

The Moon Trees

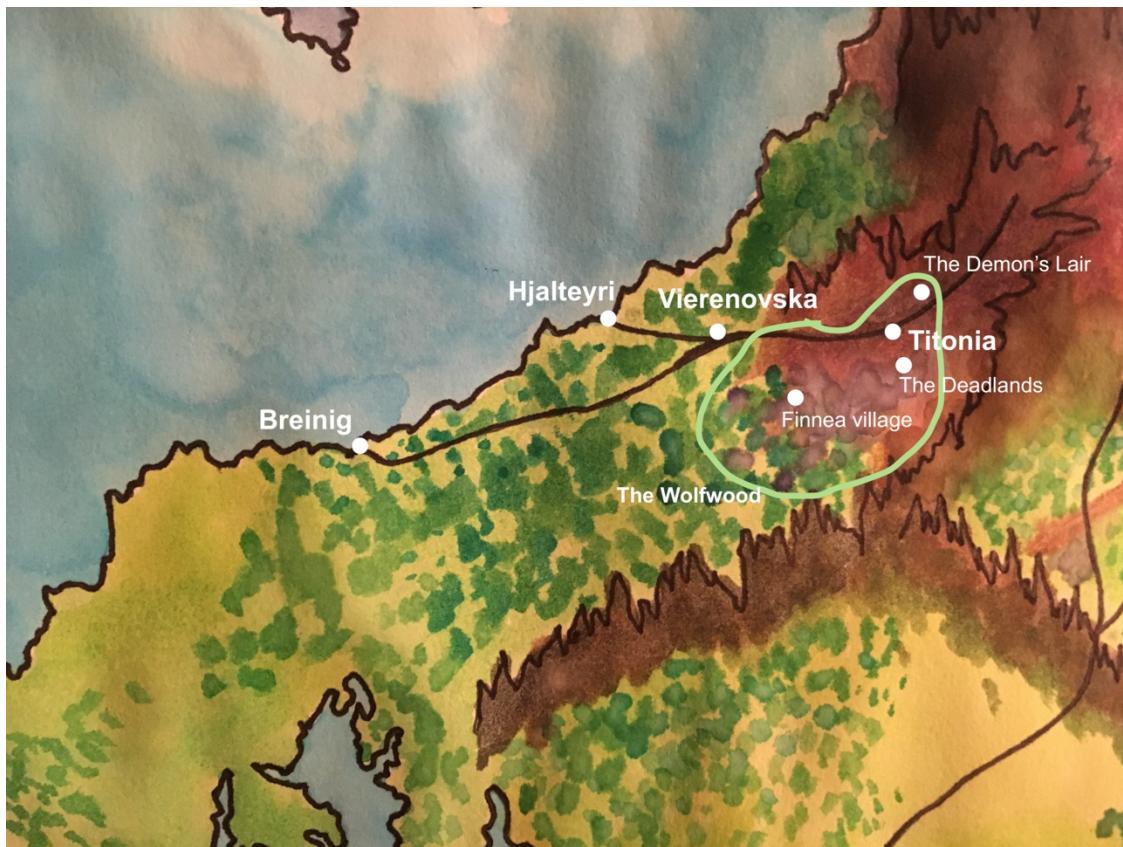
A regional campaign setting, history, and story outline for a multi-session D&D adventure

By Jamie Molaro, copyright 2019

www.datarcana.com, Twitter: @spacejammie

Regional History

This region of the world is dominated by four major cities, and a vast forest called the Wolfwood. Breinig is a gnome city to the south, modeled to be German in flavor. The city is industrious, known for its alchemy and medicines, and for production of craft goods (e.g., furniture). Hjalteyri is to the East, modeled as a Scandinavian city. It is best known for its renowned bard school and its specialized school of Faysayer magic (like a druid, but for fay creatures). It does not play a role in this story. Titonia is to the West, a halfling city deep in the swamp, and is kind of the Ewok city on Endor, nestled in the forest and built into the trees. Titonia's economy is based on gathering and growing spices, herbs, medicinal plants, fruit, and mosses in the bog, and its husbandry of giant bees, dragonflies, toads, and other creatures they use as riding and pack beasts. In the center is Vierenovska, a human city called the City of Churches. It is an extremely religious city whose economy is based primarily on farming. It is socially conservative in nature and ruled jointly by a Prime Minister and the Exalted Bishop of the Church of Heironorous (though many deities are worshipped there). Between Vierenovska and Titonia lies a vast forest called the Wolfwood. Here live the Wolvega, a race of werewolves and minority humanoids who are persecuted by the human presence in the region. They are described in detail below.



