

The Dark Mountains

by

The Forest of Doors

The Dark Mountains

The sun never breaks the horizon of the Dark Mountains, plunging the land into an eternal night without end. The stars are dim and the horizon remains dark except for the rarest of holidays. Only the moon sheds light from the sky, and its red tint rarely illuminates enough to see more than a yard in any direction without the assistance of torches or magically conjured light. Little is known about the world outside of a few valleys nestled between massive mountains. Beyond the mountains, it is said, monsters of unspeakable terror lurk and endless plains of the dead greet anyone foolish enough to leave the protection of the Dark Lords who rule these valleys. The Lords of the Valley, as they refer to themselves, rule through force of arms and magical might. It is the Dark Lords whose sorcery nurtures the fields of the inhabitants, giving life to a land without light. In turn, peasants offer their infinite loyalty to the Dark Lords, on pain of death.

Each of the six valleys of the Dark Mountains cuts a long swath of relatively flat land from the irregular jumble of barren mountains. The Lords of the Valleys build their tall citadels at one end of the valley. If there was sufficient light, it could be seen at any location within their valley, but in the darkness it is simply felt looming over the populace. Opposite the Lord's citadel lies a great necropolis, built into the mountains, where the peasants of each valley inter their dead. Orchards, fields, and small forests dominate the landscape with small villages interspersed in through out the valleys. The mountains near the valley floor are pocked with dozens of mines, caves, and tunnels. There are very few passages between valleys, but dark and dangerous caves sometimes attach the valleys together. Darkness clings to the land between valleys, and travel is incredibly deadly. Getting lost is very often a prelude to death by exposure or nightmare beasts.

Life for the peasant in the Dark Mountains is a bleak affair, full of suffering and fear. It is climaxed by the final release from torment that comes with death. However, there is a glimmer of hope within these shadows. The Seekers of Dawn are a small group of dissenters who quietly fight the bleakness and the oppression of the world. Their wish is to one day bring the sun to the zenith of the sky and to banish the Lords from their cyclopean palaces. They have so far been unsuccessful in their aim and the list of martyrs for their cause is longer than their current membership. With the arrival of gates to the Forest of Doors they have found a place where they can gather supplies, plan in secret, and possibly gather allies. Because of the gateways, the rebels have had their own faith in the future renewed. They have seen a land of light, and they know it is possible.

The History of the Dark Mountains

Ancient History

History in the Dark Mountains is passed down in tales and stories whose details are subject to the vicissitudes of those telling them. The Lords of the Valleys forbid the teaching of literacy among the peasants and thus no history has ever been properly recorded. Those found with writing implements are punished harshly and publicly to set an example for the rest of the peasantry. The oral record of tales explains the origin of this prohibition.

There was once a time when the sun rose and the land was warm. People could live where they pleased and were not hedged in by monsters or mountains. The people of the world, known as Acerbians, were

ruled by benevolent sorcerers who used their magic to improve the lives of those around them. The world was a paradise compared to its current state. There were sufficient crops, disease was unheard of, and everyone enjoyed a high degree of freedom and safety. Unlike modern times, the ancient wizard kings encouraged everyone to read. It was thought important that the peasantry should be able to learn such an important skill. Foolishly, there was a perception that reading would enhance the lives of the peasants.

As the Lords of the Valley tell it, it is this allowance that became the undoing of this idyllic land. The common folk were not content with the casual learning of everyday life. Eventually, peasants began to learn the secrets of magic through ancient texts and apply them to everyday aspects of life. Despite the fact that the world provided for everyone sufficiently, the peasants used magic to gain a greater degree of prosperity. The peasantry turned to darkness for power, and this power gave them more leisure. In time, the populace sought out greater sources of power, and eventually the system became so reliant on magic that peasants lacked skill altogether. One day, a foolish group of would-be sorcerers were tampering with an overwhelmingly complex text of magical lore, only to accidentally release darkness onto the entire world. The sun was banished from the sky forever, not extinguished, but exiled for eternity. The landscape became a blasted wasteland devoid of light or bounty. Animals were twisted into horrifying figures from nightmare, and they roamed the darkness in search of human flesh.

The six Lords of the Valley stepped up and took charge of the situation. Their knowledge of magic was unparalleled, and thus they were in a good position to help the world in its time of need. The Lords were themselves powerful sorcerer kings from the old order, and summoning every ounce of their power they lead the survivors to the valleys and gave them safety. In time, their magic would allow crops to grow in the absence of light and the peasantry to live without fearing the monsters beyond the mountains. Their ancestors are now the current Lords of the Valley, carrying on the tradition of their forefathers.

Although peasants owed allegiance to their Lord in times past, the danger present in the world now requires a heavier hand and a greater degree of control. Peasants owe their very lives to the Dark Lords, for without their magic, the crops would not grow and the beasts of the wastes would hunt children in their cradles. Therefore, no command a Lord of the Valley can make is unreasonable. No personal sacrifice is too great to ask. The Dark Lords claim right to every life within their valley, for without the Dark Lord, there would be no life. Denying peasants the right to read is a small thing to ask when compared to the colossal damage peasants caused the world previously. Peasants now find the idea of reading to be horrifying. It opens the door to destruction, misery, and horror.

The Seekers of Dawn

This order, with Dark Lords giving and taking life with impunity, lasted unchallenged for a thousand years. Peasants lived terrible lives, never questioning why they endured the terror that they did. The peasantry firmly believed that the destruction of the old order was their fault and that because of the mistakes of the past, they must live pointless lives spent toiling in the dust for a harsh but benevolent master. History certainly proved that peasants deserved nothing but lives of labor, for peasants seemed, from the old stories, utterly incapable of avoiding corruption.

However, in recent times, events have transpired to incite peasants to rebellion. Old assumptions are being questioned, and there is a movement to rewrite the histories of old. The Seekers of Dawn are an organized, although largely underground, resistance against the rule of the Dark Lords. They do not believe the account of history given, for they have heard stories of a land beyond the mountains where light, warmth, and safety abound. However, there is no proof that the Seekers of Dawn are correct, for no one can verifiably claim to have been beyond the mountains, let alone witnessed a land of light.

However, the Seekers of Dawn have a story that they tell new members so that they may have faith in a future with a rising sun. It is the story of the Dawnbringer, the first martyr of the rebellion's cause. The Lords of the Valley each have a number of highly skilled warriors known as Praetors that act as the judges, juries, and executioners of the laws of the Lords. Each is dressed completely in black with a black cloak and identified by a silver mask depicting the face of the Lord that they serve. Praetors are the hand of the Dark Lords within their valleys, and are given a respect reserved only for the Dark Lords themselves. They carry knowledge of the Dooms of Light and Shadow, and their magics can slay with a simple incantation.

