

THE COMPASS OF CELESTIAL DIRECTIONS, VOL. I

THE BLESSED ISLE™



A SETTING
BOOK FOR



THE COMPASS OF CELESTIAL DIRECTIONS, VOL. I

THE BLESSED
ISLE™

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BAD BRIAN, WRONG CREDIT. NO COOKIE.

So, I messed up. I got this great artist to illustrate a fantastic depiction of Nexus for the cover of Scavenger Lands. It's his first cover and I wind up giving the credit to the wrong person. So, the correct credit for the great looking cover to the Scavenger Lands book belongs to the talented Mike Franchina. Sorry Mike!

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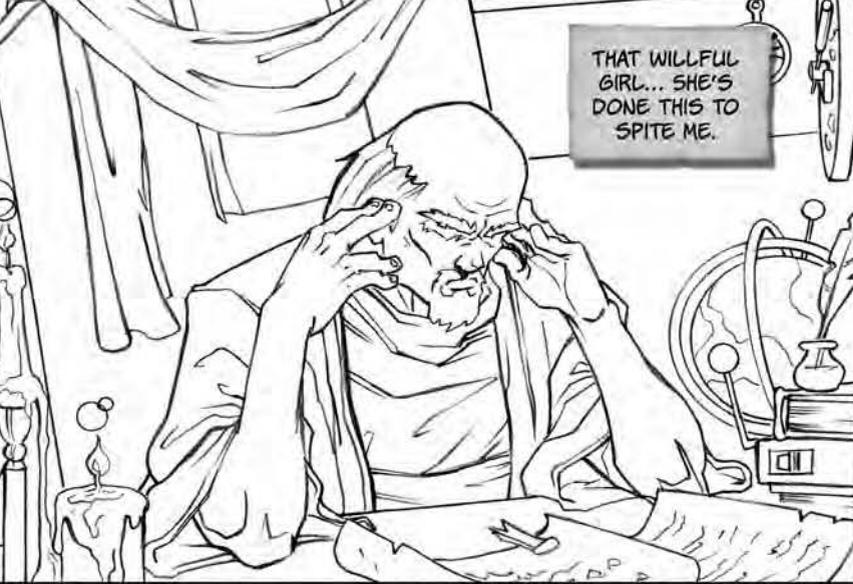


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THE BLESSED ISLE™



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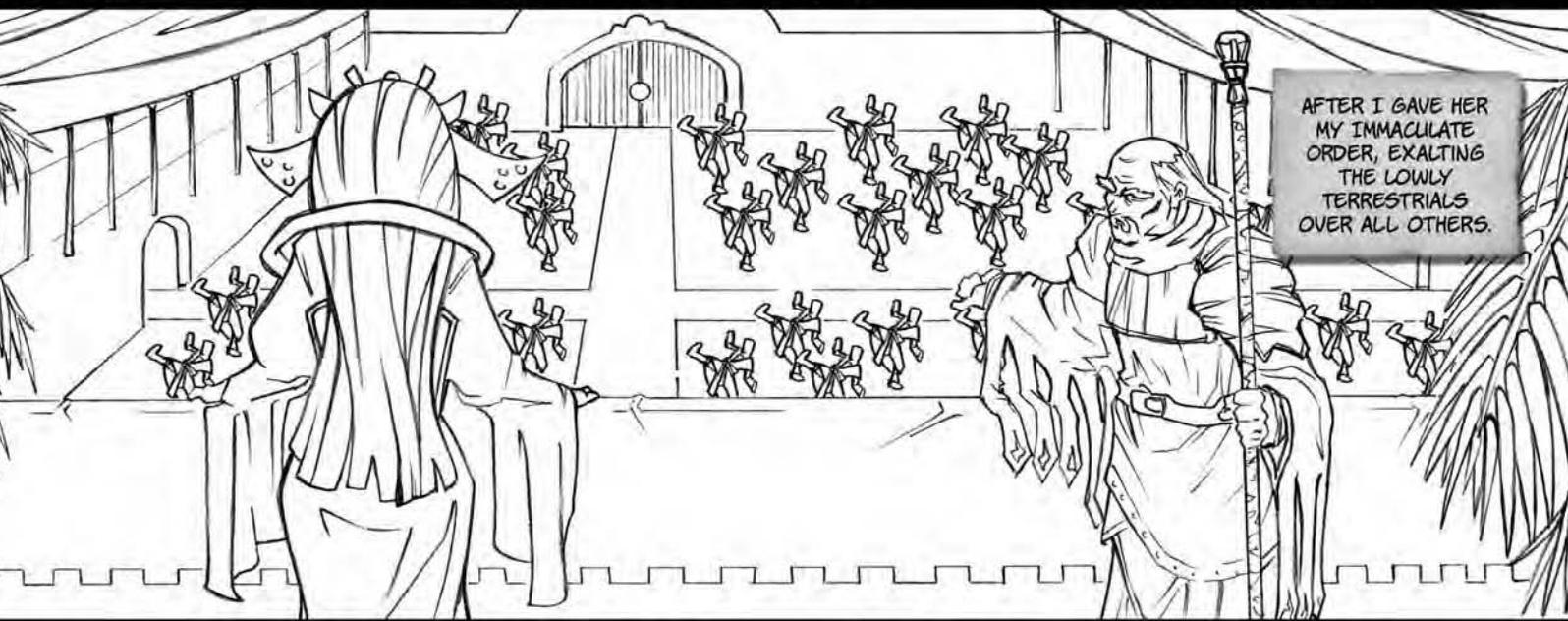
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THAT WILLFUL GIRL... SHE'S DONE THIS TO SPITE ME.



AFTER I HUMBLING MYSELF FOR ONE FULL DAY JUST TO SPEAK TO HER, KNEELING LIKE A PEASANT BEFORE HER PALACE.



AFTER I GAVE HER MY IMMACULATE ORDER, EXALTING THE LOWLY TERRESTRIALS OVER ALL OTHERS.



AFTER I FED THE TROUBLESOME TEPET LEGIONS TO THE BULL OF THE NORTH FOR HER.

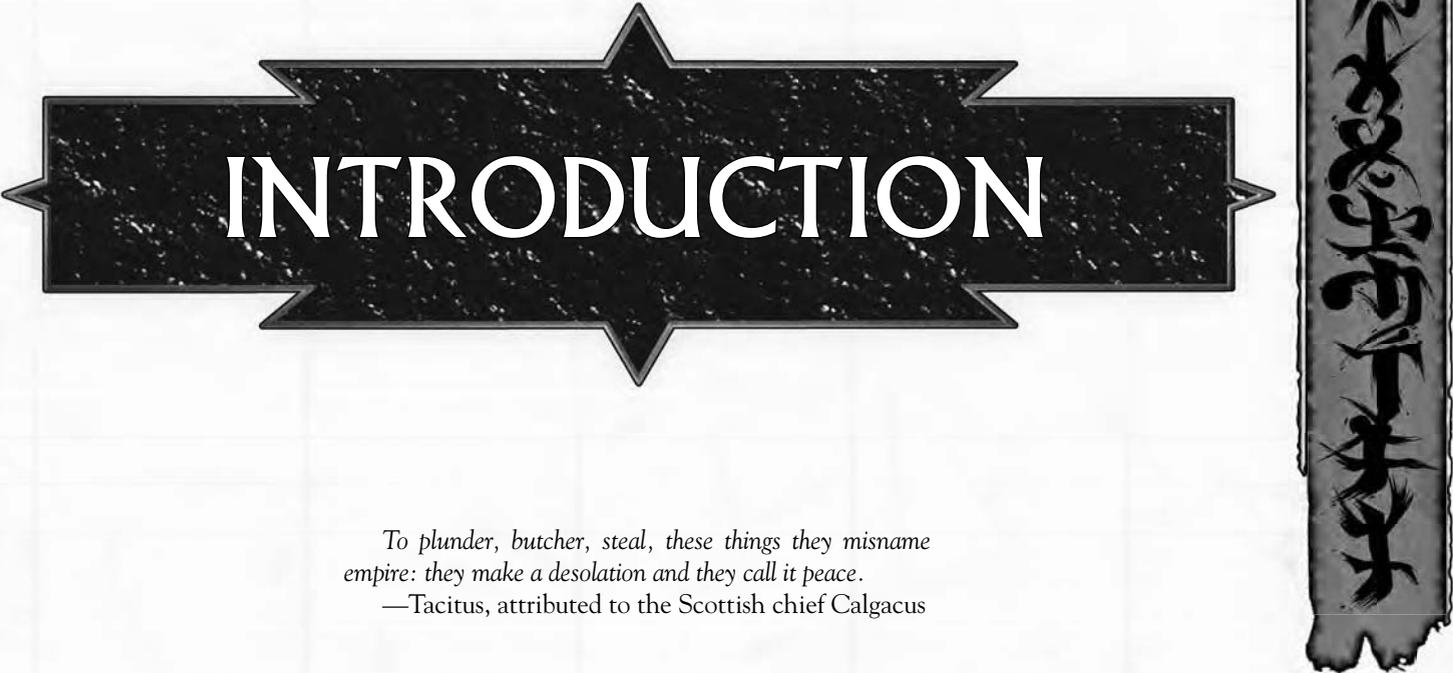
THIS IS HOW SHE REPAYS ME.



DISAPPEARING SOMEWHERE EVEN I CAN'T FIND HER. SUCH TREACHERY.

FORTUNATELY, I SUSPECTED AS MUCH FROM HER.





INTRODUCTION

*To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname
empire: they make a desolation and they call it peace.*

—Tacitus, attributed to the Scottish chief Calgacus

Originally home to the gods in the time before the Primordial War and the center of the Solar-led Old Realm that followed, the Blessed Isle lies at the very heart of Creation and is home to the Scarlet Dynasty that has ruled Creation for the past eight centuries. The Isle is the pinnacle of civilization in the Second Age and has known peace and prosperity undreamed of by the remainder of the **Exalted** world. With the disappearance of the Empress, however, the Realm stands at the brink of civil war, as the scions of the Great Houses seek to promote one candidate or another to become the inheritor of the Scarlet Throne. Meanwhile, the long-imprisoned Lawgivers have returned, some with designs to smash the Realm and reestablish the dominance of the Solar Deliberative. Can the Blessed Isle weather this Time of Tumult, or is its long peace finally at an end?

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. I—The Blessed Isle is a setting book designed to provide players and Storytellers with all they need to play games set in the Heart of the Realm. From the rough docks of Arjuf to the delicate spires of the Imperial City, from the foot of the vertiginous Imperial Mountain to the green sands of the picturesque Jade Coast, this book provides settings aplenty for every type of group and style of play—complete with dominion traits for **Exalted**'s optional Mandate of Heaven rules.

Chapter One: History of the Blessed Isle

This chapter is a concise history of the Blessed Isle from its creation as the abode of the gods to its time as the center of the Old Realm, through the Dragon-Blooded Shogunate on down to the modern-day home of the Scarlet Empire. It includes a timeline of major events in the reign of the Scarlet Empress as well.

Chapter Two: Life on the Blessed Isle

Chapter Two offers an overview of what it's like to live on the Blessed Isle, whether one is disenfranchised, a slave, a peasant, a citizen, a patrician or even a Dynast. The Blessed Isle is the safest and most prosperous land in Creation. All it demands in return is the people's freedom.

Chapter Three: The Imperial Government

This section examines the government of the Scarlet Empire, a maze of overlapping agencies and redundant purviews designed to obfuscate the reality that the Empress was the one true power on the Blessed Isle. It remains to be seen if the Imperial Bureaucracy can survive the loss of its architect.

Chapter Four: The Immaculate Order

This section focuses on the Order of the Immaculate Dragons, the most powerful religious institution in Creation and the state religion of the Scarlet Empire. Included are descriptions of the Order's major religious centers and figures, as well as details of how its monks, nuns and priests advance though the Five Coils from lowly postulants to the Paragons themselves.

Chapter Five: The Land

This chapter concerns itself with the various dominions and prefectures of the Blessed Isle and the cities, points of

interest and manses they contain. Divided by geographical region, the chapter provides an overview of who the movers and shakers are in each area, as well as each area's important natural and supernatural features.

Chapter Six: The Heart of the Realm

Chapter Six focuses on the Scarlet Prefecture and the Imperial City. At the hub of a Creation-spanning empire of Exalted demigods, this region is arguably the most important in the **Exalted** world and is presented in detail for those who wish to set their games there.

Chapter Seven: Gods & Creatures of the Blessed Isle

This section provides traits for the gods and beasts native to the heart of Creation. Although the preeminence of the Immaculate Order keeps the gods of the Blessed Isle on a short leash, the immense prosperity of the Isle and the strength of its institutions have still produced some of the **Exalted** world's most powerful gods. Also, while its lands were long ago cleared of dangerous predators, the Blessed Isle is still home to a number of unique creatures, some of which were engineered through breeding processes lost to the rest of Creation.





I CAN'T SELL THESE PUNY THINGS!

BUT THE DAIMYO'S SOLDIERS TOOK EVERYTHING ELSE! THIS IS ALL I...

HEY! DON'T IGNORE ME!



WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING... AT...

CHILDREN OF THE BLESSED ISSE, HEAR ME. THE WARS AND THE CONTAGION ARE OVER, NOW AND FOREVER. YOU HAVE PEACE. THIS IS MY GIFT TO YOU.



YOUR GIFT TO ME SHALL BE OBEDIENCE.



CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY OF THE BLESSED ISLE

When the Primordials first crystallized Creation out of the raw chaos of the Wyld, the Blessed Isle was the seed crystal around which the remainder accreted. It formed so swiftly that the Fair Folk who were trapped inside the region that became the Blessed Isle were transformed into the Jadeborn Mountain Folk. In the uncountable eons that followed, the Primordials forged an otherspace reflection of the Blessed Isle into the Celestial City of Yu-Shan, while they transformed the Blessed Isle itself into the home for the gods they had created to be their servants. While the Dragon Kings ruled the Threshold, the gods lived amidst splendor and wonders unmatched by anything except the supernal glories of Yu-Shan itself.

When the gods grew restless under the yoke of the Primordials, they planned their rebellion within the cities of the Blessed Isle. The Isle is also where they used the techniques learned from the rogue Primordial Autochthon to create the first of the mighty Exalted. Because it was their home, they defended it against all counterattacks by the armies of

the Primordials. While much of the Threshold was blasted by this epic war, the Blessed Isle came through this conflict relatively unscathed.

In the war's aftermath, the gods took possession of Yu-Shan and left the Blessed Isle to the residents of Creation. As a reward for their heroic efforts fighting the Primordials and their many thousands of well-armed and deadly demon servants, the gods gave the Blessed Isle to the Celestial Exalted to serve as the center of their newly formed Realm. From their capital city of Meru, built on the slopes of the towering Imperial Mountain, this Realm stretched out in all directions.

In the first few centuries of the rule of the Solar Deliberative—before the Celestial Exalted had grown into the full extent of their power or Autochthon had departed from Creation—the Solar Exalted feared attack by Fair Folk seeking to take advantage of the disruptions caused by the Primordial War, or by Yozis or Neverborn seeking vengeance. The Solar Exalted worked with Autochthon to construct a network of



defenses against such attacks. The outermost ring of these defenses extended around the borders of Creation. The most powerful defenses were located on the Blessed Isle itself, at the site of the largest and most powerful demesne in Creation. Situated near the Blessed Isle's eastern coast, this massive artifact was known as the Sword of Creation. In the early centuries of the First Age, the Solars used the Sword of Creation several times to repel serious incursions by the Fair Folk, but its full power was not used again until the full-scale Fair Folk invasions following the unparalleled devastation caused by the Contagion.

For the many thousands of years, the Old Realm remained intact and the Blessed Isle truly lived up to its name. In addition to containing the huge and glorious capital city of Meru, it was also the home for most of the Celestial Exalts in Creation. Despite their vast power, there were only a few hundred Celestial Exalts, and most of them preferred to live near members of their own kind. Although each of the Solar Exalted ruled a vast metropolis someplace in Creation, all of them also possessed huge rural estates on the Blessed Isle and mansions in Meru. The Celestial Exalts used powerful sorcery, impressive artifacts and the gates to and from Yu-Shan to allow them to rapidly travel from the cities they ruled and the provinces they administered to their luxurious dwellings on the Blessed Isle.

The vast metropolis of Meru, which had a population of more than 25 million people at its height, took up the heart of the island. The Blessed Isle was also home to a dozen other cities with populations of more than five million, including the huge port of Arjuf, where fleets of merchant ships went to and from Chiaroscuro, the Lap and other important Southern ports. Yet, while the population of the island was more than 120 million, more than half of its land area was owned and administered by various Celestial Exalted. They built huge villas surrounded by vast stretches of land, including private farms, elegant gardens and grandiose hunting preserves where the Exalts could hunt everything from dangerous imported beasts to stolen Wyld aberrations to the latest designer predators created in the laboratories of the Copper Spiders.



The Blessed Isle also contained the finest magical workshops in Creation, where the sorcerers and artisans of the Twilight Caste developed new and ever more powerful artifacts and wondrous life forms. Surrounding Meru was a series of the grandest and most advanced factory-cathedrals, where scores of powerful automata labored ceaselessly alongside dozens of elementals and demons to help the Exalts create a never-ending stream of powerful Essence technologies.

