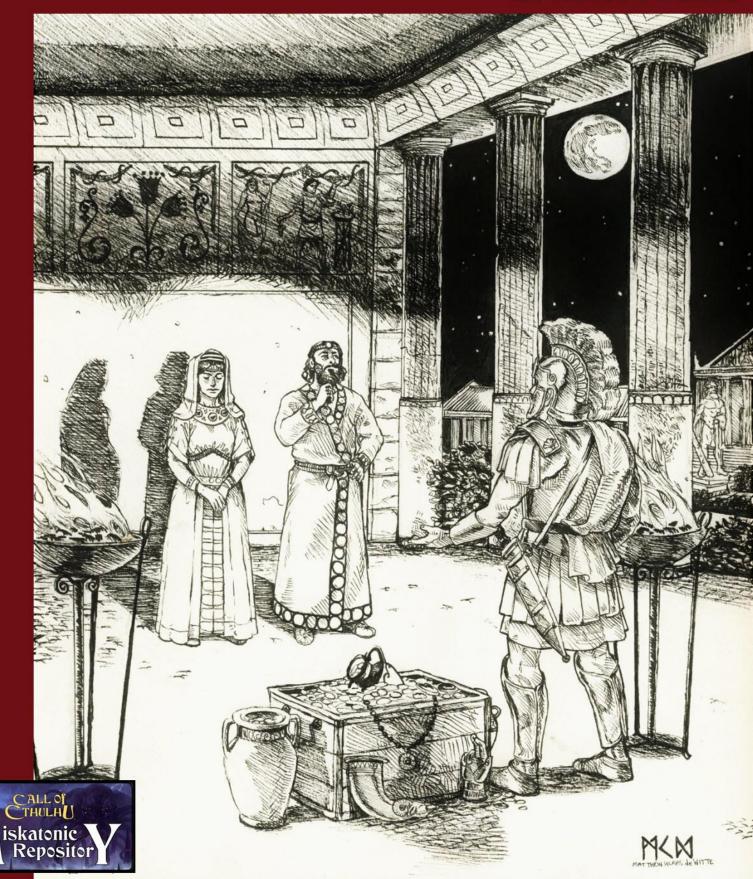
A BALANCE OF BLOOD

BY MATT PUCCIO



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A 7TH EDITION CTHULHU INVICTUS ADVENTURE

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INTRODUCTION

This is a Cthulhu Invictus scenario, set in Armenia, on the far eastern edge of the Roman Empire, in 134 CE. This scenario pits the investigators against a supernatural entity whose goals are straightforward: revenge and suffering for past misdeeds. While there is a timeline to the scenario, much of it is a sandbox – players can choose to engage with events that go on around them, or take their own action.

The goal of the scenario is to force the characters to ask themselves if they are willing to work with one horror in order to defeat another, and put them in a position where they should question whether their devotion to Rome is stronger than their sense of self-preservation. To that end, each of the characters should have strong ties to Rome, and one or more of them must be in the employ of the Imperial house. The Keeper could hand out the included pregenerated characters, or integrate this into a campaign where at least one character is employed by the Empire.

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

The north-western Parthian empire is a place of turmoil in the second century CE. Armenia has long been the victim of a tug-of-war between Rome and Parthia. In the first century CE, Rome invaded and installed client-kings in Armenia, while Parthian kings fought back and put their own rulers on the Armenian throne. Additionally, the region has seen raiding by the nomadic Alan tribes who seek to take advantage of the unrest.

In western Armenia, in the town of Ashtishat, the head of the Vahevuni family inherits the title of *sparapet*, the hereditary commander of the army, and acts as the Armenian king's right hand in the region. The current patriarch of that family, Vahevunis, commands a large contingent of *cataphracts*, heavily armored mounted troops, drawn from the aristocratic families of the region. Recently, Vahevunis fought off an incursion by the Alans tribesmen, and the bulk of his cataphracts and footsoldiers are to the north, securing the border.

Vahevunis maintains a ruthless grip on the region. His greater goal is to be named the Armenian king, with the backing of Rome. Emperor Hadrian wants an Armenian king who is amicable with Rome, and Vahevunis knows it. He will go to great lengths to cultivate his relationship with Rome, who may back him against Vologases III of Parthia when the time comes to make his move.



Coin of King Vologases III of Parthia

Lately, however, Vahevunis' attentions have been directed to his own family. Within the last year, Vahevunis' mother was murdered, his wife suffered a miscarriage, and his son was afflicted with terrible seizures. The investigators find themselves thrust into a situation of escalating tension.

In Rome, the Emperor Hadrian has dispatched patrician Fidius Burcanius as an envoy to cement a favorable relationship with Vahevunis, the commander of the army of Armenia, and return with news of the local political and military situation in the Armenian client-kingdom. Thus enter the players.

KEEPER'S OVERVIEW

Several years ago, Phaedymia, the wife of Vahevunis, became possessed by an avatar of Nyarlathotep known to later scholars as the Red Mother. Nyarlathotep seeks to sow suffering and confusion amidst humanity, and his avatar the Red Mother does this as an agent of vengeance and retribution for evil deeds.

In this scenario, the Red Mother manifests as a demonic hag known in local folklore as an Al Basti, who can become insubstantial and possess a human in order to further her horrific mission. Seeking vengeance for unpunished crimes, the Al Basti was drawn to the area by the desperate prayers of a local villager, a man whose wife was raped by Vahevunis and whose son was beaten and killed by the prince's cataphracts. Sick with grief and fed up with the constant harsh treatment of the prince, the villager prayed to the Armenian gods for vengeance and retribution.

But the gods who heard this plea were not those the villager intended. In Ashtishat, the Crawling Chaos saw a unique confluence of human evil and injustice: the corrupt wizard Prytanios who has allied himself with the cruel and heartless Vahevunis. Nyarlathotep sent his avatar, the Al Basti, to do his bidding.

Prytanios, an accomplished sorcerer from the city of Ephesus, is court adviser to Vahevunis. He is unnaturally old and worships the ancient Assyrian god Nergal. Prytanios serves as the court magician to Vahevunis as he has to Vahevunis' father and grandfather before him. Vahevunis provides the magician with the resources needed to practice his dark arts, and in exchange Prytanios works his magic against the enemies of Armenia. The prince, like his father before him, often provides human victims to Prytanios in exchange for the wizard's protections. Thus the two men are linked together in their atrocities, and both are the target of the Al Basti.



13 months ago, during a full moon, the demonic Al Basti arrived in Ashtishat. The Al Basti attempted to possess the elderly mother of Vahevunis, planning to use the woman to bring about vengeance on the family. This required the consumption of the living brain and beating heart of the victim but the old woman's heart gave out moments before the demon could consume it to complete the possession. The Al Basti was left without a host and fled to plan another avenue of attack. It was during this time that she became aware of the Vishaps, the dragon-men of folklore, hereditary enemies of the Vahevuni, and plotted to use them against him.

A month later, the Al Basti went into spirit-form and took possession of Phaedymia during the birth of the family's second son. The son was stillborn, his brain and heart consumed by the Al Basti during the possession. Normally, were the Al Basti to leave the body of its host, the body would be left a dead husk. However, because she was able to consume the brain and heart of the unborn fetus, Phaedymia was left alive. The Al Basti's power waxes and wanes with the phases of the moon – as does her control over Phaedymia's personality. As the moon comes to fullness, the Al Basti has almost complete control over the young woman. During the new moon, Phaedymia's own personality comes to the surface.



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The Al Basti can briefly leave Phaedymia's body during the full moon, taking on her own form - that of a hideous crone with fiery writhing hair, dagger-sharp brass claws, and needle-like iron teeth - and then return, without releasing her hold on the prince's wife. Phaedymia remains comatose during these excursions, until the demon becomes incorporeal and slips back into her host.

6 months ago, during a full moon, Sohaemus, the young son of Vahevunis, began to have strange seizures. The convulsions come each month during the days before the full moon and have become known to the locals as the "moon sickness." These have become more violent as the months go by. This "sickness", really a curse, is caused by the Al Basti, and is another cruel retribution against the Vahevuni.

Once she becomes aware of the presence of the investigators, the Al Basti intends to frame Prytanios for the moon sickness and use the characters to turn Vahevunis against his court sorcerer.

If the investigators fall for this deception, they may pursue the destruction of Prytanios; if they discover the cruelties of the prince and his advisor, it will be up to them whether they allow the Al Basti to destroy Vahevunis and his family, or seek to rid Phaedymia of the possessing spirit. If they choose to destroy Prytanios, they will need to convince Vahevunis that the wizard is responsible for his family's ills. If instead they decide to destroy the Al Basti, they may need to partner with Prytanios to weaken her in order to succeed. In all this, they should consider the interests of Rome and of their mission.

If they take no action, the Al Basti's scheme of vengeance against the Vahevuni continues: his son dies from the moon-sickness, his nephew goes insane, and she drives the household into ruin. Finally, during a lunar ceremony dedicated to the local god Vahagn the Dragon Reaper, the demon reverts to her true form, commanding long-imprisoned *Vishaps* (dragon-men) in an attempt to capture the *sparapet*, slay his family before his eyes, and then deliver him to his enemies to be tortured and executed.

INVESTIGATOR'S INFORMATION

The characters are part of an advance-group of minor dignitaries, fixers, bureaucrats, and military attachés sent ahead of envoy Fidius Burcanius, to announce his arrival and to present Vahevunis with a gift. Their greater purpose is to assess the local political situation and gather intelligence ahead of Burcanius' arrival.

The investigators are thus working for the Roman Empire; one or more of them should be directly in the employ of the Senate, the legions, or the Imperial house. The remainder can be translators, scribes, slaves, guards, or minor dignitaries, perhaps members of Burcanius' household. They have been entrusted with the delivery of a hefty chest of sestertii to Vahevunis.



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The Keeper should communicate the following orders to the investigators, which can come through military or civilian channels, as character background dictates:

- Announce the arrival of Fidius Burcanius, who wishes to bring greetings from Emperor Hadrian, 4 days after the investigators arrive.
- Get a read on Vahevunis' attitude toward Rome, his relationship with King Vologases III of Parthia, and the local political situation. Find out who the commander's enemies are and if there are rebel elements of the population. Discover his weaknesses and strengths.
- Under no circumstances are they to damage the relationship between Rome and Vahevunis, who courts favor with Rome. Other local political powers, who are unfriendly to Rome, would be more than happy to step into the power vacuum should Vahevunis fall from prominence in the region if Rome is not ready with a replacement.

• Deliver a gesture of friendship (and a subtle threat) from Rome to Vahevunis. The padlocked, iron-bound chest the players bring with them contains 10,000 carefully-selected sestertius coins. This gift was very deliberately chosen - the specific coins were minted in 116 CE after Emperor Trajan's conquest of Armenia, and bear the inscription ARMENIA ET MESOPOTAMIA IN POTESTATEM P.R. REDACTÆ ("Armenia and Mesopotamia reduced to servitude") - with the image of the Emperor standing over figures representing Armenia and Mesopotamia. Burcanius makes it clear that this is a message to Vahevunis: side with Rome, and you will be well-rewarded. Go against Rome, and you will be defeated.



The keeper provide this briefing to the players either as a short roleplaying scenario where Fidius Burcanius gives the investigators a mission briefing, or simply narrate this information as backstory and provide the players with the included handout — either way, it's important that all of the players understand the mission's goals and intentions.

TIMELINE

Much of this scenario is open-ended, but some events follow a rough timeline; the investigators determine the order of their investigation and when they want to escalate certain conflicts. This timeline provides the Keeper with guidance for events that occur independent of player action.

- 13 months ago
 - Vahevunis' mother is murdered during a full moon.
- 12 months ago
 - Unbeknownst to anyone but a midwife, Phaedymia is possessed during childbirth under a full moon.
- 6 months ago
 - Sohaemus begins having seizures during full moons
- Today Date: ante diem IV ides Martius (4 days before the Ides of March)
 - The characters arrive in Ashtishat.
 - The possessed Phaedymia meets privately with the investigators.
- Today + 1 Date: *ante diem III ides Martius*

- The Al Basti steals horses from the stable and drives them to the surrounding hills, where she meets with the dragon-men.
- Today + 2 Date: *priedes ides Martius*
 - A household slave boy is found dead, murdered by the Al Basti.
 - Sohaemus dies (unless investigators prevent it).
- Today + 3 Date: idus Martius (March 15)
 - The night of the full moon.
 - Fidius Burcanius fails to arrive on time for the festival.
 - Andragoras goes insane and attacks Vahevunis.
 - The lunar ceremony and/or funeral of Sohaemus.
- Today + 4 Date: ante diem X Kalends Aprilis (March 16)
 - o Fidius Burcanius arrives, late, with his retinue

Several other events are flexible and can happen on any day. The Keeper should use these as necessary:

- Dragon-men attack the temple when the investigators are visiting.
- Dreams of the Red Mother when characters sleep.

