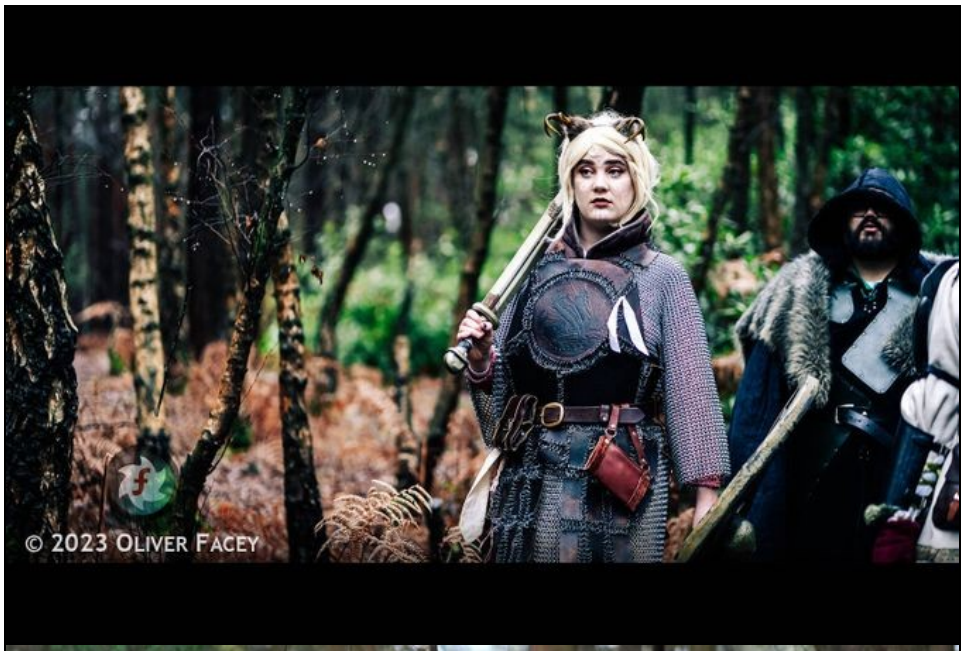
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4.4.2 Boyars

Warrior Boyars often wear the traditional lamellar armour but with more complete coverage and supplemented with hardened leather or plate on the fore-arms and legs. A few wear plate that has a simple design but is intricately decorated with the tooled plate emphasising the strength and power of the wearer to make them appear darker and more intimidating.

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4.4.3 Shields

Plain round shields are common. Bucklers are occasionally used but most warriors prefer the superior protection that a shield offers.

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4.4.4 Weapons

Schlacta, wagon raiders and sell-swords, the Varushkan professional warriors, use heavy weapons of war such as broad swords, war axes and bardiches. The woodsman?s axe is a common weapon for many other Varushkans.

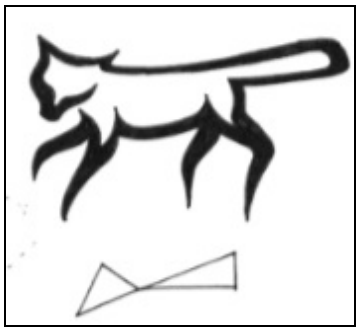
4.5 Children

Costume for Varushkan children follows the traditional styles and emphasis on bright colours.

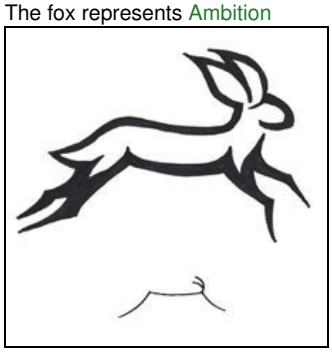
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4.6 Animals and Runes

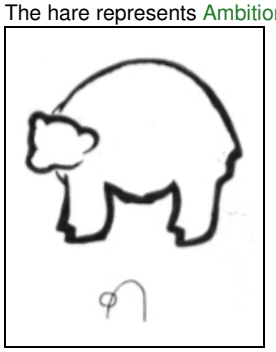
Varushkans often use animal symbols and runes to express virtues in their storytelling and artwork.

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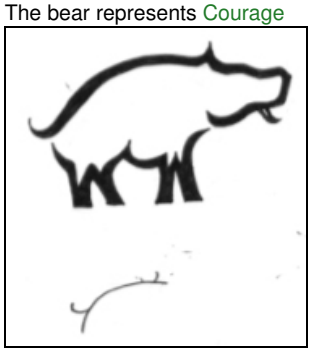
The fox represents Ambition

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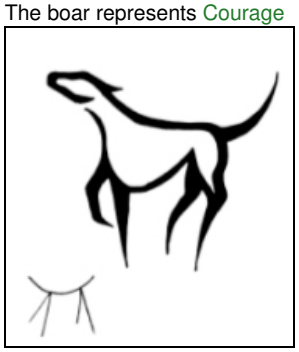
The hare represents Ambition

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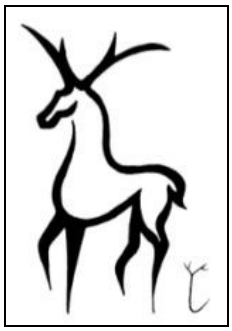
The bear represents Courage

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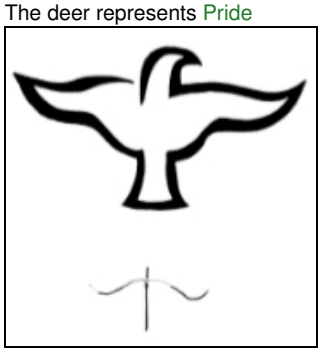
The boar represents Courage

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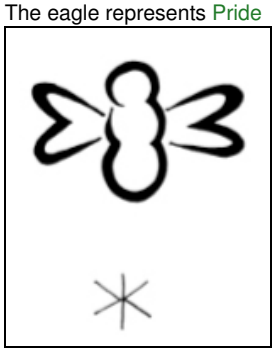
The hound represents Loyalty

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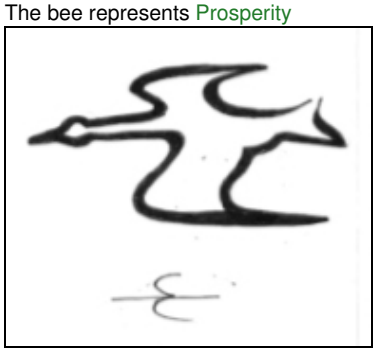
The deer represents Pride

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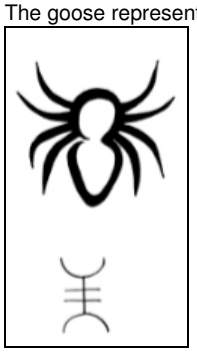
The eagle represents Pride

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The bee represents Prosperity

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The goose represents Vigilance

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The spider represents Vigilance and Wisdom

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The squirrel represents Wisdom

4.7 Inappropriate Costume

Whilst this look and feel page provides the ideal costume for the nation, it is important for players to familiarise themselves with the general costume rules for further guidelines, including those for inappropriate costume

- Varushka is not a catch all culture for all things cool and Eastern European/Russian. It would be surprising to find short braided cavalry jackets (eg Hussar's jackets) worn by Varushkans rather than the long swirling coats they favour.
- Similarly big fur hats and tiny waistcoats - Cossack style - are not commonly worn and neither are Cossack dances a common form of Varushkan entertainment.
- It may seem a short step from some of the costume guidance and the cold of Varushkan lands to Vikings and then to Thor's Hammer symbols. As Thor doesn't exist in the world of Empire the iconic symbol (much like the Christian Cross in Highguard) is best avoided where possible.

4.8 Further Reading

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5 Varushka hearth magic



Every child should know a way to ward off evil.

5.1 Overview

In the world of Empire, formal magic is the application of learning and willpower to create supernatural effects. There is another form of magic, however, which does not require the user to be a magician. Hearth magic employs the innate natural magic of the world to produce subtle but significant effects in much the same way that a compass needle always points true north. The magic is not based on the abilities of a magician, but relies on the innate mystical properties of the world. Hearth magic is usually subtle rather than potent, and where formal magic is predictable and reliable, hearth magic is none of these things.

While the principles that underlie hearth magic are common throughout the world, in Varushka there are certain specific practices, customs, or traditions that draw on the power of the world's innate magic. Often these proud customs are nothing more than traditions - but sometimes their practice taps into some facet of the world resulting in a truly magical effect.

You can learn more about hearth magic, what it is and how it works, here.

5.2 Hospitality

Hospitality is the practice of honestly sharing what you have with a guest. The iron laws of hospitality are one of the things that make life bearable in Varushka. Without them, it is doubtful if any strange traveller would ever be permitted to enter a vale, given the dangers such people can bring with them. But the hearth magic of hospitality provides a powerful protection for the host. Those who offer food and shelter to visitors know that if any mortal betrays their trust they risk ruin. Varushkan tales warning of the terrible curses that befall those who violate the laws of hospitality are almost as common as the stories warning of death for any who leave the safety of the roads. There are robbers and brigands in Varushka just as there are in any land - but none so foolish as to ask for hospitality from their hosts before robbing them. At least not for long.

Powerful as this protection is against mortals it is even more effective against unnatural creatures. Mora - Varushkan shapeshifters - will often assume the form of a human traveller seeking hospitality. They try to trick their hosts, but the magic they use to change their appearance carries a crucial weakness. The magic binds them to the form they have taken for as long as they are treated courteously and offered hospitality. While they are being treated as if they were what they appear to be, they cannot change their shape and are compelled to continue in the role they have assumed. There are many Varushkan stories of such creatures being bound to act as a polite guest and leave without hurting their hosts, or of a reckless fool who takes a mora as a spouse and meets a terrible end when they mistreat them.

Not only the guest is bound by hospitality - those who offer it are equally bound to keep the sacred trust. An innkeeper who gives food to weary travellers before robbing them will suffer in the same way as a traveller who steals from their host. Supernatural creatures are likewise compelled to keep faith with their guests. It is common for a sovereign to offer hospitality to those who visit its demesne, and doing so binds them to treat fairly with those who accept it. A wise volhov knows that the nature of the sovereigns is duplicitous however; the wicked host will often lay traps designed to trick a guest into breaking the rules of hospitality in some fashion, freeing the sovereign to destroy them. In one well-known example, a party of travellers met a grim end because they ignored the advice of their volhov guide and assumed that everything on the dining table was safe to consume unaware that the wine was not intended for their use.

There is one well-known limitation on hospitality; only creatures capable of *offering* hospitality can be bound by it. The murderous husk and the hungry lion alike are unaffected by the bonds of hospitality because they are incapable of serving as hosts.

Hospitality in Play

Choosing to offer hospitality to someone who visits your camp is a great way to play out the Varushkan traditions and to invoke this important hearth magic. You don't need to provide a sumptuous meal - all that is required is that you make an honest attempt to share what you have. Remember though that you don't need to offer hospitality at all unless you *want* to. Varushka is not a charitable nation, so visitors who aim to play on your good will should be made to work for their dinner or sent on their way with a flea in their ear. If you offer someone hospitality and they abuse it, you can always get rid of them by offering them *"a drink for the road"*. Anyone who does not quickly mend their ways after receiving such an offer can be slung out of your camp without fear of retribution. If someone says those words to you, then it means your character has overstayed their welcome and you should make amends or move on.

While most Varushkans will keep their guard up around strangers or anyone who is acting a little odd or suspicious - your character can relax if they accept your hospitality. Likewise if you have entered someone's camp and been offered hospitality then it is a good sign that they are friendly and mean you well. One of the benefits of the hearth magic of hospitality and the curse that befalls anyone who breaks it is that you can use it to overcome some of the natural suspicion that characterises Varushka if you want to. If you know your character has broken this sacred trust then you know you will be doomed as a result, unless you can find a way to make amends and lift the curse. Embracing the roleplaying around such a curse is a great way to create drama for yourself and others, even if that just means roleplaying that any misfortune that falls on your head is a result of your doom.

If you're interacting with a supernatural creature you can relax a little if it offers or accepts hospitality. If a sovereign offers you something to eat then it is likely that you can emerge from the encounter unharmed - as long as you keep your wits about you. The creature might well try and trick you into breaking hospitality in some way - but it won't outright attack you unless you do. Have a care what you say also - many sovereigns treat any insult or poor manners as a breach of hospitality.

5.3 Home

There is a hearth magic that strengthens someone in their own home, a natural consequence of the law of dominion. The things that you keep around your home serve to strengthen this hearth magic by making the place your own - but they can also carry some of the magic with them when you travel. Varushkan cabalists often seek to incorporate items taken from their home when performing rituals, or deliberately invoke imagery of home and hearth to strengthen their magic.

Most Varushkans will fight with everything they have to defend their home, and many find they can call on reserves of strength they did not know they had at such times. The power of this hearth magic can extend beyond a single home in the right circumstances. A single community, most commonly a vale, will often find themselves banding together to oppose an external attack. The hearth magic benefits everyone who fights together in this way to defend their shared home. This seems to be as far as it runs though - attempts to employ this hearth magic across regions, territories or the entire nation always fail.

The power of a sovereign grows dramatically the closer they are to their demesne, the location that is the centre of their power. No two sovereigns are alike in appearance, personality, or powers, but that they all share this same quality of being tied to their home. Their power is vast, but only because their remit is so heavily circumscribed. Some are so tightly bound to the spot that they cannot travel abroad, day or night. Others may roam a short distance, but are unable to leave the confines of whatever region they inhabit, forced to rely on wolves and other servants to enact their wishes in the wider world.

Home in Play

Although the vale you call home is where you should feel most powerful, this can extend to the temporary home you create when you visit Anvil. If you have a tent, or a shared communal tent, you may treat that as your home and modify your roleplaying appropriately. Expecting respect and civil behaviour from guests, feeling empowered and secure in your home, or decorating the place with banners or similar that leave no doubt as to who it belongs to are all good ways to call out this hearth magic.

Likewise, when you are visiting someone else's home, you may feel a little uncomfortable or vulnerable, or go out of your way to be polite to your host. One way to bring this out might be explicitly asking if there are any taboos or expected behaviours you should know about while you are visiting someone else's home.

If you can, then it's great to decorate your camp with things that might have come from home. This might be as simple as a picture to hang on the wall of your tent, or roleplaying that the banners you hang or the tools you cook with all come from your home. Anything you can do to make your area feel more homely invokes this hearth magic and helps to make the Varushkan camp feel more evocative for everyone.

5.4 Wards

While magical wards created using ritual magic are more reliable, almost every Varushkan knows a simple way to ward off evil. Many Varushkans wear a talisman or amulet with a personal symbol that represents protection carved on it, and gifts of protective talismans are common. Such wardings are not to be relied on but they are better than nothing. There are almost as many different symbols of warding as there are wards themselves. The use of eyes and faces that watch vigilantly for danger is common, with tent posts, lintels and fence stakes carved with faces that can keep watch. Other wards employ the stars and moons to represent the light that comes at night, or images of torches and burning brands, as well as symbols of swords and shields that represent armed might. Some symbols of the Imperial Faith are used as well, especially the labyrinth which represents a hope that monsters will become lost and unable to find the bearer. In dire need, many things can be used to ward an area. There are tales of travellers who were saved by a circle in the earth inscribed with salt, flour, or even petals or flowers.