Many generations ago, one of these Praetors came out of the mountains into a small mining village know as Speroton. His black cloak and clothes were tattered and bleached to gray. His mask was so tarnished, the identity of his Lord was entirely obscured. His appearance was shocking, for Praetors are upright figures of power. Shambling into town, he collapsed in a mine to the horror of local workers. Asking for water, he forbade the workers from revealing his presence. Because of their fear of Praetors, the people did as he asked.

One miner, named Virgil, approached the Praetor the next day and offered him food and drink. In exchange for his bravery in approaching him, the Praetor told his story to Virgil. He called himself the Dawnbringer, and the tale he told broke the hearts of those who heard it. He told of his life as a great Praetor in the Lord's castle, trained in war and magic from the time he could stand. He was taught to read, and in doing so, he sought obscure tomes in the Dark Lord's personal library. Sneaking clandestinely into the Lord's personal library, he found forbidden works that described a world of light. The books were personal accounts of the destruction of light, written by the Dark Lords themselves. Seeking the truth of these accounts, the Dawnbringer abandoned his Lord and traveled into the wastes to verify the stories he had seen.

Five years ago he began this journey. For three long years, he battled the beasts of the waste in the dark. Travel through the mountains was arduous and time consuming. Several times along the way, the Dawnbringer was almost destroyed. Curses from the Dark Lord exacted wretched tolls on his body and mind, as the penalty for abandoning the Lords' service fell upon him. One day, a red glow appeared on the horizon. Following this glow for another year, he eventually found himself in a green field lit by a golden sun. Every day, the sun rose and shined on ancient ruins. The world was bathed in light, and looking behind him, he could see that the mountains were shrouded in impenetrable darkness. He dwelled here for a year, and in that time he learned the terrible truth of the masters he once served. In time, the light washed away the curses the Lords placed on his body.

He had learned that the sun did not rise because of the Dark Lords. It rose in spite of them. They had

blocked out the sun deliberately, in order to preserve their own power. The monsters surrounding the mountains were there by the Dark Lord's choice, either called by the horrible darkness or created by the Lords themselves to prevent passage into the light beyond. The Lords of the Valley preserve their power through intimidation, guilt, and fear mongering. The Dark Lords were themselves responsible for the death of the light-filled world, and the horrors that came along with this change. They attained immortality through their machinations, and the Lords that now rule are the same ones that had ruled since the darkness came to the valleys. The Lords were not the saviors of the world, but rather, opportunistic dictators that use their might to enslave the inhabitants of the world. The common history was a lie, and peasants were not to blame for the debased state of the world.

Upon hearing this story, one of the miners named Claude fled the mine, tears in his eyes. He traveled to the Lord's citadel and spoke of the Dawnbringer and his story, betraying the confidence of the other miners. When the Lord's Praetors reached the mine, the Dawnbringer was gone. The miners had taken him to the village to retell his tale to those in the city. The local elders of the city did know how to react to such incredible news. When the Praetors arrived in Speroton and demanded the Dawnbringer, the elders did not immediately give him up. The Praetors brought out woman and children, and threatened them if the Dawnbringer did not reveal himself.

Filled with compassion, the Dawnbringer instructed the miners to scatter and spread his message. Summoning a courage rivaled by none, the Dawnbringer presented himself for execution alone and unarmed. As he was beheaded for his crimes, Virgil and his fellow miners fled the city into the endless night to tell of what they had seen. Speroton was set to the torch, its inhabitants destroyed, and all roads leading to it lined with caltrops. Its fields were salted and its mines collapsed. No record is left of the town, but it is said that it is still marked with the impaled bodies of those who once lived there. In fact, no one can rightly say where Speroton was or which valley it resided. There is still controversy over which Dark Lord the Dawnbringer had once served, and none can positively say they have ever seen him. However, sightings of a ruined city, encircled by impaling spikes, occur in every valley. Perhaps every valley has a city that met the same fate as Speroton, or perhaps it is a hoax. However, places that fit such a description quickly become shrines to the Dawnbringer until the local Lord discovers it, and scourges it from existence.

Using long-abandoned mines as bases of operation, Virgil and his men formed the Seekers of the Dawn to spread the word. These mines, known as Caverns of Light, detail the formation of the Seekers in glowing dye from luminescent fungi. It tells of the escape of Virgil and the spread of the rebellion. This is the first written work most Seekers are taught to read, for its importance is considered tantamount. Virgil himself is a somewhat legendary figure, and no one can claim to have spent any considerable amount of time with him. This is largely attributed to his need for secrecy. As the incident with Claude proves, trust must be kept in short supply if the rebellion is to succeed. However, everyone in the Seekers of Dawn knows someone who claims to have heard Virgil speak. Although Speroton's location may be a mystery and Virgil is never seen publicly, people have faith in the movement and its righteousness. There is little verifiable proof that the Seekers of Dawn are correct in their beliefs. The entire movement is based on a faith that the world can become something greater.

The Dark Mountains Now

The World Now

In the last five years, skirmishes between the Lords of the Valleys themselves have intensified. Poor harvests and scarcity have led to raids between the Lords as they fight amongst each other for the largest number of peasants. Wars for iron have doubled the size of military forces in recent years, and peasants are conscripted to shed blood in the name of their Lord. This causes incredible hardships as workers are sent to fight instead of to toil in the fields. The price of war is paid only by peasants, as the Dark Lords have nothing to lose through warfare amongst each other. Troops are considered expendable, and peasants on the border lands are frequently called to defend their land by any means necessary. Often, this forces the peasants into a dangerous position: fight the invaders and possibly die, or fail to meet tax quotas and face one of the Lord's Praetors. Praetors are very unforgiving in such matters, and few explanations are sufficient to avoid arbitrary punishment.

The Seekers of the Dawn have not been able to use these hostilities and conflict to their advantage for the most part. Although wars do horrible things to the population, peasants largely support the war effort. There is a perception that the Dark Lord makes war to increase the lot of the common worker or to defeat some threat against them. War also has the potential to uncover hidden Seeker bases, as moving troops frequently sweep areas for enemy positions. Since the Seekers of Dawn have no armies of their own, resistance must be done off the battlefield.

Arms are illegal for peasants to own, so weapons and armor are considered an important commodity. Deserting soldiers are a prized catch, for they bring a person with military training fully equipped for battle. Much of the proselytizing done by Seekers of the Dawn is meant to bring soldiers into their cause. Much of their message revolves around ending the pointless, eternal war. However, because everyone suffers under the yolk of the Dark Lords, the Seekers of Dawn try to win ideological converts where it can. As of yet, there is no known Praetor defectors to the Seekers of Dawn, aside from the mythical Dawnbringer, who was martyred for his efforts.