CUSTOMIZING MADNESS

When investigators suffer from temporary or indefinite insanity during the scenario, The Red Mother enters their minds and plagues them with hints of her presence. Use the following imagery to enliven these nocturnal episodes:

- Maddening drums that pound incessantly, causing the character's head to throb with pulsing blood.
- The monotonous piping of blasphemous flutes that pierce the eardrums, causing the ears to bleed.
- Writhing, blood-tinted shadows which haunts the characters' peripheral vision.
- Unlived memories of dead worlds, lit by the red, sickly light of dying red dwarf stars.
- Visions of blind, mindless gargoyles that haunt the pillars of unsanctified temples.

Characters with points in the **Cthulhu Mythos** skill who succeed at a roll may connect these visions with Nyarlathotep. The Keeper might also utilize bouts of madness to give the players insane insight into the scenario if they are struggling, frustrated or off-track.

PLAY BEGINS

The investigators arrive before the town of Ashtishat in *Martius* (March) of the year 134 AD. They have travelled from Rome via the merchant ship *Luna*, landed at the port of Antioch, and proceeded overland on horseback to Ashtishat. The Roman envoy will follow them 4 days from now on a different ship. The town of one thousand inhabitants is dominated by two structures: a temple to the local deity *Vahagn* in the center of town, and an expansive walled villa on a hillside overlooking the town.

Signs of Cruelty

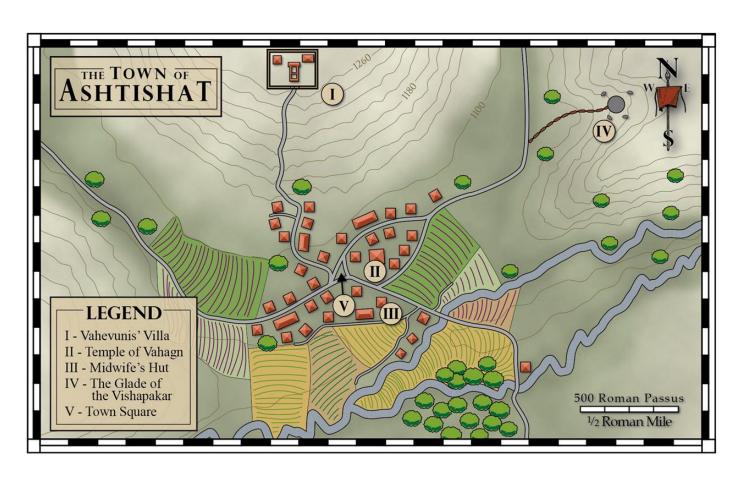
If the characters approach the town without stealth, they are confronted by a squad of heavily armored cataphracts bearing the banner of the *Sparapet* (commander of the army), Vahevunis of Ashtishat (**Other Kingdom: Armenia** or **Parthia** to identify).

The head of this contingent, a tall man with long flowing blond hair, greets them in broken Latin. The color of his hair is unusual in this region, where most people have curly dark hair. If the investigators announce themselves as emissaries of Rome, he introduces himself as Andragoras, nephew of Vahevunis, and escorts them through town, after sending one of his men on ahead to the villa.

This messenger whips his horse into a gallop through the market, trampling an old woman, breaking her back. While onlookers rush to her aid, the cataphracts pay no attention to this disturbance and ride past. The townsfolk avert their gazes from the cataphracts and scurry out of the way; a successful **Insight** roll notices a look of cowed hatred lingering on their faces. If questioned, the townsfolk remain closed-mouthed in front of the sparapet's men.

If persuaded to talk in private, commoners in town (who can only speak Armenian and know no Latin) may impart the following, depending on how the players pursue their questions:

- Vahevunis leads the Armenian army, and protects this part of the Armenian kingdom from invaders.
- He recently beat back an attack from the nomadic Alans to the north. Currently most of his cataphracts are deployed protecting that border, but a small contingent remains behind in Ashtishat.



- Vahevunis has a sadistic and cruel reputation. His
 punishments are harsh for lawbreakers, and his men
 frequently abuse their station taking liberties with common
 women, confiscating food and drink whenever they want, and
 generally running roughshod over the countryside.
- The populace puts up with his indiscretions because "things could be worse" and Vahevunis protects them from outsiders (the Parthians, in particular).
- The Vahevuni are descended from Vahagn the Dragon Reaper (530 BCE), a local hero-deity who slew *Vishaps*, dragon-men of ancient lore. There is a temple to Vahagn in the center of town.

A VERAGE CATAPHRACT

STR 80 CON 70 SIZ 75 DEX 60 INT 55 POW 50 SAN 65 HP 16 Build: 1

Move: 7 (11 mounted)
Damage Bonus: +1D4

Brawl 65% (32/13), damage 1D3+DB

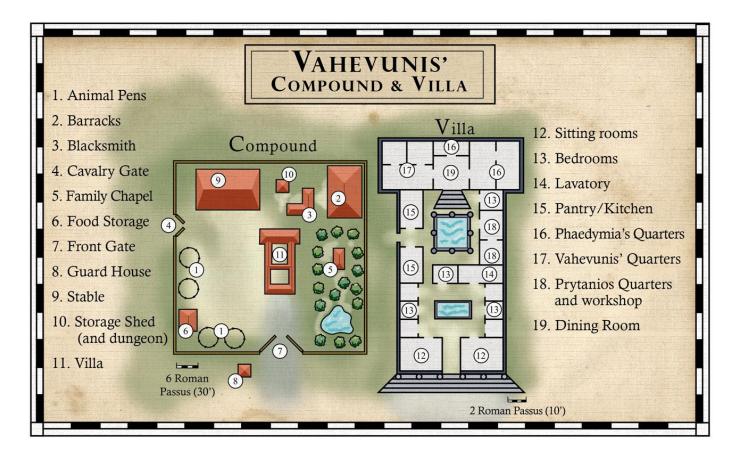
Fighting: Kontos (lance) 60% (30/12), damage 1D10+1 Fighting: Spatha (sword) 65% (32/13), damage 1D8+DB Ranged Weapons: Cavalry Bow 50% (25/10), damage 1D8 Armor: Chainmail and helmet (1D8 + 1D2 armor)

Skills: Dodge 45%, First Aid 30%, Intimidate 25%, Other Language (Latin) 15%, Ride 60%, Spot Hidden 40%, Status 60%

The Sparapet's Manor

While the manor is opulent by local standards, compared to the stately homes of Roman patricians that its architect attempted to emulate, it is little more than a large country villa. Located on a hillside a half mile from Ashtishat, an 8' high stone wall surrounds the grounds, which contain a luxurious garden, a large stable complex, and a number of outbuildings. A dozen elite cataphracts are stationed in a barracks building.

The investigators are met by Vahevunis' atriensis (majordomo) Numerius, an immaculately dressed Sassanid slave, who speaks perfect imperial Latin. Although their appearance is unexpected, Numerius treats them as honored guests and shows the characters to comfortable rooms, where they are offered baths and refreshment before Vahevunis receives them at the evening meal.



Dinner with Vahevunis

The sparapet is a handsome, charismatic and vibrant man with long, immaculately oiled curls, beard, and mustache. He welcomes investigators as guests of the Armenian kingdom and introduces his beautiful wife Phaedymia, his 8 year old son Sohaemus, his ancient advisor Prytanios, and his nephew Andragoras. In addition to Andragoras, three cataphract guards are usually near the family. Eight other cataphracts are either on duty around the villa, or off duty in the small barracks.



Gustave Boulange

After exchanging pleasantries, Vahevunis inquires about the investigator's business in Ashtishat. When presented with the chest of coins, he graciously accepts their gift. As he examines the coins, he attempts to hide his irritation and maintain his civil demeanor, but with an **Insight** roll, the investigators perceive that the deep furrow on his brow indicates that he has received the not-so-subtle message minted on them.

If this is brought to his attention, he apologizes and mentions that he is in a foul mood of late, but is not forthcoming with additional details. If pressed (with a successful **Persuade** roll), he indicates that his family has been plagued by misfortune of late. He mentions the death of his mother, and that he suspects his political enemies from Parthia, but does not elaborate. A further successful **Insight** roll reveals that he is not telling all of the facts about the murder known to him - he's hiding something.

During dinner, as Vahevunis raises his drinking *rhyton* to his lips, his son Sohaemus begins convulsing abruptly with a seizure, writhing on the floor and foaming at the mouth. Phaedymia cries out about the "moon disease," and servants exclaim about the influence of demons. Vahevunis shouts at Prytanios "Your protections are not working, save him! I've given you all the resources you've asked for!" as the elderly man springs forward, muttering in a strange language, making passes over the boy's body with his hands, and sprinkling a glittering powder over him, neither of which have any effect.

A successful **Occult** roll determines that the adviser appears to be casting a spell of warding against evil on the boy. With an extreme success, the **Occult** roll determines that he is casting the **Warding the Eye** spell, a protection against the Evil Eye. Players who attempt to interfere will be ordered back by Prytanios; if they insist, Vahevunis will allow them to examine the boy. **First Aid** will have no effect on the seizures; the use of **Medicine** to determine what is wrong with him will likewise be fruitless.

As the boy's seizures subside, Prytanios explains that his ritual wards against demons that are strengthened by the upcoming full moon, and he must renew the protection from time to time as it wears off, for his magics are not powerful enough to permanently rid the child of whatever curse is upon him. He claims to be researching a more powerful cure.



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PRINCE VAHEVUNIS, AGE 46, SATRAP OF ASHTISHAT

STR 55 CON 65 SIZ 75 DEX 70 INT 55 POW 55 APP 80 EDU 60 SAN 50

HP 15 Build: 1 Move: 6

Damage Bonus: +1D4

Brawl 65% (32/13), damage 1D3+DB

Fighting: Kontos (lance) 60% (30/12), damage 1D10+1 Fighting: Spatha (sword) 65% (32/13), damage 1D8+DB

Ranged Weapons: Cavalry Bow 50% (25/10), damage 1D8 Armor: None while in his house, otherwise Chainmail and helmet (1D8 + 1D2 armor) when out in the field

Skills: Insight 45%, Spot Hidden 40%, Empire 40%, Persuade 55%, Status 85%, Other Language (Latin) 60%, Dodge 40%, Ride 70%

The Lay of the Land

After this disturbance, Vahevunis excuses himself and his family, asking the characters to remain as his guests until the arrival of Fidius Burcanius - they may have their leisure of the villa, or go into town, as they wish. The family disperses to their quarters, and the investigators are left to their own devices for the evening.

If investigators interact with household servants, cataphracts, atriensis, etc. the following rumors and information (all true to some degree or other) may be gleaned (perhaps with a successful **Persuade**, **Fast Talk**, or **Listen** roll, depending on who is spoken to). More important slaves and cataphracts are less like to tell family secrets to Romans, while menial slaves and servants may be more open to the players if they also have clearly lower status amongst the investigators. Not all of this information is critical to impart, but may be provided by the Keeper depending on the line of questioning.

- The sparapet is a strong leader, and has defended the country many times. While he is harsh to his people, his family has served Armenia for generations, and things would certainly be worse without his guidance and protection.
- The Parthian King Vologases III and Vahevunis have butted heads frequently, and Vahevunis recently rode the king's tax collector out of town, refusing to allow him to collect a new, crushing, tax on the townsfolk. The taxman vowed to return, backed by the Parthian army to enforce his will. This gained Vahevunis some goodwill amongst the local populace.
- Prytanios uses his magic to defeat the enemies of Vahevunis.
 He is often seen going into a storage hut behind the stables.
- Prytanios has served as advisor to the Vahevuni for 3 generations - much longer than any other servant who is still
- Vahevunis is particularly cruel to servants who misbehave, having them whipped, beaten, or humiliated for even minor offenses. He is a sadist, abusing slave girls for his own pleasure.
- Phaedymia suffered a miscarriage a year ago. The child was deformed, and the midwife who attended her is said to have gone insane; the old woman was dismissed from the sparapet's service shortly afterward.
- While she was once a kind and outgoing mistress, Phaedymia
 has become more withdrawn and suffers mood swings since
 losing her child. Sometimes she locks herself up in her
 chamber for days at a time, not allowing even her
 handmaidens to attend her.
- Any of the rumors known by the townspeople of Ashtishat, detailed in the town section.

Meeting with Phaedymia



rank Dicksee | Wikimedia Common

After dinner, a female slave appears at the quarters of the investigators, inviting them to meet her mistress in her salon. The characters find two cataphract guards outside the door. These two enter and remain in the chamber when the investigators enter. The room is comfortable, strewn with cushions, tapestries, and luxurious decorations. Against one wall stands a small shrine around an elaborately painted stone idol. A successful **Other Kingdoms: Armenia/Parthia** or an **Occult** roll indicates the statue is *Spandaramet*, the Armenian goddess of the underworld, corresponding to the Greek *Demeter*. If asked about this, Phaedymia explains that *Spandaramet* is the house god of her father's family, while *Vahagn Vishapakagh* is the house god of her husband's family.

