



COUNTY OF MERATT

There's something about the air here—I wouldn't call it invigorating, but it's peaceful and calming. Were I a less-traveled woman, I might think Meratt quite the paradise. The stuffy senators and grand dukes of Oppara are nowhere to be found here, politics seem practically nonexistent, and the sleepy hamlets are filled with kind folk, even if most still try to claim a connection to one of Taldor's great families. I see through it all, though. This county is lovely and pastoral, but its greatness is long gone. Taxes have reduced its nobles to a threadbare facsimile of extravagance, and if you look closely, its well-manicured estates are plagued with leaky roofs and peeling paint. It's nice to get out of the city. But if you're looking for the height of opulence at a slower pace, the county of Meratt isn't the place for you.

—Excerpt from the travel journal of
Countess Carlotta Plenst of Oppara

Nestled just south of the Verduran Forest, the county of Meratt sprawls across the Tandak Plains, which stretch northeast of Cassomir.

The land here is pastoral, with rolling hills and pockets of verdant forest. The World's Edge Mountains to the east occasionally rise into view, creating breathtaking vistas for travelers cresting the rising plains. Noble estates, hamlets and villages, and farmland of all sorts knit the countryside together like a familiar and comforting quilt.

Travel through the county might attract far more sightseeing Taldan nobles were it not for the area's pervasive pall of economic mediocrity. Meratt was once a shining jewel of peaceful, slow-paced luxury, but that was many centuries ago. Generations of greedy nobles' mismanagement has slowly bled the locals' pockets dry through bureaucracy, taxes, and tithes of locally produced resources sent to more voracious urban centers. As a result, when visitors examine the county closely, behind the beautiful scenery they find magnificent manors with drooping roofs, towns with broken cobblestones, canals with rickety pumps, and the farmers and herders wearing little more than darned rags.

GOVERNMENT

Many nobles have a legitimate claim to overseeing the county of Meratt, but the lion's share of its administration falls into the hands of the Lotheed family, even though the family's stewardship of lands not ancestrally their own is spotty. Regardless, Meratt is broken into four major baronies, each connected to one of the following families: Okerra, Stavian, Telus, or Voinum.

Taldor's ruling family has neither used nor put resources into its lands or estate here in many years. Instead, the Stavians have designated the Lotheeds as their administrators in Meratt. Additionally Baron Telus has been an extreme recluse for nearly a decade, and so the Lotheeds now nominally administer the Telus barony as well, though in practice Lotheed workers never even visit what is now a crumpling estate and the nearby ruins of the tiny settlement of Jambis. Baroness Voinum and Baron Okerra still live on and run their estates in much the same way as their ancestors before them, though the Lotheeds keep the county's taxes astronomically high to support their own unreasonably extravagant lifestyle. As a result, Baroness Voinum has retreated from the public eye. Baron Okerra maintains his family's truly successful fishing ventures, though he's sunk most of his earnings into supporting the local economy and its workers.

The rulers of Tandak Prefecture and Taldor at large pay little attention to the county of Meratt. A few nobles sometimes find it quaint to travel and visit here, though in truth most of them have relatives or other attachments to compel their trips. Certainly nobles who truly enjoy the county's atmosphere can pay good gold to stay in the

true lap of luxury at one of Meratt's few opulent, well-preserved estates, if they wish.

Higher-ranking governmental leaders occasionally impose upon the local fishers, horse breeders, olive growers, winemakers, and timber producers for shipments in support of some official claim or another. In most cases, the amount of supplies requested is small enough that the locals simply hand over the tributes to avoid spats. In others, though, the hard-working folk refuse to comply with demands they find burdensome and illegitimate. When this happens, the demanding nobles sometimes petition the Lotheeds for help collecting their bounty, hire less-than-scrupulous agents to retrieve it, or simply drop their entitled claims to avoid the effort of enforcing their demands.

CLIMATE

Geographically speaking, Meratt's location engenders a mild, inviting climate. The mountains to the east buffer the harsh tempests that roll through the region, and the sea to the far southwest moderates the seasonal temperature swings that affect regions farther inland. This temperate climate is ideal for farming a variety of crops, including grains, grapes, olives, and a variety of fruits. However, because of the overworked soil in many parts of this area of Taldor, such ventures are less fruitful in the county of Meratt than one might think.