Because it was both the home to the Celestial Exalts and the center for the most advanced manufacturing, the many millions of inhabitants of the Blessed Isle benefited from easy access to wonders that were uncommon in the Threshold even in that miraculous Age. In addition to having the finest weather-control systems and the latest artificial life forms for use as pets, work animals or servants, the wealthier mortal inhabitants could take advantage of regular skyship service to travel anywhere on the Blessed Isle with great speed. Also, these mortals initially benefited from having far more contact with the Celestial Exalted. The luckiest might become consorts and have Half-Caste children who would make sure that their parents were well cared for. Many more were able to find work as the aides and servants to the Exalts—working in their households and having access to riches and wonders of which even the wealthiest mortal merchant or the most powerful thaumaturge could only dream.

Also, the Celestial Exalts regularly selected citizens of the Blessed Isle to become part of their programs designed to improve humanity. Residents who particularly distinguished themselves could volunteer to be transformed into the first human inhabitants of the skies and the seas, as Solars gave them and their descendents gills or wings. To more fully make use of these new breeds of humanity, the Exalts built huge undersea cities off the coast of the Blessed Isle and created enormous floating cities that flew above it on currents of Essence.

While this degree of contact was a wondrous blessing at the height of the Solar Deliberative, the inhabitants of the Blessed Isle suffered greatly as the Solar Exalted grew increasingly mad. While the influence of their saner fellows kept the most violent and dangerous Solar Exalts from laying waste to entire cities, as they did in some portions of the Threshold, the households of the Solar Exalts who still lived on the Blessed Isle became strange and terrible places. Servants were killed or tortured for trivial mistakes or subjected to horrific experiments to “improve their efficiency” or test some mad theory their Exalted masters had developed. On one Solar estate, half of the thousands of mortal servants were given roots and bark-like skin and planted in elaborate gardens. In another mansion, hundreds of mortals were altered so that their screams became inhumanly lovely and melodious. The Exalt who owned this mansion crafted beautiful, merciless automata to play upon the flesh of these servants, and powerful life-preserving Charms and artifacts kept the servants alive. The Exalt put on performances that lasted for many days at a time and were renowned for both

the beauty of the music and the inventiveness and extremity of the tortures used.

Shortly before the Usurpation, almost every mortal living in the Blessed Isle knew someone who had been killed or horribly used by the Solar Exalted. As a result, the cities of the Blessed Isle became centers for a carefully hidden resistance against the excesses of the Solar Deliberative. Knowing the horrible fates that awaited anyone caught in a conspiracy against the Solar Exalted, the rebels and dissidents held secret meetings, where most members wore masks and otherwise disguised their identities. These precautions made sure that conspirators caught by the Solars could not reveal the identities of other rebels, even when powerful Charms forced them to love their Solar interrogators with undying passion.

This spirit of resistance grew among the citizens of the Blessed Isle, while the Sidereal Exalted examined the complexities of the Loom of Fate and made their own plans. Using impenetrable disguises, the Sidereals moved among the dissidents and would-be rebels and used these mortals and Dragon-Bloods as the workforce to lay the groundwork for their daring coup. Although they had operatives and dupes throughout Creation, the heart of the Sidereals’ carefully managed conspiracy was the Blessed Isle. Here, they arranged a vast banquet and invited every Solar they could persuade to come. More than two thirds of all Solars, including almost every Solar Exalt currently on the Blessed Isle, attended this banquet and was slain without even a chance to resist.

Once again, the Blessed Isle was protected against the destruction caused by this violent coup by the Sidereals and the Dragon-Blooded. After the deadly banquet, the few Solar Exalted still in the Realm rapidly fled to the furthest portions of the Threshold, seeking some place of safety. Almost none even stopped to destroy a single village or town before they fled for their lives. As a result, once the Usurpation was over, the Blessed Isle remained largely untouched. The only remaining dangers were in the estates left behind by the murdered Solars. These estates housed strange and deadly artifacts and were inhabited by exotic beings whose loyalty to their Solar masters often extended far beyond the Solars’ deaths. While dozens of Dragon-Blooded and many hundreds of mortals met their deaths purging the dangers from these estates, the Dragon-Blooded took complete control of the Realm after less than a decade of work, all under the careful guidance of their secret Sidereal advisors.

Although the time of the Dragon-Blooded Shogunate was a less grandiose era, the Blessed Isle remained the matchless and immaculate jewel of Creation and the center of the new Terrestrial dynasty. The cities continued to thrive, and much of the Isle was now divided up into estates for the Dragon-Blooded. Most such estates were built on lands once used for the Solars’ expansive homes, and a few were actually made from the actual buildings once inhabited by the murdered Solars.

For 70 mortal generations, the Shogunate ruled Creation, and the seat of its power was always the Blessed Isle. As with



the Celestial Exalted before them, most Dragon-Bloods had homes in the Blessed Isle, and many lived there full time, administering distant provinces using proxies, Charms and sorcery.

Although the Dragon-Blooded made few new discoveries during this era, floating cities still hovered in the skies above the Blessed Isle, and even the poorest inhabitant benefited from the era's many wonders. For instance, luxuries such as Essence-powered machines that provided every dwelling with light, heat and clean water were available to everyone. In addition, housing was inexpensive because every city contained dozens (or sometimes hundreds) of towers that were as much as 300 yards tall. The largest of these towers could house as many as 8,000 mortals, carried up and down these vast structures in Essence-powered lifts.

Although attacks by the Fair Folk increased during the Shogunate and the Neverborn occasionally sent forth scores of ghosts to attack the living, the power of the Dragon-Blooded and the distance of the Blessed Isle from the troubled edges of Creation protected the land and its inhabitants from such dangers. Even once the Dragon-Blooded began to war among themselves, the majority of their battles took place in the Threshold. Dragon-Blooded on the Blessed Isle sometimes had to fear assassination or court intrigues, but the cities and estates of this land remained safe from warfare.

Records indicate that although the Great Contagion ravaged the populace of the Blessed Isle to a lesser extent than it did in the Threshold, the Isle's dense cities and vast estates were where mortality was the highest. Although the Contagion killed almost nine tenths of the population throughout Creation, the mortality was almost 100 percent within the boundaries of the Blessed Isle's cities. The tall towers of Meru became enormous charnel houses. Shortly after this catastrophe, the vanguard of the armies of the Fair Folk overran the outermost portions of this once-serene land.

THE SCARLET EMPRESS AND THE IMPERIAL MANSE

When the armies of the Fair Folk invaded Creation, the woman who was to become the Scarlet Empress was yet a young captain of the Ninth Legion of the personal army of the Shogun of the Realm. She was a woman of impeccable family and some wealth, whose ability to rally her troops in the face of even the most dangerous crisis had earned her several commendations. Fortunate enough to possess well-equipped and well-motivated soldiers, she understood the futility of fighting the vast armies of Fair Folk in the field. Their numbers were too great, their powers too terrifying, and the Dragon-Blooded simply too few. She became convinced that the Realm's only hope of salvation lay in the abandoned and potentially deadly relics of the First Age.

The histories of the First Age told of prior Fair Folk invasions, but those invasions were always driven back by heroes wielding incredible powers. After studying forbidden texts, she became convinced that these legends were true. The majority of this power, she discovered, was concentrated

in a single structure—the forbidding Palace of the Anathema, a long-sealed fortress in the center of Vanchow, a moderate-sized but otherwise unremarkable city near the eastern coast of the Blessed Isle. Commandeering a boat, she and four of her most trusted lieutenants sailed back to the Blessed Isle. With her, she carried several tattered books and one ancient map. She believed that these items held the key to locating and activating the defenses the ancients had used against the encroaching Fair Folk in years past. While battles raged throughout the Threshold, she and her companions sought to unseal the entrances to the ancient manse. After weeks of frantic attempts to breach its defenses, which easily withstood the mightiest weapons of the era, she managed to unlock the gates of the manse and enter.

THE IMPERIAL MANSE

Known as the Sword of Creation during the First Age, and as the Palace of the Anathema in the Shogunate, this huge structure is now universally called the Imperial Manse. It is located in the center of what is now the Imperial City, near the eastern coast of the Blessed Isle. Here the currents of Essence flowing through the Blessed Isle converge and meet in a vast upwelling of power that is tapped by this mighty fortress. Using techniques understood only by Autochthon and the wisest Solar Exalted, and which could be safely used only by one of the Celestial Exalted, the Imperial Manse lay vacant during the Shogunate Era. The Dragon-Blooded rightly feared the many lethal defenses within, and—like many other powerful sites used exclusively by the Anathema—they placed it under heavy guard. They permitted limited experiments with the devices within such sites but were unwilling to risk the safety of the Blessed Isle to the little-understood powers contained there.

Records do not describe what happened inside the Imperial Manse that day, but the young captain was the only one who returned from the desperate mission inside the Palace of the Anathema. Only the Empress and a few of her closest advisors know that two of her four companions were slaughtered by the lethally intricate defenses surrounding the engines of destruction. The third shed his heart's blood upon a stone slab so that his sacrifice might awaken and feed the powerful and hungry spirits who tended the venerable defenses. And the last was given, willingly, as a gift by the captain to the guardian of the site, her soul torn screaming from her broken body as a token of the survivor's deadly earnest. Everyone who ventured into the Palace of the Anathema had been ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of the land when they entered the citadel. Only the future Empress was left with the terrible burden of survival.

The results of these heroic sacrifices were immediate and obvious. In less than an hour, vast beams of crackling



Essence struck out from the Imperial Manse and the score of war manses that were scattered across the Blessed Isle. These beams instantly evaporated the front ranks of the Fair Folk armies. Simultaneously, a host of giant warriors, some as many as a dozen yards tall, rode and flew out of the Imperial Manse. Inhuman and terrible to look upon, most had unnatural bodies composed of one of the five elements. These deadly beings attacked the survivors and drove them back out into the Wyld. These huge warriors faded only once the Fair Folk reached the Bordermarches of the Wyld.

This vast display of power saved both the Blessed Isle and those portions of Creation that had not yet been fully subsumed by the Wyld. Because the Scarlet Empress lacked both the knowledge and finesse of the Solar Exalted for whom these defenses had been built, however, earthquakes rocked the Blessed Isle. After the attacking armies of the Fair Folk had been destroyed and the few survivors had fled to the Middlemarches, both Vanchow and the northern portion of abandoned Meru lay in ruins. The devastation was far less throughout most of the Blessed Isle, but no portion of it remained untouched.

THE SEVEN TIGERS

In the hours that followed the end of the Fair Folk invasion, there was stunned silence. For days, the only sights on battlefields were dazed soldiers keeping a half-bewildered sentry against a possible counterattack and looters half-heartedly stripping the bodies of the dead. Rain poured steadily from the heavens, casting a gray veil across all Creation and driving even the greediest corpse robber to higher ground. But for a precious handful of days, there was no strife, as the entire world struggled to come to grips with the fact that both the Contagion and the Fair Folk invasion were over. An Age had ended and a new one had begun.

Dragon-Blooded commanders found themselves in the field with armies at their back and no Shogun to command them. Some few choose to harry the rear guard of the Fair Folk as it retreated, but they did so without passion, since their best efforts had done little to aid the vast Essence constructs called forth by the Imperial Manse.

More ambitious generals began to wonder what they could make of this new world. Even as the forces of the various Threshold daimyos struggled out of the mire, they faced the specter of a new age of warfare, as the shattered Shogunate made conquest a possibility now that mere survival was no longer an issue. A handful of the boldest and most daring of these generals and daimyos joined forces and agreed to rule Creation together (at least until one could gain some advantage over the others).

The oldest, Skri Shanash, invited the others to her camp at the Lap, to discuss the future of the lands around the Inland Sea. They drew up plans to carve up both the Blessed Isle and the lands of the Threshold, with provinces apportioned to each. Satisfied with the arrangement, the

so-called Seven Tigers returned to their troops and began a systematic war of conquest. They planned to subdue the coasts of the Threshold and then turn their attentions to the Blessed Isle itself.

THE EMPRESS'S RIPOSTE

Word of the Seven Tigers' depredations reached the Empress quickly, as refugees from the Threshold streamed onto the Blessed Isle with tales of the brutality of the Seven Tigers' conquests. Their armies methodically reduced the already half-destroyed cities and fortresses to rubble. Once they conquered a region, they pressed all surviving vessels into service as troop transports and were clearly readying an invasion force for the conquest of the Blessed Isle itself. As news of their victories spread, the coastal cities of the Blessed Isle repaired and augmented the defenses built in haste against the Fair Folk, and the elderly and the young were mustered to man them.

In an effort to avoid further conflict and not spill the blood of Exalts who had once been her fellow officers, the soon-to-be Empress sent messengers to order the Seven Tigers to desist their actions. The heads of the messengers were returned across the Inland Sea, their mouths stuffed with the silken scrolls they'd carried. The Empress saw only two options before her: Turn the weapons she had so recently mastered on those soldiers who once fought alongside her, or allow them to overrun the Isle and then turn on one another. Having heard stories from the cities the Seven Tigers had already overrun, and knowing that the Fair Folk still lurked on the borders of Creation, ready to return if they saw weakness, she made the only possible choice.

As the Seven Tigers readied their forces for the invasion of the Blessed Isle, she ventured back inside the Imperial Manse. Soon after, pale streamers of fire struck from the heavens at the encampments of the Seven Tigers. Vast and twisted warriors of water strode across the waves and smashed ships at harbor. Screaming winds that left coats of frost on the ground ripped down siege towers and froze men solid with a touch. Bolts of Essence-lightning leveled fortresses and vaporized mighty jade war machines. By the time the Empress called a halt, the armies of the Seven Tigers were scattered, and the generals themselves were being led back to the Isle in chains. Met at the harbor by a handful of Dragon-Blooded who had already thrown in their lot with the then-mysterious Empress, the Seven Tigers vanished, never to be seen or heard from again. Meanwhile, the laborious task of rounding up the scattered troops of the Dragon-Blooded daimyos and forging them into legions was begun. The young officer had now irrevocably set in motion her climb to the Scarlet Throne.

As before, her strike against the Seven Tigers was not without consequences. This attack on her enemies caused already-damaged buildings throughout the Blessed Isle to fall. She learned, however, that if she limited the scope of her weapons to the Blessed Isle and the seas immediately surrounding it, she could control the forces of the Imperial



Scarlet

Defense Grid—as she had renamed the Sword of Creation—sufficiently well to avoid anything more than minor tremors. As a result, the Scarlet Empress had to be content with ruling the Blessed Isle.

Although it had suffered vast devastation, the Blessed Isle had been cleansed of all Wyld taint, and a combination of the island's natural Essence flows and the Defense Grid kept shadowlands from forming within its borders. As a result, while it was a barren and devastated land compared to its former glory, it had suffered far less than most of the Threshold. It remained the tarnished crown of a much-battered Creation. The finest cities of the post-Contagion era would have been considered both small and exceptionally primitive by the standards of both the First Age and the Shogunate, but regardless, the finest cities remained in the Blessed Isle.

CHEJOP KEJAK AND THE FORMATION OF THE SCARLET EMPIRE

After her triumph over her rivals, the soon-to-be Scarlet Empress was approached by an emissary of Chejop Kejak, leader of the Bronze Faction of the Sidereal Exalted. Troubled by the possibility of a recurrence of either the Contagion or the Fair Folk invasion, he wished to make sure that such catastrophes never happened again. He believed that the young woman who had just saved Creation was his best hope for achieving this goal. The Empress recognized the precarious nature of her situation. If she attempted to step down, she would almost certainly be tortured by ruthless would-be

conquerors so that they could learn the secrets of the Imperial Manse, and Creation would succumb to chaos and endless war. Yet, if she used her power indiscriminately to eliminate all who stood against her, she'd simply raise new generations of enemies—or depopulate the Realm of the Dragon-Blooded needed to defend it against further invasions. And while she was safe from any sane rival as long as she was the only one with access to the defenses of Imperial Manse, she also knew that some of her rivals were far from sane.

Kejak's proposition offered her a glimmer of hope. She returned the emissary with a promise of acceptance... as long as Kejak came to her. Stunned by her insolence, but fully aware of both her raw power and the gravity of the situation, the Sidereal swallowed his pride and journeyed—alone and on foot—to the ancient fortress that housed the Celestials' defenses—and the Empress as well. He knelt before the gates, head bowed, for a full day. Impressed by his show of humility, and by the fact that the arrangement was obviously so important to Kejak, the Empress opened the doors of the Palace of the Anathema and bade him enter. What transpired in that meeting can be pieced together from later events and scraps of correspondence long since destroyed.

Kejak outlined his problems, what he thought the Empress's problems were and where their interests overlapped. He then proposed a solution: resurrecting the Realm, under the Empress's guidance. He'd get a stable central political entity that could impose some kind of social structure on the Dragon-Blooded, and the Empress would receive both the empire and freedom from her rivals. The Empress thought his plan overly optimistic and naive. In her opinion, officially



reestablishing the Realm would engender a series of bloody civil wars. While her control of Celestial powers would allow her to win those wars, the price of victory seemed prohibitively high.