Armenian Religion

The chief god of Armenia at this time is *Aramazd* (derived from the Zoroastrian diety *Ahura Mazda*), called the Architect of the Universe, Creator of Heaven and Earth. He is the father of other gods, and has several daughters, among them *Anahit*, who corresponds to the Greek goddess *Artemis*. His wife *Spandaramet* is an earth goddess, representing both fertility and the resting place of the dead.

As the characters enter, Phaedymia sets aside needle and thread, handing her son Sohaemus a woolen doll of a cataphract that she has been sewing, saying "go, play with your friend Narseh" and shoos him off. He grabs the hand of his playmate, a young servant boy, and they run off to another part of the room. Remember during this scene that the Al Basti is actually in control of Phaedymia's actions.

Once Sohaemus is distracted, Phaedymia explains (in perfect, if accented, Latin) that she suspects Prytanios of cursing her son with the moon-sickness, which grows in severity as the full moon nears. She also believes that he is responsible for the death of Lusine, the elderly mother of the prince, just over a year ago. The old woman was found with a gaping hole in her skull, her brains removed, and a terrible, slashing wound across her chest. If the investigators probe for more detail, she reveals that the body was found by a servant, a washer-woman named Musa. If asked, she will recall that the murder occurred on the night of the full moon, although she does not lead with this information if unprompted. While she has no solid evidence that Prytanios is involved, both the moon sickness and the death of her mother-in-law reek of exactly the sort of evil sorcery the wizard practices upon the enemies of her husband.

If they ask why she thinks the magician would act against his employer, she cannot offer a reason, except to say that his evil must have corrupted him.

Phaedymia asks the characters to investigate the adviser and find evidence that he is doing something nefarious against her family. She warns them not to speak of this to her husband until they have something concrete, and beg them not to reveal that she has asked them to help, as her husband is an extremely proud man and would be terribly displeased with her for acting behind his back.



Vahagn, defeating the dragons

She asks them to do this "out of respect for your *Justitia*" (the Roman goddess of Justice) and for "the benefit of the relationship between Rome and Armenia." If they balk, or present a more mercenary attitude, she sighs, saying "You Romans, always looking for the advantage at every turn. Very well, perhaps this will sway you to my task?" as she pulls out a small enameled chest of jewels. Either way, she gives them the chest of gems as a gift, in exchange for their consideration. If they continue to resist getting involved, she will appeal to their sense of duty to Rome, implying that Vahevunis' well-being is directly tied to the continuation of Rome's influence in the area and that without their assistance, she fears that her husband's political enemies will pounce if he is seen as weak.

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The lid of Phaedymia's enamel box

Phaedymia's Gift

The small metal and red enamel box is decorated with ornate Phoenician sphinxes, each with the head of a woman and the body of a hyena (a subtle reference to Nyarlathotep's guise as the sphinx in his Faceless God aspect). It is filled with small rubies with a total value of 1000 *sestertii*.

If asked about her husband, Phaedymia acknowledges that while he is a master tactician, he is extremely superstitious, and is convinced that his adviser's powers are all that hold the moon disease at bay from his cherished son. If asked how her husband treats her, she blushes and avoids the question, maintaining that he is a wonderful father to their son. The reality is that while he is cruel and harsh to those of lesser station, he does not abuse or mistreat his own family - but the Al Basti is more than happy to lead the characters to believe otherwise.

If asked about Prytanios, she explains that he is a wizard of the dark arts: her husband finds the adviser's magical abilities of great use against his enemies - spying on them, cursing them, causing their men to fall sick, their food to become poisoned, their wells to dry up. Prytanios is from Ephesus, a city of magicians, and a long-time servant of the sparapet's family: he has served for decades, since the time of Vahevunis' grandfather. He spends much of his time in his chamber in the villa, but she has often seen him entering the dungeon, which is accessed through a hut behind the stables.

Roleplaying Phaedymia

While Phaedymia is possessed by the Al Basti, the demon's control over her waxes and wanes with the cycles of the moon - as the moon nears fullness, the Red Mother takes full and complete control over the woman, while as the moon wanes, Phaedymia, although still influenced by the spirit, returns to some semblance of her normal personality. The investigators have arrived within several days of the full moon, so the Al Basti has near complete control and has subsumed Phaedymia's personality during the events of the scenario.

The Red Mother's goal is to bring retribution, misery, and suffering for the injustices perpetrated by Vahevunis and Prytanios. As an avatar of Nyarlathotep, she enjoys using the characters to frame Prytanios, bring confusion to Armenia, and sow discord between Rome and Parthia.

The Al Basti is supernaturally manipulative; if the investigators suspect her of lying, the Keeper should ask for an **Insight** roll, and secretly make it a contested roll against Phaedymia's **INT**. If the characters succeed, they are told that she might be hiding something about her husband (she is, but it's not what they may think...); if they make a further successful **Idea** roll, they might suspect that he is abusing her and she is too ashamed to talk about it. If instead they fail the contested **Insight** roll, tell them that she is clearly afraid of Prytanios. Any time they try to use **Insight** to tell if she's deceiving them, utilize a contested roll; if they fail, misdirect their suspicions. If they succeed, they realize that she has darker motives towards her husband or Prytanios.

PHAEDYMIA, AGE 26, HUMAN POSSESSED BY AL BASTI

STR 45 CON 75 SIZ 45 DEX 90 INT 80

POW 100 APP 90 EDU 60

HP 30 MP 50 Build: 0 Move: 7

Damage Bonus: o

Brawl 25% (12/5), damage 1D3

Fighting: Dagger 75% (37/15), damage 1D4

Spells: Cause Blindness, Cloud Memory, Numantina, Dominate, Enthrall Victim, Deflect Harm, Implant Fear, Mesmerize, Mind Blast

Skills: Insight 85%, Spot Hidden 55%, Empire 25%, Persuade 65%, Status 75%, Other Language (Latin) 60%, Other Language (Greek) 65%, Dodge 40%

Phaedymia appears to be a beautiful, young Armenian princess. Heavily made up and bejeweled, her black hair is long and curly and she favors clothing in shades of red and maroon. She is reserved and a bit aloof; her servants and family almost treat her as a goddess.

The Al Basti's spells are granted to her by Nyarlathotep. If she uses any of her spells on an investigator, that character should experience one of the effects listed in the Customizing Madness section above, as the Keeper finds appropriate.

Dreams of the Red Mother

Once the investigators have accepted her mission to uncover more information about Prytanios, Nyarlathotep begins to send them dreams. The dreams that each player experiences should be customized for the character, and revolve around guilt and unpunished crimes - theirs, or of people associated with them. Perhaps they stood by and did nothing, perhaps they participated, or perhaps it was something in their family's past. Feel free to ask the players for an incident in their characters' past that might trigger such a response.

Some examples:

- An investigator who is a Patrician experiences the guilt he felt when he had a slave unjustly whipped to death.
- A priest rethinks the cruel treatment he has visited on acolytes of his temple,
- A Centurion sickens at the memory of his Legion pillaging a village in Gaul and murdering innocent inhabitants.
- A scribe regrets using his position in the Senatorial offices to forge an arrest warrant for a personal enemy who was thrown from the Tarpeian rock.
- A slave is wracked by remorse for misdirecting blame for a priceless broken vase from herself to another slave.

Each morning after these dreams, the characters are left with the feeling that some presence knows about their past sins. On subsequent nights these dreams intensify until the Al Basti is banished, slain, or has completed her goals. Each day the investigators who suffer from these dreams lose more and more SAN – one point of SAN the first night, 1D2 the second night, 1D3 the third night, and 1D4 thereafter.

INVESTIGATING CLUES

During the next several days, allow the characters to pursue their own course of investigation, utilizing the outline of events as a guide. NPCs and locations are detailed below. The characters are treated as honored guests of Armenia by Vahevunis and his household, as long as they do not create problems.

OUESTIONING THE WASHERWOMAN

There are two leads that may point the investigators to Musa: she is the niece of Nisa, the midwife who delivered Phaedymia's stillborn child the night of the Al Basti's possession; and she discovered the mutilated body of Vahevunis' elderly mother Lusine.

Musa is a young woman of 18 who is either found gathering soiled laundry from the villa or working in the sweltering heat of the laundry. An elderly matron runs the laundry and is displeased with anyone who disrupts her domain; investigators need to distract or persuade her before she will allow them to converse with Musa.

Musa works long, lonely hours and is relieved to have someone other than the laundry matron to talk to. She readily gossips with the characters (particularly handsome young men) about what she knows. Unfortunately she only speaks Armenian, and a small amount of broken Parthian, so translation may be required.



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Musa appears unphased by the gruesome discovery she made of Lusine's corpse, going into intricate details of her experience. She was carrying clean linens to the family's rooms, when she saw a bright flickering light and heard a wet, slurping sound in the hallway near Lusine's room. Turning the corner, she saw, by the light of the full moon, a half-naked, wrinkled old woman, dressed in torn and tattered red rags, with writhing, fiery hair. The hag was crouched over the body of the sparapet's mother, it's bloody, claw-like hands ripping organs out of Lusine's chest. Seeing her, the creature leapt out the window, blood and gore dripping onto the window sill. Musa saw that both the heart and the brain had been ripped out of Lusine's body; bits of skull, brain, and gore were dribbled across the carpet.

If the characters make an **Insight** roll upon hearing the obsessive detail with which she describes the event, it's clear that she was so shaken by the experience that she can't stop talking about it - her sanity is rattled and she is fixated on reliving the details of that horrific night.

She mentions that the creature reminds her of the stories of the Al Basti, a folk tale told to her by Nisa, her aunt. She eagerly tells the investigators that she doesn't know much about the stillbirth of Phaedymia's second son, but that her Aunt Nisa was present that night. Phaedymia sent Nisa away after the event, "probably because she didn't want to see Nisa's face, it must remind her of her loss." Since being dismissed from the family's service, her aunt has never been the same in the head. Musa knows her aunt lives in the poor part of town now, but rarely visits her.

Musa can also impart any of the other rumors known by the household staff that the Keeper finds appropriate.



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Al Basti Folklore

The Al Basti is a female spirit who brings justice and vengeance to the guilty. The Al Basti has been known to plague pregnant women and their children - blinding the unborn, bringing diseases to young children, causing miscarriages and deformities.

The Al Basti has the physical form of an ancient, decrepit hag, whose hair writhes rhythmically and throws off a fiery light that mesmerizes her victims. She wears the torn rags of a red dress. Her mouth is filled with needle-like teeth made of iron, and her fingers end in razor-sharp claws. She can be seen on nights of the full moon, pursuing those who are straddled with guilt.

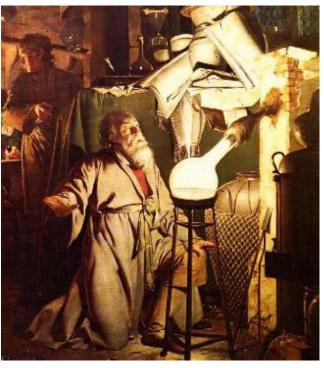
The demon spirit can possess its victims. When it leaves or is driven out of its host, it is found to have consumed the heart and brain of its victim, leaving a dead husk behind. The Al Basti is also blamed for stealing horses, who are found lathered and exhausted the next morning. To what ends it puts these beasts is unknown.

FOR THE KEEPER ONLY

The legend of the Al Basti goes back to the time of the Sumerians and is present in many cultures in the Caucasus region. Nyarlathotep has embraced this legend in furtherance of his own indiscernible motives, and used the Al Basti as his own agent. In various eras the Al Basti has been known as the Red Mother or the Queen in Red. Whatever Nyarlathotep's motivation, the Al Basti spreads pain, suffering, destruction, and insanity in her wake.

Questioning Prytanios

If requested, Prytanios readily agrees to an interview. While he does not have anything to hide from the investigators, he has no reason to reveal to the agents of Rome any tactical information, such as what spells he uses or how he deals with the enemies of Armenia. Nominally, he indicates that he is employed by Vahevunis for purposes of "gathering intelligence, creating tactical advantage, and ensuring that the satrap's troops are properly equipped to deal with the enemies of Armenia." If he is pressed, and with a successful **Persuade** or **Intimidate** roll, he will indicate that he uses magic to demoralize, weaken, and impair the enemies of Armenia - including the Alan tribesmen and the Parthians.