In generations past, the county's wealthiest farmers paid druids to magically replenish the soil before each growing season. However, such ventures were costly, and as the county's economic fortunes waned, they became financially unviable. Now, Meratt's farms instead focus on livestock such as goats, horses, sheep, and occasionally chickens, all of which find the climate pleasant year-round if not always perfectly comfortable. Summers are warm, if a bit more humid than on the coast, and winters are more rainy than snowy, though a few recent winters have been harsher than the locals would consider normal. These early frosts, especially when the temperature drops to below freezing even for a single night, run the risk of damaging the grapes and olives that grow plentifully in this region.

GAZETTEER

Once, the county of Meratt was an elite holiday destination for high-ranking nobles who sought to escape the punishing rhythms of urban Taldan life. Estates were grand and well staffed, and a hum of activity belied prominent families' eyes toward improving their holdings and adding even more luxurious features. The towns and hamlets that grew around these elite estates had the most exquisite shops and the coziest taverns and restaurants, and farmers and artisans used the finest supplies—and even magic—to ensure that their crops and goods were of a quality to keep visiting

SONGBIRD,
SCION,
SABOTEUR

Foreword

Part 1:
Songbird

Part 2:
Scion

Part 3:
Saboteur

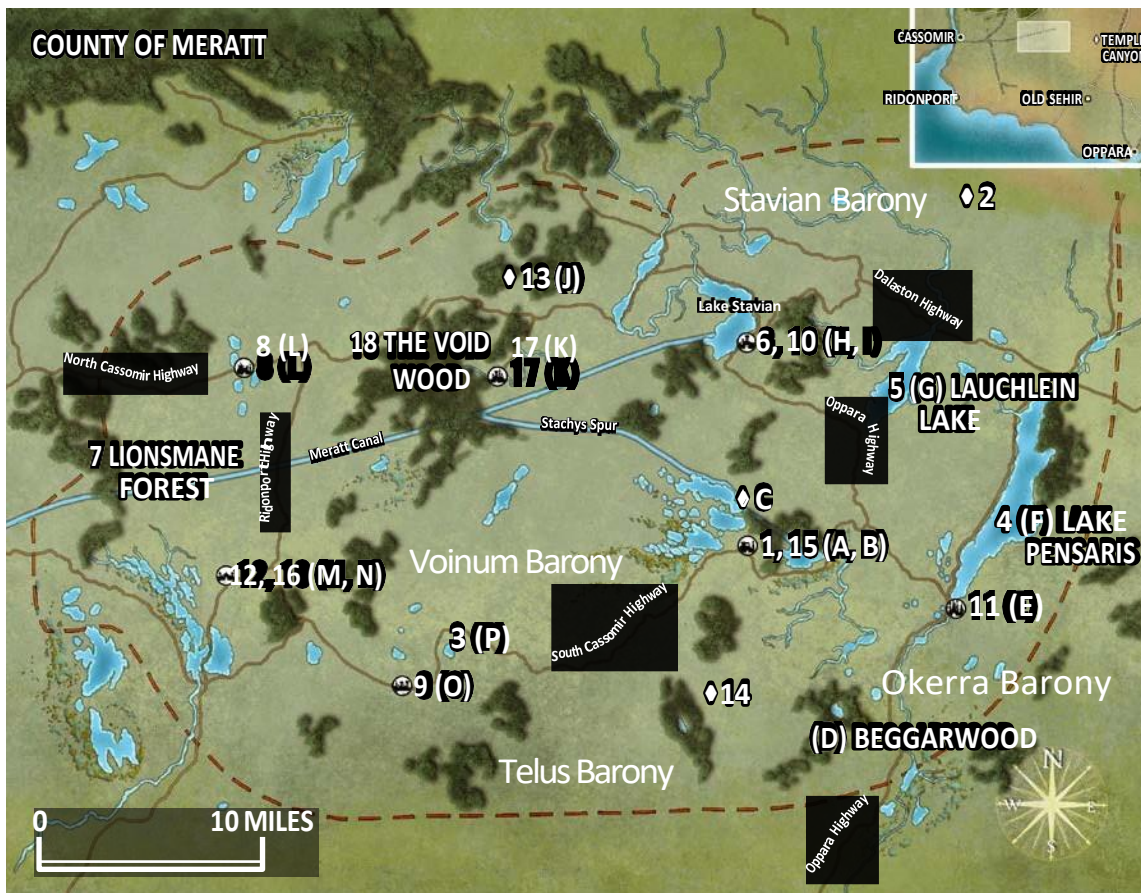
NPC
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County of
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customers coming back. Even the Stavians, Taldor's current ruling family, kept a gorgeous estate in the county. Life here was quaint, privileged, and sheltered, with all of the benefits of wealth balancing out the drawbacks of a rural locale.

