

The Gourdian Knot of Peoria

[\[The Day After Ragnarok\]](#)

City: Peoria, Illinois

Population: 7,000/3,000

Controls: Peoria and the fields around it.

Government: Squatters

Problem: Gangs

Heroic Opportunity: Mercenary Work

City Aspect: Divided and Grim.

Peoria had the misfortune of being directly hit with a concentrated mist of Serpent-tainted foulness from the sky (when a writhing Jormungandr spits out blood and bile into the sky, it's going to land **somewhere**) that killed the population within minutes. Ironically, the same mist that killed the population mostly spared the city infrastructure. Serpent bile tends to play havoc on meat while sparing everything else: within a week, even the poisoned corpses were just vaguely human-outlined piles of dust being washed away in the eternal rains.

The people who survived (either through blind chance or supernatural intervention) soon discovered that the plants in the fields outside Peoria were mutating terrifyingly, in

the wake of the concentrated Serpent bile-mist. Worst of the lot were the pumpkins, which developed a taste for flesh -- and the ability to move and attack, using a set of six vine-legs. Fortunately for the survivors, the new 'bugkins' were just a little too small to prey on humans effectively; in fact, they could even be quasi-domesticated. Ironically, a tamed bugkin is more dangerous to a human than a wild one, as their vine-legs can effectively strangle someone taken by surprise.

Starting in 1946 the survivors of Peoria had been led by Bettye Goldstein, a young Californian psychologist visiting her family during the Serpentfall. Goldstein's background in labor organizing enabled her to take power during a critical time period, and her psychological training let her keep it; during her sole control of the city was a fairly autocratic but not entirely oppressive extended commune, with some interest in expansion into the rest of central Illinois. If it weren't for the bugkins, Peoria might have arisen as another counterweight to Chicago -- or rival to the Iowa Soviet.

But the bugkins did indeed stop those plans; more accurately, the hive mind that formed when twenty or so bugkins somehow managed to link up with each other stopped those plans. In 1947, the new super-bugkin

(which, alas, calls itself the 'Gourd-Emperor,' in the classic pulp style) attempted to rally the other bugkins to its side and conquer Peoria for itself. It did not quite succeed.

Today, the city is divided in two. Bettye Goldstein's half has more people, and a carefully managed colony of bugkins that increasingly provides Peoria with its food supply. Bettye rules these days more or less as an actual queen, complete with a remarkably over-ornate throne, scuttling bugkins to enforce her will, and an apparent need to maximize her skin's Vitamin D production (admittedly, this is a common problem in the Poisoned Lands). Her court is increasingly baroque, with odd customs and an insular mindset. Queen Bettye is capricious, but with a certain deadly mystique about her; adventurers toy with her affections at their peril.

The Gourd-Emperor efficiently controls the other half of the city; the humans are its (well-maintained) property, and they serve the bugkins that roam the streets freely. Oddly, the human slaves seem fairly docile about it all. There is enough to eat and the work is not too onerous, which is paradise to a slave in the Poisoned Lands. Some humans even serve in the court of the Gourd-Emperor, where they hark to the whispery decrees from their inhuman ruler and do its will. It's not a bad life, really. Admittedly, every so

often someone is thrown to the bugkins, but only the really bad people. Or captives from Queen Bettye's side of the city.

The two factions are not exactly in a war, as neither side has nearly enough people for an army. They barely have enough for raids. But Peoria is very rich, for a city in the Poisoned Lands; both the Queen and the Gourd-Emperor can easily afford mercenaries. Just get paid in advance. And don't take more than a strictly professional interest in the city situation, although that should really go without saying.

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