The most basic ward known in Varushka is a simple wall. It is the essential nature of walls that they create a barrier. In Varushka they traditionally have warding symbols carved into or painted on to them, and it is vital that such sigils be maintained. Many monsters have strictures that prevent them clambering over walls or attempting to breach them to get at the inhabitants. Just as they can keep things *outside*, they can also be used to trap things *inside*. There are plenty of stories of sovereigns trapped inside enclosures of one type or another. Wise travellers know that if they encounter an old wall in the wilderness, perhaps one with no obvious doors, they should leave well enough alone. Those who don't risk bringing ruin on everyone else nearby.

Varushkan wise ones say that roads are ?*walls laid on their side*?. They are much more than just a route to travel. Properly marked and signed, they represent a triumph of human will over the Varushkan wilderness, driving the marks of civilisation into a land that might otherwise resist them. The powerful warding they provide is what allows Varushka to exist as a nation. Few wolves will dare to step over a properly constructed Varushkan road. Without this protection, it is doubtful that meaningful communication between Varushkan vales would realistically be possible.

The risk with wards is that their power comes from the separation between the people who dwell within them and those kept out. If someone inside a ward - whether it be a ring of salt, a palisade of stout oak, or a sturdy keep of white granite - invites someone to enter then any supernatural protection provided by the barrier is negated. This need not spell disaster - an intelligent creature can be offered hospitality and bound by the rules of host and guest - but it is a fact drilled into every Varushkan child that one should always be extremely careful about inviting a stranger into one's home, especially after dark.

Wards and Walls in Play

Every Varushkan knows at least one way to ward off evil. There are some examples above, but you are free to make up one of your own in a similar style. Employing that warding in dangerous situations can help heighten the drama. The Varushkan camp is regularly warded by players, and you can add to this magic by including some of your own specific methods, hanging warding symbols along the fence that surrounds the camp, or including warding symbols in the decoration of your personal or group tent.

If you are a ritual caster, you or your coven can make a big deal of warding the area where you are performing magic to ensure that no outside influences impinge on your working - or to protect bystanders from any side-effects of your magic. This is particularly appropriate for magic such as Whispers through the Black Gate that may have unexpected outcomes, or for curses that already draw on malignant forces to achieve their ends.

5.5 Oaths

Oaths are a powerful hearth magic throughout the world. There is a power in binding oneself with a self-imposed oath, especially those that are spoken in front of witnesses. Swearing an oath can give you unlooked for strength, but breaking it can have dire consequences. Those who do so often find themselves cursed as a consequence. There is a strong sense of "*an eye for an eye*" in Varushka, and this hearth magic is no exception. Those who

break oaths and bring curses down on themselves often find that their misfortune takes a form ironically connected to the oath they broke or the harm they did by abandoning their vow.

Likewise, the laws that govern civilised society have the weight of hearth magic behind them. Imperial laws are a boundary that separates mortals from monsters - abiding by them provides a level of protection from the dark forces rife in Varushka. Those who choose to cross that boundary may end up consumed by those forces. In the end, a criminal may end up becoming a monster; running the risk of destroying not only themselves, but their friends, family, or vale. This risk applies to everyone in dwells in Varushka, no matter where they hail from and without regard for where the lawbreaking took place.

Varushkan monsters are not bound by Imperial laws, but many of the darkest powers are bound by geases of their own. Monsters cannot willingly break their own rules, at least not without great risk to themselves, so if the rules that apply to a certain creature can be understood they can be used to gain protection against it. In the vale of Barynya in Karov, for example, every child knows that they must never look behind them when they travel the paths through the woods, or they may meet the lambent yellow eyes of the Thin Man and mark themselves as its prey. A clever volhov may be able to defeat a monster by using the creature's own rules against it, or by tricking it into breaking an oath.

Laws and Oaths in Play

Swearing an oath should be a big deal for any Varushkan. If anyone asks you to make a promise - any sort of promise - it's appropriate to treat it as a major, weighty decision even if the actual promise seems inconsequential. Formally requesting an oath from someone you are dealing with can add drama to any interaction, and if you're a witness to such an undertaking you should take it very seriously indeed. Once someone makes a promise, you would expect them to be bound by it. If someone breaks an oath you have witnessed, you may want to take action of your own - ostracising of shunning them, warning others not to deal with them, or helping fate along by delivering a curse of your own.

In some nations, those who successfully skirt the edges of the law might have a degree of social acceptance, but in Varushka it's appropriate to treat anyone you suspect of being a lawbreaker as very dangerous indeed. The hearth magic implications of transgressing the law mean that those who do so represent an ominous threat that is difficult to quantify. Keeping such people at a distance is one way to respond, but its even better to actively support the law and report your suspicions to the magistrates and militia. It's easy to be a law-breaker in a live-roleplaying game, whereas striving to uphold the law can be a real challenge. By doing so you emphasise the importance that Varushkans place on the law and make the game cooler for everyone.

Finally, you may want to create a particular rule for yourself or your group - something related to your home vale that helps to keep you safe from the unique dangers that haunt the outskirts. You might give a libation before you settle down for a meal, never give your name to someone until they have told you their own, or engage in some equally unexpected but innocuous behaviour. This kind of incongruous behaviour will help to make your group distinct and emphasise the sinister nature of Varushka.

5.6 Further Reading

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6 Varushka history

6.1 Origins of Varushka

The Ushka were the first human inhabitants of this land; their legends claim that they were born, fully formed, from the soil and the shadows beneath the trees. Their villages clustered together in the wilderness, prey for wolves and worse, but they had an understanding of the cruel realities of life in the forest. They made bargains with stronger powers and thus survived, although they often paid a steep price for their survival.

The Vard were cousins to the Steinr, warlike and fierce; they came to Varushka meaning to claim the riches of the land for themselves. When the Ushka encountered the Vard, at first they tried to hide. When hiding failed they tried to make bargains with the Vard. When this too failed, they tried to fight the Vard. When the steel axes and steel shirts of the Vard meant they could not be defeated, they bowed their heads and were conquered. Rather than destroy them, the Vard offered the Ushka a place at their hearth and protection from the shadows beneath the trees. In return the Ushka shared their hard-won wisdom and helped them to survive the dangers that could not be defeated with steel alone.



At Mourning Hollow, heroes of the Empire recover ancient Ushkan artefacts
With the wisdom of the Ushka and the prowess of the Vard, their ancestors defeated or bound many of the monstrous threats that lurked in the wilds. They spread slowly over the land, working together, until eventually the Vard and the Ushka were both gone, and in their place were the Varushkan people who partook of the strengths of both.

Not all the Ushka are gone, however. Early records say that many of the Ushka were assimilated but that the greatest of their sorcerers ? who called themselves the ?bargainers? ? refused to bow their heads. When it became clear the Ushka were outmatched, these bargainers made terrible compacts with the Eternals of the Wasteland, the place Imperial scholars call the realm of Winter. In return for dreadful sacrifices ? and with the promise of more to come ? these Volodny hid their hearts outside their bodies, becoming to all intents and purposes immortal. Kept alive by their hatred, and possessed of terrible hungers, they vowed collective vengeance against the Vard and those Ushka they now saw as collaborators.

A more in-depth document discussing the history of the Vard and the Ushka, and of early Varushka, can be found here.

6.2 Joining the Empire

In the time of the first Empress, the Volodny created a terrible champion, Alderei the Fair, who sought to conquer Varushka with the aid of their sorceries. In desperation, the Wise Ones convinced those Boyars who opposed Alderei to turn to the nascent Empire for help. Faced with few choices, many Boyars agreed to become part of the Empire, in return for aid against Alderei. With the strength of the Imperial forces, they were finally able to defeat the Volodny pawn.

Even while the war still raged, the foundations for the Empire were being laid. The nations had agreed to a set of laws and seemed confident that they could be enforced but the cautious Varushkans thought otherwise. They argued that the powerful of each nation could not be trusted to collect the taxes and enforce the law with an even hand. They would find themselves constantly torn by their allegiances to their countryfolk.

This caused outrage, but the Varushkans were adamant, and insisted that the Empire needed dedicated civil servants and judges, whose loyalty was to the Empire only and whose probity was above reproach. In the end each nation agreed to put forward a dozen individuals of good standing. The Civil Service was created and powerful enchantments were woven to ensure that the Magistrates and other civil servants would be loyal to the Empire and no other cause.

6.3 The Orc Rebellion

Of all the Imperial nations, Varushka is the one most associated in the popular consciousness with the enslavement of the orcs. The Orc Rebellion began in Varushka and the ringleader, Thrace, was a Varushkan slave. The Varushkans were the first people forced to confront the necessity of using their armies against the escaped orcs, and the last to accept the decision of Emperor Ahraz to recognise the orcs as people. Many Varushkans were ruined when the orcs were freed - barely two generations later the violence, and the sense of betrayal by their Imperial allies are still fresh in many minds.

Some Varushkans find the attitude of the other Imperial nations a little hard to swallow - they are quick to remind them that *every* nation other than the Freeborn kept orcs as slaves for centuries. The farms of the Marches, the fighting pits of the League, and the forests of Dawn were worked by orc slaves just as much as the Varushkan mines were. It is unjust, they argue, that Varushka is painted as the villain, the tyrant who oppressed the ancestors of the Imperial Orcs.

For many years there were Varushkans who nursed an undercurrent of bigotry against Imperial Orcs - sometimes overt, more often bubbling away beneath the surface. There was an unspoken belief that Ahraz had made a mistake and that the Imperial Orcs would inevitably seek revenge and turn on the Empire. Those fears slowly receded as the Imperial Orcs more than proved their loyalty, but there is often little love lost between the two nations and many Imperial Orcs avoid Varushka, except to make pilgrimages to the places where certain key events of the rebellion took place.

6.4 More Varushkan History

- People of the North
- Steinr, Vard, and Jotun
- Alderei the Fair

6.5 Further Reading

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7 Varushka leadership



The vales of Varushka are havens of safety in a dangerous wilderness.
The typical community in Varushka is a vale. These inhabited valleys are usually well fortified, and may be home to a single small town or several villages. Most vales have a leader called a boyar. Anyone can, in theory, become boyar ? while it is common for the boyar to be a warrior, there are plenty who are magicians, priests and especially merchants. A boyar generally oversees day-to-day life in the valley and serves as an arbiter to resolve disputes. Their authority stems from the protection from the dangers of the Varushkan wilderness they provide to the vale?s inhabitants.

The boyar is usually assisted in this task by a group of professional warriors called schlacta. Heavily armed and armoured, these soldiers protect their vale from the dangers of Varushka. Most boyars provide weapons, armour and food for their schlacta, in return for their loyalty. A boyar can claim as much land as their schlacta can protect ? prosperous, ambitious or wise boyars arrange regular patrols to keep quite large areas safe from wolves and other threats, acting decisively to destroy their lairs before they can threaten the boyar?s vale.

There is no single way that boyars are selected ? or, more truthfully, select themselves. In some areas it is common for a single family or group of families to lead a valley for several generations. In other villages there are fierce feuds between a small number of families over who claims the title of boyar. Some vales claim not to have a boyar at all ? they are often run by a small council of wise ones ? but in these cases it is usually easy for an outsider to point to the leader of that council, the head of the local militia forces, or some form of local sheriff, as being the de facto boyar.

Imperial law has done little to curb the real power of the boyars, which ultimately stems from their ability to withdraw their protection from the community, or from individuals in the community. While this is unlikely to result in immediate death, the next time the wolves gather in numbers those who cannot rely on the protection of the boyar and the schlacta are almost certainly doomed. Despite the cruelty of this practice, there is nothing illegal about it ? Imperial Law does not require the boyars to protect the people who live under their auspices.

While some boyars are fair and even-handed and enjoy the respect and love of their community, others rule with a rod of iron. Tyrannical boyars are not necessarily evil people. The dangers of Varushka are very real, and sometimes compromises need to be made between freedom and survival. A weak yet well-meaning boyar is often more of a threat to the people they supposedly protect than a strong yet authoritarian boyar whose schlacta maintain rigid order in the face of malignant supernatural evil. ?*Hard as iron and fair as silver*? is meant as a compliment for a boyar who brooks no disagreement with their judgements.

While a boyar is often the effective leader of a valley, it is a foolish leader who neglects to hear the counsel of the wise ones. The wise ones maintain a loose network of communication between valleys, and help to tie the nation together. While their communication is most often used for the transmission

of gossip or the spread of useful information, in times of trouble the wise ones are capable of working together to orchestrate effective responses. The relationship between the wise ones and the boyar in a settlement often sets the tone for the entire vale.



Costume by Jo Perridge

7.1 Leading a territory

Each territory in Varushka returns a senator to the Senate. The process whereby these senators are selected is built around the Varushkan emphasis on wisdom. The candidates are isolated from the rest of their nation and then brought one-at-a-time before a council of wise ones from the territory in question. Wise ones who hold high office ? senators, cardinals, generals, for example ? are customarily prevented from taking part in this council.

Candidates will be asked three questions designed to reveal the Virtue of the candidate, especially their Wisdom. The wise ones listen to the answers but are forbidden to discuss them with the applicant. The egregore will often call on a child to present the questions if there are any young Varushkans in Anvil of a suitable age, and may even encourage them to ask for clarification or challenge what is said if they choose.

Once the questioning is complete, the wise ones will discuss among themselves which candidate demonstrated the most Wisdom. When they have made their decision, the candidates (and the civil service) are informed of who has been chosen to be senator for the coming year. Although only wise ones may talk in this meeting, others may be present. Members of the Synod, in particular, have the power of witness that gives them the power to witness or observe all aspects of the bodies of state in function, which includes any part of the meeting which involves electing a senator.

The senators for each Imperial territory are re-elected at specific equinox and solstices during the year. The Senator for Karsk is elected at the Spring equinox, the Senator for Karov is elected at the Summer solstice, the Senator for Volodmartz is elected at the Autumn equinox, and both the senator for Miekarova and the senator for Ossium are elected at the Winter solstice.

In Winter 382YE, the Senate assigned the newly conquered territory of Ossium to Varushka. The Senator for Ossium is elected alongside the Senator for Miekarova during the Winter Solstice.

7.1.1 Incumbent

The current Varushkan senators are listed below - see the individual territory pages for a full election history for each position.

- Karov - Morana Vesnayevich
- Karsk - Belakov Zakharovich Prochnost
- Miekarova - Vasilmir Radovanovna Esskivic
- Ossium - Bronimir Ranedzkah Pinewheel
- Volodmartz - Desilav Sergeyevich Jesen

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8 Varushka economic interests



Costume by Jo Perridge
Varushka may be dangerous, but it is also rich. Varushka does not export many finished goods. Varushkan crafters tend to craft for their family and community, not for the wider world. The true wealth of the nation lies in raw materials, and in that it has become a great provider for the Empire. It is famous for its high quality furs, which are sold all over the Empire, and the nation is home to many species of majestic hardwoods whose timber is in high demand. Not just timber is produced from the woods; amber is a common export, and many Varushkans of any gender sport amber jewellery.