However, hundreds of years ago, as Taldan fortunes in general began to wane, the county's opulence and economic success began to falter. The area stagnated as fewer and fewer of Taldor's richest came to visit, and the quality of the crops and goods produced here dropped as a result. Now, the county of Meratt is in an obvious state of decline, though glimpses of its former greatness are still evident in its once-grand estates, the care with which some nobles continue to cultivate their grounds, and the family recipes and techniques used to produce the county's exports. Some rare Taldans who live in the area haven't seen as hard of times, but they keep their wealth to themselves as to not draw too much attention. Visitors are generally welcomed here, though the locals are either a bit too eager to please or resentful of their presence, depending upon their take on the county's economic reality. Adventurers who travel in Meratt might find a plethora of rural political intrigue, and they could even discover valuable family treasures if they spend the time and energy to fix up one of the many neglected manors.

Below are notable places in the county of Meratt. The lettered locations on the map correspond to locations described on pages 26-45 of this volume's adventure.

1. Betony Estate: As with many Meratt estates, the Betony complex was once the grand home of a proud noble family. However, as the Betonys left their ancestral home for the cities and as Meratt's own prospects dwindled, fewer family members were willing to take responsibility for the estate. The last administrator of the home, Lady Allis Betony, died nearly a decade ago, leaving no heirs. Since then, the home has languished in a state of receivership, with the Lotheeds showing little interest in finding real administrators for the property. There are rumors that the estate's once-grand ballroom still contains magnificent oil paintings of the Taldan countryside as well as full sets of splendid flatware and other supplies geared toward the fantastic dinner parties of old. However, the late Allis Betony is rumored to have spoken with spirits even while still alive; no one cares to find out if they – or she – still linger.

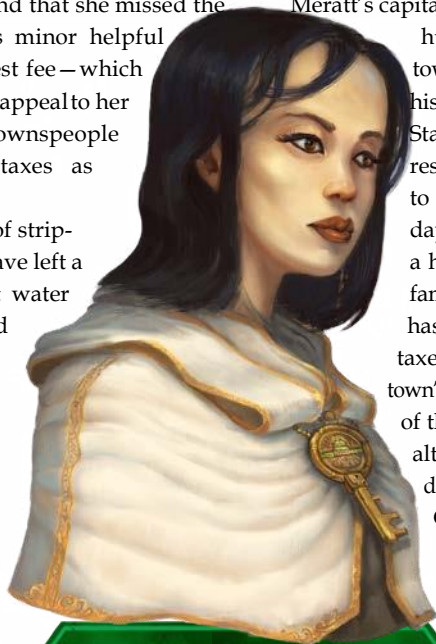
2. Cascina: This tiny hamlet's population consists of a few families once in the employ of the Voinum barony. All told, about 30 souls live in the sleepy settlement, most of them simple goat, grain, or sheep farmers. Perhaps most notable is a resident named **Yarelle Towsine** (NG female old human aristocrat 1/WIZARD 2), a distant

Voinum cousin several times removed. As a youngster, Yarelle stole off to Oppara to study the arcane, but the city was expensive and she found that she missed the countryside. Now she performs minor helpful magic for the locals for a modest fee—which she often waives for those who appeal to her kindly nature—and helps the townspeople pay the Lotheeds' exorbitant taxes as she can.

3. Gold Canyon: Centuries of strip-mining, now long in the past, have left a deep ravine filled with stagnant water here. The stone bridge over Gold Canyon is left over from the quarry days; it collapsed in a small earthquake decades ago, and fixing it is at the bottom of Baron Telus's list of priorities. While the area is impassable to travelers on horseback or wagon, the fact that much of the gold used to mint Taldan coinage came from this land makes it a popular, informal holy site for Abadar worshipers, who throw coins back into the waters below.

4. Lake Pensaris: Northeast of the town for which it's named, this lake is natural and deep, with a good stock of edible fish. Many of the poorer locals use the lake as a primary source of food, though the nobles openly look down on them for such pedestrian practices. Still, some of the most downtrodden individuals consider the lake their own slice of paradise. A hermit who goes by **Jeke** (N male halfling expert 1/BARBARIAN 2) once lived in Pensaris, but he grew tired of village life and has built a makeshift home into an old beaver dam on the northern side of the lake. He calls himself "the General's butler" and claims to speak directly to the monster rumored to live in Lake Pensaris. Most anglers believe that the General is simply a very large, old catfish and that Jeke is just an eccentric old halfling who tells tall tales. Others, though, believe that the General is some sort of malevolent fey creature and that Jeke might be the only person keeping it from rising out of the lake to attack.