The Seekers have been very slowly gaining the respect of the peasants through quiet proselytizing. However, the Seekers of Dawn command the Dooms of Light and Shadow, and this power more frequently draws peasants into the Seekers simply to learn magic. It is said that the Dawnbringer initiated Virgil into the Dooms of Light and Shadow, and Virgil in turn taught the magic to his disciples. Now, all Seekers of Dawn have access to the magical discipline practiced by the Praetors. This is a potent weapon, and its wonders entice peasants to greater acts of disobedience against the Lords. Despite its power though, Seekers of the Dawn can never perform magic in public. If word were to reach the Dark Lord's citadel, the would-be sorcerer and their family would no doubt meet a grisly end for their trouble.

The greatest strength of the Seekers is just being realized. The Seekers, holding up in caves and abandoned mines, happened upon gates to a bright world. It isn't the land beyond the mountains, at least, not exactly. It is a land beyond the world itself, a sun-lit land of wonder where Seekers can live free of oppression. However, such an impulse would be incredibly selfish, and instead the gate world beyond is being used as a place to plan, gain resources, and regroup. It is a land beyond the reach of the Lords of the Valleys, and it is a valuable commodity too. However, it is not a permanent solution.

Because of the fickle and random nature of the gates, a full scale evacuation could never happen. That would only serve to reveal the position of the gates that the Seekers control. However, the presence of these gates serves to renew faith in the Seekers of Dawn's righteous cause, and this is sufficient for the time.

Over the past few years the access that the Seekers have had to the Forest of Doors has paid unpredicted dividends. Valuable arms and armor have flowed from the Forest of Doors, but even more valuable has been the food and other supplies. Very recently strange new magics have been brought by the Seeker leader known as David of the Forest. An elite guard following David have surprised many loyalist warriors by throwing flames, bolts of noxious venom, and weapons that strike with thunderous peals.

This has created some tension between fellow Seekers and factions has begun to appear within the ranks. Before the doors were discovered there were two factions in the Seekers, the extremist Burning Rays, and the conservative Torchbearers. The Burning Rays believe that the only way to defeat the Dark Lords is through grandiose shows of force that directly impact the Lords and are obvious to all of the peasants. Counter to that are the Torchbearers who believed that such acts ultimately wasted resources, preferring selective assassinations, theft, and coercion to quietly undermine the Dark Lords from within.

More recently two smaller factions have emerged. The first are the Sun Touched, they are the few who have returned from the Forest of Doors, and are currently led by David of the Forest. They believe that the time of the the Seeker's ascendance has arrived, and they currently are carrying out a very violent, and somewhat successful, guerrilla war against Dark Lord Constanin. The other faction is the Rejectors, they have dismissed the idea of fighting for the Dark Mountains, and are instead planning to establish a settlement in the Forest of Doors and evacuate people to it.

The Dark Lords

There are six Dark Lords, and each rules one of the valleys of the Dark Mountains from their citadels. They are sorcerers of immense power, able to keep life flourishing in the valley without the aid of the sun. They keep warmth in the land and force crops to blossom in the eternal night. Their power is without limit within their valley, for their whim is law, executed by the terrifying Praetors who sup in the immense presence of their Lords. There is great controversy about the nature of the six Dark Lords, for they are seen rarely and little is known about their histories. It is common wisdom that the Lords descend from the ancient ruling families of the old sunlit order. However, the Seekers of the Dawn claim that the Dark Lords are in fact immortal sorcerers who enforce darkness on the world to rule over it without opposition. If this is true, the Dark Lords would be thousands of years old and bloated with magical power beyond the capability of mortals. Although quite similar in many ways, the Dark Lords constantly make war upon each other. Although they never suffer personal losses in war, peasants pay for these conflicts immensely. It is said that the Lords of the Valley believe that they will one day be the supreme power of the Dark Mountains, thus each is driven to fight the others.

Lord Constantin

Constantin, the Monarch of the Frozen Valley, Lord of the Third Valley, makes public appearances on occasion. He appears as a corpse, dressed in black finery, his skin held together by screws and bolts. The folk of the Fortress Indomitable (as his citadel is known) know that this is because the sorceries he performs to ensure bountiful crops drains the very life from his flesh. However, he willingly accepts these horrors to aid his peasants, asking only unswerving loyalty in exchange. He willingly shows his terrible visage to his people, allowing them to know the suffering he has taken onto himself. The Seekers of the Dawn claim that his flesh is corrupted by his own sorceries, and that his rituals deliberately keep the sun from warming the land. Instead of eyes (which have clearly rotted away), many claim he has two frozen orbs of ice. He is said to wield a sword of pure ice, capable of freezing the heart of any man foolish enough to touch the blade.

The Frozen Valley is gripped both by eternal night and eternal winter. Indeed, Constantin himself and his Praetors seem immune to the terrible cold of the land. Although his sorcerous might is great and he does keep crops growing year after year, he is unable to replicate the sun's warmth that other Dark Lords generate. In a land without sun, the cold becomes unbearable. Frost hangs on everything, and it is only through the sheer power of Constantin that crops flourish at all. Peasants on the other hand frequently succumb to the terrible cold which penetrates everything in the valley. Although it almost never snows in the valley, it is constantly freezing, and the ground is hard.

Constantin makes great use of animated dead in his valley, as they need no protection from the cold. A majority of his soldiers are walking dead and living soldiers who will one day serve a second time upon death. Although the necropolis of the Frozen Valley is the ultimate place for the dead, Constantin makes it clear that all in his valley owe him a hundred and one years of service in death. Undead servants toil in the fields, bound to the lands they once worked in life. The ranks of the army swell with the dead, and even the Lords craftsmen are themselves dead. Disease is common because of the presence of half-preserved frozen corpses everywhere, but the inhabitants of the valley rarely die from such maladies.

Recently Constantin has had to deal with a guerrilla war being carried out against the supply lines of his army, and even in his citadel. Scores of undead laborers have been torched by marauding Seekers and Constantin's forces have so far been unsuccessful in quelling the rebellion. The rebellion is said to be led by Seekers who have returned from the Forest of Doors with strange magics, powerful weapons, and unmatched prowess.

Lady Divia

Among the Dark Lords, the greatest sorcerers of all time, Lady Divia, the Black Robed Queen of Lost Heart Valley, Lady of the First Valley, is considered the most talented and capable among them. She commands the Dooms of Light and Shadow to a degree that can only be described as frightening. She calls creatures from the darkness to serve her, scourges whole towns with blinding light, and can shroud her entire castle in a protective circle of solid night. She makes no public appearances, but she is popularly described as a tall woman with alabaster skin and teeth made of black granite. Popular legend tells of how, upon becoming Lady of the Valley, she removed her heart and placed it under her citadel to rule without being swayed by mortal passions.