Kejak then informed her of the full extent of what his aid would mean. She would have the assistance of the entire Bronze Faction of the Sidereal Exalted and its most prominent tool, the Immaculate Order. He required only one condition. Kejak's examinations of the Loom of Fate told him that a purely secular empire would eventually collapse into decadence. To avoid this, he proposed linking the political necessity of empire to the spiritual structure of the existing Immaculate Philosophy. The doctrine of the Immaculate faith already stated that the Dragon-Blooded themselves were essentially divine and that their word was law. Using this philosophy to explicitly support the new Realm (as it had implicitly supported the Shogunate before the Contagion) would both help pacify the masses and also offer a sop to the other Dragon-Blooded. If they accepted Kejak's plan and supported the empire, they would be regarded as gods. If they didn't, they'd rapidly find themselves outside the empire and at the mercy of the Anathema and Fair Folk in the hinterlands. Meanwhile, the humans of the new Realm would be trained to support the empire as a matter of faith as well as good business, ensuring the loyalty of the populace. Successive generations of Dragon-Blooded would then grow up with a spiritually and politically advantageous code of conduct in place.

They argued and negotiated for nine long days, as the Empress weighed the temptations of his offer against the risks of attempting to support an empire with an untried faith—and of allowing Kejak and his allies substantial official influence. Eventually, she could see no other option, and she accepted his offer. She granted imperial sponsorship to the Immaculate Order, with the caveat that it be dedicated to

upholding the reign of the Dragon-Blooded and, through them, the Empress. Neither the Empress nor Kejak trusted the other, but both recognized that both higher loyalties and practical necessities would bind each to uphold their respective ends of the bargain.

THE BIRTH OF EMPIRE

After she completed her fateful deal with Chejop Kejak, the Empress once more used the vast machines of the Imperial Manse, but this time they had a peaceful purpose. She projected an enormous image of herself in the sky above every village and city on the Blessed Isle. When all eyes in the Blessed Isle were turned upon her, she used these machines to send her voice so that it could be heard as clearly as if she stood no more than an arm's length away from each and every listener. Her image was clad in inhumanly vivid scarlet robes, and even today, poets, novelists and foreign artists attempt to capture a pale shadow of her finery and grandeur on that fateful day. In the proclamation, she informed all of the inhabitants of the Blessed Isle that the Realm was hers to do with as she willed. This speech is familiar to every literate citizen of the Realm.

THE REACTION TO THE PROCLAMATION

In the wake of the Imperial Proclamation, there was chaos throughout the Blessed Isle. Local daimyos who dreamed of power and glory gathered their armies around them, swearing they'd serve no usurper. Immaculate temples were filled with the faithful and terrified, and true to Kejak's word, the priests counseled the troubled masses to accept the divinely granted authority of the Empress. Troops who'd witnessed the destruction of the Seven Tigers or who desperately sought a new and stable order flocked to the Empress's scarlet banner. This banner was raised in every town and

THE IMPERIAL PROCLAMATION

Children of the Blessed Isle, soldiers and priests, Exalted of the Immaculate Dragons and those who toil in the dust, hear me. Know that the wars and the Contagion are over, now and forever. Know that the Fair Folk have been driven back to the empty places beyond the walls of the world and that it is my power that has done so. Know that those who sought unlawful dominion over the Blessed Isle have been vanquished and their bones sunk beneath the mire at the bottom of the hungry seas. You have peace. This is my gift to you. I think you are all wise enough to accept it.

Your gift to me shall be obedience. For I am the Scarlet Empress, she who has laid waste to the Fair Folk and washed clean the Contagion and she who has protected the Blessed Isle so that you might live. Mine is the power and the right to rule, and mine is the power and the right to destroy all those who would threaten this land.

Let it be proclaimed, therefore, that the Realm has risen and that the Scarlet Empress reigns over it with honor as its shogun and queen. Let it be proclaimed that the subjects of the Realm do fealty to the Empress and serve the Realm faithfully, for it nurtures and protects them even as the Empress does. And let the enemies of the Realm tremble, for there is no power in all Creation that can stand against it.



hamlet on the Blessed Isle (often through the actions of itinerant monks, who'd been alerted by their superiors that the proclamation was coming). Within a fortnight, the bulk of the troops on the Isle had sworn fealty to the Scarlet Empress, and their commanding officers had received visitations from the Empress like the one in which she had proclaimed her authority. The legions were put in motion against those Dragon-Blooded who had announced their defiance or their desire for independence, and the results were swift and bloody. In less than a year, the Empress's legions had scoured the Isle of most opposition and established the new Realm as a solid and forceful entity that soldiers could follow and citizens could take comfort in.

THE FOUNDING OF IMPERIAL CITY

The capital city of the Old Realm was the vast metropolis of Meru, located at the foot of the huge Imperial Mountain. Here were located the vast palaces and largest factory-cathedrals of the Anathema. The moderate-sized city known as Vanchow, however, near the eastern coast of the Blessed Isle, had once been a vital part of the Old Realm's defenses. There, Autochthon had built the Sword of Creation over the largest confluence of Essence currents in Creation. Yet, when she activated the Realm's defenses both to repel the Fair Folk invasion and to destroy the Seven Tigers, the resulting earthquakes had destroyed most of Vanchow. Only the Imperial Manse stood untouched amid the ruins and the thousands of corpses created by the Great Contagion. Afterward, the Empress lived in the outer chambers of the building she now referred to as the Imperial Manse.

As word of her presence there spread, petitioners, would-be courtiers and representatives of the Immaculate Order sent by Chejop Kejak all came to the ruins of Vanchow. At first, they settled in the few surviving structures or camped among the ruins. In time, they began to bury the bodies of the dead and remove the rubble. Soon, the Scarlet Empress's advisors among the Immaculate Order suggested that she commission a new capital.

The capitol of the Dragon-Blooded Shogunate was also in ruins, and those few portions that survived were a vast charnel house. The Scarlet Empress knew how closely her rule was tied to her control of the Imperial Manse, so she ordered the Shogunate capitol be razed and proclaimed Vanchow as the new capital of the Realm. Three years after the Imperial Proclamation, the Scarlet Empress commanded her subjects to build the Imperial City on the ruins of Vanchow. Here, the Realm's greatest architects competed to gain permission to build the largest and most important public buildings. In addition to monies derived from taxes, much of the city was paid for by wealthy Dragon-Blooded who wished to lavishly demonstrate their wealth, their generosity and, most importantly, their loyalty to their new Empress. The Scarlet Empress personally approved all of the plans for the city, as she was determined to have a capitol that was the gem of Creation.

Using summoned demons and elementals and some of the more powerful artifacts remaining from the Shogunate, as well as vast numbers of skilled and unskilled mortals, the initial plan was completed in nine years. As the inhabitants of the Realm came to terms with their survival and the fact that life would indeed go on in this new Age, however, more people continued to flock to the Imperial City. As a result, construction continued, albeit at a slower pace, for the next 91 years. By the time it was largely completed in RY 103, the city was home to more than two million inhabitants. Both then and now, it is the largest city in Creation.

THE FATE OF THE THRESHOLD

The Scarlet Empress soon realized that without regular use of the full power of the Imperial Manse, she had little hope of ruling the entirety of Creation. By the time she had brought the Blessed Isle largely under her control, reports were already coming in about various states in the Threshold forming around all manner of local leaders. After further discussion with Chejop Kejak, they both sadly understood that without fleets of skyships and other lost wonders of the Shogunate, there was no way for any Dragon-Blood, even one backed by the power of the Imperial Manse, to control much more territory than the Empress already did.

The Scarlet Empress also realized, though, that her newly founded empire could be gradually strangled if it were cut off from the rich provinces surrounding the Inland Sea. At this point, she attempted to ensure a solid imperial foothold off the Blessed Isle without world conquest. Those states that immediately offered allegiance to her were granted special privileges. Their queens and princes were invited to meet with the Empress and offer counsel, and legions were posted throughout their territories so that they need not bear the expenditure of their own defense. In addition, the export of their goods to the Blessed Isle was exempted from the usual tariffs imposed on foreign trade. Ambassadors, accompanied by operatives of the nascent All-Seeing Eye, traveled on diplomatic missions to the neighbors of these allied provinces. Empowered to offer similarly generous terms, these ambassadors proposed unification with the new Realm without the slightest threat or effort at coercion. Meanwhile, other agents of the All-Seeing Eye canvassed the territory, with an eye toward subversion or gathering intelligence for invasion should the offer be refused.

Ultimately, most of the kingdoms, duchies, provinces and city-states along the rim of the sea agreed to various tributary relationships with the Realm. Several came to agreements with imperial ambassadors only after legion troops deposed rulers disinclined to negotiate, and independent-minded governors demonstrated a tendency to suddenly drop dead with no visible cause. By RY 223, much of the Threshold had come loosely under imperial control. Imperial territories and tributary lands paid taxes to the



imperial coffers, receiving in exchange the protection afforded by the legions, the benefits of the presence of the Immaculate Order and a preferential trade relationship both with the Isle and with other imperial territories and tributaries. The Realm also built paved roads and harbors in many areas. These latter were put in place to facilitate the movement of troops should such become necessary in the future. In the interim, though, the benefit they afforded trade was immeasurable. Using a careful mixture of occasional brutal punishments and frequent generous rewards, the Empress was able to minimize revolts and disruptions to trade from one end of the Inland Sea to the other, and the resultant flow of wealth to the Blessed Isle was both immense and unceasing.

Some of these allied states were reduced to penury by taxes and similar forms of tribute they paid to the Realm, but several of the stronger young nations were potent enough to be able to dictate their own terms in their dealings with the Realm. Armed with magics of their own, strong defenses and ready troops, they were rich but unprofitable targets, and the Empress wisely accepted their allegiance without forcing their subservience. The only term that was immutable in any treaty made with the Realm involved the Anathema. Other concessions could be asked for and granted, tariffs lowered and taxes negotiated. But in every single instance of discussion with the Realm, one constant held: Any Anathema found were to be turned over to the agents of the Realm immediately. Failure to do so was always grounds for war.

THE SCAVENGER LANDS

The only place where the Empress's policy of alliance and subversion utterly failed was in the territories once known as the River Province, now referred to as the Scavenger Lands. The Scarlet Empress desperately wished to gain control of the large store of First Age weapons and technologies held by the Seventh Legion of the Shogunate. Unfortunately, this same storehouse of ancient wonders is the reason for her continued failures in this region. The Seventh Legion soon formed the city-state of Lookshy from the ruins of Deheleshen. Determined to make their land the last bastion of the Shogunate, the generals of Lookshy had no interest in forming an alliance with a woman they regarded as a brash upstart. Using their advanced weapons, they successfully repulsed the Empress's many attempts at invasion. By RY 302, Lookshy and the Realm had an uneasy truce, but Lookshy remains ever vigilant. Over the next 466 years since that truce was reached, the Empress continued to send various military expeditions and covert missions into the Scavenger Lands, but she avoided making direct threats to Lookshy.

HISTORY AND THE STATUS QUO

The history of the Scarlet Empress's Realm has included decades-long (even centuries-long) stretches when nothing of historical importance occurred. Crops were planted and harvested, taxes were levied and collected, and the sun rose and set every day without incident. This stability is a hallmark of the Empress's success. Having seen the horrors of the Contagion and the social chaos that led up to the end of the Shogunate, both the Scarlet Empress and the Sidereal Exalted of the Bronze Faction desire nothing so much as to leave behind a legacy of peace, prosperity and stability. For the Empress, a decade without the need for another war was both a decade without anything that might upset her reign and a decade when the populace could live without fear.

Nevertheless, large-scale stability was not the same as stasis. While the incidents of those long decades never shook the pillars of the empire, they were certainly not dull to those living through them. Great Houses rose and fell to intrigue or poor fortune. Local peasant revolts arose and were put down, often brutally. Provinces declared independence and were dragged back into the fold. Pirates hunted Realm ships and were harried across the Inland Sea. Anathema appeared and were slain by the Wyld Hunt, and not a year went by without some prodigy, omen or false heir appearing and causing the gossipmongers of the Imperial City to predict changes, scandals or even the imminent fall of the Realm.

As dramatic as these brief incidents were, they neither shook nor altered the course of the Realm. Business continued as usual, and citizens and peasants who were not directly involved in these incidents rarely knew which province was in revolt on a given day and typically forgot this information within a few weeks. The Realm endured. While the elevation of each Great House and the fall of each rebellious satrap were duly recorded by clerks of the Ministry of Scrupulous Observance of History, most of these events were largely forgotten before scribes finished chronicling them.

CURRENT EVENTS: THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE SCARLET EMPRESS

Five years ago, in the midst of the inauspicious five-day period of Calibration, the Empress vanished without a trace. Simply disappearing for a few days or even a few months was not necessarily unusual. She had taken brief sabbaticals from the Scarlet Throne before, some lasting as long as half a year. The Realm continued to function smoothly during these

absences, carrying itself forward on sheer momentum as the mechanisms of government lurched along with business as usual. Certain that she would soon return, none of the Great Houses made a play for the Scarlet Throne. Even the mostly powerful and highly placed Dynasts were wary that this could be some trick of the Empress's to see which of her offspring were too ambitious for their own good. In the past, she had always returned as if she had never been away, with no word as to where she had been or what she had done.

THE VACANT THRONE

Popular songs of the Realm speak of what the Empress did during her disappearances. The more romantic ones claim that, during these times, the Empress took it upon herself to disguise herself as a humble peasant woman and walk to and fro on her lands, and up and down in them, so that she might better understand the suffering of her people. When she had seen enough, the songs went, she would return to the Imperial Palace and use what she had learned to govern the Realm more wisely. Other more ribald (and less widely performed) tunes describe debauched and erotic adventures with everyone from the gods of Yu-Shan to the Lintha pirates of Bluehaven.

These melodies are, of course, not close to the truth. After centuries of rule, the Scarlet Empress cares for nothing except the Realm, her continued dominance over it and the powerful and potentially deadly mysteries of the Imperial Manse. The Empress's absences from public life were all spent deep in the depths of the Imperial Manse itself. There, she labored to propitiate the engines and the things dwelling therein that had brought her to power, offering them sacrifices of treasure, blood and souls in exchange for continued mastery of the devices and further instruction in their use. Thousands of slaves have been sacrificed thus over the years, as well as some of the Realm's most powerful Dragon-Blooded, a handful of unwary spirits, at least one imperial consort and the Empress's youngest daughter, whose curiosity led her to follow her mother a trifle too far into the palace.

THE LONG ABSENCE: THE REALM

BEGINS TO FRAGMENT

While everyone pretended it was business as usual when the Empress first vanished in RY 763, every well-connected Dynast was aware that something was seriously amiss by late 764. While the Empress had vanished before, she had never been gone for so long, and the complete absence of any communication had senior members of the Thousand Scales, the Dynasty and the Immaculate Order extremely worried. Several luminaries—most notably the venerable Shenesh of House Iselsi, the ancient and well-respected Minister of the Imperial Gardens, and no fewer than six abbots of the Immaculate Order—convened a meeting to address the question of what to do if she failed to return. After making certain that there was no hint as to her actual fate or any evidence

that she might return, the council began to debate the far trickier question of succession. Presented with what might be their golden opportunity, the most powerful Dynasts were reluctant to seize power. They not only feared that civil war might result but also simultaneously hoped and feared that the Empress might secretly be watching and would return mere hours after they declared their rulership, inflicting decades of torture upon anyone foolish enough to attempt to usurp her throne. Instead, an unlikely alliance of Nellens, Ragara and Cynis nobles put forth the following plan: The heads of the Immaculate Order would announce that the Empress had gone into seclusion to meditate upon the state of the Realm and would return in due time.

The Deliberative would choose a regent to guide the Realm in her place, doing nothing save occasionally waving to the populace, so that the peasants would not grow restive. Should the Empress not return within seven years, then steps toward a more permanent succession might be taken. In the interim, all were to regard themselves as caretakers of the Realm against the day when the Empress returned. Both satisfied and relieved, the various representatives to the Council of the Empty Throne departed and immediately began strengthening their positions against the day when competition for the Scarlet Throne would be thrown open. The Deliberative did its part to perfection, selecting a timid and mediocre member of House Tepet to keep the Empress's seat cushions warm in her absence.

That selection, however, was the only aspect of the council's decision that went as planned. Even before the council met, the allied city-state of Thorns was conquered by the Mask of Winters and transformed into a vast new

shadowland. Farther north, a minor barbarian upstart known as the Bull of the North was revealed to be a powerful Anathema working with an Anathema sorceress known as Samea. Together, they and their forces defeated the Realm's Linowan allies and destroyed the Tepet Legions. The activities of both the Deathlords and the Anathema terrified the populace of the Realm, who began to worry that the Scarlet Empress disappearance might have signaled the dawn of a new and terrible era.

Emboldened by tales of the Bull of the North's victories over the Realm's forces, barbarian attacks on legion outposts increased. As the various branches of the Imperial Service began to strive against each other, the legions found themselves increasingly ill supported. In the satrapies of the northern coast, rainy winters and dry summers wrecked crops, and the taxes levied on tributary states shot upward as the machinery of empire lurched to a halt. As further evidence of weakness inspired increasingly greedy and self-serving thoughts, the least loyal tributaries in the Threshold edged toward revolt and independence. On the Blessed Isle, the families of the Dynasty circled each other warily, waiting for an opening either to ascend or to bring a rival down. Meanwhile, the Scarlet Throne sat empty, for not even Regent Fokuf dared seat himself upon it more than once. In the streets, some peasants sing songs of the Empress's triumphant return in the hopes that she will be their salvation. In the Immaculate temples, the priests and the faithful nervously discuss whether the Elemental Dragons are displeased. And in the Realm's halls of power, the possibility of civil war becomes ever more real with every passing day.