The bones of the land itself are valuable. There are rich deposits of iron and precious metals, and quarries that produce both fine quality stone and beautiful precious gemstones. Honey and mead are both common Varushkan exports. Varushkan honey is a delicacy, with different regions producing different types of honey. Connoisseurs talk about Varushkan honey in the same way one might discuss fine wine or cheese.

In Varushka, nothing is free. The supernatural threats of the nation often seem strongest where the wealth is greatest, and those seeking to make their fortunes must contend with the malign creatures that come in darkness. As a result, operating a Varushkan mine or lumberyard, or entering the forests to hunt and trap, is not an entirely mundane business. It is dangerous to harvest the bounty of an area that is claimed by a sovereign unless the creature is subject to a compact, agreement or binding. Only by following these rules may the resources be gathered safely. For example, a Varushkan lumberjack might mark trees in a certain area with a sigil the day before they plan to fell them; if the sigil is gone when they return the next morning, they know that the tree is claimed by a sovereign and cutting it down will have dire consequences.

While Varushka has towns that serve as trade hubs, it has no cities ? but this was not always the case. Temeschwar, the greatest city in the north, was once part of Varushka. When the Empire was formed, Maria Ivanova, the boyar of Temeschwar, elected to join her city's fortunes with those of the League rather than remain part of Varushka. While some Varushkans were outraged by this apparent treachery, the majority simply shrugged. The defence of Temeschwar was now no longer their concern; the inhabitants had simply looked for protection elsewhere. Relations remain mostly good, and the city is still a central trade hub for many Varushkan traders. The symbiotic relationship between Varushka ? rich in raw materials ? and the League ? rich in worked goods ? has made the fortunes of merchants from both nations.

The Navarr are welcome if irregular visitors to the land. They ensure that every settlement receives news of the wider Empire and provide additional protection to those who want to travel long distances. For their part, visiting Navarr know to keep to the roads and to consult the wise ones and wardens whenever they can, to ensure they do not accidentally break some important taboo and bring disaster down on their own heads and the heads of the people they move amongst.

Many Varushkan villages employ Stzena, local musicians who perform at local civic events and celebrations.



Varushka is the great provider.

8.1 Outposts

Not all Varushkans dwell in the vales; there are countless isolated mines, quarries and similar across the nation where hard folk work to make their living. Few of these outposts are joined to the network of warded roads that cross the nation and lacking the constant vigilance of a community they must be guarded solely by schlacta. Those who work there are often regarded as foolhardy, desperately gambling their lives to make their fortune.

Most outposts are ruled by a merchant boyar. The best eventually grow to become a true vale, as people settle there to raise a family under the protection of the boyar and their schlacta. The worst have a reputation for iron rule and cruel discipline, a refuge for exiles and anyone prepared to wield an axe and follow orders. Most outposts were worked by orc slaves in the past. That practice has long been abolished but many still retain a fetid air and often employ criminals working off a punishment. Varushkan magistrates keep a close eye on those they can travel to, but the more isolated outposts are difficult to reach.

The Oathwright lay unopened in Pavel?s hands. He played gently with the corners of the white paper with his fingertips before setting it down on the desk. He rose slowly and with a sigh, crossing to the window and pressing his forehead against the chill glass. The streets of Delev were busy, even at nightfall, and he could hear the chanting of Wardens in the distance as they marched near the palisade. The clustered townhouses and drifting people were a sign of the town?s growing prosperity.

It was the prosperity which troubled Pavel.

?The Singing Caves Retaken.?

Turning back to the desk, picking the day?s copy of the *Pledge* from the bin he read the same headline in its crumpled pages. He thought he heard gruff voices for a moment, echoing roughly as though reflected by sheer walls of granite and glanced toward his bookcase. A guilty moment, but enough to take in the early volumes of ledgers and accounts wedged into the most inconspicuous space at the bottom. The cracked spines loomed, and seemed to grow in his mind?s eye into a rock face. He slumped down next to the worn leather, and ran his finger gently along the top of the oldest records.

?The Singing Caves.?

Again the distant singing. Not of Wardens, but the defiant, raucous noise of a hundred tribes drowned by time and stone and Prosperity. Made loud now by guilt. Pavel pulled a ledger from the row, the engraved leather bearing the name of his grandmother, an icon in his family and the second Novak to run a trade through the difficult mountainous paths of northern Miekarova. Rich trade, which had run through the Empire and into the multitude of mines and farms and ports. And to the Singing Caves, the great Marcher mithril mine. His hands worked ahead of his mind now, leafing through the pages of prosperous trade deals, accounting and material movements until they reached a section more dog-eared than the rest. The title written in the neat,

warm handwriting of his father?s mother.

The Singing Caves

Shadows from the fireplace flickered gently around Pavel as he bent to read. His heavy sigh drowned out in his head by the ceaseless moaning of a lost generation. Varushkans make oaths with everything; the land, spirits of the natural world, Paragons and their totems. Not least of all pacts are made with the past, and the singing must be satisfied. He began to read.

Tragg of Otkodov and family to Singing Caves. 4 thrones, 3 crowns, 0 rings

Bannak of Verthandi and family to Singing Caves. 5 thrones, 0 crowns, 8 rings.

Usshak of Otkodov and family to Singing Caves...

By David Stibbards

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9 Varushka military concerns



A well equipped schlacta is a fearsome sight.

9.1 Overview

Varushka is a dangerous land. The hills and forests between the vales are haunted by monsters. There are great expanses of deep wood and dark rugged wilderness where the rule of law is tenuous at best, which provide havens for brigands, bandits, and sinister cults. Even the vales in the relatively peaceful lowlands ensure that they have plenty of warriors ready to protect them from surprise attacks, and even when traveling on the warded roads a merchant is happier when accompanied by a party of armed and armoured fighters.

The warriors of Varushka are known in the rest of the Empire for their black humour, leather or metal scale armour, vicious axes, and grim determination to *get the job done* - even if it means doing things that other Imperial citizens may find distasteful.

9.2 Schlacta

The schlacta are the most common group of professional soldiers in Varushka. They stand ready to defend the valleys that form Varushkan society. They are the defensive core that shields the people against its enemies, whether those enemies are ravening wolves, rapacious bandits, or rampaging orcs. The schlacta tend to be the best armed and best armoured of Varushkan warriors, but they also tend to see the most combat. As professional soldiers they tend to favour the heavy weapons of war such as broad swords, war axes and bardiches. This sets them apart from other Varushkans who tend to favour weapons that are also tools ? the hammer, bow or spear and most especially the woodsman's axe.

Not all schlacta work for a boyar; any organised group of warriors that fights for a living could be called schlacta. Several travelling merchants maintain schlacta to protect themselves and their caravans. There are even mercenary bands of schlacta who offer their protection to others in return for money.

9.3 Wagon Raiders and Sell Swords



When opportunity knocks...
Mercenary fighters are perhaps more common here than anywhere else other than the League, living rough lives drifting from contract to contract. They are often greeted with distrust by the people of the vales, but when there are bandits that need dealing with or shambling wolves sighted in the nearby woods they rarely lack for employment. Most citizens view them as a necessary evil, however, and any vale that can looks to the boyar's schlacta for defence rather than to itinerant sellswords.

Some particularly brave ? or reckless ? Varushkans follow the tradition of the wagon raider - indeed some warriors drift back and forth between sell sword and wagon raider as the opportunities present themselves. These opportunists seek their fortunes by launching forays into barbarian lands to grab whatever riches can be found. They live in tight-knit communities of hard-bitten veteran soldiers, forming well-defended wagon trains. The wagon raiders are especially skilled in the use of shields, and these hardened gangs are adept at desperate fighting in close quarters. They are also treated with suspicion ? there are plenty of stories of wagon raiders who bring back more terrible things than riches when they return from the deep forests.

9.4 Warden Fellowships

As well as schlacta, Varushka is home to the warden fellowships who combine martial might with the clever use of amulets, talismans and magical devices to oppose the threats of the Varushkan wilderness. Many wardens are champions of Imperial Law, and they are often seen as romantic, dashing and above all heroic figures by the people of the vales.

Not all Warden fellowships are popular however. The Company of the White Stag is a warden fellowship of changelings who concentrate on fighting monsters. Their natural confidence drives them to seek ways to destroy these creatures wherever they can, often taking risks far beyond what their peers consider good sense.

9.5 Imperial Armies

Varushka currently fields three armies: the *Army of the Northern Eagle*, *Army of the Golden Axe*, and the *Army of the Boyar's Hasta*. In recent years there has been some upheaval in the Varushkan armies as the nation has focused on its heritage in the wake of the reformation of the Iron Helms.



9.5.1 The Army of the Northern Eagle

The soldiers of this army have long experience of fighting along the northern mountains that border the Thule lands. They contain a number of expert mountaineers, ex-prospectors and other specialists who serve as scouts, and have a significant advantage over less-experienced armies when fighting in mountains, forests and marshes. Once the Northern Eagle establishes a presence in a territory, it can prove extremely hard to dislodge.

The first Varushkan general leads the army of the Northern Eagle, and is appointed (or re-appointed) at the Summer Solstice each year.



9.5.2 The Army of the Golden Axe

The history of the army of the Golden Axe is a history of sustained assault, horrible battles and massive losses. The Varushkan soldiers are philosophical - someone has to do the hard work - but also adaptable. They consider themselves good at surviving against odds that would devastate other armies; they are known for ruthlessly crushing all opposition during their slow grinding advance through enemy territory. Pessimism has become the norm for the officers of this army, although their dire pronouncements of failure are often rendered incorrect by their own heroism and fortitude. In recent years they have been driven to embrace legacy of the Vard; to conquer what can be conquered, to bar their door against what cannot be defeated, and to endure what must be endured without flinching.

Furthermore, as of the Summer Solstice 383YE, the Golden Axe is a large army, reinforced by the wealth of Varushka with the aid of the mining families of Moresvah in Karsk.

The second Varushkan general leads the army of the Golden Axe, and is appointed (or re-appointed) at the Winter Solstice each year.



9.5.3 The Army of the Boyar's Hasta

The Boyar's Hasta were raised by Senate motion proposed by **Aleksandr Zoravich Novosad**, then Senator for Karsk, during the Winter Solstice 386YE. Mustering completed in just six months, shortly before the Summer Solstice 387YE. The former senator for Karsk named the army after the weapon once commonly used by schlacta, and endorsed the army's focus on wagon raiders and sell swords.

The third Varushkan general leads the army of the Boyar's Hasta, and is appointed (or re-appointed) at the Spring Equinox each year.



9.5.4 The Army of the Iron Helms (Destroyed)

The first army to bear this name fell victim to the budget reforms of Empress Mariika. In 379YE, the Senator for Karov, Maximov Goraniv Strascovich, received authority from the Senate to raise the army. It was completed shortly before the Winter Solstice 380YE. The core of the army is made up of former followers of a sovereign known as the Charnel Lord. The Iron Helms are renowned for their cruelty, employing merciless strategy against those they face in war.

Following the Autumn Equinox 386YE, the Iron Helms joined the attempt to drive the Druj out of Therunin. Unfortunately, they and their fellow Imperial armies were massively outnumbered and snared by a magical trap. The Iron Helms fell securing the escape of their fellows into the Barrens - but in an event some claim bordered on the miraculous the soldiers continued to fight even after they had been slain. The army disbanded, but that did not quench their thirst for the blood of the Druj.

The third Varushkan general led the army of the Iron Helms, and was appointed at the Spring Equinox each year.

9.6 Army Orders

The fortified barracks in Nearweald allows any Varushkan armies in Ossium to take the *Hospitality of the Boyars* defending order for as long as the armoury is maintained,

Hospitality of the Boyars

- **Can be used by a Varushkan army in the territory of Ossium**
- **Casualties suffered by this army are decreased by a fifth**
- **The army receives additional natural resupply: 250 strength is distributed among all armies taking this order in the territory**

The soldiers of the army are dispersed across the territory of Ossium, receiving the hospitality of the boyars of the vales. Commanders and officers are welcomed as guests at the armoury of Karantzy, given the opportunity to resupply their troops from the stock of weapons and armour sequestered there.



Varushka is a hard land, and so are its people.

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10 Varushka religious beliefs



10.1 Overview

Priests in Varushka are considered to be (or seek to be) wise, and are generally either physically old or possessed of an ?*old spirit*.? These wise ones are the repositories of wisdom in a community. While many consider themselves priests, and several are magicians, anyone can be a wise one simply by dint of offering good advice and keeping a close eye on moral concerns.

Elder wise ones are particularly respected, but there are wise ones of all ages. As a wise one grows older, they traditionally take on young apprentices who help them with their growing infirmity and in return are schooled in the ways of wisdom and virtue.

The most important role of the wise ones is to help people fend off the monsters of Varushka. Few wise ones fight the monsters directly; rather they teach people how to recognise them and protect themselves. They rally the whole vale when the monsters come, sharing with them the benefit of their experience and common sense. It is more important for a wise one to recognise and think their way around a problem than it is for them to memorise chunks of historical lore.

Wise ones recognise the danger of judging by appearances. There are plenty of stories where a wise child defeats a monster by refusing to trust the evidence of their eyes. Some wise ones emulate this by blinding themselves ? not literally, but by blindfolding themselves when they are about official business. Forced to rely on other senses, they claim that they become adept at separating truth from lies ? there is a common conceit that by blinding the eyes of the body, the eyes of the soul open wider allowing the wise one to see things as they truly are. A few wise ones never remove their blindfolds, living their entire lives in darkness and cultivating the ?inner vision? that helps them hone their insight into the souls of others.

There is no official test to become a wise one ? the title is an honorific either claimed or bestowed by one's peers. One becomes a wise one by being treated as a wise one and included in the counsels of the other wise ones.

10.2 The Virtuous Animals

Varushkans believe that most animals display one or more of the great virtues. In particular, they know that symbols or drawings of a creature can contain some of its power, so many Varushkans decorate their belongings with images of animals whose virtues they wish to emulate. The virtuous animals are also seen in Varushkan heraldry and art, as well as being worn as charms, belt buckles or embroidered patches.

Wisdom is usually symbolised by the spider or the squirrel. The goose and the spider (again) symbolise Vigilance. The bear and the boar symbolise Courage, and the virtue of Loyalty is associated with the hound. Deer and the eagle often symbolise the Imperial virtue of Pride. Hares, foxes and other animals seen as cunning symbolise Ambition, and often encourage the hero of the tale to improve their lot or that of their family. Prosperity is symbolised by bees, whose honey has a special place in Varushkan society.

Varushkans use animal symbols and runes to express virtues in their storytelling and often as part of their costume.

10.3 Storytellers

Another common role for priests is as storytellers, following a tradition of telling instructional tales that show proper forms of behaviour and the repercussions of foolishness or vice. These stories balance optimism with harsh practicality; Varushkan religion instructs with a harder edge than some other national traditions. The custom of an older relative telling stories to the younger generation as the family gathers around the family is as old as humankind, but in Varushka it takes on additional significance.