The Lost Heart Valley is a relatively hospitable place compared to the valleys of other Lords. Although it is rainy and damp, it is warm and free of monsters. However, it is less safe in many ways because people seem to disappear randomly. Peasants frequently disappear while sleeping and are never seen again. Some peasants walk into cellars only to disappear forever. Occasionally a peasant will disappear for ten years, return, and remember nothing of their time away. These abductions are frequently blamed on the peasants themselves, as many people suspect that those who disappear may be spies from another Lord, or worse, rebels. However, rebels have attempted to stop these abductions but are stymied because they seem to have no root cause.

However, spies working on behalf of the Seekers of Dawn in Divia's citadel have clues to the location of those who disappear. It is surmised that Divia has a breeding program located in her tower where she attempts to develop peasantry with specific characteristics to her liking. To the citizens of the valley and the Lady's citadel, these stories sound like unfounded nonsense. If it were true, the abductees would need to be fed, and Lady Divia has no food delivered to her tower. Such a project would be difficult to conceal, as thousands have been abducted over the years.

Lady Magda

Lady Magda, Imperatrix of the Bloody Valley, Lady of the Second Valley, is well known for her love of carnage. Although she is described as virtuous and compassionate as any of the Dark Lords, she understands the necessity of bloodshed for the continued survival of her valley. The land itself hungers for sacrifice, and it is sacrifice that allows the people of the valley to continue to live. Those who are found to be criminals must pay for their crimes in blood, either through the forfeit of their life, or through mutilation. Executions are carried out by impaling, and blood rolls down from the citadel into the fields of those who benefit from Magda's benevolence. Magda herself is said to be as pale as maggot flesh and slightly translucent, but as beautiful of figure as to break the heart of any living thing. However, only those doomed to be impaled in service of their community ever sees her wondrous visage.

The Bloody Valley itself is much more lush than other valleys. It boasts a forest, grassy glades, and a few random fields of colorless flowers. The plants that bloom in the dark are pale, translucent reflections of plants from ages past. They grow in the absence of the sun, and their milky-white leaves would never offer shade if there were a sun to light the land. It is said that these plants greatly please Lady Magda, who is said to pick flowers and hand them to those she condemns. The necropolis of the valley is in the middle of a great field of translucent poppies.

When times are good and there are few criminals, Magda holds a lottery of unmarried women and each village must give up a randomly selected victim. Since all life within the valley exists at Magda's will, she is not stealing the lives of these women, but rather, reclaiming what is rightfully hers. It is said that she takes only the unmarried, for married women frequently spill their blood through childbirth, and this pleases Magda. The Seekers of Dawn claim that Magda bathes in the blood of these women to keep her beauty intact for the ages, but this is considered libel of the worst variety by most peasants. Magda is often accused of feeding the bloodless bodies of offending peasants to her Praetors, but this cannot be confirmed in any capacity.

Lord Petru

Petru, Hierarch of the Black Valley, Lord of the Fifth Valley, is known as a man of great taste as well as a master of sorcery. His castle is built in dark orange gold and deep grey silver. Ebon and jet are studded into any available surface, and images of skulls, chains, and ghosts line the halls. Lord Petru acquires these luxuries through trade with other nations. The enchantment he places on his land is largely inferior to that of the other valleys, and his land is less fertile as a result. However, the land is rich with iron, gold, and skilled craftsmen. Petru trades with other Lords as often as he makes war against them. However, he is a skilled diplomat and leverages alliances to benefit his position against the other Lords of the Valleys.

The Black Valley is a barren place with few fields. However, despite this, it is the most heavily taxed of all the valleys. The tax wagons come more frequently than other valleys, but peasants enjoy the highest degree of safety here. There are no kidnappings, no monsters, no maniacal cults, and conscription is rare. However, starvation or freezing to death are very real possibilities, as peasants owe their Lord an overwhelming majority of what they earn, whether or not the land yielded sufficient bounty to sustain life. The penalty for being under quota is harsh, but Petru is known for his generosity to those who can meet what he demands without fail. He often gives out extra rations from his own supply to villages that please him. This generosity is unique among the Lords of the Valley, and for this, he is well loved.

However, Lord Petru is considered by the Seekers of the Dawn to be among the worst because he is also among the most loved by his subjects. Seeker spies report horrifying things about Petru himself. He is described, if rumor can be believed, as a shifting, corpulent, black vapor possessed of a human face without a body. The mist devours things of beauty, fueling its own horrid existence. If this is true, Petru would be the most inhuman of all the Dark Lords. Petru is however known to have the greatest collection of history in his library. He is known to trade favors for those who wish to gain access to his ancient lore, and the Praetors of other Lords secretly use his services from time to time. Some fanatical Seekers of the Dawn believe that it would be beneficial to their cause to trade attacks against rival Lords for access to Petru's lore.

Lord Petru also is the only Dark Lord to be known to have an established foothold in the Forest of Doors. Through this he has been able to import significant quantities of resources that his valley lacks without having to trade away his valuable iron for it. The surpluses that he has gained from this has allowed him to start a very popular program where in he will reward a town that turns in a Seeker of the Dawn with that Seeker's weight in food. Primarily this has resulted in a innocent people being sent to the gallows to feed the whole of a town, but a number of Seekers or sympathizers have been swept up as well.

Lord Sislau

Sislau, the Acrid Pontiff of the Scarred Valley, Lord of the Fourth Valley, is both the Lord and spiritual leader of his Valley. Unlike other Lords of the Valley, he uses imagery depicting the old Acerbian order of warmth and sunlight. Images of the celestial bodies cover his citadel which is more like a cathedral with large grey glass windows than a place of war. However, it is in fact a place of war, for within, Sislau's Praetors practice their skill at arms. Praetors frequently make forays into the villages to abduct

peasants that fit the description of whatever traits their Lord has specified. What happens to those taken away is unknown, but roars of a creature known as the Black Beast issue forth through the valley whenever a Praetor returns with their charge.

The Scarred Valley is so named for the jagged cliffs that hang above and below the valley. In the valley itself, people are pious and quiet. The quiet is broken five times a day as peasants gather and pray in the direction of Sislau's cathedral on pain of death. Whatever the peasants are doing, whether working, sleeping, or otherwise convalescing, they are required to cease their action and bow in supplication to the citadel. Two of the prayers fall during the time most peasants sleep. The common belief is that this piety helps Sislau prepare the world for the coming light. Many believe Sislau is working an elaborate magic that will one day return the light to the world, and peasants are eager to help in any way possible. The truly devout pray more than five times a day, in the hope that salvation comes that much sooner.