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If questioned about being responsible for any of the terrible events (Sohaemus' moon disease, Phaedymia's miscarriage, or Lusine's death), he denies any involvement and bristles at the accusation. Vahevunis has numerous enemies: internal Parthian rivals, the nomadic Alans to the north, even some in Rome who seek to restore Trajan's conquests and expand Rome's holdings in Armenia. Any could be responsible. He defiantly states that he has and will continue to use his powers to defend the satrap and his family.

Prytanios' motivations are to keep Vahevunis in power (either as an agent of Rome or of Parthia/Armenia - he cares not which) and to continue his own magical research. To this extent he is loyal to Vahevunis, although ultimately he is self-serving. Any indiscretions that Vahevunis perpetrates are none of his concern, and below his notice.

If threatened, he raises the alarm for the prince's cataphracts. If attacked, he utilizes his magics to their fullest extent.

PRYTANIOS, AGE 172, ANCIENT WIZARD

STR 30 CON 55 SIZ 50 DEX 40 INT 90

POW 125 APP 60 SAN 35

MP 25 HP 11 Build: -1 Move: 5

Damage Bonus: -1 Brawl 25%, 1D3-1

Fighting (Dagger) 50%, 1D4-1

Spells: Blight Crop, Cloak of Fire, Contact Nergal, Evil Eye,

Implant Fear, Nightmare, Steal Life, Stop Heart,

Summon/Bind Hunting Horror, Eye of Nergal, all spells listed in the *Apotropaioi Theoi*

Skills: Insight 35%, Spot Hidden 30%, Empire 40%, Persuade 40%, Status 40%, Other Language (Latin) 80%, Other Language (Greek) 92%, Occult 60%, Cthulhu Mythos 35%, Dodge 20%

Prytanios' Laboratory

The wizard inhabits a large suite that serves as his sleeping quarters and laboratory. Unless he is away on the sparapet's business, it is likely that he is present in his lab, working on some new spell. His room is not guarded, but the door is locked, even when he is inside. When he is away, the lock can be picked with a successful Repair/Devise check, or forced open (opposed STR against STR 70). A failed roll on either of these causes a nearby slave to notice the noise and come to investigate. If the characters cannot successfully Fast Talk an explanation, the slave seeks out a pair of cataphract guards who come to investigate. If the door is forced, the same slave will notice that the door has been left open, damaged, after 1D10 rounds.

The following items of interest are in the room:

- Implements of ritual magic: candles, incense, braziers, colored powders, dried bits of various insects, etc. Of particular note, should the investigators inquire, are some thin sheets of lead, often used to inscribe inscriptions upon.
- A library of scrolls, parchments, and musty old books, all of which discuss magical theories, alchemical subjects, and occult references.
- A large tome, written in Greek, sits open on a reading desk to a page discussing "methods of warding against moon-spirits and demonic presences". The manual describes wards, spells, and signs that can be used to purge and ward against evil spirits. APOTROPAIOI THEOI "The Averting Gods," written in Greek. Sanity Loss 1/1D4; Occult +3%; Study Time 12 weeks. Spells: Create Amulet, Create Bulla, Enchant Brazier, Identify Spirit, Warding the Eye.

- A pestle full of a fine, gray-blue powder. An investigator who reads Greek and successfully skims the APOTROPAIOI THEOI determines that the powder was created by the Identify Spirit spell. There is one "dose" of this powder. When sprinkled or blown over a target, the form of any hidden or possessing supernatural entity becomes visible: a life-size shadow of the target's true form is superimposed over the host. The shadow vanishes at the end of the next round. If thrown over Phaedymia, a shadow of the Al Basti is revealed; if tossed on a Vishap stone (see description in The Glade), the form of a Vishap is revealed. If tossed on Sohaemus or Prytanios, nothing happens, as neither are possessed. If this is done to Phaedymia, it reveals her presence as a vision of her true form - and results in the Al Basti immediately using her spells to attempt to fog the memories of those present, and/or use her charm abilities on the investigators and others.
- Resting in a locked (**Repair/Devise** to pick the lock without damaging it) drawer is the journal of Prytanios. This volume is notable because it is massive. Penned in cryptic Latin handwriting, it has daily entries dating back over 150 years, focusing on Prytanios' magical experimentation. **DIARY OF PRYTANIOS** in Latin. Sanity Loss 1D2/2D4; Cthulhu Mythos: +2%; Occult +10%; Spells: Contact Nergal, Eye of Nergal. Study Time 4 weeks. Due to the obscurity of the shorthand the book is written in, just skimming the book takes either takes 2 hours with a successful INT roll, or 4 hours if the roll fails. If skimmed, the journal reveals the following information:
 - Prytanios worships and derives his power from Nergal. Nergal is a dark and oppressive deity who was borne to Earth on a shooting star
 - Prytanios has extended his lifespan through the repeated use of a foul ritual that involves sacrificing humans to Nergal. The diary does not detail the ritual, however.
 - Details of his duties under Vahevunis include cursing and sending supernatural assassins against his enemies; sorcerous scrying of his rivals; enhancing and heightening the strength of his cataphracts and horses.
 Descriptions of many of these rituals includes the sacrifice of animals and, in the case of some of the most powerful spells, humans.

- Vahevunis supplies Prytanios with these human sacrifices, in the form of convicted criminals, captured enemy soldiers, and when neither of these are available, commoners from the region of Ashtishat, kidnapped by his cataphracts. Some of these sacrifices are used in direct service to Vahevunis; others are used in experimentation to develop new spells.
- The diary includes nothing that would lead the investigators to believe that he has any reason to harm any member of Vahevunis' family.



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The Dungeon

Built under a storage shed, the dungeon serves to hold the enemies of the prince who he chooses not to immediately execute. This is where Prytanios practices his more horrendous magics - here, his sacrifices to Nergal take place. The cells currently house a single prisoner - a mad Greek astrologer, who, having slighted Vahevunis, was cast into a pit to languish until Vahevunis decides what to do with him.

During the day, multiple successful **Stealth** rolls are necessary to get into the building unseen, as the area around the shed is frequented by cataphracts and servants. At night, a pair of cataphract guards patrol the villa grounds, passing by the shed every hour or so. Twice during the day (morning and evening), a servant brings food and water from the kitchen to the lone prisoner.

Inside the shed, stone steps descends to a heavy, locked door. Prytanios keeps one key on his person; the patrolling cataphracts have a key, and a third key hangs in the kitchen, for use by the servant when bringing food. The door could be forced (opposed STR roll against STR 90) or the lock picked with a **Repair/Devise** roll.

Beyond is a stone room lit by an oil lamp; within are four pits, each 8 feet in diameter and 20 feet deep from which noxious odors of human excrement waft. Against a wall lies a wooden ladder long enough to reach the bottom of a pit; there are also several ropes with buckets attached to one end, used to lower food down into and excrement up from the pits. At the far end of the room another staircase descends into darkness.

Lukhon, a mad, bedraggled old astrologer has been kept in a pit for the last year. With no one to listen to him, he's eager for conversation, and anyone who attempts to question him must put up with tangential discussions of esoteric astrological topics mixed into his answers.

Lukhon explains that he was the satrap's astrologer for 6 years, until his predictions and calculations began to portend dire things for the Vahevuni. The sparapet became increasingly irritated with the outcomes of Lukhon's horoscopes; despite the fact that he was merely relating what the stars forecast, the prince tired of these tidings and in frustration after his mother's death, had Lukhon imprisoned.



In addition to knowing any of the rumors and lore known to the villa servants, he also can relate the following items:

- Prytanios tortures prisoners in the room below. Lukhon hears awful chanting during these sessions. Sometimes after these sessions, Prytanios calls down to Lukhon, "Your time will come, old man."
- If told about the story of the fiery hag seen by the stableboy, Lukhon connects this to the legend of the Al Basti, which he can describe.
- He knows that Prytanios derives his power from Nergal, a dark god.
- He believes that Sohaemus' seizures are caused by the activities of demonic influences, which are heightened during certain phases of the moon.

He asks what the date is. He mumbles to himself as he calculates in his head; "ante diem III ides Martius (13th of March)? What year did you say it was? 883 years since the founding of Rome? Ah, nearly a full moon! Just a few days from now...so I thought...Vahevunis was born with moon ascendant...the full moon is never a good time for his family. You know, they say he is descended from the Dragon Reaper...these Armenians have a ceremony to Vahagn on that date...in Martius, the moon is in the 5th sphere and the second quadrant on that date...A full moon in that sphere brings foul, disastrous tidings for the Vahevuni!" with that he trails off into a mad, rambling discourse on astrology.

LUKHON OF KHIOS, AGE 65, GREEK ASTROLOGER

STR 25 CON 25 SIZ 50 DEX 35 INT 80 POW 70 APP 35 EDU 110 SAN 5

HP 6 Build: -1 Move: 5

Skills: Astrology 75%, Insight 25%, Empire 60%, Persuade 35%, Other Language (Latin) 65%, Own Language (Greek) 85%, Other Kingdoms: Parthia 35%, Other Kingdoms: Armenia 45%, Occult 30%

The Chamber Below

Near the lower chamber, characters smell the iron tang of blood. Against one wall of the roughly-hewn chamber is a small statue. In the center of the room is a rectangular stone plinth, an iron manacle bolted to each corner. This stone table is stained with blood; carved into the floor leading from it are channels. Blood has run down these channels, pooled around the statue's feet, and dried; numerous layers of dried blood tell the tale of many sacrifices made here.

The two foot tall statue is made of a dull, black stone and depicts a centaur-like beast-man hybeid, dressed in the Assyrian style, one arm raised above his head, holding an olive-sized stoney object. This stone can be removed from the statue's hand. It is an agglomeration of black iron shards and red gemstone fragments, fused together. A successful **Occult** or **Other Kingdom: Assyria** roll reveals that the statue depicts Nergal, an ancient Babylonia and Assyrian god of the underworld and pestilence, sometimes known as "the raging king" or "the furious one." With a **Natural World** roll an investigator can tell that the rocky object in the statue's hand is meteoric in origin.



An investigator searching the room and making a **Spot Hidden** roll, or specifically looking behind the statue, finds two lead *tabula defixiones* behind the statue. These curse tablets, rolled sheets of lead inscribed by and pierced with bronze nails, have the following curses inscribed upon them in Greek:

"Great and awful Nergal, I beseech you to strike down the son of my so-called master Vahevunis, to nail his limbs to his body, make his breath come in gasps, force his muscles to spasm. May he bite his tongue off and choke on it. May his pain and suffering languish over many moons, so that his parents know the true extent of his suffering."

"Terrible and mighty Nergal, your servant calls upon you to bring pain and misery to the family of Vahevunis, his crops to molder, his horses to lame, his allies abandon him, his wife spurn his advances, his genitals shrink and wither, his cataphracts turn against him. In your name Nergal I call upon you to visit terrible miseries upon him."

These have been planted here by Phaedymia/the Al Basti as part of her plot to frame Prytanios.



An unrolled tabula defixiones

Commotion in the Stable

On the morning of the second day, while the characters are breaking their fast with the sparapet and his family, one of the servants bursts into the room exclaiming that horses are missing from the stables. Andragoras, the prince's nephew, will head to the stable, and if the investigators accompany him, they find stable boys and cataphracts are standing near a horse which is laying in the middle of the stable, breathing heavily and sweating. The few remaining horses in the stable are spooked, whinnying and shying away from any who approach.

A stable boy explains that this morning four horses were found missing, and this fifth one was laying on the ground, and kicks at anyone who approaches it. The head groom is in the process of whipping one of the stable boys, who is held by one of the cataphracts, demanding to know what happened. The stable boys, who sleep in the loft above, initially swear that they saw nothing, and that the horses were all safe and sound when they went to sleep. The cataphracts mutter about demons and curses; one muses that the distressed horse will have to be put down. If a player examines any of the horses closely, have him make a regular **Animal Handling** or difficult **Ride** roll; if he fails, it kicks at him, requiring a **Dodge** roll to avoid. A failure delivers 1D6 damage.

Investigation of the stable and questioning the stablehands reveals the following items:

- The horse on the ground has no external wounds. With a successful **Animal Handling** or **Ride** roll, the investigator realizes it is exhausted and lame, as if it was ridden exceptionally hard all night.
- The lame horse's hooves are unusually worn and bear traces
 of reddish mud. The floor around the horse has globs of
 dried red mud smeared on it. If asked about this, servants
 or cataphracts indicate that the hills to the north of town
 have reddish soil, but the cataphracts don't usually patrol
 there, and haven't been there in some time.
- A Spot Hidden roll notices a pile of horse dung imprinted with a vaguely human-shaped footprint with unnaturally long toes, ending in sharp talons.
- The guards on patrol last night noticed nothing unusual around the stable (the Al Basti used Cloud Memory on them).