TIMELINE OF THE SCARLET EMPRESS REALM

Realm Year	Event
1	The destruction of the Fair Folk armies. The annihilation of the Seven Tigers. The founding of the Realm.
3	The Imperial City is founded
12	Founding of the All-Seeing Eye.
38	Establishment of the first ministries and magistrates.
40	The legions are reestablished.
44	Araka Jeresh, lover of the Scarlet Empress, assassinated by a lovesick suitor.
57	First assault on the River Province.
69	Imperial forces withdraw from the Scavenger Lands.
75	Second invasion of the Scavenger Lands.
76	Seventh Legion troops use First Age weapons against the legions of the Realm. Imperial forces withdraw from the Scavenger Lands again.
81	Empress decrees the separation of High and Low Realm.
88	Realm's last full invasion of the Scavenger Lands.
89	Empress's Guard destroyed at Melevhil.
103	Founding of the Deliberative.
114	Assassination attempt on the Empress; founding of the policy of the Thousand Mazy Paths. Empress marries Rawar of Arjuf.

TIMELINE OF THE SCARLET EMPRESS REALM CONTINUED

- 130 Birth of Manosque.
- 139 Birth of Ragara.
- 146 Bagrash Köl uses the Eye of Autochthon to build a great kingdom in the North, which surpasses the early Realm.
- 174 Nine Duchies Banner is raised to the northwest across the Inland Sea. Three legions are sent to crush it.
- 176 Bagrash Köl destroyed by the Eye.
- 202 The Thousand Scales reaches its current form.
- 211 Delzahn Horde conquers Chiaroscuro, offers fealty to the Realm.
- 223 Relationship finalized with all states along Inland Sea and many well into the Threshold.
- 227 Nellens taken as consort.
- 231 Sesus born.
- 235 Ledaal born.
- 244 Manosque Viridian uses the Eye of Autochthon in an attempt to stage a coup. He is destroyed by the defenses of the Realm, and his House is put to the sword.
- 261 Nellens dies.
- 299 Trae Leng's Revolt.
- 301 House Iselsi sponsors a semi-official expedition into the Scavenger Lands, which fails spectacularly.
- 303 House Iselsi attempts a coup after its unsuccessful adventure in the Scavenger Lands. The attempt is crushed out of hand, and the Iselsi are stripped of most of their possessions and made servants of the Scarlet Throne.
- 326 Vengeful Harvest uprising.
- 362 Tepet taken as consort.
- 364 Barbarian incursions along the northern coast of the Inland Sea repulsed by the Gleaming Fang Legion (formerly the 11th).
- 369 Birth of Mnemon.
- 370 Rawar dies.
- 371 Imperial consort Tepet vanishes.
- 416 The Guild boycotts trade with the Blessed Isle. The Trade War ensues; resolved in RY 418 as each side recognizes how untenable continued hostilities are. Guild trade items bear an extra tariff for the next two centuries as a result.
- 422 Elevation of House Nellens.
- 433 Fire seen in the skies over the Imperial Mountain. Mountain People send emissary to the Empress and return with remarkable gifts, though their delegation had been reduced in number.
- 465 Unbroken Rushes Rebellion.
- 550 Treaties renegotiated with Chiaroscuro and other major cities to relax tariffs.
- 578 War against the Anathema Jochim, which ends in 585.
- 591 Ragara's Widows Uprising.
- 707 Bloodied Scythe Uprising.
- 748 The Empress supports an underdog in the succession of the city of Thorns in exchange for a cat's-paw to use against the Scavenger Lands.
- 752 The forces of Thorns are mauled.
- 754 The Battle of Mishaka. Armies of Thorns devastated.
- 763 The Empress vanishes.
- 764 The Council of the Empty Throne. Armies of Mask of Winters attack and sack Thorns. The Battle of Futile Blood, the Bull of the North slaughters the remainder of the Tepet Legions, under the command of Tepet Arada, in the Valley of Shards.
- 768 Current day.



MOVE.



IMPERTINENT...
HIC!
DO YOU KNOW
WHO I AM?



NO.

I CLEAN HORSE
DUNG OFF THIS
STREET ALL DAY, AND
THIS BEER'S MY ONLY PAY.
NOW, I AIM TO STAND HERE
AND DRINK IT. YOU GOT A
PROBLEM WITH THAT?



NO.



CRACK



NO.



CHAPTER TWO LIFE ON THE BLESSED ISLE

This vast island is home to the largest kingdom in Creation, as well as the most populous and the most advanced. When discussing the lives of any of its tens of millions of inhabitants, the first and most important factor to consider is always those inhabitants' social class. In the rigid hierarchy of the Blessed Isle, the lives of the Dynasts, patricians, citizens, peasants and slaves are all prescribed by their status. Within the limitations of their social classes, the lives of the patricians and citizens can be rich and full, but neither group can ever aspire to the power and influence of the Dynasts. The lives of the peasants might be largely free from either famine or the threat of violent death, but they can look forward to only toil and drudgery as their lot. With the exception of a few carefully regulated paths to advancement, everyone is born into a station, and attempting to go beyond that station is not only nigh impossible but a transgression against the will of the Immaculate Dragons.

THE 11 GREAT HOUSES

The 11 Great Houses are matrilineal family lines that have a recognized political place in the Realm. They were all created by the Empress to recognize the fact that the hereditary nature of Terrestrial Exaltation meant that certain families were destined to become politically and economically important to the Realm. The leaders of Great Houses have special rights of audience with the Empress, each of the Houses may own slaves, and each can also keep small numbers of household troops. In addition, the Dynasts get special tax arrangements, and they fill important roles in the Realm by providing generals, satraps, ministers and other important functionaries in the imperial government. In almost all cases, the founders of Great Houses are Dragon-Blooded—House Nellens is the only Great House with a mortal founder. Leaders of Great Houses are usually descendants of the Empress, but three times, the Empress has adopted a worthy as her child in order to use that child as the foundation of

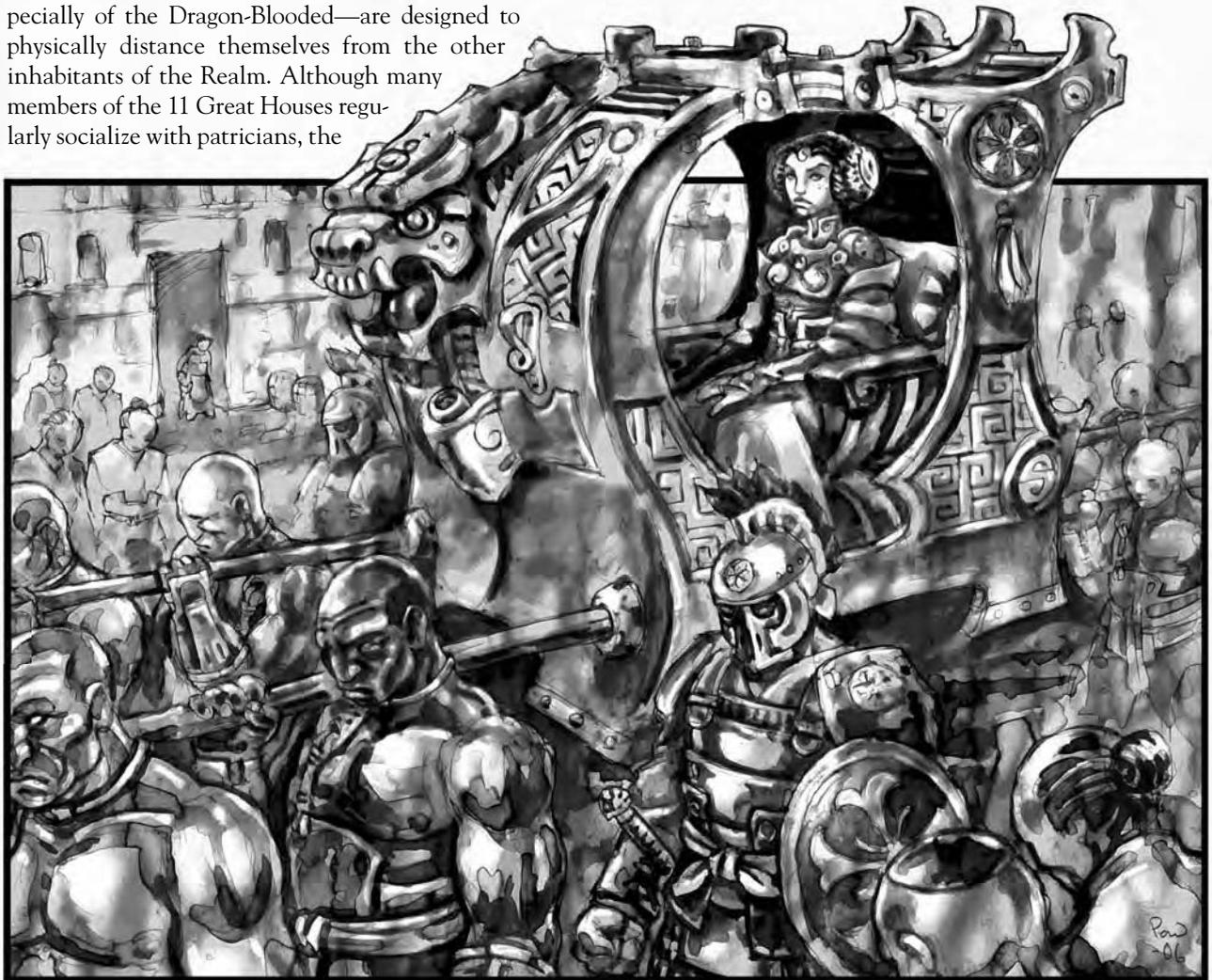
a Great House. The founder of a Great House uses only her given name, and any offspring she bears or adopts take the founder's given name as their family name.

Great Houses do not necessarily endure forever. There have been 23 recognized Great Houses during the Realm's history, of which only 11 survive today. The other 12 fell to treachery, treason or misfortune. The last House created was House V'neef, founded 60 years ago by the Imperial Cupbearer, probably to counterbalance the Peleps maritime advantage, though that was only apparent several years later. New Great Houses always enjoyed the Empress's utmost favor; if they did not, their peers would quickly rend them asunder. The Great Houses always dread the creation of a new House, as it means that some or all of the established Houses would lose assets, which are stripped away and given to the new House.

The members of the 11 Great Houses grow up knowing that they are the true lords of the Realm. They also are taught that even those members unfortunate enough not to Exalt are inherently far superior to the lower classes. To maintain this separation between Dynasts and commoners and this sense of superiority, the lives of all Dynasts—especially of the Dragon-Blooded—are designed to physically distance themselves from the other inhabitants of the Realm. Although many members of the 11 Great Houses regularly socialize with patricians, the

vast majority of Dynasts have absolutely no social contact with commoners.

On many Dynastic estates, the majority of work is performed by slaves, and the residents interact with almost no commoners. Even when working in the Thousand Scales or in trade, most Dynasts and almost all Dragon-Blooded make an effort to isolate themselves from commoners. Commoners must instead talk to a Dynast's patrician secretary or her enslaved amanuensis. Both the Scarlet Empress and the tenets of the Immaculate Philosophy strongly encourage this separation on the grounds that familiarity breeds contempt, while isolation increases respect and deference. The Scarlet Empress understood that social isolation combined with the Dragon-Blooded's inhuman powers would cause commoners to think of them as almost divine beings whose power was nearly limitless because it was so mysterious. More importantly, this isolation would also help encourage the people to accept the Immaculate Philosophy's teaching that the Dragon-Blooded were inherently wiser and more perfect than ordinary mortals. Therefore, most commoners would blame the problems of the Realm upon patricians and other lesser government officials.





The only places where commoners can freely interact with Dynasts is within the ranks of the Imperial Army or inside the Immaculate Order. In both cases, all such interactions are governed by strict rules, and the mortals have been thoroughly indoctrinated in the proper attitude of deference toward Dragon-Blooded. Dynasts, both mortal and Dragon-Blooded, who have spent time in either organization usually develop at least some degree of rapport with their fellows, regardless of whether these individuals are commoners or other Dynasts. The strict rituals and rigid discipline of both organizations, however, keeps Dynasts in either organization from forgetting the division between themselves and ordinary commoners.

Within the Realm, many peasants assume that all Dynasts are Exalts, but a large number of the children born to Dynasts never Exalt. These elevated mortals lead privileged and wealthy lives, but few go on to secondary school, and most must be content with less highly elevated positions within the Realm. Many are encouraged to look after their family estates so that the Dragon-Blooded members of the House will be free to spend time in the Immaculate Order or the Thousand Scales, but determined mortal Dynasts can rise quite high in the Realm. Nevertheless, many Dragon-Blooded consider the most important feature of any mortal Dynast to be his bloodline, and being the parent of a child who Exalts always earns such a Dynast much acclaim.

THE PATRICIANS

Second only to the Dynasts themselves are the patricians. Related distantly by blood to the glorious Dragon-Blooded and occasionally giving birth to Dragon-Blooded children, the patricians make up the wealthiest and most powerful class of mortals in the Realm. They also have greater rights and more power than any commoners. The Dragon-Bloods of the 11 Great Houses hold all of the highest offices on the Blessed Isle, and their un-Exalted kin typically become their aides and immediate underlings, as well as forming the bulk of the mid-level officers of the legions. The bureaucracy of the Realm is far too large, however, for the important offices to be held solely by Dynasts. The highest-ranking patricians are ministers of the Thousand Scales, prefects in the regional government, winglords of the legions and trierarchs of ships in the Imperial Navy. The children of these worthies—in fact, any patrician children who show sufficient promise—can attend the same primary schools as the children of the 11 Great Houses. Here, they learn and play beside individuals who will Exalt and become the lords of the Realm. Such contacts both in school and later in government or the legions permit friendships and a close understanding to grow among the patricians and the Dynasts. As a result, many patricians have Dragon-Blooded mentors, patrons and allies they can ask for both favors and information.

The close bonds between the patricians and the Dynasts of the 11 Great Houses are also reflected by the vast social distance between patricians and commoners. With the

exception of some social and economic interactions with the wealthiest commoners, most patricians rarely deal with commoners except as their servants or underlings. Like the Dynasts, patricians live on large estates, and when they stay in cities, they stay in lavish townhouses isolated from the lives of most urbanites. With their lavish silks and jewelry and their easy command of High Realm, patricians live vastly different lives than citizens or peasants do, concerning themselves far more with the lives and troubles of the Dynasts than with the fates of commoners.

Yet, despite the fact that most patricians prefer to isolate themselves from commoners as much as possible, they are rarely able to do so effectively. While urban Dynasts live in walled palaces and enclosed urban compounds, the lavish townhouses of the patricians are rarely more than a few hundred yards from the more modest dwellings of the well-off citizens. Even patricians who live on their vast rural estates must deal with commoners because they almost never have access to slaves. Unlike Dynasts, who can have slaves perform all the work on their estates, patricians must rely upon peasant laborers to work their fields and skilled citizens to sew their clothes, cook their meals and craft their jewelry. As a result, most patricians must interact with commoners every day of their lives. While few have any social or informal dealings with any but the wealthiest commoners, patricians are well used to seeing and speaking with commoners, and vice versa.

Their social position means that patricians often serve as intermediaries between commoners and the Dragon-Blooded. Except for soldiers in the legions, priests and monks of the Immaculate Order and servants who work for one of the 11 Great Houses, most commoners rarely see one of the Dragon-Blooded and almost never have any chance to interact with these majestic beings. Most commoners see the Dragon-Blooded only at public ceremonies. The Terrestrial Exalted are distant rulers whose lives and concerns are largely unrelated to the lives of the average citizens of the Realm. Patricians are far less isolated, though. Their larger numbers and their positions in both the Thousand Scales and local government mean that almost every commoner has come before a patrician to seek redress for some injustice, as a defendant or witness in the Imperial Court or simply to register some piece of important paperwork. Also, just as the patricians serve as the underlings of the Dragon-Blooded, the better-educated citizens sometimes serve as the underlings of patrician ministers, prefects and archons. As a result, commoners are often quite familiar with the lives and dispositions of the patricians.

As so often happens, familiarity indeed breeds contempt. Because the Dragon-Blooded are inhuman Exalts who are glorified by the Immaculate Philosophy, as well as being distant figures whose faults and petty squabbles are rarely visible to commoners, many citizens and peasants regard them with deference and awe. Patricians, however, are both merely mortal and far more accessible. Their lives, excesses



and misfortunes are frequently the subject of public gossip and private speculation among the commoners, and they are often blamed for problems that commoners experience with the government.

In addition to legitimate complaints about greed, favoritism or incompetence by patricians, many commoners regard the Dragon-Blooded as semi-divine beings who can do no wrong. Therefore, any problems they have with the local government, the Thousand Scales or any other official agency must naturally be the fault of stupid or venal patricians who are somehow subverting the righteous will of the Exalts. For obvious reasons, the Dragon-Blooded often attempt to encourage such feelings. As a result, in many of the peasant and citizen revolts that have occurred in the Realm's history, the commoner's rise up and vent their anger upon easily accessible bodies of patricians before they are captured or killed by the legions.