However, the Seekers of Dawn, who have a similar aim, claim that this is merely a front. They say that restoration of the world is not his aim at all, and in fact, the ritual prayer may serve to keep the darkness over the land. The great horrible sounds of bestial slaughter that occasionally issue from his citadel is further proof of Sislau's nature. Seekers of the Dawn believe that Sislau either becomes or simply is a great shambling beast. When gripped by his bestial nature, he hungers for the flesh of a specific class of person, based on the day on which the cannibalistic hunger occurs. If the Seekers are to be believed, Sislau is himself the great Black Beast that inhabits the citadel.

Lady Tacita

Tacita, the Mistress of Iron Valley, Lady of the Sixth Valley, is well known for her violent ways. Her citadel, known as the Fetid Garden, is constantly training and arming itself for war. Every peasant, from the age of 13 and older, is considered acceptable fodder for her wars against the other Lords. The peasantry understands that this is a regrettable, but necessary arrangement, for the other Lords of the Valleys eye the Iron Valley with envious eyes. It is a place of unknown bounty, and for this reason, the other Lords covet the Valley as their own. Tacita is happy to use this impression to mount a never ending campaign of aggressive expansion against the other Lords of the Valley. Ultimately, most of her advances fail utterly and hundreds regularly die or are maimed in her vain attempts at conquest.

Domestically, Tacita is feared to a greater degree by the peasantry, for her ways are brutal. Tacita, unlike the other Lords, frequently employs mutilation in place of execution. The remains of such punishments are combined to create skinless monsters that protect the citadel. The peasantry is aware that there are things that are in fact worse than death, and whispers speak of peasants who crossed the Lady. It is said such fools are kept alive in her oubliettes, magically sustained but forever twisted in an existence of pure suffering. Indeed, her Praetors have uncovered bands of Seekers of Dawn who are now Tacita's prisoners. It is no secret that members of the Seekers of Dawn would be denied the mercy of death.

This heavy handed tactic has emboldened some peasants. In fact, Tacita, for all her brutality, has some of the hardest time eradicating the Seekers from her land. Peasants often refuse to rat out fellow peasants, for fear of being inculcated in the rebellion. Many are too afraid to approach the Fetid Garden, let alone voluntarily speak to a Praetor and have to explain how they came into information

about the rebellion. Furthermore, the Seekers of Dawn are better armed in the Iron Valley, for soldiers constantly defect rather than face certain death for pointless victories of spite against other valleys. It is believed that Tacita reserves special fates for deserters, but no one can honestly claim to know what these horrors are.

A World Without Light

The absence of the sun necessitates a certain way of life. There is no clear cycle of day and night. Every day is marked by the slightest reddening of the horizon, but there is never a complete dawn or twilight. Even the muted sunrise can barely be seen, and the presence of torches usually drowns out its effect. However, the light is sufficient enough to be used as a marker between days. Every day at this time, peasants are roused from sleep by great bells from their Lord's citadel. The moon provides much of the natural light of the world, but it is unreliable and passes quickly from the sky.

Life in the dark requires a constant source of light. Peasants carry torches with them nearly everywhere they travel. Work in the field is always done by torchlight, by necessity. Often, peasants will carry a staked torch around with them and move the torch as their work progresses. Travelers always carry torches with them, for travel is dangerous enough even without light. A traveler whose torch goes out will likely die. Villages are not very far from one another, but they are always out of shouting range. If a peasant gets lost between a village, it usually takes a miracle to retrieve them. Navigation itself is nearly impossible, for without navigable stars, one cannot find a proper direction. Initiates into the Dooms of Light and Shadow frequently create portable lights to carry with them, so they are in no danger of losing their lighting. However, for peasants, the practice of magic is illegal. Carrying a magical light is grounds for execution, whether or not the offender was the one who created it.

A strong light also keeps the terrible beasts of the wilderness at bay. This is of utmost important when traveling through the mountains between valleys, for the mountains are home to uncounted numbers of terrors. Twisted creatures, horrid reflections of the animals that once lived in the wilderness, hunt the mountains for fresh victims. No one can claim to have studied these creatures, but common folk depictions describe them as skinless, howling wolf creatures or tentacle-wielding, spineless masses made of liquid shadow.

Culture in the Dark Mountains

The Acerbian Common Folk

Peasants, known as Acerbians by those knowledgeable about the history of the world, awake by the great bells of their Lord's citadel. Every hour thereafter, the bells are rung. After 16 soundings of the bell, peasants are given leave to sleep until the bells come to life again in the morning. Allowances are given for peasants to eat two meals during the day. Lord Sislau offers three breaks in the work day, but only for prayer. Those caught doing something other than praying are executed publicly. Peasant life continues like this without break, save for the occasional visit by merchants or Praetors from the citadel.

Many Acerbians live in the Lords' citadels, given a more comfortable life in exchange for a greater

degree of service. They wake at the same hour and but are expected to work slightly fewer hours. Instead of toiling in the fields, they work as craftsmen, merchants, or other skilled labor. All craftsmen are kept in the Lords' citadels, for this allows the Lords' to control the flow of trade. In their spare time, workers in the citadel spend time drinking bitter ale and listening to merchant's tales of travel. They wear jewelry and although they practice a trade, they live relatively comfortably. Those who live in the citadel rarely worry about the lot of peasants, and often have contempt for their rebellious elements.

Seekers of Dawn reject this way of life. When the final bell of the night sounds, Seekers become active. They will meet with whatever Seekers are in the local area and set the agenda for the night. This can frequently involve sabotage, travel, transport of goods, instruction in the Dooms of Light and Shadow, or the delivery of messages to other cells of rebels. Travel between valleys is incredibly dangerous, and weeks of preparation can go into a single voyage. Seekers who are not involved in missions are employed as sleepers or as recruiters. They are expected to blend in with other peasants and bring worthy candidates to the cause. Craftsmen who serve the Seekers frequently do so as spies, alerting the rest of the rebellion about the activities of the Dark Lords. This is among the most dangerous missions, for those captured face terrible consequences.

Life in the Citadel

Not everyone in the Dark Mountains is a peasant however. The Dark Lords draw close to themselves individuals they find talented or worthy. Craftsmen, performers, artists, and warriors of renown live in relative splendor within the citadels. Although they are expected to devote their lives in service to the Dark Lords as much as anyone, they are given a degree of comfort unprecedented. However, this comfort comes with a steep price. The Lords of the Valley demand unswerving loyalty and adherence to strict orthodoxy within their citadels. Citadels are the center of trade and craft within a given valley, as all skilled workers are centered on the citadel itself. A small but efficient bureaucracy also exists to oversee taxes and keep records.