Storytellers are often travellers, bringing spiritual support, entertainment and news of the outside world to isolated valleys, especially those without their own priests. The traditional garb of a storyteller is a brightly coloured coat of patchwork, marked with symbols and hung with trinkets, each one of which represents a story. Many storytellers use these trinkets and symbols as memory aids when telling their favourite stories. More so than other wise ones, a storyteller is likely to have a younger apprentice who learns the storytelling craft and the priestly ceremonies by travelling alongside the older priest.

...could not see the Wisdom in blindfolding oneself as some Varushkan wise ones do. So I tried it, and I will concede that I had to change the way I interacted with the world. The stories of the wise ones are steeped in virtue, and I feel they will come to accept the whole of The Way as readily as they do Wisdom. There is a matter I need to clarify, though. Is using animal symbols for the virtues a useful metaphor, or blasphemy against human virtue? I always believed it was the latter, but the practice is widespread and I cannot dissuade them against it.

Wayfarer Sarah in Epistles to the Winds of Virtue, 2 BE

See here?

A rich woman is wounded in her bed, surrounded by three girls that were, to her, as precious as any daughter. She had had no time for children of her own; these were her jewels, her honey, the unburst seeds planted in her garden, and, alas, it seemed she would not see them flower. Her stomach was twisted in a black knot; the skin was puckered and bruised where a great, terrible beast had pierced her gut, out in the forest. Tendrils of poison were spreading along her skin.

?My time has come,? she told the girls, who were stone-faced beside her. ?Draw closer, so that I may tell you how to live in Prosperity such as I have.?

The girls did as they were bid. She clutched hold of a white blouse, her brow dripping with fever.

?In the forests about this vale, and in the mines beyond them; that is where you will find treasure greater than all the Empire has.? Her grip grew weaker, and the woman died.

The girls closed their eyes in respect, and did not cry.

The next day they met to arrange a funeral, but their minds quickly wandered to the dead woman?s talk of fortune.

?I think I will look for this treasure in the mines beyond this vale,? said Oksana, the oldest of the three girls.

?Well, I think I will search for it in the forest that surrounds us,? said Yuliya, the second oldest.

?And what of you, Zoia?? she asked the youngest of the three. ?The forests and mines are so great for us alone to search - won?t you join one of us??

?Why should I venture into those forests or those mines? Where my life is at stake?? asked Zoia at once, who had had quite enough of this talk. ?That is what killed the old woman! That is where children are devoured and those who die are lucky! Those are the places of monsters, where life never ends, but tumults in a terrible dance with death, and you lose yourself or you work forever and beg for the Labyrinth, so the welts and sores on your toiling

hands will finally stop weeping. I value my prosperity because I can live with it - indeed!?

Oksana and Yuliya looked to one another.

?But where will your fortune be if you do not work for it?? they asked.

?I work for it in my own way. I have a farm at home, and it is safe enough, because it is well known!?

They did not press the matter. Soon, Oksana had hired several men and women to accompany her to the mines, and Yuliya had found several strong schlacta who would help swing their axes in the forests.

Zoia laughed mirthlessly at the sight of it. See here, she thought to herself. They will spend all their money to work and not earn a ring of it back, not before they die, at least!

Oksana made her way along the red paths to the vale?s mines. It was as though she trod in heartsblood, as she descended deeper into the freezing pits, and her fingers stung as she swung her pickaxe, and all she saw was crackling darkness, and not a sliver of silver and gold.

Yuliya travelled along the snowy roads of the woods. She and the schlacta found their path was long and perilous, and before long she began to work at felling the trees in her way, that devoured the light above and obscured the forest floor, so that she could not search for riches or buried gems. She shivered from the sweat under her furs, and grit her teeth as her blisters tore.

So they continued, and they would return home at night with no chests of fortune. Instead, they began to ferry back the goods they had harvested. Oksana was burdened with the ores she had discovered, and she brought it home in barrels. Yuliya found she could not leave the fallen trees where they lay, and began to lug home her timber. They sold their excess, and continued to work.

Zoia, sitting at the door of her hearth, saw the women, bruised and wheezing as they were, and laughed outright. ?No treasure at all,? she said, as Yuliya and Oksana stopped to hear what was so funny. ?You are working tirelessly, and for nothing. My fortune is humble, but at least I have one.?

?Ah, nothing is free, Zoia!? they said. ?So many are too afraid to venture forth - if we aren?t to work the forests and the mines for fear then they will sit there and be wasted!?

?Better you than I, and I will laugh as I live!?

But, in time, word began to spread of the rarity of Oksana?s metals, and the mighty strength of Yuliya?s hardwoods. They heard a sudden cry for their goods, and so they worked to acquire more, forgetting their search for the old woman?s fabled fortune, as their own began to grow by the hands of their labour, and their vale began to prosper as it never had. They were respected widely, and the vale thought on them as their wise women for all they had done.

Zoia, seeing their great riches mount up, found herself in a fit of jealousy. They had not died, and they were richer than she could ever imagine she would be on her farm. ?Where did you find the treasure?? she demanded. ?Where had the woman buried it??

?Nowhere,? the women told her. ?Our industry itself was the treasure, and Vigilance the very vein from which our Prosperity is drawn.?

See here?

They lived with their fortune for the rest of their lives.

They were very prosperous women, indeed.

The Treasure on the Mountains, by Doubravka Nadjaovna Vanek

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11 Varushka magical traditions

Most Varushkans regard magic as a useful tool to protect people, but one that can also be dangerous. Supernatural evil is rife in Varushka, and magic is often the only counter to the workings of sovereigns, many of whom possess potent occult power themselves. Magic is rarely free however ? and Varushkans understand that magical power often involves some sort of sacrifice. Magic is neither good nor evil ? the same power that lets a magician bless crops and protect against monsters allows them to spread sickness or kill their enemies. As such magicians are treated with wary respect by sensible Varushkans.

A lot of Varushkan ritual magic revolves around sacrifice. This may involve a literal sacrifice when performing rituals that involve casting valuable items into a fire, or be more symbolic in nature involving shedding of a small amount of a ritualist's blood. There is a strong tradition of bargaining and payment in Varushkan magic that recognises that nothing comes without a price.

Some Varushkan magicians practice a form of aspect magic, specifically using the virtuous animals in beast magic.



11.1 Volhov

Varushkan volhov are occult problem solvers who make a study of supernatural powers to better understand and defend against them. They work to unravel curses and defend their allies from monsters, but they also lay curses on those who they think deserve or will learn from them. They aspire to wield magic with an even hand, maintaining an internal balance between positive and harmful magic.

Volhov often specialise in two particular branches of magic. They are interested in magic that wards against and binds supernatural forces for obvious reasons, and volhov who master this particular type of spellcraft are often interested in the eternals. These entities are dangerous, but several of them seem to have a particular interest in Varushka and they can be bargained with by clever volhov. Further, some volhov actually make contact with sovereigns, either arranging deals that protect their community or working magic to keep the sovereign quiescent.

They also make a study of divination ? especially if they are also wise ones. The ability to predict danger or uncover secrets serves them well as advisors, and is often key to uncovering the weakness of an enemy. Volhov know that uncovering a secret is not enough, that they need to find a practical way to use their knowledge to resolve their problems. The volhov embrace practicality and teach that not every problem can be solved with magic ? that it sometimes creates more problems than it resolves.

Some volhov are itinerants, travelling the roads between settlements in the company of a warden fellowship or Navarr striding, or trusting their wisdom and magic to protect them when they journey by themselves. This willingness to travel alone adds to their mystique, and there are many stories of cunning volhov encountering and overcoming sovereigns, often staying as their guests for a short time while the sovereign tries to trap them into breaking a stricture and freeing the creature, or dooming themselves.

Volhov have a reputation for being meddlers that is not undeserved. They do not live apart from the other inhabitants of Varushka, and actively involve themselves in the lives of those around them, offering advice or interfering to improve any situation that catches their fancy. A volhov boyar is rare but not unknown; some use magic to empower their schlacta, or hire schlacta who possess practical magical talents of their own. Some volhov boyars have

a bleak reputation for making deals with eternals and sovereigns that protect their people but leave the people of other valleys prey to monstrous depredations.

Volhov are usually aided by a younger apprentice who learns when and how to wield magic. It is common for volhov to possess lineage, and they often prefer to take apprentices who have the touch of ?the other? about them, in the knowledge that it makes it easier for them to deal with some eternals. Volhov tend to dress in dark coloured robes made of hard-wearing fabric and are rarely without their staves. They commonly cover their heads with hoods or hats, and volhov are often described in stories as ?*shadow faced*? as a reference both to their headgear and their mysterious nature. This simple uniform announces their profession to others, and warns them to be respectful.

This touch of the other also draws the attention of the volhov. Many volhov are lineaged or were taught their magic by a lineaged master. When people are troubled by eternals or their heralds, the volhov know that people with lineage will have an advantage dealing with creatures who share their supernatural roots. If a vale is having trouble with a Summer eternal, many volhov would rather have the assistance of a naïve changeling cook than a schlacta without lineage.



Cabals come together to work powerful magic.

11.2 Cabalists

Magic commonly forms a basis for cooperation in Varushka with skilled practitioners from different vales coming together to form a cabal to work powerful rituals. Cabals vary greatly in their unity and purpose and members may include wise ones, volhov and even wardens. The loosest cabals are little more than ritual teams where individuals whose primary concern is the vale in which they live come together for a time to further their own interests but more unified cabals often have an identity and a purpose of their own.

No two cabals are alike; some make their existence known while others prefer to operate unnoticed. Some occupy ancient fortifications and employ schlacta to protect them and keep unwanted intruders away, while members of others prefer the comforts and community of life in a vale. Some welcome any who would be a member, others invite only the most powerful to join them. The cabals of Varushka rarely challenge the power of the boyars, precious few have the time or the inclination to take on the defence of a vale and its populace, but they are influential and most boyars tread carefully around those who can wield magic. Some cabals favour the philosophy of the volhov, and tend to meddle in the politics of the vales and the nation, while those that favour wise ones tend to serve as a haven for wisdom and assistance when a hard winter brings difficult times.

The most powerful cabals have existed for centuries and often have an agenda of their own; many can trace their roots back to groups of Ushkan magician-mystics known as "bargainers" who specialised in negotiating with the sovereigns in the days before the appearance of the Vard. In the centuries since, as in all areas of Varushkan life, there has been an extensive merging of Ushka and Vard traditions to create something very different to the original small covens.

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12 Varushka territories

Varushka spreads across the north and north-eastern borders of the Empire. It is a wild land, a mixture of difficult hills, dark forests, unpleasant marshes and fast rivers. The terrain has helped shape the nation, and has contributed to the relative isolation of its settlements. It is also a prosperous nation - the bounty of its forests and mines provide the Varushkans with great wealth.

It is also a land of danger; the monsters of Varushka are well known, but the wide wilderness holds dangers other than the claws of the walking dead or the bite of a maddened bear-horror. It is easy to get lost in Varushka, if one strays too far from the vales and the roads that connect them.



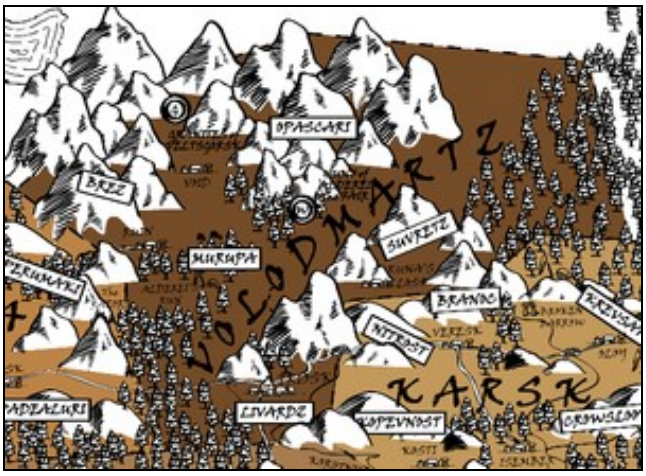
12.1 Karov

The rich heartland of the nation, and the wealthiest territory in terms of timber and amber, this is where most outsiders think of when Varushka is mentioned. The vales here exist among rich forests, where they have not been cleared to make way for small farms. Karov has the largest towns in Varushka, and the majority of its boyars come from this relatively civilised territory. A great deal of trade happens in Karov, with wagon trains and river barges carrying raw materials south to Temeschwar and north to more isolated valleys who are in need.



12.2 Miekarova

Miekarova is more heavily forested than the rest of Varushka. It is known for its furs, for its hunting, and for its particularly harsh winters. Snow regularly falls here for up to six months in the year, and it is common for vales to be snowed-in during the darkest months. The wolves of Miekarova are especially savage, and every few years or so gather in great hordes that sweep down out of the north, threatening the unwary and causing widespread trouble until they are eventually dealt with. Plaguewulfs are more common here than anywhere else in Varushka, and the sovereign believed to be their progenitor, The Howling Queen, is said to slumber somewhere beneath the hills of north-eastern Miekarova. .



12.3 Volodmartz

The mountains of Volodmartz are rich in timber and ore. There are comparatively few vales here, and the boyars have a reputation for being particularly iron-fisted. Much more common are outposts, scattered across the brooding hills and growing rich from the mineral wealth they exploit. Both tend to be very well fortified, and not without reason. There are dark things in the peaks north of Volodmartz - creatures too wicked to live in Thule lands, or spawned in the lightless depths beneath the mountains. Plenty of folk tales tell of malign horrors that burrow under the earth, emerging without warning to overwhelm the foolish. The Volodny had their old centre of power in Volodmartz, and it was here that Alderei the tyrant-boyar was defeated by the Imperial Army. The ruins of his strongholds still lie beneath the forest canopy.



12.4 Karsk

This has always been a war-torn land. The scene of many vicious battles against the barbarians since before Varushka joined the Empire, it is scattered with fortresses, battlefields and ruins. It has an accursed reputation, and many stories refer to the "bloated crows of Karsk, grown fat from human flesh and suffering." At one time this territory was home to numerous merchant boyars who became rich capturing and enslaving orcs to work in the mines of Volodmartz. When the Imperial Orcs joined the Empire and it became illegal to keep orcish slaves, the senator for Karsk was brutally murdered during a meeting with a dozen now-ruined Karsk boyars. It was conquered by the Thule in 368YE, and liberated by the Empire in 377YE - although how long it will remain free is difficult to judge.



12.5 Ossium

The first territory conquered by the Empire in almost two centuries, and the territory that officially made Varushka the largest nation in the Empire. Ossium was once part of the Mallum, finally conquered by the armies of Varushka, Dawn, and the Thule in the Winter of 382YE. It is a grim country of deep, dark forests, one that the Varushkan settlers share with the orcs of Otkodov. When the territory was claimed, most of the population were orcs. In the months since, there has been a drive to expand into the new land and claim its riches for Varushka. Of course, with new territory comes a new border with the Druj - one that is unlikely to remain peaceful.

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13 Varushka children



Varushkan children are treasured, but they are also a source of constant worry to their parents. They are often naive, and their innocence of the dangers and rules of Varushkan life can bring harm not only to themselves but to their families. In a land where harsh winters can sometimes mean shortages of food, another mouth to feed can be a blessing but also a burden.

There are many sovereigns and Winter eternals who desire children for their own purposes, and stories tell of the bargains they strike with unscrupulous or desperate parents in return for their offspring. There are also monsters who feast on children, or who carry them off as servants and entertainment. Some of these children are twisted by their captors and returned to prey on their parents in turn.