5. Lauchlein Lake: Even more remote than the sprawling Lake Pensaris, Lauchlein Lake is the target of far more sinister rumors and legends. The entire body of water is shrouded in unsettling mist, and it's far shallower, with a much murkier, swamp-like quality, leading to poorer fishing prospects than Lake Pensaris. Local rumors claim a variety of stories about the lake, including that the Night Swan, a mysterious vigilante, makes her home here. Other stories alternately claim that a vicious serial killer and a trio of kelpies hide beneath the lake's mist.



ARCHBANKER LADY PARIL

6. Lotheedar: At the fork of the Dalaston Highway and the North Cassomir Highway is Lotheedar, the county of Meratt's capital as well as its most prominent trading

hub. The Lotheed family adjudicates the town's affairs, and owing to the nobles' historically solid stewardship of the Stavian family's land, they're generally respected here. Much of this is owed to the leader of the Lotheeds' day-to-day affairs, Sir Gul Gusairne (see page 68), a half-elf who has served as the Lotheed family's seneschal for two generations. Gul has long ensured that a hefty share of the taxes the family collects has gone into the town's upkeep, and as a result, Lotheedar is one of the county's most well-to-do settlements, although it's not exactly wealthy. There's a downside to this relative success, however. Gul is a rather strict enforcer for the Lotheeds and also serves as the head of the county's secret police, ferreting out dissent and conspiracy against

the family's power. Were it not for the steadying hand of Archbanker Lady Paril (see page 68), a respected member of the Abadaran clergy and leader of the town's largest temple to the Wealthy Father, Gul may have long ago turned into more of a despot than a seneschal. As it is, Gul's hardfisted nature leads some to whisper that Lady Paril would be a kinder, more egalitarian leader than the half-elf. Nowhere are those rumors spoken of more loudly than in Lotheedar's most popular tavern, the Count's Cravat.

7. Lionsmane Forest: This small forest straddling the county's northwest border is little more than a collection of copses that, due to its rather remote location, no one in the past several centuries has bothered to exploit for timber resources. As a result, the wood is much healthier than other forests in the county, with ancient trees, unkempt foliage, and no structures to speak of. Wanderers and ne'er-do-wells have always found shelter here. However, more recently, the Lionsmane has housed a few dozen locals whose failure (or refusal) to pay the Lotheeds' high taxes has led to the confiscation of their property and their reduction to beggars, hence the wood's name.

These outlaws have erected tents and sod shelters in various hollows through the wood, and they are known for accosting and robbing travelers and lone nobles in the area. In the past few years, the outlaws have united under the leadership of **Rena Winterall** (CN female human ranger 5), daughter of Deryk Winterall, a local man who worked his way from groundskeeper to homestead owner before losing his modest fortune to the Lotheeds' taxes and fines. Under Rena's leadership, the outlaws have become more discerning and less

LOTHEEDAR

LN small town

Corruption +2; Crime -2; Economy +1; Law +3;
Lore +2; Society -3**Qualities** rumormongering citizens, strategic location
Danger +0**DEMOGRAPHICS****Government** overlord**Population** 1,600 (1,200 humans, 200 half-elves,
150 halflings, 50 other)**NOTABLE NPCs****Archbanker Lady Paril** (LN female human cleric of
Abadar 7)**Sir Gul Gusairne** (N male half-elf aristocrat 2/fighter 5)**MARKETPLACE****Base Value** 1,100 gp; **Purchase Limit** 5,000 gp;**Spellcasting** 4th**Minor Items** 3d4 items; **Medium Items** 1d6;**Major Items** —

violent in their attacks. Some locals even whisper that Rena might be planning a political uprising against the Lotheeds. Such rumors are hard to confirm, however, especially considering that almost no one has met Rena in person.

8. Moost and the Crabbe Estate: A hamlet of about 50 residents grew up around the adjacent Crabbe Estate, which is the abode of Dame **Parthena Crabbe** (N female human aristocrat 4). Moost is famous for hosting the largest and nicest coaching house along the Northern Cassomir Highway, while the Crabbes run a successful conservatory tutoring young musicians and dancers. In recent years, however, the number of students they've taken has dwindled. The business screeched to a halt when Borrgrame Crabbe, Parthena's husband, died of cancer, and grief limited his widow's interest in teaching. Now, the dame spends most of her time obsessively searching for a suitor for her recently come-of-age daughter, Sepsinia, though the young woman seems withdrawn and uninterested in her overbearing mother's plans after her last suitor's tragic suicide.