PATRICIANS AND LOCAL POWER

While their lives are destined never to be as grand or glorious as those of the Exalted, patricians, like the members of the 11 Great Houses, have only a few acceptable career options in life. Many choose to leave their estates and attempt to make a name for themselves in the world. Some go into the Imperial Army or Navy, others join the Immaculate Order, and many find careers in the vast Imperial Bureaucracy. Yet, not all patricians are so ambitious or so willing to travel. Some patricians prefer to live on their great rural estates. Like the Dynasts, all patricians grow up believing that individuals of their station in life are expected, both by their fellows and by the Immaculate Dragons, to serve the Realm and its interests in some important fashion. While a few become noted *bons vivants* and dissolute rakes, the vast majority of patricians who eschew the Imperial Service go into trade to help increase their families' wealth. Others manage their farms and estates, while still others gain important appointments within the government of their prefectures. Most prefects and archons of the various prefectures are patricians whose estates lie within the prefecture they rule. These local leaders understand the particular needs of their prefectures and have connections to the various important commoners living there, allowing them to be just and efficient leaders. Unfortunately, these connections can also allow such local officials to be especially corrupt and unjust—fabricating charges against commoners whose lands or businesses they wish to control and knowing the best ways to extort excessive amounts of wealth from the populace.

In the past, the unquestioned power of the magistrates kept the most corrupt patrician prefects in line. The disappearance of the Scarlet Empress, however, has caused some of the more self-serving prefects and their allies to consider their prefectures to be their personal property and the residents to be their subjects. As disharmony increases throughout the Realm, many of the more ambitious patricians are becoming increasingly free in asserting their power. Fortunately, most

still understand that they cannot directly oppose the wishes of the Dragon-Blooded. As a result, patricians in prefectures that contain estates owned by one of the 11 Great Houses almost always either remain loyal to the Realm as a whole or to a particular Great House. Many prefectures in the more remote and less fertile portions of the Blessed Isle, however, are of little interest to the Dynasts. The patricians who control these prefectures understand that the Dragon-Bloods must now expend far more of their effort in conflicts with other nations and between the Great Houses, leaving the backwater inhabitants to fend for themselves. As the cohesion of the Realm decays, these patricians are becoming increasingly comfortable with the idea of ruling their own lands as they see fit and ignoring the government's distant and sporadic demands.

THE LIVES OF THE COMMONERS

The mortal citizens of the Realm have lives that are both far less dangerous and considerably less free than those of many of the inhabitants of the Threshold. Widespread famine is an almost nonexistent fear, as even the poorest inhabitant is assured a minimal amount of grain, onions, tubers and other simple foods. None need fear the depredations of the Fair Folk or the dead either. The commoners are excluded from all positions of power, however, and they are ruled by thousands of inhumanly powerful Exalted with centuries-long life spans.

URBAN LIFE AND THE LIVES OF THE CITIZENS

The vast majority of citizens are skilled workers who earn solid but not lavish rewards for their labors and who are mostly literate and at least somewhat educated. While some live in rural areas as petty landowners or managers employed by patricians or Dynasts to administer the labor of peasants, most citizens work in the cities and towns of the Realm. The Blessed Isle is a highly urbanized land (for the Second Age). Almost a quarter of its population lives in cities. This is possible only because a combination of weather control, good soil and carefully regulated agricultural practices makes sure that the Blessed Isle's farmland always produces bountiful amounts of food during its five yearly rice harvests. Also, on the few occasions when food production is inadequate, the Realm demands that its satrapies and protectorates pay their taxes in food, thus making certain that the inhabitants of the Blessed Isle always have enough to eat.

Every one of the island's prefectures has a capital city with a population of at least 10,000, however, and most prefectural capitals have populations of between 20,000 and 40,000. While none of these cities are as cosmopolitan or diverse as the Realm's largest cities (which can rise to the hundreds of thousands in population), all cities on the Blessed Isle share an essential similarity. With the excep-



tion of Arjuf and less than a dozen other cities that date from the First Age, all of the Blessed Isle's cities were built after the Usurpation, and most were built during the reign of the Scarlet Empress.

Regardless of when they were built, cities from all eras were carefully planned. Because the Scarlet Empress has complete authority over the Blessed Isle, she was able to decree that all city plans would share the same characteristics that have been used since the end of the war with the Primordials. As a result, all cities on the Blessed Isle share one of two exacting city plans.

PLANNED CITIES

Cities designed to support trade or to impress visitors, such as Lord's Crossing, the Imperial City and many of the prefectural capitals, are all built on a radial plan. The streets include both a series of roads that run in concentric circles and wide boulevards that run from the city center to the periphery. The center of the city is always a large open area that may be a market, as is the case in Lord's Crossing, or a large public building, such as the Imperial Palace, which lies at the heart of the Imperial City.

Cities with large military garrisons or those that form an important part of the Realm's defenses are built on a rigidly square grid plan to maximize ease of movement. Chanos and Arjuf (which is located near the House of Bells) are typical examples of such cities. Most ports are also built on a grid plan to help with their defense against invasion. Each block in these cities is between 300 and 500 yards on a side and is walled, with sturdy gates, so that each block can be sealed off from all of the others. In all of the Realm's ports, foreigners must live in a designated foreigner's quarter, which consists of one or more of these walled blocks. While foreigners can freely venture out of the foreigner's quarter in the daytime and early evening, there is a curfew after which they will be escorted back to the foreigner's quarter and fined unless they can provide an excellent reason for being out after curfew.

Regardless of the plan used in any individual city, any large-scale changes to a city must be approved by the local authorities. Buildings cannot simply be put up where or how the land lessee desires. Roads and alleys must always have a certain minimum width, only certain building materials are allowed, and the requirements for multistory buildings are even stricter. Also, every building must have adequate drainage and plumbing and a minimal number of windows. All of these laws help reduce the spread of both fires and disease and so allow cities in the Blessed Isle to be far safer and more productive than squalid Threshold cesspits such as Nexus.

Even the poorest inhabitants of these cities have certain amenities to which few other inhabitants of Creation have access. Streetlights line the roads, while running water and wide stairs for multistory buildings are found in both the wealthiest urban mansions and the poorest apartment

buildings. Also, everyone who is in need can go to the local granary and obtain a weekly ration of rice, salt, onions and dried beans. While this meager and limited food is far from appetizing, it is freely available to anyone in need. As a result, starvation (as well as the riots and lesser crimes that it so often produces in the Threshold) is largely absent from the Realm.

The Empress's strict utilitarianism has resulted in many similar benefits for urban dwellers in the Realm. The Realm has strict building codes that include provisions that mandate the use of materials that will help prevent and slow fires, as well as the use of thaumaturgical anti-fire safeguards in all multistory buildings. In addition, use of paid street cleaners and the requirements for indoor plumbing serve to greatly reduce disease, rendering the Realm largely free from the epidemics of various contagious diseases such as typhoid that regularly sweep through cities such as Nexus. In addition to reducing civil unrest, these measures also serve to maintain both morale and productivity.

THE LIVES OF CITIZENS

The jewelers, scribes, minor bureaucrats, shop owners, scholars, physicians, thaumaturges and small-scale merchants of the Realm are all citizens. In many ways, the citizenry in the Realm is an exceedingly diverse default category—every official resident (thus excluding slaves and the disenfranchised) who is not a Dynast, patrician or peasant is a citizen. Their lives are much like the lives of the middle class throughout Creation. They engage in skilled work and earn sufficient monies to afford at least minor luxuries. The poorest have several suits of clothing and meals somewhat more varied than the peasants, while the wealthiest live in lavish mansions and townhouses that rival those of the patricians. The citizens also make up the only class with significant economic mobility. By definition, peasants are always relatively poor, and both patricians and Dynasts are exceptionally wealthy. Citizens span the gamut in between. Shrewd mercantile practices, acquiring a patrician patron or simple luck can transform a citizen with a modest home and worn but serviceable clothes into someone whose wealth earns invitations to patrician balls and parties. Also, while most citizens follow in the profession of one of their parents or some other close family member, citizens are free to choose their occupation. If the daughter of a potter has the talent and the funds to pay for her training, she can become a thaumaturge, a sailor or a playwright. Even the wealthiest and most renowned citizens have no real voice in government, however, and the whims of the Dynasts can raise or topple their fortunes with the stroke of a pen.

WEALTHY CITIZENS

While the stereotype is that the citizens of the Realm are the hard-working middle class and that the wealthy and the powerful consist solely of the patricians and the members of the Great Houses, commoners occasionally





achieve great wealth in the Realm. Most of these wealthy mortals are merchants, but trade is not the only path to riches. Some are skilled artists or artisans who have both Dragon-Blooded patrons and a studio of apprentices and assistants carrying out their wishes and bringing them the bulk of the profits. Others are entertainers of various sorts, whose novels, plays or songs have captured the imaginations and the monies of both commoners and Dynasts alike. Naturally, a few are the children of wealthy parents who were born to riches. Regardless of how they make or made their fortune, all of these individuals live in a unique position. Under the Realm's laws, they possess no more rights than any other commoner—the Dragon-Blooded rule the Blessed Isle and even the wealthiest commoner will never have a real voice in the government. The wealthiest and most influential might potentially gain the false power of a seat in the Lesser Chamber of the Deliberative, but very few who are not at least of patrician birth will ever hold even this office. Commoners are barred even from positions of moderate official power such as becoming ministers or prefects. Instead, wealthy mortals are left with two paths to greater influence. They can marry a patrician, or they can forgo official power and concentrate on increasing their wealth and their connections with the Threshold.

There are always patrician families interested in increasing their wealth through marriage, especially by marrying a member of a family whose wealth and commercial connections are greater than their own. As a result, the eligible members of the wealthiest commoner families rarely have difficulty securing invitations to patrician balls and other social functions. Historically, many wealthy commoner families have merged their fates with slightly less prosperous patrician families to their mutual benefit. In some cases, especially wealthy mortals can negotiate for their siblings and other close relatives to be adopted into the patrician family they marry into, completely joining the two families and instantly elevating all of their relatives into the patrician class.

Some commoners choose another option—cultivating contacts with the Threshold. Doing so usually means establishing an especially close relationship with one or more Guild factors or with one or more rulers of kingdoms in the Threshold that have favorable relations with the Realm. Regardless of which powerful Threshold-dwellers these wealthy commoners develop close ties to, the results are usually similar. In addition to making occasional visits to lands where mortals have at least some control over their own destinies, these contacts also give wealthy commoners access to wonders forbidden on the Blessed Isle. Many avail themselves of the opportunities to gain access to skilled thaumaturges who can make improved longevity drugs and powerful talismans against ill health. Some go further and gain access to artifacts that allow them to use the power of a hearthstone from a Threshold manse, or even to make bargains with spirits or demons for various powers.

Using such techniques, these wealthy commoners can gain access to one of the Dragon-Bloods' greatest advantages, longevity. The oldest of these mortals sometimes live to almost 200, and few find the existence of wealthy commoners who are healthy and active well into their second century of life to be at all surprising. In rare cases, commoners even make deals with spirits to become God-Blooded or outfit themselves with hearthstones and artifacts usable by mortals. Such individuals often fall under suspicion of wishing to usurp power beyond that allotted to them by the Immaculate Dragons as well as having forbidden dealings with gods. Since such heresies can be considered treasonous, wealthy commoners who wish to empower themselves in this fashion usually leave the Blessed Isle to take up residence in a land more hospitable to their desires.

Most of the Realm's wealthiest commoners are content to live on the Blessed Isle, though. While their power is circumscribed, they also have far less reason to fear dangers that plague other large cities. (For instance, riots occasionally spill out from the poorer quarters of Nexus or Chiaroscuro, the undead and fae monsters threaten Whitewall or the cities of the Haslanti League, and wars can swiftly engulf any of the nations of the Threshold.) All wealthy individuals desire peace, safety and stability around their homes, and many mortals value these ideals far more than freedom, especially if they possess sufficient wealth to indulge their pleasures and need never fear hunger or want.

Unfortunately, many of these wealthy commoners believe that their wealth will protect them from the negative repercussions of their actions. For those who cultivate close contacts with well-connected patricians, this is usually true. Wealthy commoners who look outside the Realm for most of their allies, however, can find their allies helpless to aid them if they break any of the Realm's stringent laws or even if they appear to be getting too powerful and too well connected with foreign powers.

The Dynasts are both jealous of their power and distrustful of significant international relations that they do not control. Wealthy commoners sometimes find themselves stripped of much of their wealth and power due to trivial or fabricated offenses, and those who complain too loudly can find themselves also losing their citizenship or even their lives. A few foolish or idealist commoners who spend time outside the Realm might consider the idea that the Dragon-Blooded might not have an inborn right to rule. Even the wealthiest of these individuals swiftly discover that their riches cannot protect them if they begin to speak openly, or just too often, about these opinions. As a result, few wealthy commoner families remain wealthy for more than three generations. By that time, most have either married into the patrician class, left the Blessed Isle for less regimented lands or lost their wealth (or lives) because one or more of their members were seen as a potential threat to the Realm.

RURAL LIFE AND THE PEASANTRY

Although it boasts the largest cities in Creation and has a larger proportion of its population living in cities and large towns than anyplace in Creation, three quarters of the population of the Blessed Isle still lives in rural areas. Along with the gangs of toiling work slaves, these farmers, foresters and small-scale craftspersons are responsible for much of the Realm's prosperity. Unlike those slaves, however, the Blessed Isle's rural inhabitants have all of the rights and responsibilities of mortal inhabitants of the Realm. As is true everywhere in Creation, foresters and peasant farmers have hard lives filled with menial work. Yet, unlike similar rural inhabitants elsewhere in Creation, these people live free from fear of monsters devouring them or armies trampling their fields. Most peasants on the Blessed Isle can look forward to nothing except living in a small and rude house, performing physical labor and eating meals largely consisting of food they raise, but they always have good weather and sufficient food. When they are sick or injured, they can rely upon trained physicians to treat their ailments.

Despite the inevitable association of peasants and rural areas, peasants on the Blessed Isle are not simply farmers. Some fish the streams of the Blessed Isle or work on the fishing boats that sail out every morning from every port in the Realm. Others work as laborers in the cities. The definition of a peasant is a laborer with a hereditary occupation and a hereditary home. Unlike citizens, peasants are not only expected to follow their parents' profession, they are

required to do so, just as they are required to live in their parents' village, town or city. When there are labor shortages or surpluses, ministers in the Honorable and Humble Caretakers of the Common Folk relocate peasants to different portions of the Blessed Isle. Peasants can also petition these ministers to move or even to change profession, and if there is any justification for this request, it is usually granted. Regardless, most peasants live and die in the same city or village and work in their parents' profession. Farmers farm the land, fishers sail out to catch fish, and urban laborers unload ships, clean streets or perform manual labor for hire. In this last case, urban peasants are not expected to negotiate their own contracts. Instead, they assemble at hiring halls run by the Honorable and Humble Caretakers of the Common Folk, where citizens and patricians in need of laborers come to ask the clerks in charge for a work crew. All arrangements are made between the individuals hiring the laborers and the clerks administering the hiring halls. Peasants are hired for terms ranging anywhere from a day to a year, but regardless of their term of hiring, they are paid once a week by the clerks at their hiring hall. Their pay is a standard rate that all of them know well, so few clerks attempt to short their pay. Doing so can easily result in riots and similar violence.

ADVANCEMENT AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

The Scarlet Empress and her advisors who helped craft the Realm's laws and government cared far more about

Peasants





stability and peace than about freedom. As a result, little allowance was made for individuals who wished to improve their station in life, because doing so risked upsetting the social order. The Immaculate Philosophy teaches that it's wrong to seek a different position in this life. Doing well at one's assigned role is what leads to advancement in one's next incarnation. The Scarlet Empress did understand, though, that not everyone could abide such strictures, so the restless yearnings of the few who refuse to be satisfied with their lot in life were harnessed to the demands of government. In the Realm, two ways to advance in status exist. The individual can "take the coin or take the razor." In short, the person can join the Imperial Army and fight for the Realm at home and abroad, or he can shave his head, join the Immaculate Order and fight the enemies and aid the believers of the Immaculate Philosophy at home and abroad.

A peasant who serves a 15-year term in the legions is automatically elevated to citizenship and can then retire with a modest cash bonus that will hopefully allow him to set himself up well in his new life. Serving an additional five years provides the individual with a modest pension when he retires. Citizens who join the army automatically earn modest pensions after 15 years and somewhat larger ones after 20. In addition, acts of exceptional bravery or especially impressive service in the direct defense of the Realm can result in common-born soldiers being elevated to the status of patricians. Such ennoblements occur very rarely, but they form a major incentive for would-be heroes to give their all for the Blessed Isle. Naturally, most such ennoblements are awarded posthumously. More commonly, significant service to the Realm is rewarded by land grants and other monetary rewards provided when a soldier retires. Even the disenfranchised can regain their place in society through military service. After 15 years, one can choose either citizenship or the stable life of a peasant on a fertile tract of land.

Service in the Immaculate Order offers no such obvious rewards, but it does allow intelligent young commoners to gain an education that they might otherwise be denied. It also provides everyone seeking such a thing a life of faith, service, contemplation, duty and self-enlightenment. Unlike joining the legions, membership in the Immaculate Order is typically for life, but especially devout and hard-working members can advance far in the Order. When they grow old, these priests and monks can look forward to a comfortable retirement surrounded by younger monks who earn merit by caring for them.

These two choices are the only options for advancement in social class for commoners in the Realm, and they are available to everyone from the lowliest disenfranchised peasant to the wealthiest citizen. Even outcaste Dragon-Blooded who are born among the ranks of the commoners are expected to choose one of these two options. Neither option is a choice for the lazy or the incompetent, however. Recruits to both the Imperial Army or the Immaculate

Order are expected to work unusually hard to prove their worth, and any who refuse to do so are soon asked to depart and never return.