Children are often dressed in bright clothing to make it easier to spot them against the dark wood of the Varushkan forests. Innocence is a powerful protection in Varushka. They are taught to stay close to adults who can protect them from the dangers of Varushkan life. They are expected from an early age to help with chores such as cooking and cleaning. It is impossible to keep them in sight at all times however, and it is assumed that a child who is not being watched is getting up to mischief.



Costumes and photography by Sarah Loughlin
Varushkan children are taught a powerful warding that draws on its owner?s innocence and fear. By presenting the talisman boldly in front of them a young child can turn dark creatures aside, keeping them safe. Unfortunately this protection extends only to the child themself; the parents and older siblings are fair game for the monsters of Varushka. The power of the talisman wanes as a child ages and most children find them useless long before they reach their majority.

13.1 Things every child should know

- **Don't trust strangers.** Danger can take pleasing forms in Varushka, do not trust people you do not know.
- **Listen to your elders.** They can teach you wisdom which will protect you from the dangers of the wilds.
- **Use your wits first and your talisman last.** It will only work so many times, so save it for when you really need it.
- **Stay alert.** Look for things that are out of place and warn the adults about them.
- **Don't cry wolf unless it is for real.** Those who pretend danger is coming will not be listened to when it comes for real, and then everyone suffers.

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14 Varushka music

14.1 The Music of Varushka

14.1.1 Style summary

Varushkan music is rich and full-bodied, following a long tradition of being used to keep both the cold and the horrors outside at bay. Choral singing, accordions, violins and hurdy-gurdies all find their place with the Varushkan love of discords resolving into rich harmony; the normally stoic people find an outlet for grief, love and joy in their music that they would find hard to express in any other way. A vein of melancholy runs through their music - minor keys are more common than major.

Varushka draws on the real world traditions of Eastern European and Balkan music, in particular Georgian, Bulgarian and Russian songs and Yiddish or klezmer instrumental music.

14.1.2 Commonly known songs

- Marching song - This simple melody has echoed wherever the Varushkan army has fought - the night before battle, on the way to the battlefield and accompanying them home in victory or defeat. Often led by one singer with everyone joining in the chorus.
- Wardens of Varushka - A popular song often sung while warding villages and camps at dusk.
- Raise up your glass to Varushka - The toasting tradition in Varushka is a huge part of their culture. Here is a famous musical toast.
- Mother Varushka Goes to War - A rousing battle song.
- The Beast of Volgadurn - A cautionary poem for monster hunters, often recited rhythmically and dynamically, and accompanied by stamping feet and clapping.
- One More Vodka - drinking song.
- Hearth and Home - nostalgic travelling song, easy
- Song to Keep the Dark Away - a.k.a. the oompah song
- Day Song and Night Song - two songs that are commonly used for warding as night falls.
- Feast of the Loom - most vales have a version of a song that is sung at the Feast of the Loom

14.1.2.1 A musical tradition

Toasting is very common in Varushkan culture. Pretty much every major event - weddings, funerals, births, victories, defeats, change of leadership, ceremonies of adulthood - will lead to both spoken and sung toasts. A typical Varushkan toasting song has very few words: the old-fashioned songs use "mravalzhamier" meaning 'good health' although others are sung to similar sentiments, or sometimes the name of the person being toasted or simply "Varushka!". Toasting Songs often start slowly and speed up and can be sung in full harmony or led by one singer. Some examples: Mravalzhamiers and Raise up your glass to Varushka, or use Here's A Health to the Company which is a drinking song known throughout the Empire.

Many Varushkan towns and villages employ a Stzena, a band of musicians who perform at civic functions, local events and public ceremonies. Historically, these were sentries who kept night vigils and raised the alarm in case of attack from monster, barbarians and raiders by blowing on trumpets and beating drums. As the wardens grew in strength and reach, the Stzena turned their skills to music and served their community in a different way, but some still take their secondary role as watchmen very seriously.

14.1.2.2 One for the kids

- The North wind doth blow

14.1.3 Further examples

14.1.3.1 Warding Songs

- Wardens of Varushka - easy call and response song (3 part harmony optional)
- Day Song and Night Song - two songs that are commonly used for warding as night falls.
- A Song of Hospitality

14.1.3.2 Funeral Songs

- Footprints - medium Varushkan funeral song about Courage and the Labyrinth.
- Here's To Varushka - rousing song for wakes.

14.1.3.3 Drinking Songs

- Raise up your glass to Varushka - some toasting songs
- Mravalzhamier - some more toasting songs
- One More Vodka - drinking song.
- Ballad of the Schlacta - easy and fun drinking song

14.1.3.4 War Songs

- Mother Varushka Goes to War - A rousing battle song.
- Brave Varushka Forth
- Marching song - medium difficulty

14.1.3.5 Other Songs & Poems (unsorted)

- Rubies on the Snow
- The Beast of Volgadurn - poem about a monster
- Beneath the Skin
- The Walker of the Snow
- The Sovereign- haunting ballad
- Hurry, Hunter
- Build The Fires High
- Dos Vidanya
- If Varushka Wills
- Mother Varushka
- All The Ushka
- Keep the Fires Burning
- Lord of Winter
- The Brewer's Lesson
- Three Wardens
- The Rusalka
- Ballad of the Stzena

14.1.3.6 Instrumentation and tunes

Violins, accordions, reeded woodwind, or a hammered dulcimer if you've got one. Music is drawn from Romani music, klezmer, or any fast tunes written in a klezmer scale.

Varushkan rhythms - and how to do them

14.1.3.7 Other performance traditions

- Dancing, set dances like ceilidh circle dances but typically dancers will come out of the line to do their own thing before rejoining the set moves. Avoid Cossack dancing!

14.1.4 How to adapt your repertoire

- Avoid cliched Russian tunes like the Tetris theme music (good though it is!)
- Start very slow and speed up!

14.1.5 Our sources

Georgian, Serbian, Croatian, Czech, Moravian and Bulgarian folk as well as traditional Russian songs.

Artists: Bulgarian State Television Female Vocal Choir; Georgian Voices; Northern Harmony, Kitka, Yale Slavic Chorus

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15 Category:Archetype

15.1 The Brass Coast

Dhomiro	A dhomiro is a member of a Freeborn family who is chosen by the family to be their representative to the wider world; sometimes as a leader, sometimes as an emissary.
Kohan	Kohan are groups of volunteer and outcast warriors-without-family, who traditionally pledge loyalty to a group of hakima.
Sutannir	Sutannir perform inspiring religious ceremonies for the Freeborn, and encourage people to exemplify and celebrate Virtue.
Hakima	Hakima are highly-organised groups of magic-users whose loyalty is to the nation, not their family. They are taken to be wise.
Corsair	Freeborn corsairs are traders and privateers who deal with - and raid - barbarian shipping in the Bay of Catazar.
Scrivener	Scriveners are Freeborn contract-writers who help traders frame the terms of their deals, and then decorate them with artwork and calligraphy.

15.1.1 Dawn

Earl	The Earl of a Dawnish Noble House is the House's leader, who leads the House in all its great achievements and who sets its conditions of membership.
Knight-errant	Knights-Errant are engaged in their Test of Mettle. Still technically yeofolk they are expected - and are questing - to prove themselves glorious.
Questing knight	Questing Knights are those Knights who have proved themselves worthy in their Test of Mettle and have chosen to keep on questing for ever-greater glory.
Troubadour	A Troubadour is a priest who learns all the stories of their Noble House, past and present, and tells them in poetry and song to inspire their people to greatness.
Witch	Witches are Dawnish magic-users. In noble houses, they fight alongside the House's warriors. Most others belong to Weaver Cabals, independent groups of ritual witches which accept both yeofolk and noble members.
Guiser	Itinerant entertainers who often combine magic with their performances and practice dramaturgy. They are often (sometimes justly) accused of being spies, tricksters and mountebanks as well as performers.
Enchanter	Some Earls who have studied magic choose the title "Earl-Enchanter" or simply "Enchanter". Most learn ritual magic to benefit their people; some build relationships with powerful Summer Eternals.
Seneschal	A Noble House's Seneschal is a trusted yeofolk who oversees its financial affairs, arranging deals and trades and keeping the House solvent.
Advocate	Dawnish Advocates are yeofolk politicians who navigate the murky waters of Senate politics for their noble masters.
Retainer	A yeofolk Retainer is a Dawnish Noble's most trusted attendant, who works closely with a particular Noble, or sometimes for the whole House.

15.1.2 Highguard

Exarch	The Exarch, or Exarchs, are those who are appointed by a Highguard Chapter as their leader(s) as determined by the Chapter's creed, or by embodying its principles.
Guardian	Guardians form the core of Highborn military, taking on a range of roles in defence of their Chapters, and in prosecuting vigilant warfare.
Unconquered	The Unconquered are Highguard's elite guerrilla troops. They are prone to using ruthless tactics, even operating behind enemy lines, to destroy the enemy's capacity to make war.
Cataphract	Cataphracts are Highguard's elite heavy warriors, who once rode horses into battle but who, in modern times, represent a resolute and unbreakable wall of steel.
Wayfarer	Wayfarers are Highborn priests with a long-standing tradition of teaching the truth of The Way to the ignorant, and seeking out Exemplars and Paragons born in other lands.
Inquisitor	Highborn Inquisitors are zealous defenders of The Way from those that would threaten it, whether mortal or supernatural.
Steward of the Dead	Stewards of the Dead dedicate their lives to preserving the legacies of the worthy. This includes the interring of remains as well as the preservation of legacies and tales.
Magister	Magisters are the master magicians of Highguard, often with an affinity for Winter Magic. They shape magic using movement, sound and the chime of bells.
Benefactor	Benefactors are affluent Highborn merchants and tradesfolk who do not pursue wealth for its own sake, but who sponsor individuals, great works and endeavours.

Archivist	Archivists are a unique class of Highborn scholar dedicated to preserving the essence, or truth, of history, over and above accounts and evidence that may seek to undermine that truth.
Grey pilgrim	Grey pilgrims are a recent phenomenon. They walk the trods in a crusade to free the souls believed to be trapped between life and death by the vallorn, but they also oppose heresy and idolatry, convert foreigners to the Way, and seek to guide the other human nations of the Empire toward enlightenment.

15.1.3 Imperial Orcs

Warlord	Legions chose their own commanders, called warlords, with individuals chosen for their ability to provide clear effective leadership in battle, according to the traditions of the individual legion
Pitfighter	Professional fighters of the Pits in which the Orcs hone their combat skills; trading on the reputation for skill and strength that they have built up in previous fights, pitfighters build their careers until their notoriety means that other orcs begin to seek them out and actively challenge them.
Shaman	Most orcs only experience communion with the ancestors when battle is upon them but a few individuals - called shamans - are able to hear the voices more frequently; they are almost incessantly surrounded by the constant input of ancestral advice much of it bearing a contradictory or even hostile message.
Preacher	Those Imperial Orcs who embrace the Way and become priests.
Warcaster	The highly physical traditions of the Wintermark runesmiths has appealed to some orcs who adopt a similar approach and become Warcasters.
Oathwright	Oathwrights believe that the bond between an item and a person affects them both, items may gain worth by being owned and bonded to the right person and the right item affects an individual?s hopes of becoming an ancestor.
Bonesetter	Usually trained apothecaries, physicks or both, Bonesetters are expected to attend to the physical needs of the legion, but their remit runs well beyond this.
Thief-taker	Working closely with Imperial Magistrates, Thief-takers earn their income by collecting bounties on criminals who have fled the law and more rarely by taking payments from private individuals looking to identify perpetrators of crimes.
Reaver	Soldiers of the Legions who become dedicated to raiding and mercenary work.

15.1.4 The League

Merchant Prince	A Merchant Prince is the head of a Guild, the tight-knit mercantile organisations which define the shape of League society.
Bravo	Bravos are the members of the mercenary Free Companies, as rough and rowdy off the battlefield as they are disciplined and professional on it, and immensely proud of their Companies.
Bishop	The Bishops of the League are its high priests, who provide Virtuous guidance to any who can afford it, and who compete using the size and influence of their congregations.
Troupe Magician	Troupes are bands of actors who often go masked while performing, and when performing ritual magic. To them, magic is a commodity like any other.
Mountebank	Mountebanks are street magicians whose tricks may be sleight of hand or genuine magic, many of whom skirt the edges of the law playing short-cons and rigging street games.
Cicisbeo	A Cicisbeo is an expensive professional paramour, the only exception to League culture's absolute prohibition on extramarital relations.

15.1.5 The Marches

Steward	A steward is the chosen head of a Marcher household. However a steward leads their household only with the consent of the other yeoman.
Beater	Beaters are a roaming informal police force, learning every part of the land, watching for thieves, vagrants and other ne?er-do-wells. Beaters are often instrumental in settling land disputes between neighbours and they have a vital role in the tradition of beating the bounds. Most are skilled foresters or hunters.
Yeoman	The yeoman is to many the archetypal inhabitant of the Marches. They are a hard people, who own their own land and are well accustomed to a long day working it. Military service is a proud tradition in the Marches, and the majority of yeomen are also soldiers.
Monk	Monks minister to the spiritual welfare of the folk around their monastery, largely ignoring household boundaries. They divide their time between study of the Imperial Faith and working the farmlands claimed by the monastery.
Friar	Friars work their own land and provide spiritual advice and counsel to their fellow yeomen in their household. Many also serve as scholars for their community, acting as a chirurgeon, and teaching letters and history to young children.
Landskeeper	

	A landskeeper is a figure from the Marches magical tradition, who supports the territories or the nation as a whole. Landskeepers can use a variety of methods, from hearth magics and good practical advice to rituals.
Mummer	Itinerant entertainers who combine theatrical performance with magic using the techniques of dramaturgy. They attend fairs, markets and other regular gatherings performing plays and feats of skill but are often greeted with suspicion and (sometimes unfairly) accused of being tricksters and mountebanks.
Alder	Alders are the appointed leaders of market towns, and are the rough equivalent of the yeomen. In most cases these are wealthy merchants of the town, but often they include prominent town folk such as a friar or blacksmith who lives in the village.
Smith	A skilled crafter who has used a lifetime's experience selling their wares to become a canny trader and experienced negotiator.
Thresher	A thresher dedicates their life to tracking down those who use magic for nefarious purposes and finding ways to punish them.

15.1.6 Navarr

Brand	Navarri who have dedicated themselves to the service of the community, who work tirelessly to aid others without fee. They might be from any profession - Thorn, Vate, blacksmith, tanner, it doesn't matter. They are named for the brand burned into the skin on their left cheekbone.
Dreamspeaker	Philosophers, visionaries, and activists who aspire to make dreams into reality.
Thorn	A Navarri sworn to service in battle - usually, but not necessarily, a warrior. Always tattooed, they often wear warpaint into battle.
Guide	A Navarri who follows the path of the Virtues, and takes it upon themselves to ensure that members of the Empire have found the place in society that they are best suited to.
Broker	A Navarri who serves as an intermediary between a buyer and a seller, usually claiming some sort of payment from the deal.
Vate	The magical practitioners of Navarr. Often called upon to perform rituals in service of the nation and the Empire, they are the Navarri most trusted to meet with eternals or their heralds.
Vine	A Navarr who has dedicated themselves to healing the wounds caused by the vallorn.