The central conflict in the background of this adventure focuses around the historical war between Vierenovska and the Wolvega that occurred about 40 years ago. The humans of Vierenovska had never gotten along with the Wolvega, believing the werewolf to be the spawn of evil and diseased. They themselves were devout and religious, and it was their righteous duty to rid the land of these evil creatures. The Exalted Bishop of Vierenovska called upon an order of clerics called the *kukol'nik*, or *puppeteers*. The *kukol'nik* believed that Hextor (god of war, discord, and tyranny) and his so-called half-brother Heironorous were one in the same, and practiced necromancy believing that our bodies could still serve a divine purpose after death. The Exalted Bishop declared it a waste to send precious living soldiers into battle, and so they raised an army of the undead and sent them into the Wolfwood. The Wolvega were fewer in number but skilled in guerilla fighting. Still, they would not have survived if Titonia had not stood with them. Many from Brienig also joined the war, which is how our NPCs Freischütz and CK get involved in the current story. The war was narrowly won, but the persecution and occasionally hunting and raiding of the Wolvega did not end. In recent years, younger members of the Wolvega (those who weren't alive during the war) are calling on the Elders to fight back and be more aggressive in protecting the pack. The Elders strive to maintain peace with the neighboring cities, trying not to make the pack a target for another war.

The Wolvega

The werewolves in my world are called the Wolvega. They aren't monsters, rather they're a minority race of humanoids persecuted by the dominant human presence in the region. They developed a strong connection with the moon in their early evolution. Their lore goes that the moon's magic is beamed down upon the planet along with the moonlight. This is then taken up by the Moon Trees, sacred trees that spread the magic out throughout the forest through their roots. It is said that on rare occasions (such as eclipses, when no moonlight is present), the trees are unable to pull the magic from the air and it hangs in the woods like a mist. They have an ancient spell (a song, a lullaby really) which they sang to their children that distilled the moonlight out of the air and drew it into their children's bodies. This is what gave them their Wolf's Blood, their ability to transform, and their magical connection to the world's two moons. One of the moons controls how easy it is for the Wolvega to transform into their wolf shape. They can transform at will, but their power is strongest (and transformation easiest) when the moon is full. Wolvega that are younger or have less control over their powers may voluntarily be locked up during full moons, but most adults can control when they want to transform. The other moon controls the Wolvega's alignment. The idea is that they are net-neutral creatures, connected intimately with nature. They are not truly good or evil, but wax and wane between the two. They have their own rule of law, but also think about this differently than the humans do. Their customs and traditions are also foreign, and the clerics of the nearby city believe them unnatural.

They are werewolves, but not all have the ability to transform. Those that do are called Fangs. Those that do not are called Claws (sometimes named for other body parts depending on their skills, e.g., nose, eyes). They look human (or whatever racial parentage they have) and are carriers of the Wolf Blood (which the clerics call a disease) and can transmit it to others via bodily fluids. Claws make up the majority of the clan and fall into every role of the village except for warrior. They *can* and do fight, but it is not their primary role. The Fangs are *made* to fight. Claws can have

relationships with humans and take a special herb to prevent transmission of the Wolf Blood to others. This protects their lovers, except when the Moon is full or near during which time the herb cannot prevent transmission. Fangs will always transmit to humans (still via fluids) and relationships with humans are forbidden unless the human has explicitly chosen to take the life of a Wolvega. It is typically not done, but there are cases throughout any pack's history. These members are welcomed into the pack.

Occasionally a new member is brought to the pack who has not chosen, but was bitten by accident by a Wolvega who could not control their powers. Newly bitten members can always transform (they are called Teeth) but have less control over themselves during full moons. Since the second moon affects their alignment, this makes them dangerous while in a transformed state. Teeth must be locked up during full moon for the safety of the pack and the pack's relationship with surrounding cities unless they have proven mastery over their Wolf Blood. There is a great hall (the Healing Hall) in the village where they can wait out the full moon in comfort, where ancient magic rituals prevent them from transforming. Natural born Wolvega have more control over themselves, and typically don't have to be locked up. Even when their alignment changes, they still have rule of law and know it will shift back- they live with this, the good and the evil, the human and the wolf- it is all a part of who they are. The chaos of nature.