THE DISENFRANCHISED

The majority of crimes against the government are considered to be treason and are punishable by death. In the case of serious crimes such as arson, attacking a Dynast or sedition, the punishment is death by torture. Other crimes against mortals or their property are considered less serious. While the commoner courts (see p. 66) deal with most problems, more serious crimes such as large-scale vandalism or riots attract the attention of the magistrates. The typical penalty that the magistrates issue for such crimes is disenfranchisement. Usually only a portion of a village or an urban neighborhood, ranging from a single individual to several families, is disenfranchised. Sometimes, however, entire villages or neighborhoods are disenfranchised, forcing several dozen to several hundred individuals to leave their homes and take to the roads.

Disenfranchising an entire village or urban block is supposed to be an extreme measure that is applied only in situations where the entire local population is peripherally involved in the crime or where everyone attempted to shield the identity of the perpetrators. In actual practice, the magistrates, prefects and archons use this power far more widely. Sometimes, officials decide to eliminate a village or other concentration of people who have been problematic in the past, or a busy prefect decides to save the trouble of finding the actual criminal by disenfranchising everyone who might be guilty. In addition, when a Dynast or other powerful individual wishes to obtain the title to a specific piece of rural land or a city block, she might convince the local magistrate or prefect to disenfranchise the locals the next time one of them commits some minor infraction. Because commoners have no recourse, this particular power is exceedingly easy to abuse, and it is difficult to tell how often such abuses occur, since most disenfranchised mortals aren't eager to talk about how they were unfairly turned out of their homes.

The fate of the disenfranchised depends upon their wealth and the feelings of their non-disenfranchised neighbors. Once the magistrates leave, the well-liked disenfranchised are allowed to stay in the houses of their friends or relatives. If an entire village is disenfranchised, the individuals must walk to villages that house their friends or relatives. Once there, they are typically allowed to stay for a few days or weeks, until they can make some plans for what they will do next. For those who are not wealthy enough to pay the four-koku residency pledge fee to move into a new prefect, the best option is to leave the Realm and settle in the Threshold. Those who can afford passage and have a useful skill can often make decent lives for themselves and their families in Chiaroscuro, Nexus or one of the other large cities of the Threshold. While



it is perfectly legal to steal such people's money and then deny them passage, ship captains rightly worry that such activities will diminish the number of disenfranchised customers they will have in the future. Still, the disenfranchised regularly pay between half again and twice as much for their passage as do citizens of the Realm.

Those who lack the money to pay for their own passage can find passage-brokers in every port in the Blessed Isle. In return for agreeing to spend the next three to seven years as indentured servants, these individuals are given passage to someplace where their indentures will be purchased. While skilled individuals such as physicians or jewelers can usually sign relatively short indenture contracts and are usually treated well, farmers and unskilled laborers often find that they have signed up for seven years of clearing poisonous jungles or rowing a war galley or mining gemstones in the Far South. The least fortunate end up being sold as slaves or, occasionally, becoming part of a human tithe to the Fair Folk.

The lot of those who elect to remain on the Blessed Isle is often no better. Disenfranchised who are wealthy or even members of the middle class are often robbed repeatedly within a few days of their disenfranchisement, reducing them to utter poverty. Also, regardless of their wealth, unless they can afford the high residency fee for another prefecture, they are condemned to wander from place to place. Such individuals typically subsist by doing

odd jobs and the most menial forms of labor and often end up the equivalent of privately owned slaves. Others seek out prefectures that have a sufficient labor shortage that their residency fees will be waived. Once again, anyone possessing skills in a trade has a far greater chance of obtaining such a boon. Many disenfranchised end up agreeing to work for an archon or some other minor official or wealthy local in return for room and board and a promise of becoming a citizen of the prefecture within a month or two. All too often, at the end of this time, these disenfranchised laborers are turned out to wander the roads again with nothing to show for several weeks of backbreaking labor except barely adequate food and poor housing for the duration of their work.

SLAVERY ON THE BLESSED ISLE

During both the First Age and the Shogunate, the wonders of the Blessed Isle ultimately came from the power of the Exalted and the magics of their Essence-based technologies. In addition to controlling the weather and altering the landscape to better serve the needs of the mortals who worked the land, the Exalts built automata that worked in the factory-cathedrals and others that mined and purified valuable resources. They also produced many other artifacts, including the glorious skyships that once swiftly carried vast numbers people and enormous cargoes to the cities and towns of the Blessed Isle and the far reaches of Creation.



The remnants of these technologies still provide many essential services for both the Dynasts and the mortal citizens of the Realm. Most automata, vehicles and other complex artifacts no longer function, however, and cannot be repaired. As a result, there is a continual demand for workers to quarry stone, mine metal, repair non-magical roads, reclaim poor land, dredge harbors, haul freight overland and perform a host of similarly backbreaking tasks. To meet this demand internally, the Realm would need to employ tens of thousands of its citizens every year. The Scarlet Empress long ago realized that the Realm could not afford to pay sufficient numbers of its residents to perform such tasks and that demanding the citizenry of the Realm perform such services for free would both reduce tax revenues and incite significant amounts of civil unrest. Instead, the Blessed Isle now imports many thousands of slaves every year. Most of these slaves work in gangs of up to 10,000 and are given such strenuous work that few survive more than five years. Some are war captives, but most are given to the Realm as tribute from its many allies and foreign satrapies.

Every citizen of the Realm knows that slaves are a necessary part of the infrastructure that allows them to live in the most prosperous land in all of Creation. As a result, opposition to the brutal treatment of these slaves is minimal, especially since imperial law forbids any resident of the Realm from ever being enslaved.

To help prevent slave revolts, these gangs of work slaves are kept isolated both from each other and from the citizens of the Realm. Slaves live in rude villages constructed at their work sites. These villages and the areas where the slaves work are well guarded, and commoners are prevented from coming into contact with them. This policy of strict isolation is even maintained when a slave gang must dredge a harbor. The slaves are quartered on vast barges and almost never set foot in the cities whose harbors they are dredging.

Work slaves can be freed, but only in the most extreme circumstances, such as if one of them undergoes Terrestrial Exaltation, selflessly saves the life of a Dynast or single-handedly prevents a large slave revolt.

The lot of specialty and domestic slaves is far less onerous, though less than one twentieth of the slaves coming into the Realm end up in either position. When new slaves first arrive in the Blessed Isle, well-trained overseers examine them and separate out the unusual, the highly skilled, the well educated and the most beautiful for use as either skilled workers or personal servants to the Dynasts. The lives of these slaves are typically much longer than (and far superior to) those of the work slaves.

Most Dragon-Blooded households have at least two or three specialty and domestic slaves, either for pleasure or to handle the particularly distasteful or dangerous jobs. Dragon-Blooded estates sometimes keep small groups of work slaves for dangerous mass labor such as mining, and the Dynastic families lease slave gangs to the Realm or to patri-

cian interests to perform unskilled and manual labor. Most Dynastic household servants are slaves, but some households, especially among the few Dragon-Blooded who are opposed to slavery, also hire from among the local peasantry and pay wages in food, clothing and staple goods.

The laws governing slavery are set up to both maximize the work that can be obtained from slaves and to prevent slave revolts. In addition to preventing contact between slaves and commoners, the Dynasts also make certain that commoners lack sympathy for slaves. To this end, the Scarlet Empress established the firm rule that citizens of the Realm can never be enslaved. Slaves are always foreigners, who even the peasants are taught to regard as inferior barbarians. To further prevent contact, the laws about freeing slaves are also quite strict, preventing the growth of a large population who might attempt to help aid rebel slaves.

Dragon-Blooded can free their slaves only with the permission of the Deliberative. Each Dragon-Blood is allowed to free no more than three slaves per decade. The only exception is freeing slaves after death. A Dragon-Blood with a will registered with the Department of Graceful Passings is permitted to free up to 16 slaves (one for every month of the year, and one for Calibration) upon her passing.

Some Dragon-Bloods use freedom as a reward for slaves who perform heroically in the service of their masters. Others use the lure of eventual freedom to prod new slaves into ever-more dangerous or degrading acts. A few Dragon-Bloods simply free as many slaves as they can get away with. It is rare for the Deliberative to deny a request to free a slave.

Yet, while few slaves can hope to be freed, and work slaves are almost never freed, certain regulations govern the treatment of work gangs and the treatment of specialty and domestic slaves. Slaves who are starved, needlessly beaten or mutilated are far less efficient than healthy, well-fed, uninjured slaves. As a result, while mutilating pleasure slaves for the purpose of increasing the range of pleasures she can be used for is considered acceptable, mutilating a slave as punishment is considered both wrong and foolish. Minor infractions are resolved through beatings, and major infractions are dealt with by transferring specialty or domestic slaves to work gangs and by executing work slaves.

CITIZENSHIP ON THE BLESSED ISLE

Because it is the safest and most prosperous nation in Creation, large numbers of mortals wish to live on the Blessed Isle. Although many nations in the Threshold offer more freedom and chances for advancement, they also offer the threats of rogue gods, hungry ghosts, predatory Fair Folk and all manner of similar dangers that the inhabitants of the Blessed Isle never face. Many mortals would happily trade the opportunities that they might find elsewhere for the safety of the Realm, especially since living on the Blessed Isle also means that they are far less likely to face crop failures or starvation.



While the Realm always needs more slaves, the Dynasts understand that even this huge island cannot accept unlimited numbers of free immigrants. As a result, the process of becoming a citizen of the Blessed Isle is both difficult and governed by strict rules. Everyone who has at least one parent who is a citizen of the Blessed Isle is automatically of the same social class as their Realm-born parent. Dragon-Blooded from any part of Creation may automatically become citizens of the Realm if they first join either the Imperial Army or the Immaculate Order. For everyone else, the process of becoming a citizen of the Realm is far more arduous.

Only three ways exist for ordinary mortals from the Threshold to become citizens of the Realm. The wealthy can make a payment equal to Resources 4 (between four and six talents of jade) and instantly gain citizenship for themselves, their spouses and their children. Everyone else can either serve in the legions for a term of 15 years or work for at least a decade in the vast civil service that the Realm maintains in its colonies, protectorates and close allies and gain at least one major or three minor commendations.

A major commendation is given only to individuals whose actions either directly save the lives of one or more Dynasts or who otherwise perform some service that directly prevents a crisis. Minor commendations are far easier to come by but still demand that the individual perform some important task above and beyond the call of duty. Many of the bureaucrats who manage to perform such services are either employed as spies by the Realm or act as spies and informants in addition to their ordinary bureaucratic duties, in the hope of gaining citizenship. In this fashion, the Dynasts are assured of both excellent intelligence and valuable new citizens.

The only other way that outsiders can become citizens of the Realm is for one of the Dynasts to recommend them for citizenship. Any Dynast can do this, but doing so too often can earn Dynasts the contempt of their fellows. Dynasts are expected to provide this service only for relatives or close companions or to reward valued servants for many years of service. As a result of these inducements, foreign soldiers and bureaucrats are always eager to obtain work in the Realm's legions and civil service, and Dynasts who live in one of the Realm's satrapies are always assured of having exceptionally dutiful servants.

THE CONTROL OF KNOWLEDGE

The Scarlet Empress's regime, like the Shogunate before it, has a deliberately created ideology as its basis. As a result, the Dynasts are keenly aware of the power of information, and they maintain careful control of any books or other records that contradict the Immaculate Philosophy or that are otherwise potentially dangerous. Over the years, the definition of potentially dangerous information has expanded. Naturally, the Dynasts severely limit the availability of any

works that conflict with the approved histories, as well as all records from the early days of the First Age, especially those that portray the Anathema in any sort of positive light. The Dynasts also limit access to any information that could be used to endanger their lives or to disrupt the social order. As a result, books on thaumaturgy, poisons or even detailed medical texts are available to only the Dynasts themselves or to the few mortals whom the Dynasts grant access.

The result of this system of censorship and control has been the grouping of all books, thought crystals and other types of recording media into three categories. The most stringently controlled are considered too problematic for even the majority of the Dragon-Bloods to access. Although they all are referred to as heretical texts, most have nothing to do with religious heresies. Such books include all uncensored writings from the First Age, plans and details of the construction and workings of national secrets such as the war menses and the Imperial Manse, and all information on making magical deals and pacts with the Neverborn or the Yozis. Copies of the infamous *Broken-Winged Crane*, which allows any Exalted to gain vast amounts of infernal power, are the most closely guarded of these books. Those works that are not kept in the most secure portions of the Heptagram library or the sacred Chamber of Records in the Cloister of Wisdom are stored in the Imperial Manse or in the most restricted portion of the Imperial Library in the Imperial City.

The only individuals who have free and unrestricted access to these books are the Sidereal Exalted of the Bronze Faction, the highest officials in the Thousand Scales, the Scarlet Empress and her most trusted advisors, and the senior members of both the Immaculate Order and the Heptagram staff. Mortals, including patricians and un-Exalted members of the Great Houses, are never allowed access to any of these works. These texts are considered so sensitive that only the Exalted can read them. In addition, Dragon-Bloods who are not members of one of the few groups allowed free access to such works must petition for access to them. Professors and students at the Heptagram must request them from the heads of the Heptagram. Monks and priests of the Immaculate Order must ask permission of their leaders. Everyone else must request them from the special librarians who deal with these works. To gain access to any of these books, petitioners must state an acceptable reason to look at them. Anyone granted access to these works can examine only one book at a time and cannot remove it from the room where it is stored. In addition, manually copying these works or using Charms to do so is forbidden, and all of the rooms where these books are stored are equipped with enchantments that register any use of Essence. Also, the Thousand Scales' Office of Literary Control keeps track of everyone who requests such works and alerts the All-Seeing Eye if someone appears to be too interested in dangerous topics of research.





LIBRARIES ON THE BLESSED ISLE

The vast Imperial Library, located in the Imperial City, contains at least one copy of every work written since the Contagion. In addition, it contains several hundred works written during the Shogunate, as well as a few dozen books and other more exotic recordings dating from the First Age. (The latter works include everything from lurid First Age novels to scholarly works on complex Essence-powered devices that have not existed since the Great Uprising.)

While most inhabitants of the Blessed Isle think of this vast repository of knowledge when someone mentions a library, there are three other types of libraries in common use. Dynasts and a few patricians maintain large private libraries, institutions such as the Dynastic secondary schools maintain large libraries of works devoted to topics related to the subjects they teach, and the Realm maintains a series of public libraries. Every small city and large town has at least one such library, and large cities might contain as many as half a dozen. Here, copies of the general texts that are freely accessible to all commoners are freely available for everyone to read. Books may not be removed from the library, but any resident of the Realm is free to come in and read any of the works. These public libraries exist to both encourage the populace to read the wisdom contained in the general texts and to indirectly discourage anyone from seeking out restricted or heretical texts.

In all of the Realm's libraries, the books are not openly available. Instead, there are large catalogs listing the titles, authors and brief descriptions of every work contained in the library. Patrons must request a text from a librarian, sign for it, read the book in the library and return it before they depart.

Restricted books are those that are considered acceptable for any Dragon-Blooded to read, but that are not considered suitable for the majority of mortals. Restricted books include works on thaumaturgy; military strategy and tactics; specific information on gods, demons, elementals or other supernatural beings; uncensored histories of the First Age or the Shogunate; uncensored accounts about any faith other than the Immaculate Philosophy; martial-arts manuals; treatises on poisons; medical texts that include more than basic first aid and the treatment of simple diseases; and any books that give detailed information about the Charms of the Dragon-Blooded or the powers or construction of artifacts or other enchantments. In addition, fiction that is considered too disrespectful of appropriate standards of ethics or morality is also restricted. In general, only plays or novels that have the protagonists or other sympathetic

characters speaking out against the Dynasts, practicing heresy or praising the Anathema earn a place on this list. Beyond prohibiting plays and novels that are openly seditious or heretical, the Dynasts rarely concern themselves with the entertainments of the commoners.

Dragon-Bloods may freely own a copy of any restricted book, but they are forbidden from copying these books or allowing mortals access to these works. Mortals must be individually approved to read any of these texts, and their names are recorded. Patricians and the mortal members of the Great Houses can easily get approval to read any of these texts. Other mortals must apply to the Honorable and Humble Caretakers of the Common Folk to gain access to such works. In addition to presenting a signed and witnessed permission for access to a specific work and a statement of why they wish to read the work, commoners must also present appropriate credentials. Only licensed physicians can gain access to restricted medical texts, and only licensed thaumaturges can gain access to restricted works on thaumaturgy.

Finally, general texts are books that are freely available to all mortals. Such books include approved histories compiled by skilled scholars, treatises on various non-restricted trades, books on geography, travelers' tales, novels, plays and similar entertainments, guides to etiquette and morality and the religious texts of the Immaculate Philosophy. Mortals with the means to do so can freely purchase such works, and other mortals can read them in one of the Realm's many libraries. In addition to the fact that they contain no potentially dangerous or troubling knowledge that might upset commoners, these works are also mostly written so that they help inculcate appropriate standards of ethics and behavior in the readers. As a result, most novels and plays tend to feature heroic Dynasts and evil heretics, and in the end, the heroes usually either triumph or die heroically, while the villains receive some sort of justice or retribution.