15.1.7 Urizen

Arbiter	An arbiter is the elected leader of the spires, citadels, and temples of Urizen. They are often called on to resolve disputes within a community or to represent it to outsiders.
Architect	Architects are interested in economics and how money moves around and the influence it exerts on the world.
Illuminate	Illuminates use their understanding of the Net of the Heavens to perfect the world; focusing on building up the virtuous... and removing the unvirtuous from prominence.
Mage	Mages are magicians motivated by politics. Ambitious and potentially ruthless, a mage understands that all magic is inherently political.
Seer	Seers believe that perfect understanding is they key to unlocking the Net of the Heavens. They seek out opportunities to get the right information to the right people so they can make the right decisions.
Sentinel	Sentinels study the art of war with dedication and commitment that matches that of any magician.
Stargazer	Stargazers are scholars of magical lore who love magic in all its forms; they are the theoreticians and debaters who push knowledge to its limit.
Sword scholar	Sword scholars are warrior priests with a passionate commitment to reason and wisdom. They exhort others to test what they have learnt.
Torchbearer	Torchbearers are dedicated to ensuring that as many people as possible know the truth. They work to keep fellow citizens informed about current events and abhor falsehoods and secrets.
Questor	Questors consider the Way of Virtue to be an unfinished work and the Doctrines of the Faith as incomplete. Questors are radical priests who are willing to tear apart the Way in their quest for perfection.

15.1.8 Varushka

Boyar	A Varushkan Boyar is the hard heart of a Varushkan community, whose first duty is as a strong protector of their people. Second to that, they arbitrate and govern their vale in council with their Wise Ones.
Warden	The Warden brotherhoods are heroic warriors who employ magical protection along with their armour and weapons to hunt down the terrors of the Varushkan wilderness, and to uphold Imperial Law.
Schlacta	The Schlacta are Varushka's well-organised bands of soldiery, who provide defence to a place or an employer.
Wise One	Wise Ones are the true hearts of Varushkan communities. They are the thinkers who deal with those problems which cannot be dealt with by strength, and who look through the appearance of things to discover the threats lurking beneath.
Volhov	A Volhov is a Varushkan who studies magic, particularly warding magic (so necessary to Varushka's safety) and divination, to uncover threats before they grow too great to deal with. They often find it necessary to deal with Eternals, and sometimes even to pacify

	Varushka's deadly Sovereigns with rituals or bargains.
Cabalists	Cabals are teams of ritual magic users, who often act as individual groups, independent of their vales. Each Cabal is different from each other, but their magical might grants them considerable influence.
Storytellers	Varushkan Storytellers are the nation's ragged priests, often itinerant, around whom entire communities will gather to hear news, entertaining tales, and spiritual messages told well.
Stzena	The inheritors of a tradition of night sentries, Stzena are bands of musicians who perform at local events.
Wagon raider	Opportunists who seek their fortunes by launching forays into barbarian lands to grab whatever riches can be found.

15.1.9 Wintermark

Thane	The leader of a Hall in Wintermark, a Thane settles disputes that lie outside the law and provides civic and military leadership.
Banner-Bearer?	Warriors whose purpose is to raise the morale and fighting spirit of their companions. Banner-bearers often literally carry their warband's banner.
Stormcrow	The ragged priests of Wintermark, who act as guides, witnesses and confessors, and who provide spiritual and moral inspiration and guidance for the Winterfolk.
Runesmith	Artisans who specialise in the magic of the old runes of Wintermark, who create engraved weapons and armour, or scribe warding marks to protect people or places.
Icewalker	The cunning mages of the Suaq, who use their magical skills and their knowledge of the Ice as part of their hunting tradition.
Mediator	A Wintermark merchant who specialises in negotiating weregild between aggrieved parties.
Maggot	A scavenger, a looter on the battlefield; "Maggots" are seen as scum by most Winterfolk.
Mystic	Deeply spiritual Kallavesi who make predictions about the future and advise their fellows on the wisest course of action. Often a magician, but some do it with hearth magic and intellect.
Scop	The professional entertainers of Wintermark, Scops are known for their mastery of saga and song, and their skill with alliterative poetry. They are responsible for granting an adult name to a child coming to adulthood.
Grimnir	The battlefield doctors and healers of Wintermark, Grimnir swear an oath to stay clear of the front lines.

16 Varushka groups

16.1 Overview

There are many important vales, cabals, and warden fellowships in Varushka. Despite the number, only a comparative handful are involved in the affairs of the Empire (that is, attend the seasonal summits at Anvil). Their influence can wax and wane, and involvement in Imperial affairs is not always a reflection of their prominence within the nation itself. This page presents in-character information about the groups that attend, or have attended, Anvil ? the kind of thing that someone who asked about them might uncover from talking to their peers. In each case, the information is provided by the players and edited before being put on the wiki.

The majority of groups listed here are made up of player-characters. You should not create a character who is part of a group, or has personal history with one, without first clearing it with the appropriate players. You should also check before including other players' groups in your background. The background team are unlikely to approve a background that significantly impacts or involves another player character group without their permission. There are also a handful of prominent NPC groups included for completeness, but they are not intended for use by player characters.

16.2 Vales

16.2.1 Vales of Karov



Orlov

16.2.1.1 Orlov

- **Location:** Wieliczka
- **Colours:** Blue, red and black
- **Boyar:** Jadwiga Orlovna

Beneath the southern mountains of Karov, along a stream rich in mana, lies the small Vale of Orlov. For centuries, the old Ushkan family who founded the vale lived in relative solitude. When the Vard fell from the sky, Orlov was slow to feel the aftershocks. Over the years, members left and fresh blood was drawn to the vale by the promise of mana and magic. The Mizerski family, the old Ushkans, were known to be great teachers of Winter magic. Some believed it to be the cause for the strong presence of the draughir lineage. Others thought it a gift from the *Man in Blue and Red and Black* - one of the two sovereigns of the vale.

345YE brought with it the first of the Jarmish refugees, rescued from Jarm by a pair of intrepid brothers. Every couple of years, more and more would come. Orlov grew in size and Prosperity as the Jarmish became Varushkans and settled in the vale that had given them a life. The Mizerskis were hesitant at first, but eventually warmed to their guests and eventual neighbours. Sometimes, the pack grows in unexpected ways. When he was too old to keep sailing to Jarm, one brother took over the Pale Lady Inn - named for the vale?s other sovereign.

Nowadays, there are many Dawnish yeofolk travelling through in their attempt to build a road to Delev through the mountains. Wardens often rest on their journeys too, defending the fledgling road and the travellers who use it.

16.2.2 Vales of Miekarova

16.2.2.1 Forest of the White Caves



Forest of the White Caves

- **Location:** Mieriada

Deep in the heart of primal Miekarova, in the region of Mieriada, lies the Forest of the White Caves, named for its many painted caves, and claimed by the ancient Ushkan cabal: The Circle of Zulgan-Tash. The people of the Forest of White Caves come from ancient stock; they keep to themselves and they know the value of wisdom and tradition. The forest itself is as vast as it is dark, and as old as it is untamed. Amongst the pine, spruce, and larches, grow great oaks, as wide as a wagon, and as tall as a the towers of Urizen. The oaks provide a reminder that the lives of mortals are short and the forest will still be there long after they are buried in the body of moist-mother-earth.

Before the worst of the threats to humanity were pacified or driven out by the Circle, the depredations of wolves and worse led to isolation and poverty. These days, monsters are kept at bay by the wisdom and magic of the cabalists. Safety comes at a price of course, and only the Wise Ones know what bargains have been made with the Circle to gain their protection.

In the Forest of White Caves, people know they must work hard and remain vigilant to survive. They know that just because they cannot hear the wolf howl, it doesn?t mean it is not there, and they know that when you deal with a wizard there is always a price to be paid.

16.2.2.2 Hundr Fenn



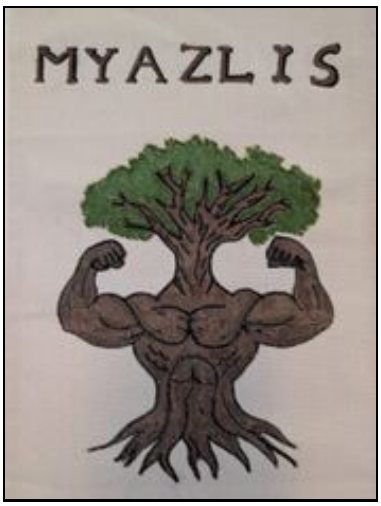
Hundr Fenn

- **Location:** Perumaki
- **Boyar:** Dorys Delgorokov

The howling and barking of the hounds of Hundr Fenn can be heard long before the lights of the small vale can be seen. Nestled on a border between the ore-rich foothills of the Razors and an expanse of misty fenland, this small insular vale had existed in relative solitude for generations. Those few traders who visit the Vale of Hundr Fenn speak of the huge black mastiffs and wolfhounds the villagers breed and revere.

After the mysterious death of their boyar and schlacta, the vale was forced to break its long-held isolation in 386YE; reaching out to the nearby Grimhold Guard for support and security. The Delgorokov family answered their call for aid, providing a new boyar and schlacta. Now they must navigate the vale finally being represented at Anvil, under the frosty and judgemental gaze of the vale?s denizens and their hounds.

16.2.2.3 Myazlis



Myazlis

- **Location:** Srodkoja
- **Boyar:** Valenya Makarovich Bereza

Nestled in the south-western reaches of Srodkoja in Miekarova, the Vale of Myazlis sits almost in the looming presence of the Icy Crag of Eternal Darkness, the foreboding college of magic dominating the landscape. Sheltered by the mountains marking the border of Miekarova and Skarsind, this small, self-reliant vale thrives with minimal need for the outside world?its main contact a steady trickle of trade with the Icy Crag?s ritualists.

The surrounding forests are particularly robust and thick-limbed; this seems to have carried over to the locals, known for their strength and resilience. The clang of hammers echoes between the hills as its smiths forge tools and weapons from the ore mined nearby, while apothecaries vanish into the green depths in search of potent herbs. Each day, a single bell calls the folk together for rigorous training, keeping bodies honed and ready.

Peace may reign most days, but the howl of wolves or the shadow of greater threats is never far. The people of Myazlis meet these dangers with their usual pragmatic style: hard training, strong arms and a little bit of tempering wisdom from the vale's wise ones.

16.2.2.4 Night's Whispers



Night's Whispers

- **Location:** Mieriada
- **Colours:** Red, black, purple, blue, and white
- **Boyar:** Silvia Rishkovich Danyleski

In the heart of the woods in Mieriada is a vale settled in the midst of the forest in a clearing. This is the vale of the Night's Whispers. Its inhabitants have an emphasis on the Virtues of Loyalty, Wisdom, and Vigilance above all others. There are a number of volhovs who lurk in their cottages in the vale, content to keep to themselves and use their skill as they wish without a coven. Storytelling, as in most vales, is important but in the Night's Whispers the focus of the stories during the day are lessons for children, but once the sun sets the stories become far more nightmarish. Stories are not just a warning

and a lesson, but a way of understanding from a different level how important things are, like to stay on the roads.

The surrounding forests are for the most part safe, and many draw wealth from the forests of the area, but wolves have had a history with this vale. Strange monsters often arrive and are never turned away. Ultimately the vale is strives for harmony and acceptance, being proud of who you are and Loyalty to your kin and vale.

16.2.2.5 The Singing Night



Singing Night

- **Location:** Mieriada
- **Colours:** Blue, yellow, grey, iridescent
- **Boyar:** Nadezhda Marzenanyn Navratil

Located deep in the forests and mountains in northern Mieriada and steeped in night magic from a nearby northern system of the Painted Caves is the vale of the Singing Night. An Ushkan vale once lost to wolves, potentially to deliberate sabotage if the passed-down tales of locals are to be believed, it was originally reclaimed as an outpost to provide supplies and a home to the Wardens of the Dancing Forest but over time grew to become a true vale as it drew in both scattered residents from the surrounding area and newcomers from farther afield.

Rich seams of weltsilver and orichalcum, along with more mundane metals, are common in the mines around the vale. The mountain they rest at the foot of and the forest that surrounds them is filled with both a multitude of iridescent butterflies that are partially responsible for its name and a startling number of medicinal herbs. This combines with a long tradition of healers to mean a large number of the residents are trained as chirurgeons and physicks. The close proximity to some of the Painted Caves and the night regio within also leads to a large number of night mages and is occasionally blamed for the sizeable naga population among those born in the vale.

Music is a vital component of the warding here, most visible and audible in the many wind-chimes hanging from buildings, trees and even the supports in the mines and in the large number of resident stzena. It is said if there is ever silence the vale will be lost once more.

16.2.2.6 Strascovia



Strascovia

- **Location:** Perumaki

Named after the Strasyelka, the tyrant that once ruled the area, Strascovia is a fertile valley rich in mines and forests. The sound of hammers striking metal can be heard from craft halls as iridescent butterflies flit through the restless woodland. There is a dark lake down the spine of the valley, those who stroll its shore may come across the odd broken child?s toy or the sound of something slithering across stone. Brooding over the landscape at the head of the pass, towers the ancient Grimhold. While prosperous, Strascovia is a hazardous vale of hollowed hills necessitating continual vigilance. Its forests are rumoured to uproot and march to war, it is even said the trees of Strascovia can be heard whispering on certain nights about battle tactics and blood.

The locals are hard working with their own traditions born from generational endurance and a creed of hospitality. Strascovia has way stations on the main trade routes at either end of the Vale. Strascovia has two Boyars Vasiliy Krenyenkov Valeskai Strascovich and Nisha Melinka Rupelia Strascovich. Other Boyars have come from the vale to care for other regions. The nearby small vale of Bitter Fruit has recently come under Strascovia protection after the unprecedented eradication of the incumbent Sovereign and is now home to many from Miechernya.

16.2.2.7 Spider's Rest



Spider's Rest

- **Location:** Perumaki
- **Colours:** Green and white
- **Boyar:** Father Drakov

This vale of Spider's Rest lies in Perumaki close to the border of Mieriada. The vale was originally founded as a logging village during the reign of Empress Giselle as an offshoot of the Wulfen Reavers. The vale was lost in unknown circumstances when the population was found to have been massacred almost to the last during the winter of 341YE. The only survivor was a baby who was found days later and raised by the Vor?azi sect.

During the winter of 384YE, Drakov returned with many others to reclaim the vale. Having dealt with the sovereign and the wolves the vale is once again growing; its wards have been renewed and are being strengthened daily and the local roads repaired. Spider?s Rest welcomes those who wish to find a new home and provides refuge for those wanting to heal physical and spiritual wounds.

16.2.3 Vales of Volodmartz

16.2.3.1 Sovereign's Head



Sovereign's Head

- **Location:** Opascari
- **Colours:** Red, blue, and white
- **Boyar:** Vladamir Sasha Volkov

High up within the Opascari mountains, where the snow only melts during the summer months, lies the Vale of the Sovereign?s Head. The wealth of its mountains and woods keep the people of the vale busy, it was rare that they would travel much farther than the nearest market and trading towns.