If the stable boys are questioned, they insist that they heard nothing and saw nothing out of the ordinary. However, it's clear to the investigators that one of the younger boys is nervous and hiding something (no **Insight** roll required). He'll refuse to change his story unless he is questioned out of earshot of the prince's men and the other grooms, or threatened with a beating. If the investigators question him later, he relates that a flickering flame from below the loft woke him. He peered over the edge and saw a withered female form, clad in torn red rags, her hair writhing, snakelike. She lept up on a horse and rode off, leading four other horses with her. The demon gave off a fiery light, and its leering mouth was filled with sharp teeth; its hands and feet ended in claws like nails. He claims it was just a dream, but it's clear that he believes what he saw. He doesn't want to say this in front of the others lest he be beaten for not raising the alarm. He mutters "Al Basti" and "demon spirit," clutching at a symbol of Vahagn around his neck.

The Al Basti, reverting to her true form, left the body of Phaedymia in the night, and used her magical abilities to distract and pacify the guards, but did not realize that the grooms were asleep in the loft. She took five horses into the countryside to the Vishap-glade. There, she used magic to free the dragon-men from their slumber within the vishap-stones, to await the ritual on the night of the full moon. She returned to the villa on the now-lame horse, which collapsed once it reached the stable. The other four horses remain with the dragon-men.

Visiting Town

At some point the investigators are likely to venture into Ashtishat. Most buildings in town are built of wood; while well-kept, they are not impressive to citizens of Rome. As the town is small, any trip to town leads through the town square where four criminals are chained to stone pillars. They have been whipped and are dying of dehydration, moaning in pain and begging for water. While there are no guards nearby, these unfortunates are shunned by the townsfolk, and any aid to them will be frowned upon by those nearby.

Three of the criminals are adult men, but one is a 14 year old boy. If asked, a nearby shopkeeper explains that they were all sentenced to death by starvation for various petty offenses - theft, vandalism, etc. For example, the boy was caught stealing a loaf of bread. If Andragoras or other cataphracts are present, and are asked about this, it's clear that they feel little sympathy for the condemned, and believe that Vahevunis has not only the right to mete out such punishment, but the responsibility to do so, in order to maintain law and order.

Temple of Vahagn

This stone edifice is older and more ornate than other buildings in town. The front portico is held up by stone pillars; within, the interior walls are covered with depictions of the Armenian gods. Stunningly painted marble statues, surrounded by lit candles, stand in alcoves. The priest and acolytes live in small quarters at the rear of the temple.



extatan | Pixa

If the characters arrive at night, a lone acolyte dozes on a stool, monitoring the atrium, and asks them to return in the morning. During the day, three acolytes and a half-dozen commoners are in the temple, praying or performing temple rituals.

If the investigators visit during the day, as they arrive on the front steps of the temple, four mounted Vishaps (dragon-men) charge down the main street into the temple courtyard, attacking anyone there. The Vishaps bear swords and spears, and initially attack from horseback. While the rest attack, one of the Vishaps dismounts and runs inside the temple, knocking down a statue of Vahagn as he does so. He is focused on finding and killing acolytes and the priest Phraates. If the players don't stop him, he rushes to the back of the temple, attacks Phraates, and then returns to his horse; all four dragon-men gallop off toward the hills north of town. Any cataphracts with the investigators will report back to the villa immediately, leaving the characters to their own devices.

If allowed to flee the town, the Vishaps can be tracked to the glade, but the sparapet's stolen warhorses are too fast for the investigators to catch, even mounted. The dragon-men disappear into the hills until the evening of the lunar ceremony and cannot be tracked to their hiding places as their tracks disappear in the rocky terrain outside of the glade. Characters making a Spot Hidden roll during the attack notice Vahevunis' brand on the horses and also recognize the prince's sigil on the horse's tack.

AVERAGE VISHAP, DRAGON-MAN

STR 80 CON 85 SIZ 95 DEX 50 INT 60

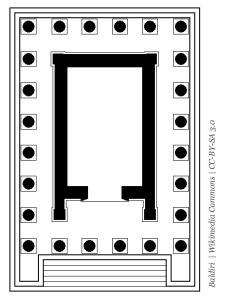
POW 50 HP 18 Build: 2

Move: 8 (12 mounted) Armor: Thick Hide (1D4) Damage Bonus: +1D6

Brawl 50% (25/10), damage 1D8+Venom (below) Fighting: Spear 55% (27/11), damage 1D8+DB Fighting: Sword 50% (25/10), damage 1D6+1+DB Sanity Loss: 1/1D6 Sanity points to see a Vishap

Skills: Dodge 50%, Intimidate 50%, Ride 30%, Spot Hidden 55%

Vishaps are heavily muscled, 7' tall half-man/half-beast. They have a long snout ending in a mouth filled with sharp teeth. Their grayish skin is hardened and calloused, making them appear reptilian, although warm blood flows through their veins. They have long flowing hair and are able to ride horses and swing swords like men. They communicate with unintelligible barking chirps. Their saliva is poisonous; if they succeed with a bite attack, the victim must make an opposed CON roll against the venom (CON vs POT 60) or suffer an extra 1d6 points of poison damage; failing the roll, the victim suffers 1 extra point of poison damage.



Temple of Vahagn, Ashtishat

Villagers and acolytes will scatter during the attack, and the Keeper should make separate SAN rolls for each group of NPCs (one for worshippers, one for acolytes, one for cataphracts). If cataphracts are not with the players, one or more villagers will go up to Vahevunis' villa to summon a patrol of cataphracts in response; it will take half an hour before such a patrol will arrive.

If Phraates, the priest, survives the attack, he is grateful to the investigators for any help they have rendered, and can impart the following information:

- No one in living memory has seen a Vishap until now. They
 are the ancient enemies of Vahagn Vishapakagh (Vahagn the
 Dragon Reaper), who this temple is dedicated to. The Vishaps
 are the children of Spandaramet, the goddess of the
 underworld.
- The population of Ashtishat believes that Vahevunis' family is descended from Vahagn, an early Armenian king (530 BCE).
- The head of the Vahevuni family is traditionally given the title
 of sparapet, the leader of the Armenian army, as reward for
 their ancestor's role in defeating the dragon-men.
- Phraates is preparing for an important ceremony dedicated to Vahagn depending on when this encounter happens, and based on the timeline the Keeper should determine the specific number of days until the full moon. The rite takes place in an ancient glade north of the town when the moon is completely full, to celebrate the victory of the gods Vahagn, Anahit, and Astghik over the Vishaps. The tales say that when Vahagn slew the Vishaps, they turned to stone. The populace believes that the stone pillars that still stand in the glade today are the corpses of these ancient Vishaps.

PHRAATES, AGE 35, PRIEST OF VAHAGN

STR 45 CON 35 SIZ 60 DEX 35 INT 75 POW 75 SAN 50 HP 10 Build: 0 Move: 7

Damage Bonus: o

Brawl 35% (17/7), damage 1D3+DB

Fighting: Knife 25% (12/5), damage 1D4+DB

Skills: Dodge 15%, Insight 45%, Empire 25%, Persuade 35%, Other Language (Latin) 55%, Other Language (Greek) 25%, Own Kingdom (Armenia) 65%

Phraates is devout in his worship of the Armenian gods. He has great respect for Vahevunis as a descendant of his god, but is frustrated at the cruelty of the sparapet and his cataphracts. If there is something he can do to prevent the suffering of his flock, he will do it.

Locating the Midwife

If the characters investigate Phaedymia's miscarriage, asking about the midwife who attended her, other household servants indicate that Phaedymia dismissed the old woman from her service, but her niece, Musa, works in the villa's laundry, and may be able to tell them more. Musa can direct them to her aunt Nisa, who lives in a hovel on the outskirts of Ashtishat, and practices her craft for the poorest of the townsfolk.

Nisa witnessed the possession of Phaedymia by the Al Basti, seeing the demon in her true form during the birth. This event drove her insane and induced minor amnesia. She does not remember seeing the Al Basti but recalls an evil presence during the birth. As a result of this, she is paranoid and fears that local children are at risk of being corrupted by demons, particularly during full moons. Once they locate her, Nisa can tell the investigators the following:

- She felt an evil presence enter the chamber during the birth.
- The child was stillborn; he appeared to have been born without brain or heart. This could trigger an **Idea** roll for the investigators if they've also talked to Musa about the death of Lusine, who was also missing heart and brain.
- Nisa suspects that the child was the victim of an Al Basti, whose legend she will explain (see Armenian Folklore sidebar).

Nisa knows a variant of the *Create Bulla* spell; she has created a number of *bullae* - small leather amulets that protect children from evil spirits. As long as a child 13 years of age or under wears the bulla, he cannot be possessed by spirits (specifically, the Al Basti) and is protected from the moon-disease (the Al Basti's curse) as well. The amulet has no effect when worn by someone older than this. Nisa will not come up with the idea herself, but is easily convinced to part with a bulla if the investigators suggest giving one to Sohaemus.

If the characters later offer the bulla to Phaedymia to give to Sohaemus, the Al Basti sweetly thanks them, but subtly refuses to handle the amulet, asking one of her servants to take it. An **Insight** roll during this interaction allows the successful investigator to notice that she is very uncomfortable about it; if asked about this, she lies (make an opposed **Insight** roll to detect) that she is distrustful of folk remedies "from that wretched midwife and her common hedge magic."

Visiting the Glade

The glade of the Vishapakar (dragon-stones) lies in rocky reddish-brown hills a mile north of Ashtishat. Outside town, local farmers direct the characters to a well-worn, red dirt path that leads to the glade. The glade itself is a grassy meadow 50 yards across, surrounded by scrub-covered hills which rise up into the nearby mountains.

In the center of the glade is a plain altar of stone; around the edge of the meadow are four *Vishapakar*: centuries-old stone menhirs, 8 feet tall, with the forms of *Vishaps* (dragon-men) carved into them. The altar and stones are very old and weathered, and cannot be moved without great effort.

Eight additional indentations in the ground once clearly contained Vishapakar in the past; now they contain only a few shattered stone fragments. None of the indentations contain enough stone fragments to make up a single menhir.



A Vishapakar

A number of clues can be found here:

- Anyone who looks will find hoofprints are evident in the
 dirt path leading from town to the glade (without a roll).
 Additionally, a successful Track roll near the road
 indicates two sets of hoofprints that were made within the
 last several days. One goes toward the town and the second
 go into the hills, but the latter fade out as they enter the
 hills and cannot be tracked any further in that direction.
- A Spot Hidden or Track roll while investigating around the altar or stones locates trampled grass leading into the glade from the dirt path, and from the central altar to each menhir. Someone paced around the central altar, and then walked to each stone, pacing around it.
- Any player investigating around the edge of the glade locates in the grass a woolen doll of a cataphract, much like the one that Phaedymia was sewing earlier. This doll is wrapped in a crimson, silk scarf. Those examining it may make a **Idea** roll; on a success, the doll reminds the investigator specifically of Andragoras, due to its blond hair. This was used by the Red Mother to cast the *Numantina* spell on Andragoras. Whether the **Idea** roll is passed or not, an investigator may make an **Occult** roll to determine that this is a component to ritual magic. If the scarf is shown to one of Phaedymia's handmaidens, they recognize it as work of their mistress.

The Death of Narseh

At some point on the morning of Day 3, one of the investigators should stumble across the corpse of the young slave-boy Narseh, while walking through the window-lined halls of the villa. His face is contorted in agony, his tunic ripped open, and a massive, razor-sharp gash runs across his abdomen, with a large volume of blood spilled across the marble floor. Depending on the abruptness of the discovery, the Keeper could call for a SAN check (O/1D2 Sanity loss). Further examination of the body reveals strangle-marks on his neck, and that his liver has been cut out. He's been dead since the wee hours of the morning.

Characters with **Occult** skill can make a check; on a success, the removal of the liver seems similar to other rituals; with a hard success, they know of spells purported to cause insanity that require a human liver as a material component.

Once alerted to this event, Vahevunis orders his cataphracts to search the grounds for evidence of the perpetrator. They won't find anything - no bloody implement, no tracks outside the window, no sign of the missing liver. Vahevunis is greatly agitated by this, concerned that there is a murderer in his household, and links this to the murder of his mother. He orders vigilance on the part of the cataphracts.

The Al Basti cut out the boy's liver to use in her Numantina spell; his death is meant to cause distress to Vahevunis' young son. At some point, in the presence of the characters, Phaedymia should make a point of mentioning to Sohaemus the death of his playmate, at which he bursts into tears, while she comforts him.

Further Questioning of Phaedymia

Investigators may wish to question Phaedymia about a number of topics:

- Her whereabouts at various times (when the horses were stolen, when Narseh was killed, etc.): while perturbed at being questioned in this way, she indicates that she spends the evenings in her chamber. If questioned, her guards (who she has charmed with her supernatural abilities) maintain that she never leaves her chamber at night unless it is to go to the chamber of Vahevunis (who sleeps in a separate room).
- **Her miscarriage**: she refuse to discuss the event, claiming the memory is too painful.
- Regarding the midwife: she only says that the old woman
 was dismissed from her service, as she had become demented
 with age and was no longer trustworthy. If probed further on
 this, she says that the old woman dabbled in superstitious
 hedge magic, and she wanted nothing further to do with her.
- The woolen doll found at the glade: If the similarity to the doll she was making is pointed out, she comments that it's a common pattern, and could be found in any household in town.

