

LIFE AND DEATH IN KERN

While the residents of other nations fear attacks by the armies of Kern, those who suffer the most from the Lich King's many atrocities are the residents of this Shadow-tainted nation.

In addition to being one of the most horrific and Shadow-tainted lands in Aldea (only the Shadow Barrens compare), Kern is also the least diverse. In keeping with the policies of the other Sorcerer Kings, Jarek has ordered all vata'an in his kingdom slain on sight. Vata'sha are taken into the custody of the kingdom, often becoming Jarek's servants and apprentices.

Jarek has a paranoia about sea-folk, after hearing many prophecies that his doom would come from the sea. Therefore, he long ago ordered the few sea-folk in Kern executed. He also offers bounties for the hides of all rhydan. With the exception of a few vata'an who manage to remain hidden and rhydan who avoid settled areas, the only mortal peoples in Kern are humans, night people, vata'sha, and various shadowspawn. Kern's other main inhabitants are unliving and darkfiends. Skeletons and zombies perform the most basic menial labor, and Jarek uses summoned darkfiends as private guards and shock troops. Also, the top ranks of his secret police are held by darkfiends.

Unliving make up almost 20 percent of the population of Kern, and only the expendability of many of them prevents them from being even more numerous. Night people are about 15 percent of the population, and the remaining 65 percent is human and vata'sha. Fortunately for both the living residents of Kern and the inhabitants of all nearby nations, even Jarek's powers do not allow him to control more than a few hundred darkfiends at a time, so these eldritch beings only make up a tiny fraction of the population.

Daily Existence

The most obvious thing a visitor to Kern notices is the wretched living conditions. With the exception of the few Shadow-aligned people serving the Lich King, everyone in Kern is deeply impoverished and lives in constant fear. Jarek takes steps to ensure this. Not only does this allow him to devote more time to his pet projects, but also forcing the inhabitants to live on the edge of starvation keeps them from revolting or even planning an effective rebellion. Everyone is too busy struggling to survive and cowering in fear from the predatory looks of Jarek's secret police.

Every resident of Kern serves the Lich King in one way or another. Their work consists of everything from mining and carving shas crystals to making weapons, building and repairing roads and buildings, and many similar tasks. Everyone is expected to work. The frail and the infirm are allowed to cook and carry food for laborers and perform other support tasks, like distributing and repairing tools. Anyone unwilling or unable to work is beaten, and if this does not motivate them to work (or if they are physically unable to work), they are killed. As a result, very few people in Kern live to see old age.

Most Kerns simply do their best to survive and avoid the attention of the secret police. The cities and towns of Kern clearly reflect the lives of their inhabitants. There are no large public buildings, except for places where labor gangs work and small dingy taverns where people go to drown their misery in drink, gambling, and whoring. Most other buildings are shabby homes with small gardens plots where the locals supplement the food grown in the countryside with hardy root vegetables, herbs, and eggs from scrawny hens.

There are fewer animals in Kern than elsewhere in Aldea. The crown owns all horses, and no common folk have use of them. The land is too harsh and food too scarce for cattle, and few can afford to keep pets. People who have animals are most likely to have dogs, pigs, chickens, sheep, goats, and donkeys.

Kernish Law

The law of Kern are simple: obey the Lich King in all things, or die. So long as his subjects obey and do not threaten his rule, Jarek doesn't care what they do. They are free to work together to help each other survive or, if they prefer, murder one another for tattered blankets and crusts of bread. Depending on the circumstances, both things occur regularly in Kern.

In most of Kern, communities elect judges called lawspeakers to settle disputes, determine guilt, and assign punishments for crimes. Lawspeakers have no rights beyond any other citizen, and Jarek does not recognize their authority, but they are supported and respected by the common people. Their community helps provide for them and protect them. Since prisoners cannot work and so would be killed, lawspeakers dispense only three punishments: fines, shunning, and death.

Lesser crimes like burglary, vandalism, or minor cases of assault all require criminals to pay restitution to their victims. Since everyone in Kern is quite poor, these fines can be a heavy burden. Anyone who cannot afford to pay can instead work for their victim as a servant, when they are not working for Jarek.

