

The Lower Groves

The grassy meadows and fruit groves of Pleak dip gently in the nation's southern border, as if slightly pressing upon the dense forest of trees that makes up the lower Shorewood. Nestled at the base of the ladle-like stretch of land, lies a region of hamlets, thorps, and villages collectively referred to as the Lower Groves.

The people of the Lower Groves live peaceful, simple lives, farming the land, tending the indigenous groves, and raising livestock. Each fall, fruits from the harvest are used to make preserves, wines, brandies, and scented oils, which, in the spring, are taken via caravan to Uln to be sold for profit or traded for supplies. The brandies, in particular, are prized by the nobles and lords of the Pleak, always fetching a high price.

Each settlement in the Lower Groves elects a representative to speak on behalf of itself. Collectively, these individuals are referred to as the Council of the Groves. At least three times a year (more if needed) the representatives meet in Fieldon to discuss any relevant business. In addition to managing the affairs of each settlement, the representatives weigh laws in the event of a crime and settle misunderstandings between residents. Serious crimes, such as murder (which seldom occurs) are brought before the council for judgment. Those found guilty of such an infraction are taken to Uln for sentencing. Minor crimes, such as petty thievery, assault, and disorderly conduct, typically have their limited sentences served out by incarceration in Fieldon's jail.

While not as far from the capital city as many of Pleak's northern lands, the Lower Groves had, until recently, attracted less attention from the Crown in Uln. The past year, however, brought change when Queen Malandria opened talks of trade with the nation of Thurber. As the cold of winter settled over the land, an agreement with the gnomes to the south was struck, and when the warming winds of spring arrived, so did scores of timber cutters, intent of carving a useable road through the Shorewood.

The tree cutters' foray into the Shorewood has stirred the denizens that make their home within, and as a result, creatures have been wandering from the wood to attack nearby settlements. The bulk of the Lower Groves' militia, normally resident in Fieldon, has been dispatched to Cordun Springs to offer patrols and protection from all manner of goblinoids.

The process of cutting a road to Thurber is an undertaking that will likely be ongoing for several years. When the road, which is to be named the Woodway, is completed, commerce in the Lower Groves is expected to grow as the traffic from merchant caravans increases. This inevitability has struck some discord in the region, with citizens of the Lower Groves heavily split as to their thoughts on the matter.

Fieldon – Population: 231

Situated between groves of apple, plum, and cherry trees, the village of Fieldon is sometimes jokingly referred to as the "Capital City" of the Lower Groves. Founded over 300 years ago by farmers seeking lands to grow crops, harvest fruit, and raise animals, it is the oldest village in the region. Fieldon holds within its boundary several shops and businesses not found in the surrounding settlements, such as a fletcher, a butcher, an herbalist, and a blacksmith. In addition, it is the only village in the Lower Groves to have its own militia.

Commanded by the constable, Bax Hadlerm, the militia is made up of twenty men from the surrounding settlements. Each serves one month per year as a soldier, helping to protect the lands of

their home. Until the recent stirring of creatures in the Shorewood, it was a service that most looked forward to, a chance to practice the bow and sword with their neighbors and enjoy pipeweed and dice without the prattle of women. Since the tree cutters entered the forest, however, it has become dangerous.

Fieldon serves as the head of the Lower Groves, and it is the responsibility of its mayor, Brin Falmoor, to represent the village at council sessions, which the village hosts. In addition, Brin acts as emissary for the Lower Groves, receiving and distributing missives (that, until recently, never existed) from the Crown in Uln.

Cordun Springs – Population: 68

Situated slightly inside the border of the Shorewood, Cordun Springs is the only walled settlement in the Lower Groves. The spiked tops of native elm, sycamore, and locust trees form a wooden palisade that holds back the creatures of the forest in which it resides. The thorp, built around a small, ever-flowing spring of crystal clear water, is, in essence, nothing more than a large distillery.

Within the walls of Cordun Springs, the native fruits and grains of the Lower Groves are transformed into wines, brandies, and other spirits. The purity of the water provided by the spring lends the beverages created in Cordun Springs a crisp and distinct flavor that is highly sought after throughout Pleak. Nearly every other settlement in the Lower Groves relies on Cordun Springs to distill its fruits, making the thorp vital to the region's prosperity.