9. New Towne: Perhaps the most run-down active settlement in the entire county, New Towne houses the remnants of those who fled the ruined Jambis. All told, about 60 tenants live here in shockingly squalid conditions; most of New Towne's residents live in little more than canvas tents. These residents are still technically under the protectorship of the Telus family, though Baron Telus long ago disappeared from the public eye. Of late, a young upstart named **Felsha** (CG female half-elf brawler^{ACG 3}) has been advocating on New Towne's behalf to the Lotheeds, the outlaws in the Beggarwood, and anyone else who will listen. Felsha claims to be an

adventurer from Cassomir who was passing through the county and was attacked by unknown assailants, only to be nursed back to health in the hut of a New Towne woman she now calls Grandmother. Felsha remains cagey, however, about whom or what Grandmother might be.

10. Palace of Birdsong: This sweeping estate is nestled among beautiful vineyards and orchards heavy with apricots, olives, and plums. The estate belongs to the Stavian family, though it's been under the administration of the Lotheeds for some time. At first glance, the home is breathtaking, with graceful arches and domes made of expensive marble. However, behind this facade lurk hints of neglect: the marble is crumbling and the ivy creeping up its gates is uncontrolled. The Lotheeds have gone to the trouble to ensure that the estate's overall upkeep is handled, but no loving hands have seen to the estate's finer details in many years.

11. Pensaris: Nestled on the southern shore of Lake Pensaris, this fishing village of 200 residents grew up around the nearby Okerra estate. As such, it and the estate are the purview of the Okerra family, whose members hail from a long line of military veterans, including the current baron **Nicolaus Okerra** (LG male human fighter 6). Pensaris is one of Meratt's most prosperous and bustling villages, second in wealth and prominence only to Lotheedar. Much of this is due to the fairness with which the barony treats its residents and the no-interest loans Baron Okerra sometimes extends to young entrepreneurs who present a solid business plan and relevant skills. Of late, however, those loans have dried up, owing to Count Lotheed's harsher tax collection policies. It's said that Baron Okerra is furious about these policies and their effect on the residents, though his strict military upbringing means he doesn't criticize them in polite company.

12. Ruins of Jambis: This hollowed-out shell of a village was once the capital of the Telus barony, but its homes and buildings have been abandoned for nearly a decade. Residents first began trickling away from their holdings once Baron Telus disappeared from public view. However, the thorp truly became a ruin about a half year later, when a massive fire started in an abandoned tavern called the Rat's Nest and tore through the entire settlement. The fire began and spread under suspicious circumstances — the Rat's Nest was closed, no one should have been cooking in its kitchens in the first place, and the blaze spread far more quickly than a fire should. However, with few resources and the ruling baron nowhere in sight, the town's remaining residents opted to flee rather than rebuild. Some settled in Lotheedar, some started the sad camp now known as New Towne, and some left the county of Meratt altogether.

13. Sotro: With fewer than 20 residents, this tiny thorp is little more than a collection of a few houses occupied by two extended families of goat herders. The locals

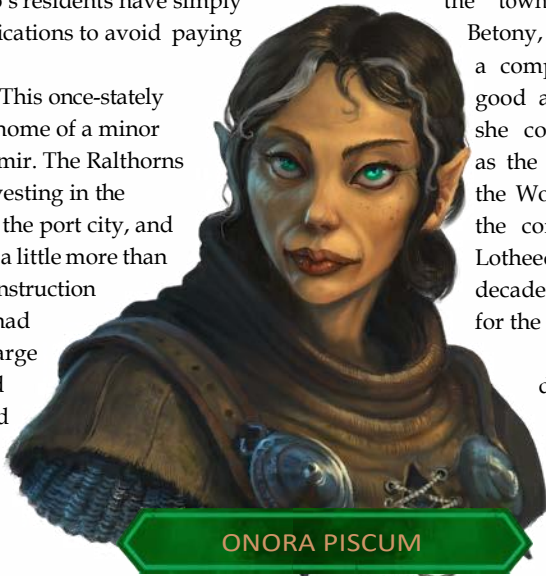
claim that the family is cursed, or at least predisposed to bad luck, for every few seasons wolves, mountain lions, and worse carry off a large percentage of the thorp's herds. Others claim Sotto's residents have simply created well-crafted fabrications to avoid paying the Lotheeds' taxes.