They have lived in the Wolfwood for centuries, and their powers are intimately entwined with it. They can choose to leave, but this forest is where they are strongest and most connected to both the earth and the moon. Moon Trees rarely produce seeds during their long lives, but when it has happened some Wolvega have chosen to take the seed and split off to form other packs in distant parts of the world where a new Wolfwood might grow.



Here is a chart showing the Wolvega's transformation cycles. It was an embroidery art project, you can download the image and read more about it here:
<https://dataarcanacom.wordpress.com/portfolio/3-moon-wolf/>

The Adventure

In this story, a demon portal has opened over the Wolfwood, transforming one of their sacred Moon Trees into a Night Twist. Its evil power trapped the wood in perpetual night, with an ominous double full moon hanging in the sky. The goal of the party is ultimately to travel to the portal and defeat the demon. *The existence of the demon portal is related to the broader story arc in my campaign, so you'll have to contrive some reason for them to either know about it, or to be traveling to the region for another purpose. The party also must have in their possession a cursed chalice that can talk (see NPC histories below), which can easily be given as loot. The chalice will tell them its name *Der Blutschädel* (The Blood Skull), but otherwise (it claims) it has no memory of how it came to be or what it is.*



The double full moon is the time at which the Wolvega's power is strongest, and with the perpetual night over the wood, some of the younger Wolvega Fangs decide to take the fate of the pack into their own hands. Tired of persecution by Vierenovska, they lock the Elders in the Healing Hall (see below) and take control of the village. With the majority of the fighters in the pack on their side, the rest of the pack acquiesces to their rule- not everyone agrees, but there are complex pack dynamics at play PCs wouldn't understand that prevent the rest of the town from rising up against the Young Fangs. So the Wolvega are in the middle of a pack civil war, of sorts, when the payers reach the region. The Wolvega have declared all trade to Vierenovska through and near the Wolfwood shall stop. This is obviously difficult economically on surrounding towns and on Titonia, so when smugglers try to get goods through anyways the Young Fangs start taking them as captives and holding them in the village. This is surprising and alarming to the greater region, who have existed peacefully with the Wolvega for decades. Even those sympathetic to the pack are still subject to subconscious racial prejudices, and it does not take much to stoke their fear of the werefolk.

The party must travel through the Wolfwood to reach the demon portal. They learn news of what is happening with the Wolvega along the road. They begin in Breignig, where they are prompted to seek out a guide who may get them through the wood safely. Any gathering of information will point them to Freischütz, a man known to be an expert on the Wolvega and the Wolfwood. He will be resistant to helping them at first, but upon discovering the party has *Der Blutschädel* he will agree. He has an ulterior motive for helping, as he fears the chalice may be responsible for the Wolvega's alarming behavior- no one outside the pack knows of their civil unrest, all they know is that the pack's actions suggest they have turned from friend to foe and he worries they are under an evil influence. He is quiet and reserved, and only reveals his history with the chalice slowly over time. Though the party may tell him that the false moon and perpetual night are the work of a demon, he will not believe it.

Shortly after the party enters into the wood, they learn that the demon's influence over the wood is causing the sacred Moon Trees to die, threatening the existence and way of life of the Wolvega people. The forest can only be saved by gathering seeds from the moon trees, one of which has been taken over by the demon, and planting them anew. So, in the process of finding and defeating the demon, the party visits each of the five moon trees to retrieve their seeds. The demon's influence over the forest and draining of the moon trees' magic power has also drained their seeds. The party must use a special spell to distill the Moon's magic from the air and dip the seeds into it, imbuing them once more with power. The defeat of the demon ends the perpetual night and double full moon that gives the Young Fang's their ability to stay transformed permanently. Now weakened, they lose control of the village and the civil unrest comes to an end. After the adventure, the Wolvega Elders will replant the Moon seeds to grow into the new Moon Trees that will protect the forest, and end the trade ban and violence against neighboring cities.

Central NPCs

The central NPCs in this adventure are Freischütz (originally a German folkloric figure, name meaning “free shooter”) and Crypt Kicker (or CK). CK is trapped inside of a cursed chalice called Der Blutschädel (The Blood Skull) that the players must obtain before the story begins. He will not reveal his true name until after the party meets Freischütz. The two mean have a long history together, their stories are told below:

When Freischütz was a young man, his name was Lampert and he had a 10 year old son. His wife had passed away due to an illness after the child was born, so he raised the boy alone. This was back around 40 years ago before Breinig was very prosperous. There had been drought in the region for a few years in a row, and times were hard. Lampert decided to try his hand as a merchant, traveling between Breinig, Vierinovska, Titonia, and Hjalteyri selling mundane goods. One day, they were ambushed on the road by bandits. The bandit leader demanded that he hand over everything he had. He begged her to take the goods, but leave the small amount of coin he had saved up in order to send his son to school. She took one look at the boy and slew him in cold blood right there, telling Lampert that he now no longer needed the coin. She left him there holding his bleeding son.