Amusement and Vice

Acerbians rarely have free time, but villages often have weekly storytelling meets that relieve the tension of the work week. Storytelling serves many purposes: it increases social cohesiveness, it entertains the populace, it passes history from generation to generation, and it enforces society's standards. Often, the stories explain the correctness of the Lord of the Valleys' dominance. Village elders are encouraged by local Praetors to tell stories that depict peasants as a powerful force that can be corrupted easily. This reinforces the premise that the Dark Lords rule because the peasants cannot be trusted, especially after having nearly destroyed the world.

Aside from these story meets, there are few opportunities for personal amusement that are not frowned upon. Peasants without a family frequently play dice with one another, betting against one another using food or alcoholic blends of fermented grass and grain. The rules for these games vary between villages, and each valley uses its own dice design. Usually, each half of the die's faces are a single image (skulls in most valleys), two are another image (plowshares in most valleys), and one rare image (the moon in most valleys). Two dice are rolled, and combinations of images yield different results. Two of the rare result is always a victory for whoever rolled it. Dice is considered intemperate and is

looked down upon, but not illegal. As long as it does not interfere with productivity, elders do not intercede.

A certain herb, known as Pipe Grass, is often smoked by peasants for a relaxed feeling of euphoria. It grows naturally in the mountains, but it is also cultivated within each Lord's citadel. It aids peasants in their work, for it reduces stress and gives the user a burst of energy. However, when used over time, it frequently saps the user's spirit. Those who have used it regularly become more docile and much more willing to accept their fate. A user can be weaned off, but it requires a short period of violent illness. Usually, peasants cannot afford to reduce their production, so it's easier to continue use than to break the habit. Seekers often claim that Pipe Grass is enchanted by the Lords, who sell it for a profit despite the fact that its presence serves their purposes.

Noteworthy Nights

The Bright Horizon

Every year for a single night, in the middle of the growing season, the eastern sky of the Dark Mountains takes on a very dark blue hue for a few hours. This night is celebrated by the Seekers as a sign of the truth of the word of the Dawnbringer, and they secretly celebrate this night by sitting around fires and telling stories of courageous sacrifices carried out in the cause of the Dawnbringers.

The Reaping

Each year at the time of the harvest the collectors of the Dark Lords will go to each village to reap the Lord's share of the harvest and any necessary slaves. During this period the Seekers usually make their most daring strike's against the Dark Lords and attempt to recruit new members.

Life in the Endless Night

Children in the Dark Mountains are not considered adults, nor are they even named, until they have passed a test known as the Disciplis. The elders of the village give this test to the subject in order to determine whether the child is capable of surviving and aiding the village instead of becoming a burden. Although the contents of the Disciplis vary between villages, it tests physical competence, basic survival, knowledge of their family trade, and mental acuity. Although an overwhelming majority of children pass the Disciplis, there are always a few that consistently fail and are known as Andisciplis. Andisciplis are not permitted to marry, own property, or learn a proper trade. They are relegated to tasks so menial as to make farming seem complex, such as digging ditches and cleaning animal filth. Until a person passes the Disciplis, they are known by a nickname bestowed by their parents. Upon passing, they are given a name by the family that is blessed by the elders of the village. This name frequently is that of a recently dead relative or else taken from the child's birth order.

When an adult proves they can follow the family trade without supervision, the elders of the village arrange to find a suitable partner in marriage for the young worker. The marriage ceremony is short, and couples are expected to produce as many children as fast as is possible, in order to lighten the work load on the village. When a married peasant becomes too old to perform the family trade, they become an elder. Elders, although not officially recognized by the Lords of the Valley, have considerable power over villages. Elders decide what course of action to take in a crisis, administer the Disciplis, and sanctify all contracts and marriages. Elders are usually among the most conservative of village members, and wholeheartedly support the rule of the Dark Lords. This is because rebellious Acerbians

infrequently reach the age of elder, as they are either executed or worked to an early grave.

Death in the Dark Mountains

Death is given a great air of mystery in the Dark Mountains, and peasants are often occupied by dream-like thoughts of their own demise. In death, it is believed, every person becomes like a Lord of the Valley. Indeed, each person is interred in the City of the Dead, a structure as large and imposing as the palace of the Lord of the Valley. It sits in the opposite side of the valley, giving it a sort of equality with the citadel of the Lord. Within the City of the Dead, the bodies of the honorable dead wait for resurrection. Most every peasant believes that one day, when the world is restored by the Dark Lords, that those interred in the City of the Dead will live again. Their bodies will be returned to life, and they will live in a world of paradise.

When a person dies, the family and friends of the deceased brings the body up the Path of Judgment to the City of the Dead. This road, located in every inhabited valley, ends at the gate of the City of the Dead, guarded by a Praetor of the valley. He questions those present about the life of the deceased person, asking whether their life was in service to their Lord. If the deceased was found guilty of any crimes, it is asked whether or not they were atoned for. If the dead is found to be honorable, they are taken inside. Otherwise, the body is confiscated by the Praetor to be turned into walking dead. Walking dead are used as menial labor or as soldiers. Since they are considered expendable, they rarely last very long. Eventually, they decay, are torn to shreds, or otherwise destroyed. Obviously, this makes any hope of future bodily resurrection doubtful. Some Lords require that every body serve his or her interests for a set amount of time. Constantin is the most draconian in this regard, for all peasants owe him 100 years of service before they are allowed to meet their rest.

However, honorable dead of every valley are eventually given rest by the morticians employed in the City of the Dead. They dutifully preserve the body for its future resurrection, and then encase the body in cement. The deceased's death mask is imprinted on top as well as the dead's name and noteworthy deeds. The entire assemblage is then placed in the city as one would place a brick. The entire structure is mostly made of this sort of de facto mausoleum. The great mortician-artists of the City of the Dead live there with their families. They keep the grounds clean, tend to gardens inside, and see to the wellbeing of those interred within. These groundskeepers also serve as healers, often tending to outbreaks of disease. Those seeking surgeries or other long-term sort of care often make their way up to the Path of Judgment to ask for medical help.

Names

Children are not given proper names when they are born by their parents. Until they pass the Disciplis, they are known by an informal nickname. Once they pass the Disciplis and are expected to survive as adults, the elders of a community will give the child a proper name. Usually it is the name of a relative who has recently died, in the hopes that the child will emulate the recently deceased. Some are given numerical names describe a child's birth order (such as Quentian for the fifth boy, Septima for the

seventh girl). A person's last name is taken when they take up their profession, such as Miner, Farmer, Miller, Shepherd, etc. Among the Seekers of the Dawn it is not uncommon for a person to take on a "war name" so that their name cannot be traced back to their village or their family. These war names are usually just different first names, though some go so far as calling themselves things such as Night's Enemy or Darkbane.