14. Ralthorn Manor: This once-stately manor was the summer home of a minor noble family from Cassomir. The Ralthorns made their money by investing in the shipbuilding industry in the port city, and they built this estate only a little more than a hundred years ago. Construction was swift as the family had plenty of gold to hire a large crew of stonemasons and carpenters, and they used their trade contacts in Cassomir to ship the materials and workforce to the remote estate for a fraction of the usual cost.

However, just 20 years after the estate's completion, tragedy struck the family while they were vacationing at the estate. An uncharacteristic earthquake shook this portion of the county one warm summer night. Its quick and violent tremor spared all other buildings in the region, but half of Ralthorn Manor collapsed, crushing the sleeping family beneath a pile of stone and timber. The family wasn't discovered for nearly 6 weeks when a business partner rode out to the estate after Berlan Ralthorn didn't attend an important meeting with her investors. Although the unfortunate family was removed from the rubble and properly buried in Cassomir, some say that their spirits still haunt the site. Hunters seeking shelter in the still-standing parts of the manor for the night or from a passing storm claim that their horses start and act panicky when they draw near, and others report that ghostly figures play in the overgrown orchards and a stern woman watches them, manifesting partially from a tangle of collapsed stone.

Those who knew the Ralthorns well claim that few of their personal items were retrieved from the wreckage, and others suspect that a large portion of the family's wealth might be buried beneath the ruined manor.

15. Stachys: This hardscrabble town is near the Betony estate and historically enjoyed the protection of that noble family. However, since the estate has languished in receivership for a decade, its population has dwindled and infrastructure quietly collapsed. Its residents are mostly commoners whose families have farmed the surrounding land for centuries, and once it became clear that the nobles had abandoned them, they portioned out the town's administrative duties to residents. Many such duties have fallen to



ONORA PISCUM

Onora Piscum (NG female half-elf expert 4/warrior 1), the town's honorary tribune—its mayor and sheriff. She followed in the footsteps of her husband, Royen, the town's previous tribune, and Allis Betony, the estate's last heir. Onora is a competent if taciturn woman and a good administrator, though she wishes she could return to her previous life as the proprietor of her public house, the Wolf's Whisker. She and most of the commoners in Stachys dislike the Lotheeds and nobles in general, whose decadence and incompetence they blame for the county's declining fortune.

16. Telus Estate: The state of this dilapidated home and its grounds is nearly as big of a mystery as exists in the county of Meratt. The popular Baron Telus suddenly turned paranoid and aggressive over the course of a few months, and then he sealed himself away from social engagements entirely; the servants and other workers who lived here either vanished or scattered into the woods, becoming bandits or wanderers. The fate of Baron Telus is one of the most gossiped-about topics in the county. Some claim he simply grew bored of his duties and fled, while others ascribe much more terrible fates to the baron. Superstition, as well as a lack of a formal investigation, has kept most everyone away from the abandoned estate; this became doubly true in the aftermath of the devastating fire that tore through Jambis, the only settlement nearby. In truth, Baron Telus was cursed by night hags and now languishes in his former home as an ettercap.

17. Voinaris and the Voinum Estate: The small settlement of about 150 folks is connected to the nearby Voinum estate, over which Baroness **Adella Voinum** (LN female old human aristocrat 4/cavalier^{APG} 2) reluctantly presides. Like her predecessors, the baroness cares for her lands and the estate's residents, but she has little love for Taldan politics or the meddlesome nature of the county's elite. Instead, she leaves adjudication of Voinaris in the hands of its most capable residents. A retired military commander, the baroness still enjoys riding across her lands and visiting with friends of all statures. She's as knowledgeable about the region's history as any in the county. In many ways, Baroness Voinum is also the social fulcrum of Meratt, since she knows who's who and wisely chooses the best opportunities to wield her considerable influence.

18. The Void Wood: The county's largest remaining forest is especially noteworthy for the light hand that Baroness Voinum takes with poaching, though its depths remain a haven for large beasts that are otherwise extinct in Meratt.

SONGBIRD, SCION, SABOTEUR

Foreword

Part 1: Songbird

Part 2: Scion

Part 3: Saboteur

NPC Gallery

County of Meratt

Agents of Change

Relics of Old Taldor

Bestiary