After any book in the Realm is written or when printer or book dealer attempts to import a book from the Threshold, the work must be submitted for approval and editing to the scribes of the Honorable and Humble Caretakers of the Common Folk. Books not immediately deemed heretical and confiscated are classified as either restricted texts or general texts. This classification must be made before any books can be printed or sold in the Realm. All such books are given a special stamp indicating both their classification as well as the date it was made and the name of the sub-minister who approved it. Duplicates of these stamps are printed on the back cover of every book printed by the Realm, along with the name of the printer, the address and license number of the printing press and the date it was printed.

MEDICAL CARE

While the Dragon-Blooded are largely immune to the frailties of mortal flesh, the un-Exalted members of the Great Houses and the patricians are all treated by well-paid on-staff



physicians. Most commoners must pay private physicians to treat their ailments. All physicians in the Realm are licensed because the Empress was unwilling to allow mortals free access to treatises on disease, injury or poisons. Mortals who wish to learn more than the simple first aid and basic remedies found in the general medical texts must apply for a license to study medicine and apprentice themselves to a licensed physician for a period of at least four years.

In addition to bringing in revenue and limiting access to potentially dangerous knowledge, licensing physicians also allows the Thousand Scales to keep track of them. Because the Empress and most of her Sidereal allies still remember the dark days of the Contagion, the Realm's commitment to public health is quite strong. Every licensed physician must spend one month every year treating the urban poor or the rural peasantry. Elderly or infirm physicians may be excused, as may any physician who can instead send a licensed apprentice capable of passing a test indicating that she possesses at least Lore 1, Medicine 2 and Occult 1. In return for obtaining free but modest room and board at a government medical station administered by the Thousand Scales, for this month, these physicians freely treat everyone in need of their services. This practice is useful because a healthy populace increases productivity and morale. It also helps reduce the severity of epidemics.

MEDICAL STATIONS

Every city has one government medical station for every 10,000 inhabitants, and most of the large farming towns also have one. Even the most isolated rural peasants must travel no more than five miles to reach a medical station. Yet, while the bureaucrats of the Thousand Scales wish to make certain that cuts and broken legs do not become crippling injuries and that most peasants will recover from fevers and infections, they are not interested in giving the peasantry unlimited medical care. As a result, while performing their public service, physicians are specifically instructed to treat only contagious diseases and relatively simple problems such as fevers, infections or broken bones. While all responsible physicians provide drugs and palliative treatments for more serious or difficult problems, they are forbidden from taking time away from their official duties to treat serious conditions such as cancer or the various age-related ailments. Despite this limitation, the poor and the peasants are all grateful for the medical stations, in part because free treatment of simple illnesses allows those who are slightly better off than their neighbors to save up monies to help pay for private physicians to treat more serious conditions.

THAUMATURGES AND MORTAL MAGIC ON THE BLESSED ISLE

Mortal thaumaturges are exceptions to the accepted social order because mortals are normally supposed to leave magic to the Dragon-Blooded. Thaumaturgy offers a useful

loophole because few Exalts consider these inferior mortal magics as being worth their trouble to learn. While mortals are permitted to learn the secrets of thaumaturgy, however, those who do are carefully monitored. Learning such skills requires the individual to look beyond the narrow range of general texts that are approved for unrestricted use. Books on thaumaturgy are all restricted texts. Gaining access to such books requires special petitions and appropriate qualifications, as well as regular payments to the Imperial Treasury for the appropriate license from the Thousand Scales.

Once obtained, this license allows mortals to work as astrologers, alchemists and enchanters, making medicines and other wares for wealthy mortals and the few Dragon-Bloods who desire such services. Alternatively, talented thaumaturges can always find employment with the Bureau of Climatic Deliberations, which is in charge of weather control for the Blessed Isle. Within the Realm, however, the practice of thaumaturgy is strictly limited. In addition to being forbidden from passing on their knowledge to anyone who lacks the appropriate training and licenses, there are strict limits on the types of magics that licensed thaumaturges can perform.

Astrology is one of the more popular and widely used services they offer. Astrologers make predictions about trade, marriage, money and a host of other topics, but they are forbidden from making readings about the lives of the Terrestrial Exalted. According to the Immaculate Philosophy, reading the fate of the mighty Exalted is an act of hubris that fosters the officially heretical belief that the Dynasts are bound by fate in the same manner as mortals. Similarly, making predictions about political upheavals or the outcome of imperial battles (or attempting to predict any similar actions involving the government or the Great Houses) is also forbidden. Not only that, but doing so is almost treasonous because it calls into question the fact that the power and success of the government and the Dynasts who rule it are divinely ordained by the Elemental Dragons themselves.

Alchemy is almost as popular as astrology. There is always a demand for medicines, exotic recreational drugs and potent draughts that enhance the prowess of soldiers, athletes and other mortals. Most such drugs are perfectly legal, and the Honorable and Humble Caretakers of the Common Folk regard providing these substances as an important addition to their own efforts. There are, however, strict limits on the sorts of drugs that alchemists can provide to mortals. Drugs that lengthen mortal life spans by more than 25 percent are forbidden, as are any drugs that allow mortals to perceive or interact with spirits or ghosts. In addition, all poisons are strictly regulated, as are all recreational drugs more potent than opium, marijuana or qat. Finally, drugs that allow mortals to ape the abilities or physical prowess of the Exalted, even for a short time, are strictly forbidden, and the use of any such drugs is considered an offense against the power of the Exalted.





OFFICIAL THAUMATURGES

Thaumaturges who wish to delve deeper into the secrets of magic or to manufacture the most potent potions or enchantments can do so only while working for one of the Great Houses or the Thousand Scales. The government employs thaumaturges skilled in alchemy to create and stockpile medicines, and many dozens of thaumaturges who are adept at weather working are employed by the Bureau of Climatic Deliberations. In addition, the Heptagram teaches limited amounts of thaumaturgy to its students, largely to help them better understand the theory of magic. While mere mortals can never become instructors at the Heptagram, the most skilled thaumaturges can gain lucrative and prestigious positions as adjunct teachers of the classes on thaumaturgy.

The majority of the thaumaturges employed by the Dragon-Blooded, however, work directly for one of the Great Houses. In addition to providing medicines and recreational drugs for their Dragon-Blooded patrons, these thaumaturges are occasionally asked to create deadly and untraceable poisons, as well as complex enchanted traps. They also create minor enchantments and talismans for their employers, ward their dwellings and perform all manner of similarly useful services that many Dynasts consider to be vitally important but far too time-consuming for them to spare the time or effort to perform.

MAGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Except for licensed thaumaturges, Immaculate monks and a few God-Bloods, none of the mortals in the Realm can wield Essence, but all of them greatly benefit from various Essence-based technologies. While the Blessed Isle suffered greatly during the Contagion, the Fair Folk invasion and the minor earthquakes caused by the Scarlet Empress's use of the full power of the Realm Defense Grid, portions of the First Age infrastructure remained intact after the Scarlet Empress took power. In addition, hundreds of skilled Dragon-Blooded survived the Contagion, and some of them were able to rebuild a few of the ruined artifacts. Most of the complex or delicate Essence-technologies that survived the Contagion failed during the first century of the Scarlet Dynasty, but many of the more robust and simple portions of the Realm's infrastructure are still in use and continue to be maintained. While there are many unique First Age wonders to be found throughout the Blessed Isle, the only ones that are universally available are the Essence-based power systems and the weather control system.

ESSENCE POWER

Drawing on the power of several dozen small (mostly one-dot) manses scattered throughout the Blessed Isle, the Dynasts maintain a system of Essence distribution with an infrastructure that, in its earliest form, dates from before the war against the Primordials. Jade pillars placed throughout the Blessed Isle channel and direct this power for various

uses. During the First Age and the Shogunate, a larger and far more extensive version of this system powered vast numbers of vehicles that hovered above the imperial roads and automata that worked in mines and factories throughout the Blessed Isle. Today, the imperial power system is far less extensive, but it still powers streetlights and provides both light and heat to public buildings and to the mansions of the Dynasts and the patricians. These Essence-derived energies also pump water to the Realm's cities and farms.

Essence lights are globes of glass infused with powdered blue jade. These lights are all slightly less than a foot in diameter and glow with the light of a half dozen torches. They are placed atop tall iron poles along many city streets in the Realm and in ornamented fixtures inside important buildings. Flat panels of a glass infused with red jade provide heat in these same buildings, and Essence-powered pumps are found in both rural canals and urban plumbing systems. All of these devices can still be manufactured, but doing so requires either a highly trained thaumaturge or Exalts working for several days. Therefore, they are mostly reserved for use by the government or by the powerful families of the Realm. A few such devices are sold to wealthy merchant families, but only the wealthiest can afford more than one or two of these minor wonders.

WEATHER CONTROL

Although the weather in the Threshold is subject to both chance and the whims of the gods and elementals, the weather is carefully regulated in the Realm. One branch of the Home Office is the Bureau of Climatic Deliberations, popularly known as the weather workers. Employing dozens of Dragon-Bloods and a sizeable minority of the Realm's licensed thaumaturges, this bureau is charged with controlling the weather over the entire Blessed Isle.

The weather workers mostly operate through a combination of sorcery, Charms, mortal thaumaturgy, advanced weather-working devices such as the powerful sky mantis towers (see **Wonders of the First Age**, p. 65) and a host of larger and more powerful artifacts such as the huge weather monoliths created during the Shogunate. Placed a maximum of 100 miles from one another, these weather monoliths help make certain that no place on the Blessed Isle is out of reach of the weather-control network that the rulers of the Shogunate used to replace the awesome power of the fallen Anathema.

Although the Bureau of Climatic Deliberations is organized by prefecture, the director of the weather workers has the authority and the ability to alter the weather over the entire Blessed Isle. Making large-scale unplanned changes in the overall weather can produce serious side effects that can take as long as a week to gain control of. As a result, rapid, unplanned changes are made only by the direct order of the Empress or a general of the Imperial Army. Such a change is usually only needed to help thwart a major attack on the Blessed Isle. Such an attack has not occurred since the second century of the



Exalts

Empress's reign, so the current director of the weather workers is ill prepared to deal with such an emergency.

This bureau, however, has regular duties that extend far beyond simply making sure that the weather remains ideal for farming. Members of the Great Houses regularly petition for specific types of weather during various important parties or festivals. As long as these weather conditions last no more than a day or two and are not sufficiently drastic that they might seriously impact local farming, such requests are almost always granted, in return for a sufficient bribe. In addition, the weather workers form an essential part of the mechanisms of social control in the Blessed Isle.

The rising urban tensions that often occur in especially hot summers are regularly defused with sudden summer rainstorms or breaks in heat waves. On a more immediate scale, if a riot, public protest or other large disturbance occurs or even looks likely to break out, rain, hail or some similarly inclement weather swiftly appears over the troubled area and helps to drive all but the most dedicated rioters or dissidents off the street. Once the less dedicated have sought shelter, the local Guardians of the Realm have far fewer people to deal with and generally assume that anyone who is still outside is a serious trouble-maker worth arresting. The weather workers also form an important part of the Realm's emergency services. Fires in cities or fields can be rapidly quenched by heavy rains, and ships trapped near the coast during a dangerous storm can expect a local decrease in both rain and wind once the local weather workers become aware of their plight.

TRAVEL AND COMMUNICATIONS

Many Exalts can travel across the Realm in a few hours using Essence-powered vehicles or sorcery spells such as Stormwind Rider, and most Dragon-Bloods know Charms or spells that allow them to instantly communicate with people miles distant. All of the imperial bureaus and each of the 11 Great Houses employ Exalts who can send messages anywhere on the Blessed Isle in an instant, as well as a few sorcerers who can carry passengers and small cargoes at high speeds. In addition, many well-connected patricians can ask a Dynast they know to instantly send a message for them, especially if the patrician offers to perform some favor in return.

The lives of the mortal residents of the Blessed Isle are very different, though. In some Threshold cities such as Nexus, wealthy mortals can pay Dragon-Bloods to send messages or carry packages, but on the Blessed Isle, making such an offer could easily result in the Dragon-Blood killing the mortal for her impudence. Instead, ordinary mortals must rely upon mundane means of communication and transport.

COMMUNICATIONS

Despite ordinary mortals' lack of access to magic, communication in the Realm is far superior to what's available in most of the Threshold. The Blessed Isle is covered with a network of heliograph towers that can flash messages from one side of the Blessed Isle to another in less than



four hours. These towers are in operation 24 hours a day and are relatively inexpensive to put to use. At night, they use bright Essence-powered light globes instead of mirrors that reflect the sunlight.

In addition to the heliograph, official couriers of the Infallible Conveyers of Official Messages and Heartfelt Expressions—more commonly referred to as the Imperial Post—are authorized to take private packages if they do not have official items to carry. Imperial couriers change horses every few hours and can travel as many as 120 miles a day. Because private packages have far less priority than official imperial documents or messages, however, the couriers rarely go more than 100 miles a day. The Realm is also home to half a dozen private courier systems using simple horse relays (see **Exalted**, p. 265).

TRAVEL AND TRANSPORT

For the vast majority of mortals, transport on the Blessed Isle involves feet, horses, carriages or boats. Important mortal officials, personal assistants to the Dragon-Blooded and well-connected patricians can sometimes persuade Dragon-Bloods to take them along when the Exalts are using spells or artifacts to travel inhumanly fast. Similarly, the most well-trained mortal soldiers in the Imperial Army or Navy—especially those trained in the use of artifacts such as ashigaru armor—are sometimes ordered to accompany Exalts on important missions, during which they are carried in such swift artifacts as chariots of the infinite heavens. (See **Wonders of the First Age**, p. 79 for ashigaru armor, and p. 37 for chariots of the infinite heavens.) In all such cases, however, the mortals either travel under orders from the Exalts or on their sufferance. Also, only a tiny fraction of the tens of millions of the inhabitants of the Blessed Isle has ever traveled by any of these means. Instead, the greatest boon that the Realm provides to mortal travelers is the military might that keeps bandits and other threats to travelers at a level far less than is found in the vast majority of the Threshold.

For most mortals, the fastest transport is that provided by the various carriage services that travel throughout the Blessed Isle. The best travel almost exclusively on the well-maintained-imperial roads and have special stations for changing horses in ever city and town in which they stop. As a result, they travel at the speed of a simple horse relay (see **Exalted**, p. 264). A character must have at least two dots of Resources to be able to afford a journey of up to 100 miles courtesy of a carriage service. A trip across a large portion of the Blessed Isle is an epic journey for which a character would need at least three dots of Resources. In both cases, travelers must supply their own food and lodgings, unless they wish to book travel with one of the luxury carriage services that exist to serve wealthy merchants and other rich notables. These services add one dot to the minimum requirement of all travel but allow a traveler to carry large amounts of baggage, and they make sure that she has excellent food and lodgings on the entirety of her journey.

Similar costs apply to sea voyages around the coast of the Blessed Isle. Since the coast-hugging vessels that make such journeys never travel out of sight of the Isle, the risks of these journeys are little greater than travel by carriage. Mortals who absolutely must travel more rapidly can rent the use of the horses used by the few private elaborate horse relays on the Blessed Isle. Individuals who attempt this, however, must have at least Ride 3, and their players must make successful daily (Stamina + Resistance) rolls for the characters with a difficulty equal to half the number of days (round up) they have been traveling in this fashion. Failure means that the rider must rest for at least two full days before resuming his journey.

MAGICAL COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPORT

Even for mortals, the fastest forms of both communication and transport involve magic. Mortal thaumaturges regularly summon up air elementals that can travel rapidly and carry messages on the wind. With sufficient payment, these beings are sometimes even willing to carry passengers. Although only the most desperate mortals risk being hauled about by an elemental, thaumaturgy provides the most rapid form of mortal transport and communication on the Blessed Isle. It is also the most expensive form of transport or communication by far, since summoned elementals often ask for rare and expensive payment, and no thaumaturge is willing to risk summoning any elemental without substantial payment. A character must have at least three dots of Resources to be able to afford to send a message or a small package this way, and carrying a large package or a person increases that minimum by one dot. Skilled bargainers can sometimes obtain a promise of a round trip journey for the same price (which requires at least three successes in an opposed [Manipulation + Bureaucracy] roll against the thaumaturge).

INTERNAL TRADE

With the Guild barred from involvement in the Blessed Isle's internal trade, patricians, Dynasts and their agents handle all of the trade in weapons, armor, jade and rice. These strategic commodities are kept out of the control of the commoners. Yet, the Blessed Isle is a prosperous land inhabited by tens of millions of mortals who also require cloth, spices, jewelry, medicines, intoxicants and a host of other luxuries and necessities. Given their many other duties, the patricians and Dynasts cannot handle this massive volume of trade, and most have little interest in doing so. Instead, mortal citizens are responsible for the bulk of trade on the Blessed Isle. Such mortals range from itinerant peddlers carrying their wares on their back between villages to skilled caravan masters hauling only the finest rare merchandise between the Blessed Isle's largest cities. The largest merchant companies come close to rivaling the scale of the Guild's operations in any of Creation's four quarters and are headed by individuals whose wealth and power almost outweighs their status as commoners.

Although all caravans must be licensed by the Thousand Scales, experienced caravaners have little difficulty in obtaining licenses, as the Realm's bureaucracy has little interest in preventing necessary trade. Many of the official regulations governing caravans exist only to make certain that all caravans are properly outfitted so that they will both be able to complete their journeys and avoid making themselves too tempting a target to bandits. In return for dealing with the regulations and the required payments, caravaners on the Blessed Isle need have no fear of attack by predatory monsters or extortion by greedy gods. Even the risk of attack by mortal bandits is considerably lower. As a result, caravan traffic is high, and so are profits. Even the Realm's taxes do not offset the fact that considerably fewer caravans are lost on the Blessed Isle than anywhere else in Creation.