Death of Sohaemus

If the investigators have been able to secretly get Sohaemus to wear the bulla without his mother's knowledge, he will not suffer any further seizures from the moon disease. Otherwise, during the evening meal on the Day 3, Sohaemus has another seizure, choking on his tongue; notably, Prytanios is not present when this occurs. This time, the boy stops breathing, and despite any efforts to save him, he dies. Placing the bulla around his neck in the midst of the seizure is the only way to stop the seizure and prevent his death; if the characters force it around his neck, Phaedymia laughs off the explanation that the amulet is responsible for saving him, but won't touch it. Later she has a slave remove it from him. However, the presence of the bulla prevents him from having further seizures this month.

If Sohaemus dies, Vahevunis rages at the gods, while the Al Basti/Phaedymia does a terrific job of acting wracked by grief. Only an extreme Insight roll detects that her tears are forced. Between sobs, she beats on her husband's chest, accusing him of not being able to protect their son, and relying on "superstitious wizardry" to save him. While he glares at her in return, he gets himself under control, orders the servants to remove his son's corpse to their private chapel, and prepare for a funeral. Phraates (if he lives) is summoned to the villa to prepare for a funeral, instead of the scheduled lunar ceremony in the glade on Day 4. If the players saved the boy, the family begins preparations for the lunar ceremony.

Convincing Prytanios to Help

If the investigators present sufficient evidence to Prytanios that Phaedymia is responsible for the afflictions of the Vahevuni, they may convince him to help them against the Al Basti. The keeper should require him to demand some concrete proof, as well as a successful **Persuade** roll, in order to convince the wizard to help them. Give the players a bonus to this roll for each item of evidence that they provide:

- If they connect the doll found in the vishap-glade to the slave boy's missing liver, he recognizes these as key components of the *Numantina* spell - used to turn its target insane. If Andragoras has gone insane, the value of this evidence rises.
- If they identify the scarf that the doll was wrapped in as Phaedymia's.
- If they show him the tabulae defixiones found in the dungeon, he realizes that someone is planting false evidence against him.
- If they tell him the legend of the Al Basti, and connect the missing heart and brain of both Nisa and the stillborn son of Phaedymia to the legend.
- If the investigators have stolen the *Identify Spirit* powder and used it on Phaedymia, he is furious that they have invaded his laboratory, and goes to Vahevunis in a rage, demanding that they be punished. In this case, he is unlikely to assist them.

If they persuade him that Phaedymia is possessed, he is willing to give them a dose of the Identify Spirit powder. If they ask him how to win Vahevunis over to their cause, he suggests that they use the dust in the presence of the prince, else the Satrap will never believe that something is amiss with her.

If the characters suggest to him that Phaedymia plans to do something on the night of the lunar rite, Prytanios realizes that he could gain a great deal of power from Nergal if he can enlist the investigators. If they can use the Seed of Nergal spell to drain the Al Basti of her magic, this would greatly amplify his own power. If they ask for his help, he recruits them to help cast the spell during the day, before the family arrives at the glade and the moon rises. He will ask them to donate the majority of the POW required to generate the spell's effects (so that it doesn't all come from him).

Spell: Seed of Nergal

This spell weakens agents of the Great Old Ones and Outer Gods in a 30 yard radius from the star-seed. For every 10 points of POW sacrificed in casting the spell, it drains 1 point of POW from such alien beings for each round they remain in the circle. If a target reaches 0 POW while in the area of effect, the target is banished from the Earth for 10 years. The POW drained from the target is funneled into the caster, who gains the POW permanently. Anyone may voluntarily contribute POW points to the casting.

To power the spell, a star-seed of Nergal (a specially prepared conglomeration of meteoritic iron and ruby) must be placed at the center of the circle and then bathed in the blood of an innocent (one without Cthulhu Mythos knowledge) before the moon rises. Those participating must call upon Nergal, chanting his name for 3 minutes. At the end of this time, a shadowy vision of Nergal appears and drains the donated POW from each participant. If this brings that person's POW to 0, he falls into a coma.

Seeing the apparition of Nergal results in a SAN check with a loss of 1/1D6 sanity. The spell's effect begins when the moon rises into the sky, and lasts until the moon sets. Anyone who participates in this ritual has a faintly visible, permanent $Mark\ of\ Nergal\ on\ his\ forehead.$

SWAYING VAHEVUNIS

If approached without any concrete evidence implicating either Prytanios or Phaedymia in the terrible events, the sparapet dismisses these accusations. His adviser has been a trusted servant for many years. As for his wife - why would his wife cause her own miscarriage, or harm her mother-in-law and her son?

Turning the Prince against Phaedymia

In order to convince Vahevunis that Phaedymia is involved in the terrible events, they must provide explicit proof of her involvement to turn him against her.

- Vahevunis recognizes the red scarf that was tied around the doll as belonging to his wife. If the investigators present evidence that the doll, the death of Narseh, and the insanity of Andragoras are related, this adds credence to their accusation. This alone is not sufficient to convince him that she is behind any of this.
- If the investigators sprinkled the Identify Spirit powder on Phaedymia and the prince sees the results with his own eyes, he may suspect that she is under the influence of supernatural forces, particularly if Prytanios confirms this.

If the investigators manage to instill some doubt in him, his superstitious mind immediately leaps to suspicion of Prytanios; with the proper convincing, he is far more prone to believe that the sorcerer is involved in cursing her than in believing some other external force is behind the family's woes.

If the investigators take violent action against Phaedymia without her husband's consent, things will go badly for them, unless they are able to cause the Al Basti to flee her body. If the characters attack her or fail to cause the Al Basti to reveal herself in the presence of Vahevunis, the sparapet calls for his cataphract guards to seize the characters. If they are not killed resisting, they are thrown into the dungeon pits, to be used by Prytanios as future sacrifices to Nergal. If this happens, see the section "If the Investigators are Imprisoned." If the characters resist, the full complement of cataphract guards present (initially 6 of them; 2 more will arrive each round thereafter until all 12 have arrived) will attempt to neutralize the characters and capture them. If necessary they will attack to kill but will try to capture the investigators alive.

Turning the Prince against Prytanios

If they try to convince Vahevunis to turn against Prytanios before his son Sohaemus dies, the investigators need only present the *tabulae defixiones* to him. Circumstantial evidence, such as descriptions from the wizard's diary, rumors from the soldiers and slaves, indirect inferences and connections - none of these things are sufficient to convince Vahevunis of his adviser's involvement. Vahevunis knows of and condones the wizard's experimentations with dark magic, and the entries from his diary are not surprising to the satrap.

Once Sohaemus dies however, it becomes much easier to turn Vahevunis against his sorcerer. The characters simply need to make a successful **Persuade** roll, while presenting a viable explanation of how Prytanios might be involved in the mysterious events, in order to set Vahevunis' already-superstitious mind against the wizard. If they present the curse tablets at this time, it seals the deal without needing a **Persuade** roll at all.

CONFRONTING PRYTANIOS

If the investigators convince him that the wizard is at fault, Vahevunis immediately orders his men to apprehend the wizard; a violent confrontation results as the wizard resists. In the first combat round, Prytanios casts **Cloak of Fire** on himself. This causes the cataphracts to hesitate to attack him, giving the wizard another round to take action. If the investigators do not get involved in the combat, the results can be narrated by the Keeper (rather than playing the NPC-only combat out round-by-round). If the characters get involved in the combat, play the fight out as normal.

The cataphracts will attempt to kill the wizard; if they do so, a larger-than-life, dark shadow takes shape over his dying body. This vision of Nergal has arrived to fulfill the dark pact the sorcerer made long ago, claiming his soul in exchange for magical power. This malevolent spectre appears to relish the downfall of the wizard, appearing to get pleasure out of his misfortune.

The shadowy form coalesces, swirling around the wizard's body; blood that has fallen to the floor during the combat is sucked up into this phantasm as the life drains out of Prytanios. The shadow becomes more substantial the more blood it ingests. His face contorted in agony, the wizard whispers out "Nergal..." as his eyes bulge from his face, and he slumps over, finally dead. Not a drop of blood is to be seen. Witnessing this scene leads to a Sanity check, 1/1D6 loss.

Anyone so foolish as to touch or strike at the avatar of Nergal while it is present causes a tendril of shadowy mist to shoot out from the cloud, automatically hitting its victim; this tendril saps blood from the target and causes the loss of 1D6 STR. If it is not harassed, it quickly dissipates.

CONFRONTING PHAEDYMIA

If the characters attempt to use distraction to throw the *Identify Spirit* powder on Phaedymia without her noticing, have her make a **Spot Hidden** roll. If she fails, she doesn't notice them throwing it. When the powder falls on her, a life-sized half-visible image of the Al Basti appears to viewers, overlaid on top of Phaedymia - a flickering image of a hunched crone, her hair writhing as if it were snakes, her fingers ending in needle-like claws and jaw filled with razor-sharp teeth. Characters witnessing this spectral image take half the normal Sanity loss of seeing the Al Basti (round up) - 1/1D4 sanity points. If they later see the true form of the Al Basti, they will only lose half as much Sanity. The image vanishes after one round.

If she notices them sprinkling the powder on them, she reacts by demanding to know what the meaning of this insult is, and orders her cataphract guards to escort the investigators out of her chamber. As they leave, she shouts after them "I'll be sure that my husband tells your Roman masters about this insult!" In this event, Vahevunis takes a very dim view of the investigators thereafter, warning them against further damaging the relationship between Armenia and Rome.

If the characters use the powder on her in the presence of Vahevunis, how he reacts depends on how much evidence they have provided to him against her and what they have told him. If he has no reason to suspect she is behind any of the events, he may well accuse them of casting some evil magic to produce this horrid vision. If he already has his doubts, his reaction may be more muted. See the section on Presenting Evidence to Vahevunis for more.

If the investigators insist on physically threatening Phaedymia in the presence of her guards, she calls for them to detain the characters. If a fight breaks out her two cataphract guards do not hesitate to protect her. If necessary, she uses her **Enthrall** or **Dominate** abilities; as a last resort, she leaves Phaedymia's body, becomes corporeal and flees the room. If she does this, she will return, incorporeal, later that night, and take possession of Phaedymia when she is alone in her chamber.

EVENTS OF DAY 3

A Targeted Sickness

The morning of the full moon, if Sohaemus died, a gloom hangs over the household; Vahevunis begins the morning meal with the sacrifice of a goat in an attempt to appease the gods. On the other hand, if the characters saved Sohaemus, the family is in a good mood, excited about the lunar festival that evening.

Either way, the investigators wake to hear that a sickness has run through the cataphract barracks, rendering nearly all of them unable to perform their duties, confined to their bunks with a powerful gastrointestinal disturbance. Only Andragoras, nephew of Vahevunis, seems to have avoided it. Any treatments provided by the investigators only slightly mitigate the symptoms, but the men are out of commission for the next several days.

Vahevunis suspects food poisoning, although questioning the kitchen slaves turns up no one who has motive to do such a thing. Investigation of the remains of their breakfast meal likewise turns up nothing; several of the slaves were fed leftovers from the same bowls and were not sick.

Their illness was actually caused by the Al Basti's magic, and the investigators have a magical means of determining that the soldiers are under some kind of spell, there is little they can do beyond add the event to the pile of clues. Observant investigators may connect some of Prytanios' spells used against the sparapet'

Preparing for the Funeral

If Sohaemus died, the grieving household busies themselves with preparations for the funeral; in the Armenian custom, they make numerous animal sacrifices. Phraates is called in to prepare the body; in the custom of the region, the body will be brought to the glade, and after the ceremony it will be left, exposed to the elements and scavengers, until the bones are picked clean. The bones will then be interred in the family crypt behind the villa.

The Treason of Andragoras

During their meal with the family, investigators making a successful **Insight** roll notice that Andragoras seems agitated, perturbed that his meal is cold; a moment later, when a servant spills wine on his sleeve, he strikes out violently.

Suddenly, Andragoras casts his plate of food across the room, eyes burning with madness as the *Numantina* spell takes hold of his mind. He pulls out his sword and leaps across the table to attack Vahevunis, dealing a slicing blow to the arm of his uncle. In a psychotic rage he continues to attack; Phaedymia screams "Kill him! Kill him! He's insane!" If the players intervene, they will likely overwhelm him with numbers; if they do not, Vahevunis will be wounded but will eventually knock his nephew unconscious.