One of the grandest buildings in the vale is the large inn in the centre of town. Its many roofs pointing high to the sky and nailed above the double doors; a giant skull, bleached white with age looking down the vale beneath it. Though the vale has been missing from the summits of Anvil for several decades, the boyar Vladamir Sasha Volkov now brings the best from his vale including famous *Sovereign?s Head* a bar often full of mystery, meetings, and mayhem.

16.2.3.2 Third Brother



Third Brother

- **Location:** Brez
- **Colours:** Black and yellow
- **Boyar:** Vidoslav Sosniok

After the Winter Solstice 384YE, three Varushkans were travelling home together. While making their way through the mountain passes of Volodmartz, they uncovered a series of rocks, unnaturally stacked on a large mound of dirt. A lone burial mound with no other sign of civilisation nearby. Intrigued but not daring to investigate up close, the trio set up camp. During the nights that followed they noticed interesting occurrences that prompted the trio to set up camp permanently and investigate the mystery.

Lysyryska has a somewhat unique shape. With regular walls facing outwards like any other vale would. But also walls facing inwards surrounding the burial mound. This gives the vale a unique O shape. The mystery surrounding the burial mound has given rise to superstition and paranoia.

One thing that has taken root is a reliance on blood magic. Many of the vale's inhabitants appear convinced of the importance blood when swearing oaths.

16.2.3.3 Vale of Carrion



Vale of Carrion

- **Location:** Opascari
- **Boyar:** Alderei

Nestled within the Opascari mountains, the Vale of Carrion lies at the very edge of Varushka, bordering the land of Otkodov. Originally founded by refugees of Alderei's armies these messy borderlands have often been contested with the Thule, yet the Vale is so remote as to be a rare site of actual battle. Wardens are the main defensive force as they are fleeter of foot than their schlacta counterparts; no amount of armour will be enough if the wolves are hunting. The mountain passes are infamous for being snowbound during winter. Anyone who arrived at the Vale of Carrion would rarely find conditions safe enough to be able to leave. Stockpiling during the winter market is essential for survival and the Vale hosts a great midwinter feast during this dark and isolated time.

"*Where the woods of Varushka grow darker, And bitterest cold makes pine sap shatter,*
Here ice and snow act as palisade, The wind and blizzard as Boyar's blade,
Wolven howls chill the blood and turn cheeks pale, Why there lies Fairest Alderei's home vale."

-poem about the Vale of Carrion by a travelling priest

16.2.3.4 Vaslyuk



Vaslyuk

- **Location:** Opascari
- **Colours:** Red, gold, and white
- **Boyar:** Ostrik Vulpe

Between the pines in the foothills of the Opascari mountains sits the vale of Vaslyuk. It sits in an artificial clearing, beneath a great maw in the mountain which the inhabitants mine for its rich reserves of weltsilver.

The town built beneath this mine has the peculiar quirk of seemingly being overrun by foxes: each building is built slightly above ground to allow fox burrows underneath. The inhabitants appear to keep the beasts; not as pets but as revered family members; not barring their entry from anywhere and dropping food from their tables to feed the animals. They seem more docile than their wild counterparts partially due to slight domestication. A pre-Imperial story of why the inhabitants keep foxes is commonly told here - titled ?The Fox Oath? - though some doubt its accuracy. According to this story a Vulpe must be Boyar of the vale or some undescribed calamity will occur; this tradition has not been broken in recorded history.

Just as the fox is the virtue animal of Ambition, so too do the members of the Fox Fangs of Vaslyuk (the vale?s delegation at Anvil) value Ambition striving to further project their vale?s power outward to Anvil and beyond. To this end, there are training grounds suitable to house and train fierce schlacta. There is a visually distinctive split between the pre-Imperial architecture and newly built homes, evidence that the vale had been isolated for some time before a very recent increase in population.

16.2.4 Vales of Karsk



Lost Souls

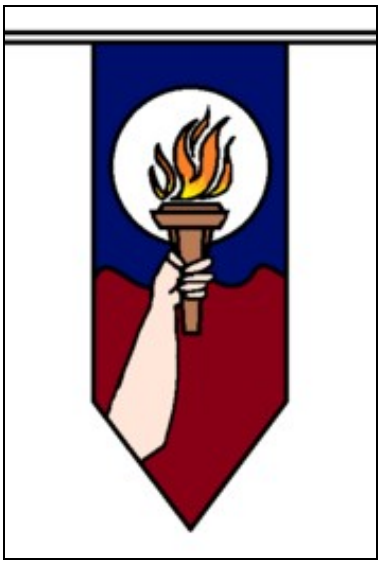
16.2.4.1 Lost Souls

- **Location:** Lestasny
- **Colours:** Dark blue and green
- **Boyar:** Amris Johan Merikovich

The vale is in an isolated and heavily forest area of Lestasny and sits next to a natural ford across a small river which runs from the deep forest to the north-east and snakes down to the Semmerlak. The vale is built on ruins left from the invasion of Karsk. This vale is now made up of outcasts and refugees looking for a new life, it will accept anybody (and some say anything) that will swear a binding oath to the vale and the empire.

Inhabitants of the vale are focused on second chances and new beginnings and is heavily tied to the virtues of Wisdom and Loyalty and the magical realm of Night. Those who reside in the vale are known to prefer the use of cunning, deception and diplomacy in favour of brute force.

Due to the vale still being relatively young it has no real traditions and most buildings are new and still being improved, however it a large number of wise ones and volhovs among its members.



Utovshy

16.2.4.2 Utovshy

- **Location:** Moresvah
- **Colours:** Blue, Red and Gold
- **Boyar:** Miro Yasenov

Within the recesses of Moresvah, where the mountains meet the Semmerlak, lies the keep of the Utovshy Vale. A crumbling stone wall with towers that cling to the cliffs above the crushing waves. Treacherous jagged steps wind down the trail to the village which lurks in the shadows of the keep. The recent settlers contend with the superstitious remnants of the original townsfolk.

The keep and docks provide many opportunities for trade and prosperity in esoteric pursuits. The origin of the keep and how it came to be abandoned lurks in the darker thoughts of those who come to reside here. Hardy and pragmatic, the folk are no strangers to a hard day's toil, throwing themselves into the renovations lest their thoughts turn to the ill omens that haunt their shores.

Whispers of dread deeds done in dark times to appease the spirit of the lake permeate the dank corners of the vale. Perhaps this is why the schlacta and wardens of the area are uncommonly ruthless in their vigilance, dedicating many of their strongest to train with blade, spear and axe. Their nerve is tested when wails of those condemned to a watery grave pierce the rolling fog.

16.2.4.3 Valakaulau



Valakaulau

- **Location:** Lestasny
- **Boyar:** Fretek Sargava Slavomiryn

Originally established as an outpost in 384YE, the vale of Valakaulau has experienced steady growth amplified by the former slaves entering the territory in the wake of the Thule liberation. The Vale rests in Lestasny?s heart, where forests slowly swallow the battlefields of the Thule war. The vale's wealth comes from exploiting the rich deposits of dragonbone as well as deep veins of iron. Even river silt does not escape this enthusiasm, supplying a strong glassworking culture within the town which has developed a reputation for fine labour. These goods flow along Semmerlak tributaries and the crow roads into Ossium and further afield.

The people of Valakaulau hold a particular reverence for artisans and other craftsfolk. The boyar's power stems from their competence in maintaining the vale?s tools and armour, which are otherwise quickly blunted by industry. This prosperous outlook translates into versatile and intricate architecture, and a unique warding style, where gifts of beads, carvings, and refined foods such as sugar draw a boundary between those who accept hospitality and wolves.

Despite often humble origins, citizens of Valakaulau are known for strong relations of supportive prosperity and hatred for those that exploit them, as they say "The only beggar in Valakaulau is the lye". The Vale's leadership hold a particularly strong ambition to see Karsk brought back into heel, seeking to reclaim the lands of Isember in service of the vale, Varushka, and the Empire.

16.2.4.4 Yarizov



Yarizov

- **Location:** Branoc
- **Colours:** Blue, red, and gold
- **Boyar:** Skandavitz Kastrioti, the Voice of Yarizov

Founded during the reign of Empress Varkula. Yarizov is a small vale constructed amidst the haunted hills in the southwest of Branoc. Yarizov was founded to be a strong defensible outpost willing to spread and expand its military might to protect neighbouring outposts, later assimilating the smaller outposts into it. Yarizov has always encouraged its inhabitants to fight for what they have and do not waver from that, to die for what they believe in and always stick to their loyalties.

The boyar of Yarizov was rumoured to make some form of bargain with dark powers during 368YE, which allowed it to remain hidden from the invading armies of the Thule, surviving but hardly thriving. Because of this, many schlacta of the vale spent their two years fighting as part of the Iron Helms before that army fell in Therunin.

The boyar of Yarizov is advised by a council of seven wise ones, each representing a Virtue, who aim to find the best way to progress the vale. There is a great respect for stzena within the vale, the boyar often being referred to as the *Voice of Yarizov* as a result.

Yarizov has often found itself taking in refugees, vagrants and lost souls, giving them a new purpose to work towards. These individuals, when leaving Yarizov are found with strong resolve and a powerful sense of Loyalty, not only to Yarizov but to Varushka as a whole.

16.2.5 Vales of Ossium



Dark Water Vale

16.2.5.1 Dark Water Vale

- **Location:** Bittershore
- **Boyar:** Mora?a

Dark Water Vale lies close to the waters of the Semmerlak and south of the port and the Golden Causeway. Centred around an old, partially ruined lookout tower and keep, its once-ramshackle houses show signs of recent renovation. Fresh thatch can be seen on many roofs, door and window frames have been repaired and newly split wood is stacked by the central hearthfire. A flock of apparently remarkably vigilant geese grow fat on the weeds and honk loudly at the presence of visitors.

The settlement has only been established for a few years. Its community comprised primarily of people who previously mined the Vale of the Sunless Depths; liberated from the Druj when the Empire claimed Ossium, along with settlers from further afield. The Way has been strongly embraced here and the Vale has many priests among its number who minister to the faithful. A warm welcome is afforded to all - the Vale has taken the tradition of hospitality to heart - and in turn, everyone is expected to work to further the community.



Vale of Redtree

16.2.5.2 Vale of Redtree

- **Location:** Echofell
- **Boyar:** Vladimir Cresavich Retreeyev

A short way from the ruins of the Tower of the Scorpion lies the prosperous Vale of Redtree. Once the site of a ruthless Druj labour outpost, this vale of former slaves has thrived since the liberation of Ossium. Known for its production and trade in herbs, potions and the sweet sap of its red-leafed trees, the vale also enjoys a close and defensive association with the Vulkari (a group of wagon raiders turned warden), many of whom have family among its inhabitants.

16.2.5.3 The Wolves Hearth

- **Location:** Echofell
- **Boyar:** Belakov Zakharovich Prochnost



The Wolves Hearth
The Wolves Hearth is a small vale situated deep in the heart of Echofell. It is deceptively cosy, offering the expected warm fire and hospitality to all in an otherwise unforgiving and treacherous landscape. What visitors may be surprised to learn is that the inhabitants of the Wolves Hearth take the idea of ?hospitality for all? further than most Varushkans. Upon the founding of the Wolves Hearth the Boyar struck a deal with a nearby sovereign, *The Father of Wolves*, that human and wolf alike would be offered hospitality if requested. For this reason the vale?s inhabitants are able to live in almost perfect peace, as long as they are able to tolerate some unusual house guests.

Founded six months after the conquest of Ossium, the Wolves Hearth was built with the spirit of raising Ossium from the ashes. Led by the Prochnost family which has dedicated itself to building Ossium?s future and has produced the first two senators of the territory. The vale is a home for any who share the vision of a prosperous Ossium. In turn, they take very unkindly to anyone who threatens Ossium?s future, always maintaining a close eye on the border, they keep their citizens in constant readiness to fight potential invaders.

The people of the Wolves Hearth are fierce, principled, and militant. Their bond is to their territory and they will defend it no matter the cost.

16.3 Cabals and Fellowships

16.3.1 Cabals

16.3.1.1 Hive Charivnyk



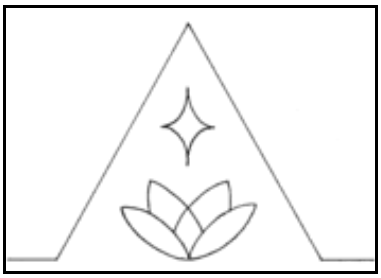
Hive Charivnyk

- **First Bargainer:** Laskav Zlatanyr Rosomák

Formed at the turn of the year of 388YE by brothers, Hive Charivnyk is a coven formed out of the Utovshy Vale of Karsk that has come to include members of other vales across Varushka, courtesy of their activity and presence at Anvil each summit. With a particular focus on the Autumn resonances of binding, craftsmanship, prosperity and trade, they have also been known to collaborate with other Varushkan covens.

It is tradition that upon joining the coven, new ritualists are given a token payment of a handful of ring coins, symbolic of the Prosperity that their decision will bring. This duty and the associated oath swearing is usually carried out by the leader of the coven, ceremonially referred to as "First Bargainer" in reference to ancient Ushkan traditions, even if the bargains now facilitated are more commonly between individuals signing agreements and contracts rather than fearsome sovereigns as in days long gone.

16.3.1.2 Heirs of Pakaanan



Heirs of Pakaanan
The Heirs of Pakaanan were formed at the beginning of 383YE, when a small group of volhovs, wardens and wise ones united over a desire to seek out knowledge and protect Varushka, beginning with a magical ward over the camp?s hearth at Anvil.

The Heirs is a diverse coven, representing traditions and practices from across Varushka. They have a range of interests and opinions, involving themselves in other people?s business as they see fit, but united by common aims. Membership interests range from Conclave, to Synod, to Senate. Despite Pakaanan?s membership of the Rod and Shield, the coven as a whole is apolitical, although individual members might not be.

The Heirs seek out knowledge and lost lore of Pakaanan, drawing on the pragmatic, vagabond spirit of Varushkan magic that the volhov embodied. The coven is not ancient and as far as they know, no members have any direct ties to volhov himself, but this does not matter.

They honour the duties of the wandering magicians of yore. They are predominately a Winter coven, respecting that realm?s resonance with Wisdom, and Oaths and Wards, and to a lesser extent Weakness and Punishment. Despite this, the coven appreciates Day?s resonance to Divination and Revelation, and Night?s resonance to Intuition and Obfuscation, for imparting and concealing knowledge respectively.



Cabal Lyktan
16.3.1.3 Cabal Lyktan

Cabal Lyktan is a coven that call on the brilliance of Day and the golden light of Autumn that shines from the lantern that is Cabal Lyktan - ?Lyktan? meaning ?Lantern? in one of the Sumaash dialects. Ritualists from across Varushka came together to found the cabal in 376YE, with an aim to support the nation and the Empire.

Cabal members from more than fifteen vales from across every territory of Varushka travel to Anvil each summit to perform curses and rituals. Ritualists with training in the realms of Day and Autumn are welcomed into the cabal with support and true Varushkan hospitality.