Holan Barinsted, a wealthy, arrogant, middle-aged man, owns and oversees the operation the distillery. In spite of his abrasive personality, he treats his employees well, realizing that their happiness translates directly to his profits. Compared to most others in the Lower Groves, Holan is a relatively new resident. After arriving from Kramm only ten years earlier, he purchased the distillery from the widow, Maleece Valmer, who passed away shortly after. Holan never speaks of his past, leading some to believe that the gains he used to purchase the distillery may have been ill gotten. In spite of these rumors, Holan speaks on behalf of Cordun Springs.

Rolen Farms – Population: 25

A loose collection of small family farmsteads scattered over a two-mile area, Rolen Farms is not centralized enough to be called a hamlet, but its residents would say differently. Cherry and plum are the predominant fruits in the region, but the residents of Rolen Farms do not exclusively ply the fruit trade. Most graze sheep and a few cows, which they use for barter with their neighboring settlements.

Newly selected by her fellow residents, Ella Ilvar, a young and unmarried farm maiden, speaks for the people of Rolen Farms.

Teem's Pond – Population 177

By the time the water from the thorp of Cordun Springs exits the Shorewood, it has picked up additional size from several natural forest drainage ditches, forming a small creek. Cordun Creek is the name given to the waterway that meanders lazily for nearly ten miles before emptying into Teem's Pond.

Teem's Pond was constructed nearly one hundred and twenty years ago when Teem Lamson enlisted the help of the people of the Lower Groves to build a small, earthen dam at the end of a sizeable,

natural depression not far from his farm. His goal was to create a pond that would be used to regulate the flow of water, so that a mill could be constructed for grinding grains and sawing lumber. The project took nearly five years to complete, and when it was finished, it was named for the man that had conceived it.

Over the following century, houses and other businesses grew around the mill, and a village was born of necessity. Presently, Teem's Pond is one of the largest settlements in the Lower Groves, second only to Fieldon. In addition to the mill, the village boasts an inn, a general store, a small bakery, stables, and a newly formed church of St. Cantis, whose resident priest, Father Darid Giden, has been granted the right to represent the village's residents at council.

Nason's Grove – Population: 83

Nestled among a semi-dense stand comprised of almost entirely apricot trees, the hamlet of Nason's Grove lies the furthest north of any settlement in the Lower Groves. Growing and raising little of their own food, the residents of the small settlement survive almost exclusively on the profits made from their preserves, scented oils, and apricot brandy.

The hamlet consists of a cloister of small houses surrounding a large inn/general store/tavern called "Bramen's Hub". Its owner, the aging Garl Bramen, is the 9th generation of Bramen to own the establishment. He is a fair man with a large family that totals nearly one third of the hamlet's population. In addition, he is the hamlet's representative and mayor.

Arx-Mantis – Population 31

Twenty-five years ago, a wealthy wizard, Finnern Mantis, constructed a keep nearly ten miles west of Fieldon. For twenty of those twenty-five years, Finnern visited Arx-Mantis infrequently, never spending more than a week at a time. Five years ago, he retired to the keep to enjoy his golden-years in peaceful study. At that time, he took an interest in the politics of the region and requested a seat on the Council of the Groves, stating, without disdain or malice, that the staff of Arx-Mantis alone was greater in number than the total population of Rolen's Farm.

Though some initially had reservations, Finnern's request was put to a vote, and the position was granted. The uncertainties were quickly quelled, as the residents of Fieldon discovered the rotund, white-haired wizard to be the exact opposite of the haughty and condescending stereotype they had expected. Finnern spent time visiting the villages, telling stories to the children, working minor cantrips in the inns, and even putting on evening displays of awing illusions on special occasions.

Two years ago, Finnern's health started to fail. Shortly thereafter, his mind began to worsen as well. Since last fall, he has been addled and bedridden. However, before the snows of winter blanketed the groves, Finnern's niece and only surviving relative, Ahnya Delante, arrived to care for him. Of only twenty-three years, she is plump woman with her uncle's pleasant demeanor and disposition. Finnern's eminent passing will leave her as sole heir to Arx Mantis, and with the arrival of spring, she has started attending council meetings in her uncle's absence.