

## Creating a Volturnian Cactus Patch



This project is a nice piece of science fiction gaming terrain that will have great reusability. I planned for the cactus patches to be found by the players when circumstances called for an encounter in the Volturnian desert. They make a nice backdrop for the action, provided for some tactical maneuver (moving at greater than half speed in a patch caused d10 damage), were a source of water, and provided an explanation for while a pair of sand sharks chose this particular spot in the desert to lay an ambush. I've used them individually to denote a patch plus laid down a cut piece of felt to denote large patches with a couple of these markers on the felt for an aesthetic look.

I decided to make 3 patches at the same time to ensure all three had the same look when finished. Recently I discovered these pre-cut wood forms at the local craft and hobby store and thought I'd give them a go for this project. A variety of bases can be used like balsa wood or hard board; they just require a little more work by the modeler. To prepare the bases paint them with PVA (white glue or wood glue) glue and set aside to dry.



While the glue is drying prepare the cactus plants. I found these at the same craft store as the precut wood forms. The cactus plants need to be trimmed off their stems so that each ball is an individual plant; wire cutters work fine for this. Once the painted bases are dry prepare some polymer clay (the kind you bake to harden) according to its manufacturer's instructions. When the clay is soft sculpt some roots and trunk sections for each base. Use a cactus ball to push sockets into the central trunks for gluing latter. When you are satisfied with the look of the roots bake the base in an oven as per the polymer clay's manufacturer's instruction. A feature of polymer clay is that baking the clay on a base painted with PVA glue will help bond the clay to the base.



While the bases are cooling mix some PVA glue with water at a ratio of 1 part glue to 1 or 2 parts water. Paint in small areas around the base with the watered glue and cover with sand. Shake out the sand and continue paint and flocking with sand till the entire base is covered except for the roots.





To base paint liberally brush with a dark brown ink. Ink actually stains more than paints and it will run into the crevasse that would normally force you to goop on tons of paint to cover. After the ink dries you can paint the sand effectively with a dry-brush technique starting with a shade a little lighter than the ink. Follow on with successive shade of dry-brushed paint till you get to a very light sand color. Use care in dry-brushing to wipe most of the paint of the brush and the lighter the color of paint being used the less you need. To paint the roots I used transparent brown from Vallejo's Model Color line but the dry-brush technique for the sand will work as well. Choose several brown shades and work from dark to light.



The cactus balls were glued in with a two part five minute epoxy. I felt that the epoxy would have a stronger grip on the plastic than super glue but super glue may have worked just fine as well.



Since this is to be terrain from Volturnus, nothing suggests Volturnus like crystal formations. To create quartz like formations I collected several colored clear plastic pieces from cocktail stirrers and the plastic card holders used in flower arranging. What is ideal with these is a more or less square shape (the card holder from the florist was rhomboid). With an electric mouse sander gently sand down each corner of the square shape so that the 'stick' now has eight sides. Trim the end and bevel it with the sander from four sides till it comes to a point. Once you created a point cut off the point at the height you want the finished crystal to be. The first crystal in each formation is the center one and it should be cut to stand straight up. Once you've cut off this piece bevel a new point with the sander and cut that one off at an angle so that, when glued in place, its "growing away from the center crystal. Repeat this process till the center crystal is surrounded by angled crystals. Glue in place with two part epoxy as super glue will have a difficult time creating a bond on the uneven sand surface. The sanding process will create a rough look consistent with unrefined crystal in a natural setting.





The final feature is reindeer moss glued in place with hot glue. Trim the moss down and “dry fit” it on the base to see if it looks right. Start to finish the project took me a few hours but I switched to doing other things while the project was drying at different steps.