Acerbian men have names like Cassius, Emil, Florin, Marius, Octavian, Quentian, Sorin, Urban, Victor, or Vlad. Acerbian women have names like Andrea, Antonia, Aurelia, Claudia, Fausta, Ioana, Justina, Secunda, Valeria, or Viviana.

Food

Food is quite simple in the valley, based around whatever grain is grown in that particular valley. Rye, wheat, oats, and barley are the most common, but corn and beans are also grown in some valleys. Meat is reserved almost entirely for those who live within the citadel, for peasants rarely keep livestock. Beer, cheese, and wine are common within citadels but difficult to find outside.

Clothing

Most peasants dress in simple tunics and pants made from wool and sometimes cotton. Members of the Seekers of the Dawn will sometimes wear a small bit of saffron on their person to identify themselves with each other. This small splash of color is kept discreet and subtle so as not to grab the any unwanted attention, but still alert those who would recognize such a thing. Within citadels, the clothing is much more varied. Black lace, leather, silk, and thick denim is the norm. The common image of a woman from a citadel is dressed in a black bodice, tall black boots, a lacy black skirt, and dark makeup.

Everyone in the Dark Mountains wears as many images of death and darkness as possible. It is believed that morbid images (skulls, blood, dark clothing, bats, and bones) keep the terrible beasts of the dark at bay. Citadel dwellers in particular heap upon themselves images of death cast in silver in the form of rings, amulets, and hairpins. It is considered fashionable in Petru's citadel to wear streams of red makeup from one's eyes, as if bleeding from them.

Art

It is rare that Acerbians have the occasion to create works of art because of all the work that must be done every year. Some villagers though do practice a form of woodcarving they call story carving. An Acerbian will take a wooden object (a staff or support beam for a house) and carve small pictures in it to remind oneself and others of details of a story. Some prolific story carvers have transformed entire rooms in a house into great repositories for their family's history. The Seekers have taken to a similar practice in their caves painting or carving picture stories about their victories, their martyrs, and their heroes. In citadels, great works of art are erected in the name of the Lords of the Valley. Stained glass, statuary, and busts are very common sights on the street. Within citadels, it is illegal to create art that does not somehow glorify the Dark Lords and their order.

Prejudices and Superstitions

The general peasantry does not trust professional craftsman such as smiths, weavers, and millers. This is because all craftsmen live inside the walls of the citadel of their respective Lord, spoiled by luxuries and pointless drinking. However, peasants do not understand that those who live in the citadels are under the constant scrutiny of the Lords and their Praetors. This constant scrutiny inevitably leads to a considerable amount of punishment.

Families, Gender Roles, and Marriage

Acerbians have very strong family ties. Extended families spanning three to four generation live in large houses together. Children tend to be named after dead relatives to keep the name and memory of the relative in the house. Families usually arrange marriages and the couple goes to live in the family house of the wife. In the occasional instance that a family's house has become too small for the family, they will usually build an extension on the house. The growth of the families in these towns and the subsequent growth of their houses have made many of these towns chaotic jumbles of a dozen meandering buildings. A new comer to one of these towns can easily become lost (especially because of the dark) in the seeming random roads and alleys created by these sprawling houses.

Both men and women work at the family trade. Different aspects of the family trade tend to be split between the sexes with men taking care of the more physically demanding roles. The women of a family are tasked with rearing the children of the family until they reach they pass the *Disciplis*.

Marriages are all arranged between families, usually for various strategic or trade purposes. Rarely are adults married over young love, and the elders of families are more than willing to tell horror stories of young lovers who eloped. Each story is different detail but tends to have the same themes; the couple elopes and is shunned by both families. They are unable to find enough to eat or a place to live in the valley and wander too close to the mountains ending the story in a gory dismemberment enough to turn the stomach of the strongest willed child. The arranged marriages rarely fail as the couple has a strong community support to draw from in the family that they live with. The elders solve marriages that do have problems as best as possible, but those that do fail because the bride or groom is some how dysfunctional are ended and the offending party removed from the family. In the event that a member of a married couple dies there are options for them to remarry. Sometimes the family elders will attempt to arrange a marriage for the widowed person to somebody from another family, failing this if there is a person with in the family who is also unmarried and the elders approve of it they will marry them together.

Sexual encounters that fall outside the bounds of the marriages arranged by the family elders happen and are frowned upon. There is no mystical value placed upon virginity or with a wife being childless, but connections of love outside of marriage have a long history of causing problems for families and the community. Those caught engaging in extramarital sex are usually warned the first time and both publicly shamed the second time. Individuals in the past who have been unable to stay within the confines of their marriage even after being shamed publicly have been dealt with more harshly, some even being banished from their communities.

Law and Crime

There are two types of laws among the Acerbians, the laws of the villages and the laws of the Lord. The laws of the villages are usually meant to protect the villagers and to preserve the peace and cohesiveness of the village. They tend to be common sense rules against harming other villagers, stealing, or causing strife. In general, individuals do not break these laws.

The laws of the Lords are a bit more fluid but are always subject to whatever desires a Praetor wishes. The laws are not written for the peasants to examine and learn. Even if they were written down, the peasants would not know how to read them. Some peasants believe privately that the Praetors simply make up laws and rules as they go, and that enforcing the law is simply a justification for their sadism.

Every peasant knows that they cannot learn to read or write, for it is forbidden to them. Literacy is the doorway through which knowledge can be passed, and knowledge is what nearly destroyed the world. They know that peasants must do whatever is asked of them by their Lord and any representatives he has without question or delay. The Lords are the keepers of the valleys, and without their law society crumbles. Peasants must legally show deference in all things to their Lords, for they owe their very life to that Lord.

Any peasant discovered breaking one of these rules could bring suffering and death down upon their entire village. The Praetors, when they come to a village, are not especially picky about who gets killed when they go to a village looking for rebellion. It is for this reason that there is so little trust among villagers when it comes to going against the will of the Lords. The Seekers of the Dawn have a saying amongst each other, "Don't trust Claude with the truth," referring to the legendary snitch who exposed the Dawnbringer to the Praetors. The Seekers know all too well that the peasants live in fear of suffering at the hands of the Praetors and do everything that they can to avoid it, many are all too willing reveal anybody who they think is breaking the law to the Praetors to save themselves from being seen as a conspirator.

The Seekers of the Dawn are seen as criminals by all the Lords and hunted whenever they are discovered. They are shunned in many villages, mostly to protect the village from the wrath of the Praetors. In the recent past the Praetors have made examples out of villagers believed to have been harboring Seekers.

Labor and Trade

There are numerous occupations to be found in the Dark Mountains most peasants engage in farming, tending orchards, herding animals, embalming, smithing, and mining. All the trades are taken care of by families within villages, so anybody who works as a shepherd is part of the Driver or Herder family. There is no family though that monopolizes the soldiering profession, as those individuals tend to be pressed into service from among the strong, young, male peasants of the villages. Soldiers commonly serve for about five years or until such time that they are killed in the line of duty.