Lampert vowed he would seek revenge. So great was his despair that it summoned a vengeance demon, keen to take advantage of the mortal's anguish. He made a deal with the demon- he was given 7 magic silver arrows which would always hit their mark and always kill. Six of these were free shots, subservient to his will. However, the seventh arrow belonged to the demon to kill whomever it chose. Because he was young and angry and impulsive, he agreed to these terms and so he became Der Freischütz. He hunted down the bandits, waiting until the leader was vulnerable and away from the group. He didn't hesitate a moment to kill her, she never even knew he was there. But in the end, he left their village with the sound of the bandit's grieving husband and daughter in his ears. He felt nothing. He felt disgust, perhaps. He certainly didn't feel better about the loss of his son, and he regretted his decision but could not take it back. After that, he promised himself he would never use the rest of the magic arrows.

With nothing left to live for, Freischütz took up life as a mercenary. He specialized in hunting the undead, which grew increasingly more common in the region as time went on. The source of these creatures was an order of clerics in Vierenovska called the *kukol'nik*, or *puppeteers*. The *kukol'nik* believed that Hextor (god of war, discord, and tyranny) and his so-called half-brother Heironeous were one in the same, and practiced necromancy believing that our bodies could still serve a divine purpose after death. The humans of Vierenovska had never gotten along with the Wolvega, believing the werefolk to be the spawn of evil. They themselves were devout, and it was their righteous duty to rid the land of these evil creatures- and so began the War of Wolves. The Bishop of Vierenovska declared it a waste to send precious living soldiers into battle, and so they raised an army of the undead and sent them into the Wolfwood. The Wolvega were fewer in number but skilled in guerilla fighting. Still, they would not have survived if Titonia (nearby halfling city) had not stood with them. Many from Brienia (nearby gnome city) also joined the war, including Freischütz who was skilled at tracking and hunting undead creatures. It was during this time that Freischütz met a man named Crypt Kicker (CK) who was also an undead hunter. CK had come to aid the Wolvega because he himself was a werewolf- a Tooth, they called him, one was not born as werefolk but was bitten or cursed (to use the clerics' term). The two men became very close, and they found a community in each other and in the Wolvega. Both were welcomed to join the pack after the War of Wolves was narrowly won.

Once the fighting was over, they spent time helping clean up the Wolfwood, rebuild their villages, and burn the dead. One day, they came upon a cache of holy relics hidden by the Vierenovska army. Among these was an elaborate chalice with a skull carved into it. CK made a joke about it speaking to him, and it wasn't until many years later that Freischütz realized he'd been telling the truth. They fell into a quiet life with the Wolvega. CK fell in love and got married and was overjoyed at the birth of his daughter. Yet, as the years passed, he began acting strangely. He was suspicious of certain members of the pack and began picking fights with a Fang who had made advances upon his wife before they were married. Freischütz was worried about him, and when he overheard him talking with the chalice he understood. It had the markings of a minion of Cyric, god of strife, lies, madness, and illusion. It reminded him of the demon with whom he had made his fateful deal years before. In truth, the chalice was a magic device created by the demon to torture mortals. It was a vessel that contained a mortal soul, and this soul would be imprisoned until it captured another soul to replace itself. The chalice had the ability to show the bearer something true and something false but could not tell which was which. The trapped soul inside manipulated its victims, turning them towards vengeance and anger until their own soul was twisted enough to be captured. And so, the next soul would fester inside the chalice, waiting for a new victim and its chance for escape.

CK had drunk from the chalice, and it had shown him two visions. In the first, his wife was living happily married upon the arm of his rival, the Fang in their pack that had feelings for her. In the second, his wife was dying of an incurable illness. The chalice was manipulative and cunning, and set out to convince CK to prevent either fate from happening. He began to pick fights with his rival, but though he was jealous he did not truly believe that his wife would ever leave him. Convinced that she was to die from an illness, he began researching rare herbs and making trips to visit master alchemists. He obsessed over mixing medicines, begging his wife to test their effectiveness. Eventually, the chalice convinced him that the source of her illness was her Wolf Blood itself. Indeed, the Wolf Blood would be the end of all them. Even now, if he looked, he

could see the signs that everyone in the pack was going mad, was dying. Since no medicine could remove the Wolf Blood from their bodies, his only option was to remove the source of its power. So he decided to cut down the Moon Tree. The Wolvega were born in the Wolfwood, transformed by the wild magic of the Moon. It was the Moon Tree(s) that absorbed and spread out the Moon's magic through its roots and into forest, and without it, the forest and the Wolvega would surely wither. But CK set out to chop it down.