If the investigators intervene in some way and manage to disable or capture Andragoras, his psychotic mind retreats within itself, and he is reduced to mumbling unintelligible phrases. Vahevunis orders him confined to a secure chamber. If he dies, the body of Andragoras will also be prepared for funeral. Vahevunis is shaken by these events and more willing than ever to have the investigators help discover the cause of his misfortune.

Burcanius Fails to Arrive

As the day progresses, it becomes clear that Legate Fidius Burcanius is late. There is no sign of him in the town and travelers from surrounding villages have no word of a Roman delegation. As it turns out, Burcanius will arrive late in the evening of the day AFTER the festival, but there is no way for the investigators to find this out in advance.



The Lunar Ceremony

The evening of the lunar rite, before the moon rises, a large retinue travels to the glade: any remaining members of the Vahevuni family, Prytanios, four cataphract guards, and a dozen servants travel to the glade. All are dressed in their finest, with Phaedymia in particular resplendent in an intricately-beaded red dress. If either Sohaemus or Andragoras are dead, the somber procession bears the corpse(s) on a bier; otherwise, a festival atmosphere accompanies them.

At the glade await Phraates and other important townsfolk who arrive shortly before the sparapet and his family. The rite begins as the moon rises and involves lengthy prayers to Vahagn led by Phraates (or another priest from the temple), pouring of libations and chanting, and culminates with the sacrifice of an ox.

The Al Basti waits until the climax of the ceremony, when the ox is sacrificed; Phaedymia rushes the altar as the hot blood gushes forth from the stricken beast, covering herself in it. The Al Basti then leaves Phaedymia's body, and the princess collapses, comatose. The air shimmers as the Al Basti transitions from her incorporeal to her monstrous form. In the next round the hag leaps upon the altar, her body and tattered red rags drenched in ox blood, and is revealed in the light of the full moon: the Red Mother at her most terrible. Characters make Sanity checks as they see her true form (1D4/1D8 Sanity loss).

Make a Sanity check for the four cataphracts to see if they are rendered ineffective or flee. A number of townsfolk are also likely to fail their Sanity checks. The remaining NPCs (including Vahevunis and Prytanios, if the latter is present) should suffer a shock but maintain their sanity. The Al Basti lets out a horrible wail, calling in the four Vishaps who hide in the nearby hills. They rush down to attack, triggering another round of sanity checks when those present see the dragon-men.

Knowing that he is the most dangerous of her opponents, the Al Basti's first objective is to kill or disable Prytanios. She will then try to incapacitate and capture Vahevunis, in order to deliver him to the leader of the Alan tribe to the north, completing her retribution on him and his family. If necessary, she will use her Dominate, Mesmerize, and Enthrall abilities on cataphracts and players to attack Prytanios, and incapacitate Vahevunis by using Mindblast or some other spell on him. Vahevunis, Prytanios, and any sane cataphracts defend themselves to the best of their ability. The Vishaps attack anything that gets in their way, including characters and townsfolk.

If the Al Basti captures Vahevunis, she shouts "The balance of blood has been paid!", and runs off into the night bearing his body, leaving the Vishaps to continue their own vengeance against anyone remaining in the glade. If all of her targets are dead or have left the glade, the Vishaps disappear into the hills, following the Al Basti into the night.

If the investigators have cast the *Eye of Nergal* ritual, the Keeper must track how much POW is drained from the Al Basti - when she reaches o POW, she is banished, disappearing from the earth. As she feels her POW draining away, she desperately tries to accomplish her goals, knowing that her time is limited, and not realizing that the area of the effect is limited unless she chases Prytanios or Vahevunis out of the glade.

If Prytanios is killed, a dark shadow takes form over the dying wizard as Nergal claims his soul. See the section on A Confrontation with Prytanios earlier in the scenario for details of this apparition.

AL BASTI, THE RED MOTHER, AVATAR OF NYARLATHOTEP, IN HER TRUE FORM

STR 110 CON 125 SIZ 55 DEX 95 INT 100 POW 250

HP 35 Build: o Move: 12 (14 mounted) Damage Bonus: +1D6

Attacks: 3 attacks each round: Claw, Bite, Entangle; or cast 1

spell

Claw 85% (45/17), damage 2D6+DB (automatic success if target is entangled by her hair)

Bite 65% (32/13), damage 3D4

Hair Entangle 40%, grapple if successful

Armor: 1D3 from tough hide

Special: At the start of her turn, 1D6 hit points of Regeneration

each round

Skills: Dodge 40%, Spot Hidden 55%

Spells: Cause Blindness, Cloud Memory, Numantina, Dominate,

Enthrall Victim, Deflect Harm, Mesmerize, Mind Blast

Sanity Loss: 1D4/1D8 Sanity points to see the Red Mother's true form.

In her true form, the Al Basti moves with superhuman quickness and makes multiple attacks each round - once each with claws, bite, and hair. Her snake-like hair may reach out and attempt to entangle a victim who is within ten feet. If she entangles, on the next round her claws and bite can automatically hit. Entangled victims are immobilized and must make an opposed STR check (as if grappled) to get free; she can continue to attack other targets while one is grappled by her long, prehensile hair.

OUTCOMES

If the Investigators Succeed

If the characters banish or slay the Al Basti, Phaedymia slowly recovers from her stupor over the next several days. She remembers little of the last year, but lives the rest of her life a husk of her former self, plagued by nightmares of the things done to her and by her while possessed.

If Vahevunis is still alive, and the investigators have assisted in freeing his wife or protecting his family, he will be very grateful to them and to Rome. Likewise, when Fidius Burcanius arrives several days later and Vahevunis praises them for their assistance, their career prospects take a turn for the better.

If the Investigators are Imprisoned

If the characters were captured and imprisoned by the sparpet's men for any reason, the Red Mother's plot successfully unfolds without their interference; she kidnaps the prince and slays his adviser and family during the lunar rite. Investigators will be deposited in different pits within the dungeon if possible, although they may communicate over the walls of the pits.

The night of the festival, the investigators, trapped in the dungeon, are startled awake by the Al Basti in her true form; she drops the severed head of Prytanios into one of the pits, where it lands land at the feet of the characters. She cackles demonically, claiming "The balance of blood has been paid!" and then leaves, never to be seen again. A sanity check for seeing the Al Basti as well as the head is appropriate, 1/1D8 for the Al Basti and 1/1D2 for the head.

If the investigators are trapped in the pits, they are rescued after several miserable, thirsty days when Fidius Burcanius and his entourage arrive. After a debriefing, Burcanius sends them back to Rome, but their career outlook is dim.

If Vahevunis Dies or is Captured

If the characters survive the ceremony but Vahevunis was killed or captured, they can return to the villa and await the arrival of Fidius Burcanius. With Vahevunis gone, a political crisis unfolds over the next several weeks as various Parthian factions seek control over the region - Vologases sends an agent to the region who quickly takes control of the area, and is hostile to Rome. The investigators may have difficulty explaining their involvement to Burcanius if no other witnesses were left alive. Things become difficult for Rome in the region, as the power struggle plays out between the Alans, the rebellious Armenian princes, and King Vologases, none of whom are as amenable towards Roman involvement in Armenia as Vahevunis was.

SANITY AWARDS

- Preventing the Al Basti from killing or capturing Vahevunis:
 +1D3 Sanity Points
- Banishing the Al Basti in her natural form: +1D4 Sanity Points
- Slaying the Al Basti in her natural form: +1D2 Sanity Points
- Preventing the death of Sohaemus: +1D3 Sanity Points
- Slaying Phaedymia while she is possessed by the Al Basti: -1D4 Sanity Points
- Slaying one or more Vishaps: +1 Sanity Point

APPENDIX A: NPCS

A VERAGE CATAPHRACT

STR 80 CON 70 SIZ 75 DEX 60 INT 55

POW 50 SAN 65 HP 16 Build: 1

Move: 7 (11 mounted)
Damage Bonus: +1D4

Brawl 65% (32/13), damage 1D3+DB

Fighting: Kontos (lance) 60% (30/12), damage 1D10+1 Fighting: Spatha (sword) 65% (32/13), damage 1D8+DB Ranged Weapons: Cavalry Bow 50% (25/10), damage 1D8

Armor: Chainmail and helmet (1D8 + 1D2 armor)

Skills: Dodge 45%, First Aid 30%, Intimidate 25%, Other Language (Latin) 15%, Ride 60%, Spot Hidden 40%, Status 60%



PRINCE VAHEVUNIS, AGE 46, SATRAP OF ASHTISHAT

STR 55 CON 65 SIZ 75 DEX 70 INT 55

POW 55 APP 80 EDU 60 SAN 50

HP 15 Build: 1 Move: 6

Damage Bonus: +1D4

Brawl 65% (32/13), damage 1D3+DB

Fighting: Kontos (lance) 60% (30/12), damage 1D10+1

Fighting: Spatha (sword) 65% (32/13), damage 1D8+DB

Ranged Weapons: Cavalry Bow 50% (25/10), damage 1D8

Armor: None while in his house, otherwise Chainmail and

helmet (1D8 + 1D2 armor) when out in the field

Skills: Insight 45%, Spot Hidden 40%, Empire 40%, Persuade 55%, Status 85%, Other Language (Latin) 60%, Dodge 40%, Ride 70%

PHAEDYMIA, AGE 26, POSSESSED BY AL BASTI

STR 45 CON 75 SIZ 45 DEX 90 INT 80

POW 100 APP 90 EDU 60

HP 30 MP 50 Build: 0 Move: 7

Damage Bonus: o

Brawl 25% (12/5), damage 1D3

Fighting: Dagger 75% (37/15), damage 1D4

Spells: Cause Blindness, Cloud Memory, Numantina, Dominate, Enthrall Victim, Deflect Harm, Implant Fear, Mesmerize, Mind

Blast

Skills: Insight 85%, Spot Hidden 55%, Empire 25%, Persuade 65%, Status 75%, Other Language (Latin) 60%, Other Language

(Greek) 65%, Dodge 40%

PRYTANIOS, AGE 172, ANCIENT WIZARD

STR 30 CON 55 SIZ 50 DEX 40 INT 90

POW 125 APP 60 SAN 35

MP 25 HP 11 Build: -1 Move: 5

Damage Bonus: -1 Brawl 25%, 1D3-1

Fighting (Dagger) 50%, 1D4-1

Spells: Blight Crop, Cloak of Fire, Contact Nergal, Evil Eye,

Implant Fear, Nightmare, Steal Life, Stop Heart,

 $Summon/Bind\ Hunting\ Horror,\ Eye\ of\ Nergal,\ all\ spells\ listed$

in the Apotropaioi Theoi

Skills: Insight 35%, Spot Hidden 30%, Empire 40%, Persuade 40%, Status 40%, Other Language (Latin) 80%, Other Language (Greek) 92%, Occult 60%, Cthulhu Mythos 35%, Dodge 20%

LUKHON OF KHIOS, AGE 65, GREEK ASTROLOGER

STR 25 CON 25 SIZ 50 DEX 35 INT 80

POW 70 APP 35 EDU 110 SAN 5

HP 6 Build: -1 Move: 5

Skills: Astrology 75%, Insight 25%, Empire 60%, Persuade 35%, Other Language (Latin) 65%, Own Language (Greek) 85%, Other Kingdoms: Parthia 35%, Other Kingdoms: Armenia 45%,

Occult 30

AVERAGE VISHAP, DRAGON-MAN

STR 80 CON 85 SIZ 95 DEX 50 INT 60

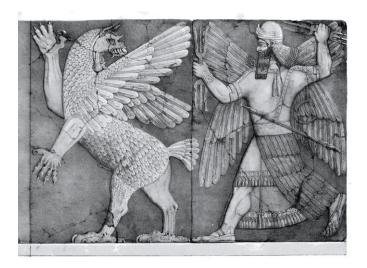
POW 50 HP 18 Build: 2

Move: 8 (12 mounted) Armor: Thick Hide (1D4) Damage Bonus: +1D6

Brawl 50% (25/10), damage 1D8+Venom (below) Fighting: Spear 55% (27/11), damage 1D8+DB Fighting: Sword 50% (25/10), damage 1D6+1+DB Sanity Loss: 1/1D6 Sanity points to see a Vishap

Sanity Loss: 1/1D6 Sanity points to see a Visnap

Skills: Dodge 50%, Intimidate 50%, Ride 30%, Spot Hidden 55%



PHRAATES, AGE 35, PRIEST OF VAHAGN

STR 45 CON 35 SIZ 60 DEX 35 INT 75 POW 75 SAN 50 HP 10 Build: 0 Move: 7

Damage Bonus: o

Brawl 35% (17/7), damage 1D3+DB

Fighting: Knife 25% (12/5), damage 1D4+DB

Skills: Dodge 15%, Insight 45%, Empire 25%, Persuade 35%, Other Language (Latin) 55%, Other Language (Greek) 25%, Own Kingdom (Armenia) 65%



AL BASTI, IN HER TRUE FORM

STR 110 CON 125 SIZ 55 DEX 95 INT 100 POW 250

HP 35 Build: 0 Move: 12 (14 mounted) Damage Bonus: +1D6

Attacks: 3 attacks each round: Claw, Bite, Entangle; or cast 1 $\,$

spell

Claw 85% (45/17), damage 2D6+DB (automatic success if target is entangled by her hair)

Bite 65% (32/13), damage 3D4

Hair Entangle 40%, grapple if successful

Armor: 1D3 from tough hide

Special: At the start of her turn, 1D6 hit points of Regeneration

each round

Skills: Dodge 40%, Spot Hidden 55%

Spells: Cause Blindness, Cloud Memory, Numantina, Dominate,

Enthrall Victim, Deflect Harm, Mesmerize, Mind Blast

APPENDIX B: HANDOUTS

Pregenerated Character Backgrounds

Print out and give to the players, along with the appropriate pre-generated character sheet. Most characters can be either male or female; the female version of the Latin name is shown in parentheses.