Trade between the valleys is rare and discouraged by the Lords who seek to control the travel between the valleys and prevent spies from infiltrating. Trade between villages is discouraged as well, except

by the official merchants who work for the Lords. The merchants sent out by the Lords take a village's commodities excess of the annual taxes such as grain, wood, and ore in barter for finished products from the craftsmen at the citadel.

The Seekers have recognized that what is happening with this system of trade is that any extra work that the peasants are doing is being swallowed up by the Lords. The peasants are gaining little to no appreciable benefit for their extra toil, and instead of being able to produce their own trade goods they are instead forced to send the only things they have of value to the citadel for much less than they are worth.

The Seekers have had a moderate amount of success in attacking these merchants and stealing their goods. Whenever they are successful they take what they need for supplies and give the rest to whichever villages will take it. Recently though the Lords have begun sending a larger number of guards along with the merchants, giving the Seekers fewer opportunities to profit from these raids.

Conflict

The peasants hate and fear war because they are always the ones who pay the highest price for war. It is their villages that become the battlegrounds between skirmishing Lords, and it is their young men who are pressed into fighting these battles. The peasants are just trying to make it through each night without catching the attention of a person with power who might make their existence more difficult. When peasants hear that soldiers are coming into town most will retreat to their homes, sometimes hiding their strong men from the press gangs as they move through the village.

Magic

The magic of the Dark Mountains is known as the Dooms of Light and Shadow. It is roughly the same magic as was practiced by the sorcerer kings of old, although the Dark Lords have bent it to their own ends. It is utterly without moral coloring, as it calls upon the elemental forces of light and shadow, not the moralist ideas of light as symbol of truth and goodness and darkness as the embodiment of evil. Indeed, although the spells and rituals can be divided into "light" and "dark", both can be put to good or evil use. Pragmatic Seekers of Dawn even call upon the names of the Dark Lords, their sworn enemies, in order to gain additional power through the Dooms. Although such a thing would likely be frowned upon, the rebellion cannot afford to throw out talented mages for simply intoning the names of the Dark Lords.

As is mentioned before, magic is illegal for all residents of the valley, except by the Lords favored servants in his citadel. Only Praetors can practice magic legally, and the penalty for being found with knowledge of the Dooms of Light and Shadow is death, with possible death of friends and family. However, despite this, the mysterious Praetor known as the Dawnbringer taught his disciples how to use the Dooms to their advantage, and it has spread amongst the rebels.

Common Aphorisms and Colloquialisms

“Praetor” (Judges, lawmakers, and executioners of the Lord’s will)

“Claude” (An epithet among the Seekers for those who are incompetent, naïve, or traitorous)

“Andis” (This is a shorter version of the word Andisciplis, the title for people who have failed the Disciplis multiple times. It is used as an insult for people who act child like or immature.)

“Trust not Claude with the truth” (This refers to the legendary peasant who revealed the presence of the Dawnbringer to the Lords.)

“The truth is valuable, so hoard it” (Knowledge is power among the Acerbians, but they also understand that not all people are ready for such power.)

“May you find the dawn” (A wishing of good health and luck among the Seekers.)

“Fight and you will not be defeated” (This is a rallying cry used by the leaders of the Seekers. It reminds the Seekers that even if they might fall in battle they do not die defeated, as the Seekers will fight on in their name.)

“Even in darkness, the stars remember light” (Another aphorism of hope. This one is used even by loyal subjects.)

The Dark Mountains in Game

Five Things Every Acerbian Knows

Every Acerbian knows the sun will return to the Dark Mountains.

Every Acerbian believes that somehow, someday, the sun will shine again upon the mountains, ushering in a new age of prosperity. The Seekers of Dawn devote themselves entirely to this event, believing that the Dark Lords caused the eternal night. Other citizens believe that the Lords of the Valley are instead the key to the new dawn, and that their rituals are the only thing that will undo the exile of the sun.

Every Acerbian knows the virtues (if loyalist) or crimes (if rebel) of the Lords of the Valley.

Loyal citizens of the valleys believe that their Lord sacrifices every moment of the day to ensure that the peasantry will live in the greatest amount of comfort that the destroyed world can offer. Rebels on the other hand know how terrifically evil the Dark Lords can be, and they catalogue the various atrocities, lies, and sins of the Lords of the Valley. Most rebels have a list of crimes they can recite if asked, and the list is often long.

Every Acerbian knows that there are worse things than death.

Acerbians, whether they love or hate the Dark Lords, fears their retribution. Although it is never publicly stated what the Lords are capable of, peasants know that the horrors reserved for traitors are far worse than simple death. Consequently, rebels do not fear death at the hands of the Dark Lords. Loyalists believe that because peasants have destroyed the world and that the Lords of the Valley have shown mercy, that atrocities are acceptable to ensure humanity's survival.

Every Acerbian knows that the Lord's chosen judges, the Praetors, are powerful and to be feared.

No one, rebel or loyalist, wishes to be in the presence of a Praetor. Armed with incredible martial skill, frightful magics, and the authority to kill with impunity, the presence of a Praetor is dire indeed. Even the most powerful rebel stronghold would likely be scattered by the presence of one Praetor, let alone multiple. Even the most loyal peasant is filled with fear when he comes under the scrutiny of Praetors.

Every Acerbian knows that one must place trust in others, but that not everyone can be trusted.

Every person born to the Dark Mountains knows who their trusted friends are. In a place where unspeakable terror awaits traitors, secrecy is paramount. Even loyal peasants don't go spouting off at the mouth to anyone who is near, for even a small revelation could land a Praetor at one's doorstep. Acerbians are certainly clannish, but not so clannish as to withhold information from everyone. Every person has someone they know they can rely on.

Inspirational Material

Dracula (Literature)

Although the Dark Lords are not vampires, the imposing undead monarch on the hill is now a classic literary and fantastic trope. There is something truly alluring about the lone, suave, horror who lives in the castle on the hill.

Skinny Puppy (Music)

The apocalyptic sounds of Skinny Puppy inspired a lot of the degradations, horrors, atrocities, and terrors suffered by the defenseless peasantry of the Dark Mountains. SP paints a soundscape that is just as blasted, desolate, dark, and twisted as that of the Dark Mountains.

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night (Video Game)

A lone hero rises up to fight the evil vampire on the hill. Using his own power against him, the hero invades his sanctum for a final showdown. The castle was certainly an inspiration for the Lords' citadels.

Dark City (Movie)

"When was the last time you remember doing something in the day?" A world gripped by eternal

night. Check! A population manipulated by the walking corpses. Check! A rebellion formed to overthrow this order. Check!