Shunning punishes violent crimes and serious property crimes. For a period of months or sometimes years, no one in the community speaks to the criminal, and in the more extreme cases, the convict's forehead is branded so people in other communities will know he or she is an outcast. Although others may be forced to speak and interact with outcasts in the labor gangs, no one does so outside of a labor gang and no one offers to aid or help the outcast in any way until the sentence is up. In the harsh nation of Kern, people need to work together to survive, so shunning is a harsh and effective punishment.

In cases of premeditated murder, mass murder, torture, and the like, the lawspeaker declares the criminal should die, and the sentence is usually carried out on the spot. The sentence of death is carried out so swiftly because,

if such criminals escape, they can try to avoid their punishment by joining the ranks of Jarek's Servitors.

Labor Gangs

One of the central features of Kernish life is the labor gang. Every Kern older than thirteen reports to the local labor gang for four days out of every seven. The Lich King would ask for more, but doing so would not permit the populace to grow enough food to survive. Each labor gang consists of a group of between seventy and two hundred humans, guarded and directed by a tenth as many night people. The humans do most of the work, while the night people keep track of their productivity, whip and threaten slackers, and capture or kill any who attempt to flee or rebel.

The only person with real authority in a labor gang is its master. In most cases, this is one of the Lich King's human Servitors, but the most important labor gangs, including those mining shas crystals, are commanded by one of the Lich King's darkfiends. Labor gangs working after dark are sometimes overseen by vampires, who feed on workers who are too lazy or rebellious, transforming them into their unliving thralls.

In addition, work gangs have zombies and skeletons equal to about half the number of humans, controlled by the gang's master. A few of the unliving guard the master, but most perform the truly mindless labor, such as hauling rubble or carrying ore, charcoal, and wood. Although they are incapable of any actions requiring thought or

care, the unliving are tireless and increase productivity. They also serve as a warning, since the masters make certain zombies made from the bodies of local criminals, rebels, and troublemakers are present in the labor gangs. Although the people of Kern feel the same revulsion towards the unliving as anyone, they are accustomed to working alongside them.

Each person has a schedule, and changing schedules requires the approval of a gang's master. Such approval is only given if someone's productivity is especially high or they are willing to bribe the gang master. On days they work, every resident must get up at dawn and report to the town square. Since every city and town in Kern is near a site Jarek finds useful—such as deposits of shas crystals, iron ore, or other resources—the members of the labor gangs rarely need to walk more than half an hour to get to the mine, factory, or other location where they work.

Under the watchful eyes of the night people (who are punished if one of the human workers escapes or productivity falls), the humans labor, and the night people help pick up the slack if it looks like the gang may fall behind in its quota. Since work quotas are always set high, the night people end up spending almost as much time laboring as they do watching and guarding the workers. With only a few short breaks for food and rest, the workers labor until nightfall, at which point they stagger home and sleep until sunrise, when they must again report to their labor gang.

Jarek orders his sorcerers and darkfiends to use their formidable arcana to create the buildings and other facilities in his mines and factories. Their powers shape earth and stone and move objects that would otherwise require large teams of workers. As a result, while the people of Kern live in crude houses of rudely dressed logs, mortared stone, or wattle and daub, the factories and other public buildings are all well made. They are also equipped with lights, heat, and other conveniences powered by shas crystals. The mines and factories are stark, ugly, and designed without any consideration for the comfort or safety of the workers, but they are sturdier and better equipped than any of the people's dwellings.

Healers in Kern

In Kern, all arcana and arcane devices are forbidden to anyone who does not work directly for the Lich King, and the penalty for disobeying this edict is death. Healers from other lands sometimes visit Kern, and a few even train apprentices there. Even though healers and anyone aiding them are killed if they are discovered, many Kerns value the services of these visiting healers so highly that they are willing to risk death to make certain they and their families can receive their occasional ministrations.

A very few of the bravest of these families do more than allow healers to stay with them in return for having first access to healing. A small number also open their houses to refugees attempting to flee Kern. Visiting healers attempt to take these refugees with them when they leave. Many of the daring families sheltering healers and refugees also help Aldin and Jarzoni agents visiting Kern.