- Aulus Cassius (Cassia) Ravilla, Age 28, Sub-Legate
- Scriptor (Scribula), Age 32, Slave, Scribe
- Nestorius (Nestoria) Dio, Age 55, Priest(ess)
- Cinna (Cinnia) Parthicus, Age 38, Translator
- Caeso Fufius Sura, Age 24, Centurion
- Sigemund, Age 20, Centurion

Pregame Briefing

If you choose not to roleplay the introductory scenario (or even if you do), you may wish to hand out this pregame briefing to the players, to remind them of the goals of their expedition.



AULUS CASSIUS (CASSIA) RAVILLA, AGE 28, SUB-LEGATE

Nationality/Social Class

Roman/Equites (upper classes)

Occupation

Minor Bureaucrat

Equipment

- Key to the chest of coins
- Small knife
- Gold amulet of Concordia
- 100 sesterces

Background

Third son/daughter of a well-off equestrian family, you had no taste for business, but found yourself good at working with people in an official role. Rules and regulations are your friends, and you know how to work around them when they get in your way, or make them work for you when they are useful.

Goals/Drives

Where your fellow bureaucrats see only the danger of failure and disappointing the Emperor, you see the opportunity to prove yourself invaluable to Rome. This philosophy has fueled your rise through the ranks of public office. Even that position is only a temporary stop on the way to greater things. Perhaps one day you can be a Legate or Prefect!

Personality Notes/Quirks/Prejudices

You deeply believe that Rome and the Roman rule of law and way of life are superior to other cultures, but you're wise enough to know that throwing that in the face of other peoples is not a way to make progress/win friends/influence people. You would never patronize another culture for its idiosyncracies, but instead would try to show them how the Roman way is actually better and adopting Roman culture and laws would make their lives better.

Additional Notes

Your boss, Fidius Burcanius, the Imperial Legate, has been ordered by Hadrian to meet with the Sparapet of western Armenia and form an alliance. You have been sent ahead of Burcanius in order to measure the lay of the land and present the Sparapet with both a gift and a message. The rich gift of coins you bring with you bear the Latin imprint "Armenia and Mesopotamia reduced to servitude" and show an image of Emperor Trajan standing atop figures representing Armenia.

Important Lares (House Gods)

- Concordia, goddess of agreement and understanding
- Messor, god of agriculture and mowing (your family owns large hay farms)

SCRIPTOR (SCRIBULA), AGE 32, SLAVE, SCRIBE

Nationality/Social Class

Non-Roman Italian/Servi (slaves)

Occupation

Scribe

Equipment

- Wax writing tablet & stylus
- The imperial seal of Legate Burcanius & sealing wax

Background

Born to slaves in the region of *Veneti* (modern day Venice), your parents were both slaves in a wealthy local farmer's house. You showed prowess with reading and writing, and were educated alongside the farmer's children, and eventually began to serve as the farmer's secretary. When you were in your mid-20s, lean times led the farmer to sell you off to a slave trader who brought you to Rome, and sold you there to Fidius Burcanius, an agent of the Senate. You've worked for him, performing duties of the imperial court ever since. While the other investigators may "order you around," your ultimate loyalty is the Burcanius, and the Roman Senatenot to any of the other PCs.

Goals/Drives

Your parents were slaves before you, and probably your grandparents before them. While getting your freedom (manumission) is not unheard of in Rome, you grew up with a slave mindset. It's almost beyond your comprehension that you might be free if you do a good job. Yet, you have a mind of your own and you have an inkling that if you do a really good job, you might be freed.

Personality Notes/Quirks/Prejudices

As a slave, you can decide either to love and adore, or hate your master (your choice).

Important Lares (House Gods)

• Minerva, goddess of Wisdom

NESTORIUS (NESTORIA) DIO, AGE 55, PRIEST(ESS)

Nationality/Social Class

Roman/Plebian (lower classes)

Occupation

Priest(ess)

Equipment

- Religious implements (portable shrine)
- Small knife
- 30 sesterces

Background

For many decades you have been a minor priest of Jupiter (or Priestess of Minerva if the character is female). In the past few years your temple has become called upon by the Emperor to serve Imperial delegations to other provinces and regions at the edge of the Empire. It has been your duty to assist the local priests of the Roman gods in the proper worship and rites, and to bring instruction on religion from Rome. Not to convert the locals, but to insure that any locals who *are* worshipping the Roman gods are doing it correctly.

Goals/Drives

It's part of your job to make sure those who are newly under the arms of the Roman gods are serving them properly and with all due respect. You take this very seriously. If they are not worshipping correctly, the gods will be very upset with them.

Personality Notes/Quirks/Prejudices

Non-roman religions are simply misguided attempts by humans to understand the universe. While they should be brought under the sway of the Roman gods, that is not your job. You don't belittle them for their misunderstanding, but simply believe that they one day will be enlightened when Rome takes this area under protection.

Important Lares (House Gods)

- In addition to Jupiter/Minerva, you personally hold dear Luna, the goddess of the moon, as she was the favored goddess of your mother.
- Your family has also long respected Pales, god of shepherds and flocks.

CINNA (CINNIA) PARTHICUS, AGE 38, TRANSLATOR

Nationality/Social Class

Parthia/Liberti (freed slaves)

Occupation

Translator

Equipment

- Soft Leather armor
- Small knife
- 5 sesterces

Background

As a child you were captured and enslaved by the Romans during one of the Parthian campaigns. You were not abused by your captors and your facility with languages allowed you to quickly learn Latin. You quickly became useful to the army officer who owned you, as a translator for him and his officers while on campaign in Parthia. Eventually you were freed and entrusted to the service of the Emperor's house. While freed, you still owe service to the Emperor, and have been attached to various political delegations to Parthia and now, Armenia.

Goals/Drives

Your religion states that active participation in life through good deeds is necessary to ensure happiness and to keep chaos at bay. While you don't feel that Rome is a force for good, it does bring order to the world. Perhaps good can come of the Roman empire. Ultimately you would like to be free from Roman influence and return to Parthia and your family, if you can find them, but the time is not right.

Personality Notes/Quirks/Prejudices

Deep down, you still harbor discontent with the Romans who took you from your family and probably killed some of them. But you have made peace with this and leave it under the surface. There are good Romans and bad Romans and you strive to work with and promote the good ones and advance the cause of Ahura Mazda.

Important Lares (House Gods)

• You practice Zoroastrianism in private. You leave the Roman gods to the Romans, and keep your own worship as private as you can. Zoroastrians believe that there is one universal, transcendent, supreme god, Ahura Mazda, or the "Wise Lord".

CAESO FUFIUS SURA, AGE 24, CENTURION

Nationality/Social Class

Arabia Magna/Plebians (lower classes)

Occupation

Soldier

Equipment

- Leather Scale Armor
- Shield
- Gladius
- Pilum (small spear)
- The chest of coins to be presented to Prince Vahevunis
- 20 sesterces of your own

Background

You joined the legions at the earliest possible age to make a better life for yourself. That seems like a lifetime ago. You are now a hardened veteran, stationed in Germania for almost 6 years. For the last year you've been attached to the legate Fidius Burcanius. You've seen it all - victory, defeat, pain, suffering. Nothing surprises you anymore. You try not to make friends anymore. You've begun counting the days til you retire; you know that's bad luck, but who cares?

Goals/Drives

Make it to retirement, and save enough money to buy a farm, get yourself a wife, and raise a family.

Personality Notes/Quirks/Prejudices

You detest the German barbarians after having served there for 6 years. The food disgusts you, they are filthy, and their women are ugly. You distrust Sigemund, as he is Germanic in origin, even though he embraces Rome; you harbor suspicions that he is not really loyal to Rome. You've heard that the Armenians are as filthy and disgusting as the Germans.

Additional Notes

Upon returning to Rome from Germania, the Legio XXX Ulpia Victrix was disbanded. Many of your brothers were sent to other legions. Your cohort was attached to the Emperor Hadrian to serve as bodyguards to various Imperial Legates who travel to distant locations around the Empire. You and Sigemund (one of the other pregenerated characters, also a Centurion) were detached from the remainder of your cohort to accompany Sub-Legate Cassius Ravilla on a scouting mission. The Legate is your commanding officer. While you are attached to the Sub-Legate (another investigator), you will consider his requests but your orders came from Legate Burcanius.

Important Lares (House Gods)

- Felicitas, goddess of Success, whom you have called upon frequently in your career and attribute with your successful rise through the ranks.
- Sors, god of Luck, who you believe is on your side due to your frequent sacrifices to him.

SIGEMUND, AGE 20, CENTURION

Nationality/Social Class

Germania/Peregrini (foreigners)

Occupation

Soldier

Equipment

- Leather Scale Armor
- Small Shield
- Hand axe
- Bow & arrows
- 10 sesterces

Background

As a boy you lived near a Roman base in Germania. You managed to be friend a number of legionnaires and impressed the Roman prefect so much that you were hired as a guide and tracker. Eventually you became so successful that you were attached to the legion. When it returned to Rome you decided to give up your homeland for travel and adventure in the Roman army.

Goals/Drives

You have fully adopted the Roman lifestyle, and promote it as superior to all other cultures. You are happy to explain why Rome is superior and use yourself and your advancement as an example.

Personality Notes/Quirks/Prejudices

You have done your damnedest to become Romanized and you believe that Roman civilization is more advanced than any other civilization in the world.

Additional Notes

Upon returning to Rome from Germania, the Legio XXX Ulpia Victrix was disbanded. Many of your brothers were sent to other legions. Your cohort was attached to the Emperor Hadrian to serve as bodyguards to various Imperial Legates who travel to distant locations around the Empire. You and Fufius Sura (one of the other pregenerated characters, also a Centurion) were detached from the remainder of your cohort to accompany Sub-Legate Cassius Ravilla on a scouting mission. The Legate is your commanding officer. While you are attached to the Sub-Legate (another investigator), you will consider his requests but your orders came from Legate Burcanius.

Important Lares (House Gods)

• You have given up your native Germanic gods and adopted the Roman pantheon. You pledge yourself to Virtus, the god of military prowess, courage and valor.

PREGAME BRIEFING



"EXITUS ACTA PROBAT (THE END JUSTIFIES THE MEANS)" - OVID

In the year 134 CE, Legate Fidius Burcanius, representative of the Senate and the Emperor Hadrian, commands you to proceed to Ashitshat, the home of Vahevunis, prince of Armenia and commander of its armies, in order to:

- Announce the imminent arrival of the Legate, who wishes to bring greetings from Emperor Hadrian. Burcanius plans to arrive on the Ides of Martius, several days after the investigators, during the local festival of the full moon, an important date in the Armenian religion.
- Deliver a gesture of friendship (and a subtle threat) from Rome to Vahevunis. The padlocked, ironbound chest the players bring with them contains 10,000 sestertius coins. This gift was very deliberately chosen the specific coins were minted in 116 CE after Emperor Trajan's conquest of Armenia, and bear the inscription ARMENIA ET MESOPOTAMIA IN POTESTATEM P.R. REDACTÆ ("Armenia and Mesopotamia reduced to servitude") with the image of the Emperor standing over figures representing Armenia and Mesopotamia. Burcanius makes it clear that this is a message to Vahevunis: side with Rome, and you will be well-rewarded. Go against Rome, and you will be defeated.
- Gain intelligence about Vahevunis' attitude toward Rome, his relationship with King Vologases III
 of Parthia, and the local political situation. Find out who the commander's enemies are, and if there
 are elements of the population who do not support him. Discover his weaknesses and strengths.
- Under no circumstances are they to damage the relationship between Rome and Vahevunis, who
 courts favor with Rome. Other local political powers, who are unfriendly to Rome, would be more
 than happy to step into the power vacuum should Vahevunis fall from prominence in the region.