16.3.2 Warden Fellowships

16.3.2.1 Wardens of the Dancing Forest

- **Location:** Mieriada, Miekarova
- **Warden-Captain:** Iskra Marzenanova Navratil

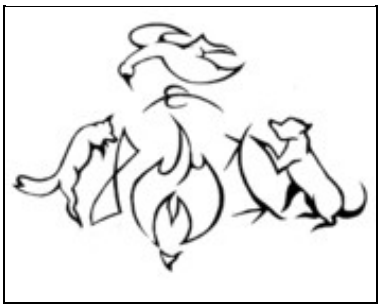


Wardens of the Dancing Forest
The Wardens of the Dancing Forest were formed when a small band of wardens, battle-mages, schlacta and battle-physicks from northern Mieriada decided to reclaim their ancestral home, the Dancing Forest and the vale that was once within it. A large undertaking given the size of the area in question and the time it had been since it had fallen they nonetheless set to rebuilding and warding the roads and buildings that had fallen into disrepair, dealing with the wolves and bargaining with the two sovereigns that called the area home. As they laboured and began to show results they grew in number of both warriors and supporters, setting the foundations of what would one day become the Vale of the Singing Night.

Many, many years after they had begun their labour they achieved their goal and with the sovereigns placated, the wards in place and the wolves killed or held at bay they continued to grow and expand their operations to help replace and maintain the wards of the northern reaches of Miekarova, heal the sick and injured and defend the Varushkans there from orcs and the many wolves that still plague the deep forests and mountains. The large number of physicks, a well-maintained tradition from when they were first formed, means the less medically-inclined are sometimes jokingly accused of being nothing more than bodyguards for the healers and a fair few stzena are also counted among their ranks.

A small group attend Anvil regularly to protect both Varushka and the Empire on a larger scale than they could achieve at home

16.3.2.2 Wardens of the Grateful Hearth



Wardens of the Grateful Hearth

- **Location:** Srodkoja, Miekarova
- **Warden-Captain:** Jaromir Ostrovyn Kostka

The Wardens of the Grateful Hearth took up their duty to the roads of their nation as a calling given amidst disaster. A band of traveling schlacta found

themselves overmatched by wolves one grim winter, yet were saved from doom only by a chance discovery of shelter; a half-collapsed hillfort of aged stone. The overgrown structure they found should have done little to keep the monsters at bay, and yet within they found the place warded, with living herbs in sheltered gardens that allowed them to tend to their wounds. Most unusual of all was the hearth in the great hall of the keep, which was piled high with dry wood and leapt to life at the touch of the softest flame.

Through these gifts, they survived, and there they named their refuge Hearthguard. When spring finally came, an oath was made; grateful for their survival, the schlacta would dedicate themselves to the warden?s path, and Hearthguard would be their stronghold from which they would range out against the dark.

In the many years since, the Wardens of the Grateful Hearth have grown in both numbers and influence, a rise which has been matched by a widening perspective on who they should be working to protect. This has culminated in their regular attendance at Anvil, where they see to the protection of not just their home of Miekarova, but the rest of Varushka and the Empire beyond. Under their watchful eyes, all shall have a safe place to call home.

16.4 Other Groups

16.4.1 Other Player Groups



Hearth and Honey

16.4.1.1 Hearth and Honey Tea Shoppe

- **Location:** Delev, Duzekani, Karov
- **Boyar:** Nikolai Yaropolk Borislav

The Hearth and Honey Tea Shoppe is the lasting legacy of Grandma Ida, who founded it beneath the shade of the brooding oak known as the blood tree. Once simply a stopping off point for traders to and from Karov, over the years it has grown into a thriving waystation for travellers of all stripes. Famous not only for its selection of teas and the quality of its cinnamon rolls, but also the ferocity of its schlacta, it is a place that any who visit once are sure to seek out again.

Grandma Ida was a keen apiarist, and with several hives dotted around the Shoppe, huge black bees are often seen around the vale on their own business - or that of the vale's sovereign. Each family in the vale goes once a week to the blood tree, an ancient deep red oak, and makes an offering of blood and tears to keep the Vale's sovereign placated. Most of the vale carry around vials of fresh blood for this reason, and anyone sworn to the banner in the field is gifted the blood and tears of the "*Keeper of the Tithe*", to keep them safe on the road until they can offer their own to the blood tree.

Predominantly following the Virtue of Prosperity, the Tea Shoppe also maintains a presence in Anvil, sending its greatest warriors through the Sentinel Gate. It counts several mages and fighters amongst its number, as well as at least one priest and one apothecary, whilst the current Boyar is an artisan of no small skill.

16.4.1.2 Karov Mercers' Compact



Karov Mercers Compact

- **Location:** Karov
- **Boyar:** Triska Markova

The Mercers are Varushkan citizens who live in various towns across Karov. They have come together to push for the interests and importance of the territory to be recognised amongst Varushka and the Empire.

They feel that Karov?s problems are two-fold: it is often overlooked by other Varushkans due to its more ?civilised? nature, while also being overlooked by other Imperial citizens as just being another part of the ?wild? and ?uncivilised? nation. The truth is, it is both of these things.

The Mercers feel that each Varushkan territory is unique; this is why the Compact includes volhovs and priests as well as traders and aims to connect with other local groups so that the best Karovian solution ? be it for politics, magic, fighting or more ? can be found for Karovian problems.

The group does not intend to disconnect or distance themselves from the rest of Varushka, simply to highlight the differences (and similarities) found within the nation.

Once upon a time, Delev and Temeschwar were rivals ? the Mercers hope that, given time and effort, they can once more bring Delev to rival a Leagueish city. They are working with other Karov groups to invest in the territory; politically, economically, and socially.

16.4.1.3 Kurstrozi Outpost



Kurstrozi Outpost

- **Location:** Drownbark Forest, Ossium
- **Colours:** Red
- **Boyar:** Krasivit Bhukova

The Kurstrozi outpost is a logging company that moved into Ossium when the territory was conquered and works to improve the Prosperity of the vale, and the territory, as a whole where it can. They are known in Anvil for bringing samples of the wood that makes up their living and splitting it in camp whilst wearing their distinctive little, red hats.

The vale is made of a mix of Varushkan settlers and natives of Ossium who are focused on making their homeland truly their own. There are a large number of merchants, and the vale is swiftly becoming recognised as a trading hub.

16.4.1.4 The Pinewheels

- **Location:** Ossium
- **Raider Captain:** Bronimir

The Pinewheels are a veteran and hard-bitten unit of wagon raiders who operate out of the Stinking Market in Ossium, formed in 383YE to secure the territory against the Druj and make a profit in the process. They take pride in completing the riskiest and most dangerous contracts they can find in foreign lands, with a motto of "Prosperity, Prosperity, Prosperity" demanding a high price in exchange for their services. Proud of their wagon raiding tradition, they disdain fighting on Imperial soil and often raid the Forest of Ulnak independently to earn their bread, if other work cannot be found.

16.4.1.5 Razoradze Wagon Raiders



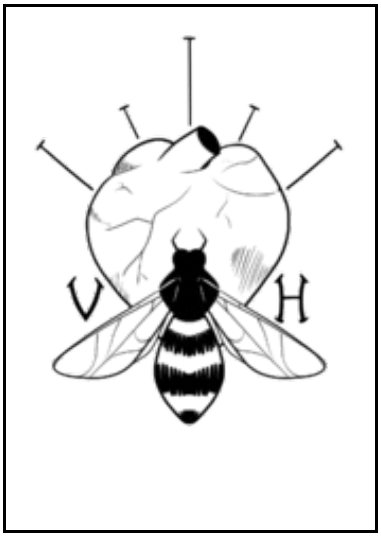
Razoradze Wagon Raiders

- **Location:** Drownbark Forest, Ossium
- **Colour:** Purple
- **Leader:** Aksel Reznov Razoradze

The Razoradze Wagon Raiders were founded by Aksel after realising there was money to be made in the Mallum; he left his homeland of Karsk and headed to Ossium to begin raiding the Druj, helping the imperial armies loot storage caches and attacking Druj remnants. Once Ossium was fully liberated they set up a base near the Stinking Market, despite the grumblings of some who wanted to remain completely itinerant, to have easy access to sell their looted wares and to raid deep into the Forest of Ulnak.

The siblings of the Razoradze are mostly made up of Karsk Varushkans and natives of Ossium with a surprising number of priests found among their contingent for a group of wagon raiders, leading to a great number of anointings and hallowed objects. All Razoradze strive to increase the prosperity of themselves and Ossium, and to help bring a final end to the Druj; with some members now going to Anvil to further these goals.

16.4.1.6 Vale's Heart



- **Location:** Levski, Karov, between Kamienczka and Skoremujac
- **Boyar:** Myshki Marishka Letuchaya aka ?The Little Boyar?

The Vale?s Heart is much more than a place for travellers to get a mug of mead. Named for its central position in the Vale of Levski, it is a community hub, the beating heart of the vale where wise ones meet, business is conducted, stzena entertain, priests share words of Virtue and storytellers share tales. Levski has a strong tradition of storytelling, performance and craftsmanship, with a renowned flair for puppetry.

Levski is built-up much like a small town, and is warded accordingly. Lamplighting and music are utilised as warding traditions; keeping roads ever-lit throughout the dark nights, and citizens are often heard singing or humming to themselves as they walk, to strengthen the wards and to keep the local water-dwelling sovereign known as The Lullaby bound.

The people of Levski, specifically The Vale?s Heart Inn, are business-minded, creative and generous leading to a strong, prosperous community. Prosperity pricing is a core practice of the Inn, and those who find themselves without coin but in need of shelter won't be turned away, as a good deed or good story can be payment enough. The Inn has often been turned into a place of refuge for displaced people, particularly during the loss of Miechernya and the attacks of the *scions* of Cold Sun. The Vale?s Heart works closely with other businesses and banners in Karov to bolster the Prosperity, Pride and Ambition of the territory.

16.4.1.7 Vardovich

- **Location:** Roads of Varushka
- **Uncle:** Borys

While most Varushkans share the idiom ?Stay on the Path?, the Vardovich live by it. The Vardovich rolled out of Strascovia centuries ago, and have not left the road since. These people number as many as a small vale, but they have no permanent home. They travel the roads of Varushka and beyond.

The Vardovich are road builders, traders and mundane artisans. The wardens amongst them rarely fight monsters, but are first when it comes to building a path to ward against wolves. As a village on wheels they are prized for their addition to any army with their logistics and support. Having no actual vale, they have no Boyar. They pay respects to the Boyar of Strascovia, and call their own leader, simply, ?Uncle?.

16.4.1.8 Wick's Rest Outpost

- **Location:** Crowslook, Karsk

The outpost of Wick's Rest is built near the ruins of the old vale of Candlehearth. The old vale was destroyed before the Thule occupation by some unknown tragedy. The outpost is home to many who once lived in the old vale who took the opportunity of the Thule retreat to attempt to reclaim their home from the wolves.

The people of Wick's Rest are survivors, many of them wardens or cabalists gifted in the magic of Winter. They are eager to establish themselves as a vale once more but the threat of wolves and ruined environs make that a challenging prospect.

In the centre of the outpost stands a watchtower. The only building of the old Vale that remains intact once marking the very edge of its borders.

16.4.1.9 Wulfen Reavers



- **Location:** Mieriada and Bittershore
- **Colours:** Red and cream
- **Boyar:** Vuk ?The Wolfeater ? Belydr?iakbalebos

The Wulfen Reavers formed from the survivors of the Vale of Belyvolk Pass. Their vale was lost one night when the wards failed and husks stormed the settlement. The survivors fought their way out and left their vale behind. They travelled the roads of Varushka being joined by those who also had no home. During the Summer Solstice 380YE the Reavers were able to travel through Sentinel Gate alongside their allies and retook the Vale, becoming the Wulfen Reavers of Belyvolk Pass.

With their home reclaimed, rebuilding began and the Boyar invited any who wished to come and resettle the vale, building a home for anyone without a hearth, a tradition they continue to this day.

At the end of 383YE some Reavers left Belyvolk to form a new Vale in Ossium, at the end of the Golden Causeway; these are the Wulfen Reavers of Causeway?s End. This led to the Reavers becoming the core leadership of several vales and outposts across the nation all following the same ideas and bound to the same oaths. Belyvolk lies primarily in Mieriada near to the borders with Perumaki and Brez. The northern end of the vale leads towards the path to Otkodov. The pass was at one time guarded by a simple palisade wall to deter Thule raiders.

Causeway?s End is in Bittershore just at the end of the Golden Causeway. It is a new vale ready to assist any those who seek to spread Prosperity in their journeys.

16.4.2 NPC Groups

16.5 Contributing

Any player character group in Varushka can submit an entry for this page. The entry should come from the out-of-character group leader and be emailed to plot@profounddecisions.co.uk.

It should contain the following information:

- Group archetype (vale, cabal, or warden fellowship). If your group doesn't have one of these archetypes, it will be listed in the "other" section.
- Territory and region where the groups lands are physically located. Vales are based around vales, but both warden fellowships and cabals will be tied to a physical location that serves as their base of operations.
- If your group has specific colours, you can mention them here.
- The name of your boyar if you are a vale. If there is someone in your warden fellowship or cabal that serves as the in-character leader of the group, you can mention them and their title here

You should also include up to 250 words of description, detailing the kind of things that other characters might know about your group. Have a look at the description for a vale, or at the archetype pages for cabalists and wardens for ideas on the kind of information that is useful. You must also include a few sentences of history, especially around the circumstances of the vale's formation or origin.

Some other questions to consider include:

- Are there one or more particular archetypes the group is particularly associated with? Obviously warden fellowships will contain wardens, and cabals are expected to have cabalists among their number, but is there a noteworthy archetype that might be unexpected or has a special role?
- Does your group have a particular ambition which helps unify your members?
- Is there anything notable about the lands you claim, or about the physical buildings that serve as your home?

Things to avoid include:

- Too much worldbuilding detail ? this represents information other characters may know about your group. It's not a place to define elements of the game world
- Lists of character names ? this isn't a place for getting your name on the wiki
- Too much emphasis on the past ? while it's useful to have a few lines of history, what matters in Empire is what your group does on the field at events

It's possible to update the information on this page over time (for example if your boyar changes) with an e-mail to plot@profounddecisions.co.uk.

17 Varushka Egregore

17.1 Mother Varushka

The Varushkan Egregore spirit is called Mother Varushka, a familial indication of the high respect in which they are held. They epitomize the Varushkan tradition of a wise one, making time for any who need advice or help.

The Egregore works hard to maintain the hearth magics that keep everyday Varushkans safe. They are particularly concerned to ensure that Varushkans celebrate properly once the sun has set, and like to test any child they meet about the nation?s traditions and the meanings behind them.

17.2 Current Hosts

Mother Varushka has two current hosts.



Yelislaveta the Grandmother

17.2.1 Yelislaveta the Grandmother

Yelislaveta Syrnaova Vlanich, formerly of the Wychlovar and the Forest of White caves. A weaver of stories, known as ?Grandmother?. She promotes the oldest traditions, and teaches the vigilance and wisdom of understanding the monsters, to know when to kill them, when to bind them and when to use them. She is always happy to listen to your songs and stories and offer a few of her own.