Freischütz was worried about his friend and watched him closely, setting out after him even though he was unsure of his plan. He followed CK all the way to the Tree, and when he realized his aim begged CK not do it. But CK would not listen, for he was blinded by his tormentor. He raised his axe and swung, and the sound of it lodging into dense bark was dull to the ear but crackling and sharp to the minds of the Wolvega. Suddenly, out of the woods sprang CK's daughter, 27 at the time. She tried to wrestle away the axe, but he swung full at her. Freischütz knew that it was not really CK committing this act, and he knew if any part of his friend remained that he would never be able to live with himself if he killed his own daughter. Without thinking and without missing a breath, Freischütz had notched and loosened a magic arrow which buried itself in his best friend's chest. In the moment of his death, CK looked upon Freischütz and saw the truth. He saw that his actions were mad, he saw that he had almost killed his daughter. He knew the power of the magic arrow, and he saw the pain that Freischütz bore at having to slay him. His soul, once twisted, was pure again. But even so, he was already being drawn into the chalice where he remains trapped. For his friend had redeemed him, and he had not the will to torment another's soul to set himself free.

It was not until you brought the chalice to Freischütz that he realized that CK's soul was true. In some ways, he was glad of this, but in others he knew CK's torture was now even greater than the demon had imagined. There is no spell upon this earth that Freischütz knows of that could free his friend from this fate. The chalice demands a soul for a soul.

Now, Freischutz and CK are both worried that the evil that has overtaken the Wolfwood was because he tried to chop down the Moon Tree. They are relieved to find this is false once the party defeats the demon, and so they redeem CK and reunite him with his daughter. The party has a special spell that can release CK's soul from the chalice, ending his torment (and his life), but it must be performed now or never. The DM can choose whether CK wishes to stay with his daughter and best friend in the Wolvega village, or die to avoid an eternity trapped in the chalice. *This spell is from a magic book that is part of my broader campaign- it can be given to the players in your campaign by someone in the Wolvega village or Titonia, found in the ruins of Zavod, or by some other means.*

Adventure Sessions and Resolution

The sessions in this adventure are described briefly below. They totaled twelve sessions for my party but could be stretched longer or truncated as desired.

- The party seeks out Freischuz in the city of Breinig to guide them safely through the Wolfwood.
- The party makes their way into the Wolfwood. They must cross a bridge guarded by Wolvega, and there encounter the first Moon Tree.
- Following the bridge encounter, the Wolvega are not on the party's trail. The PCs must flee through the woods and swamp as they are hunted. They stop at an old war outpost, findt he second Moon tree, and are taken captive by the Wolvega.
- The party is held hostage in the Wolvega village. The players do some NPC acting from scripts to learn of the civil unrest in the village and the imminent death of the Moon Trees. The party escapes with the help of Maeve, CK's daughter, who asks them to gather the remaining seeds.
- The party reaches the demon portal and enter an illusory tower dungeon full of magical darkness, life-draining tree roots, and hellcats. At the top of the tower they battle the Night Twist, and upon defeat the tree and landscape are returned to normal. Perpetual night is lifted. CK is redeemed and the party leaves him with Maeve or performs the spell to release his soul, DM's choice.
- The party travels to nearby Titonia to rest. The citizens are relieved the false night has lifted, but the city is plagued by undead from the surrounding swamp. The party is asked to travel to the Deadlands at Zavod (*factory*), an old outpost from the war where undead soldiers were created and the site of the final tree.
- The party travels to the Deadlands to find the factory had become activated by the demon's magic. They defeat the undead inside and gather the final moon seed they seek.
- The party returns to the Wolvega village to obtain the ceremonial bowl needed for the moonlight spell, and the final Moon seed in the possession of the leader of the Young Fangs. They can steal by stealth or confront the Young Fangs. They perform the spell, imbue the seeds with magic power, and save Wolfwood and the Wolvega.

The Moon magic spell used at the end of the adventure can be enhanced by giving real seeds to the players painted with thermochromic paint! See a description of what I did here: <https://dataarcanacom.wordpress.com/portfolio/moon-seeds/>