FAITH AND HERESY

The Immaculate Philosophy is the official faith of the Realm, and anyone who worships in any other manner is a treasonous heretic. The great majority of the populace, including almost the entirety of the peasantry, accepts the Immaculate Philosophy as the revealed truth of the Immaculate Dragons, rarely questioning any of the teachings of the Immaculate priests and monks. The degree of religious feeling differs from one person to another, though, and both innate cynicism and exposure to foreign ideas lead some away from this faith. As a result, Immaculate priests accept that individuals in the Realm are free to believe whatever they wish, as long as they take part in the appropriate rituals and avoid worshiping in any proscribed manner. Worshiping in a manner deemed inappropriate for mortals results in punishments ranging from heavy fines to disenfranchisement or even death. Proselytizing or otherwise encouraging others to worship in an inappropriate manner seriously compounds this offense. Worshiping the Fair Folk, demons, the Deathlords or the Anathema are all treason. The worshiper is directly aiding the deadliest enemies of the Realm with his prayers and sacrifices.

MAJOR HERESIES

Before the disappearance of the Scarlet Empress, these four varieties of heretical worship were largely unknown on the Blessed Isle. Almost all mortals there had enough sense to realize the dangers of worshiping inhuman monsters such as the Fair Folk or the Deathlords. Only a handful of the most dissolute or power-hungry thaumaturges engaged in any form of demon worship, and the Anathema were little more than a distant myth of far-off monsters that the Wyld Hunt swiftly dispatched.

As the Realm becomes increasingly chaotic, however, and news of the reappearance of the Anathema continues to be heard, even the most extreme forms of heresy are becoming increasingly common. Daring and twisted thaumaturges are more willing to worship



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demons, and while the Fair Folk are still no more than a distant, unknown menace, the fall of the city of Thorns to the Deathlords gave birth to a small number of death cults on the Blessed Isle.

The most common major heresy now, however, is the worship of the Anathema. Most mortals in the Realm still trust the teaching of the Immaculate Philosophy and consider the Anathema to be insane and predatory monsters, but small groups of mortals have seized on the idea that the return of the Anathema will somehow save them from all of their troubles. The Bull of the North's destruction of the Tepet Legions shook the Realm, and even sincere and pious commoners sometimes worry that the newly returned Anathema will soon overwhelm the mighty Dragon-Blooded. Although its efforts here are still quite furtive and subtle, these beliefs are aided by the mysterious Cult of the Illuminated. Its temple on the outskirts of the city of Lord's Crossing continues to attract more followers, and for the moment, its existence is completely unknown to the Dynasts and the Immaculate Order.

Anyone found practicing any of these four major heresies is condemned to death. Their only hope of avoiding torture is to freely confess the names of the leaders of their cults. Any who refuse are tortured and interrogated with powerful Charms until they confess the names of all of their confederates. After their ordeals, these heretics are paraded through the streets of their city or town and publicly executed after Immaculate priests describe in detail the nature of their offense and use the occasion to explain the necessity of combating such horrific heresies by any means necessary. One of the major reasons for the complete lack of tolerance of such worship is the fact that mortal prayers and sacrifices provide these beings with additional power and wealth.

To further combat heresy, the Immaculate Order offers a substantial reward for any non-heretic who acts as an informer and reveals the names of individuals who turn out to be practicing any major heresy. The standard reward amounts to a shekel's worth of jade, but it can be as much as a whole talent of jade if the informer reveals the existence of a large cult.

MINOR HERESIES

Although worshipping the enemies of the Realm is quite rare and has only recently begun to gain in popularity, lesser religious offenses are considerably more widespread. Two such heresies are particularly common: direct worship of gods or elementals and ancestor worship. The first is less common than the second, both because of the greater appeal of ancestor worship and because many of the local gods and elementals on the Blessed Isle are fearful of the consequences of being caught accepting illicit worship. Exalted Immaculate monks readily punish rogue deities found guilty of receiving illicit prayers and occasionally make deals with some of the high-ranking gods so that these gods will police their underlings and reveal

the identities of any gods or elementals caught accepting unauthorized prayers.

Once discovered, rogue spirits are then interrogated by their superiors or the Immaculate monks until they reveal the identities of their worshipers. There is a great deal of gossip and speculation among the local gods of the Blessed Isle as to the desirability of accepting private worship from mortals, but only the most daring or foolish gods are willing to accept it. Occasionally, when a particularly timid or law-abiding god is offered worship, it comes to the Immaculates on its own and denounces the mortals offering sacrifices to it.

Now that the Realm is increasingly in disarray, far more gods are willing to defy the precepts of the Immaculate Philosophy and accept worship. A few have even taken to materializing and setting themselves up as the rulers of isolated villages. So far, these offenses have been relatively isolated, and the gods involved have been willing to assert their authority over only the most remote portions of the island. The longer the current problems persist, however, the bolder some of the gods become. A few members of the Immaculate Order now fear that, unless order is restored to the Blessed Isle, it could end up as infested with greedy and venal gods as many portions of the Threshold.

While illicit worship of gods is growing, ancestor worship has been a small but endemic problem on the Blessed Isle since the end of the Contagion. Every mortal on the Blessed Isle knows she will die someday. While most correctly assume that they will swiftly be reborn, a few worry about the possibility that they or their loved ones will become ghostly vagabonds, wandering the Underworld in heedless and miserable poverty. In addition, a few mortals prefer the possibility of continued existence as a ghost to losing their memories in the process of rebirth.

The Dynasts are well aware that allowing unsanctioned funeral rites risks disrupting the cycle of rebirth and creating a multitude of ghosts. In addition to not wanting the living to be troubled by their ancestors materializing and demanding offerings, the Dynasts also fear that too many ghosts might lead to the creation of one or more shadowlands. When she first unleashed the power of the Imperial Manse, the Scarlet Empress destroyed almost all of the shadowlands that had appeared on the Blessed Isle in the aftermath of the Contagion, and Immaculate monks and Sidereal sorcerers then worked together to seal the remainder. The Dynasts are resolute in their determination not to allow new shadowlands to form in the Blessed Isle, especially not now that the Deathlords are served by the terrible deathknights.

Magistrates and lesser officials cannot police every funeral that occurs in the Blessed Isle, though. Occasionally, illicit funerals occur. Most happen in small towns and rural villages, far from the scrutiny of the local authorities. Sometimes, entire villages fall into heresy and begin burying their dead in unsanctioned ways, with grave goods. This oc-



curs most often on the coast, where individuals periodically have contact with foreigners with heretical ideas.

Few such villages persist in their illicit ways for long, however. The Realm's thaumaturges soon register the presence of significant numbers of ghosts in a specific region, and the local magistrate visits the village—typically accompanied by a small company of Exalted Immaculate monks and a sorcerer or two. If the magistrate reveals the existence of widespread illicit burial practices, the priest in charge of the funerals is executed for treason in front of the villagers, and the remainder are then executed or disenfranchised.

While open heresy is relatively rare, occasionally some error is made in the funeral service or the deceased is in some manner unsuitable for rebirth, and the individual becomes a ghost. This happens most frequently in poor funerals, where the family might not be able to afford all of the necessary trappings, in the hasty funerals of slaves or in the funerals of thaumaturges who have tainted their Essence in some manner and so are denied rebirth. The ghosts produced by these botched funerals are typically pathetic wretches who wander the Underworld as paupers and whose families have no idea that they have not been reborn.

The fear of becoming an impoverished and forgotten ghost troubles some residents of the Blessed Isle. Thaumaturges and con artists regularly sell various amulets and talismans of dubious effectiveness that are supposed to either keep someone who dies from becoming a ghost or to make certain that a funeral goes well and that the deceased is swiftly reborn. These talismans are bought by both rich and poor, and they serve as useful sources of additional income for both wanderers and licensed thaumaturges.

In addition, wanderers, covert ancestor cultists, thaumaturges of dubious morals and outright con artists all sometimes offer to use real or fake thaumaturgical practices to inform people if any of their recently departed relatives have become ghosts. Some elderly individuals pay for this service in advance, so that their surviving relatives will know if they become ghosts. The person performing this service generally offers either to sacrifice grave goods or to accept payment for high-quality grave goods that he will then sacrifice.

These services are offered equally often by sincere death cultists who are deeply troubled by the existence of homeless and impoverished ghosts and by con artists who have no interest in anything beyond the monies they can extort from the gullible and bereaved. The most skilled of these con artists are thaumaturges who make deals with ghosts or, more commonly, with minor elementals who pretend to be the departed relative when they are summoned. Afterward, the ghost or elemental and the thaumaturge split the profits. While magistrates and the Guardians of the Realm certainly do not approve of con artists bilking money from villagers and townspeople, they consider such illicit enterprises to be far less illegal than actual ancestor worship. As a result, a moderate bribe is often sufficient to allow a mountebank

to avoid punishment. In contrast, actual death cultists are always either executed or disenfranchised.

THE REALM'S DEMIWORLD

Despite living in a rigidly controlled society, some people fall through the cracks, and others deliberately avoid attention. In rural areas, wanderers travel without regard for prefecture boundaries, and bandits hide in wasted places. In the cities, criminals, rogue thaumaturges and even some God-Bloods make their livings outside of the established social order.

THE WANDERERS

As a result of the many difficulties involved in being disenfranchised, some who do not leave the Realm become professional wanderers, while others turn to banditry. Both options have become increasingly common since the disappearance of the Scarlet Empress. Professional wanderers are mortals who have forsaken the comforts of home and hearth to travel from village to village on foot or in simple carts and carriages. They have existed since the days of the Contagion, when bands of mortals took to the roads and fled the dying cities. While most later chose to settle and accept the benefits of rural or urban life once the Scarlet Empress restored order, a few decided to remain on the roads. Some wanderers are disenfranchised, but most were either born to this life or voluntarily left their previous lives as citizens or peasants behind and took to the roads. The more prosperous and organized wanderers travel in small groups for mutual protection, but a few, mostly the newer wanderers who have not yet been accepted into a wanderer clan, walk the roads alone.

Regardless of whether they are lone travelers or small clans riding in a handful of wagons, wanderers all perform similar functions. They travel from one town or village to another, providing entertainment such as music, storytelling or simply the latest news. In addition, they sell simple crafts and goods from distant towns and perform various services such as helping to bring in unusually large harvests, repairing pots, sharpening knives or applying tattoos. Many wanderers have a reputation for being minor thaumaturges and so are often called upon to cast horoscopes or sell minor talismans. While some wanderers are indeed skilled mortal magicians, many more make their living telling gullible villagers what they want to hear and selling worthless trinkets. For all that they provide useful or entertaining services, their reputation is relatively mixed, since they are also known for being con artists and petty thieves.

Because they exist on the fringes of society and have little to offer jaded urbanites, wanderers almost never visit large cities. They mostly travel from one rural farming village or small market town to another. Avoiding cities and patrician- or Dynast-owned estates also helps them avoid the attentions of the government and the Great Houses.





As a result, most wanderers are ignored unless they draw attention to themselves in some fashion.

When they travel through one of the Realm's smaller ports, wanderers often purchase unusual musical instruments and exotic trained animals or recruit skilled foreign entertainers, artists or thaumaturges who cannot otherwise find a way to live in the Realm. As a result, some of the more well-known troupes of wanderers put on Haltan beast shows or exhibitions of Chiaroscuran fire dancing. These talented wanderers are always welcome, and the most popular troupes contain as many as a dozen wagons and 40 or 50 people. Such a troupe arriving in a town creates a local sensation, and their presence is cause for a festival that lasts for the few days they remain in town. For every large wandering troupe of skilled performers and talented thaumaturges, however, there are a dozen that are little more than grifters, semi-talented storytellers and hackneyed musicians. They scrape by only because many villagers have enough food to share with strangers and are eager for any entertainment that breaks the dull routine of their lives.

While entire troupes of the disenfranchised are almost unknown, disenfranchised individuals who have useful talents can sometimes find a home among troupes of wanderers. As a result, most troupes contain several disenfranchised members, and the majority of wanderers have at least one disenfranchised ancestor. Regardless of this fact, officials generally ignore the wanderers because they are relatively rare and seldom cause any trouble beyond conning a farmer out of a chicken or sack of yams. Even wanderers who are not disenfranchised are not eligible for any aid from the government unless they agree to settle down in some village, city or town. As a result, they cost the imperial government nothing, they help keep the rural population entertained, and they occasionally give villagers something to complain about other than the government or their taxes. The only exception to this policy of passive neglect occurs when a troupe of wanderers actively incites heresy or its members become bandits.

A few troupes of wanderers make illicit deals with minor gods and attempt to get villagers to give these gods offerings or prayers in return for minor boons. Such cults are typically short-lived because they are usually found out when either a villager or the god reports the heresy to a representative of the Immaculate Order. A more serious and long-term problem is that some wanderers, especially those with several foreign members, are ancestor cultists who bury their dead in hidden graves with significant grave goods. In addition, these wanderers sometimes act as brokers of offerings for villagers they can convince to take advantage of their services. Several groups of wanderers have been responsible for the rise of ancestor cults in the villages through which they pass. Today, the number of wanderers is increasing as more villagers are disenfranchised. Also, greater numbers of them are turning to banditry.

Since the departure of the Scarlet Empress, many prefectures have become somewhat more insular and are less eager

to cooperate with their neighbors to fight bandits. As a result, gangs of bandits can more easily find refuge in the wilds of one prefecture, as long as they confine the vast majority of their raids to the inhabitants of neighboring prefectures and leave the inhabitants of their home prefecture alone. In some cases, bandits purchase their safety by giving a cut of their ill-gotten profits to local officials in return for an assurance that their presence will be ignored. While this type of corruption has always occurred, it is now more common, and fewer officials are caught and punished. Some of the most skilled and politically adept bandit gangs now operate free from interference by the legions or the private armies of the Dynasts. To do so, they must remain relatively small, never attack the estates of patricians or Dynasts and avoid any hint that they are attempting to set themselves up as warlords or otherwise openly defying the power of the local authorities.

CRIME AND THE CRIMINAL UNDERWORLD

Although the Dynasts regularly boast about how orderly and well run the Realm is, its inhabitants are still largely ordinary mortals with the same desire for power, easy money and illicit entertainment as every other resident of Creation.

Criminals thrive in the Realm, and any citizen who wishes to purchase illegal drugs or other smuggled goods, to hire assassins or thieves, or to find a buyer for blackmail information or stolen goods can almost always manage any of these feats in any city in the Realm. Every criminal within the Realm knows that both his success in his chosen profession and his very survival depends upon remaining unnoticed by the magistrates and the Black Helms, though. To do so, all criminals know that they must stringently avoid all of the following practices:

- Organizing criminal gangs that encompass more than one city or town or that contain more than a few hundred members.
- Committing any crimes against the Dynasts, the patricians, the Immaculate Order or the government.
- Interfering with large-scale commerce or threatening the uneasy peace between the Dynasts and the Guild.
- Inciting riots, committing large-scale property destruction (including arson) or encouraging open opposition to the Dynasts or the government.
- Committing or inciting others to commit major or minor heresies.

All of these acts are considered to be direct affronts to the Empress's rule, as well as serious threats to the existing social and political order. As a result, they are considered to be treasonous and are therefore capital crimes.

Conversely, criminal acts that do not involve any of the aforementioned crimes are considered relatively minor disturbances. Criminals who are careful to avoid leaving witnesses or obvious evidence of minor crimes such as small-scale theft frequently avoid discovery. The magistrates just take no interest in their crimes, and the Guardians of the

Realm rarely have the time to spend many days tracking down someone who stole a pig or a scribe's prized cloak clasp. In addition, criminals can sometimes bribe their way out of arrest for minor crimes unless several commoners or at least one wealthy and powerful individual complains to the magistrate. The Guardians of the Realm mostly assume that a certain minimal amount of crime is unavoidable, and as long as a crime does not interfere with the Dynasts' rule or impinge too heavily on their tax revenues, the guardians are often willing to ignore it, in return for suitable recompense.

RECREATIONAL DRUGS

Like almost everywhere else in Creation, alcohol, marijuana and qat are all legal and widely available on the Blessed Isle. While public overuse is frowned upon and being high to the point that it interferes with an individual's expected duties results in various financial, legal and social penalties, the Realm does not legislate the use of these drugs. Because the Empress was unwilling to allow large number of her citizens to become worthless addicts, however, most of the harder drugs are illegal. The only exceptions are drugs that allow tired or overworked individuals to either increase their productivity or reduce the degree to which fatigue impairs them. Opium is available only to licensed physicians, while heroin is completely illegal, and coca leaves are legal, while cocaine is illegal. (The penalties for sale and possession are relatively minor, though.)

In addition to preventing social disruption, the fact that many drugs are illegal is also used as a way both to control the populace and to enrich the coffers of guardians and bureaucrats. The laws forbidding any drugs that allow mortals to perform feats reserved for the Dragon-Blooded are exceedingly strict and are broken only by career criminals and would-be rebels. There is, however, a high demand for many other illegal drugs by people in all levels of society. Wealthy mortals can evade the law fairly easily, and small amounts of all manner of illegal intoxicants are a feature at many of the wilder parties held by the Dynasts, the patricians and the wealthiest commoners. (Patricians and wealthy commoners often pay the local Black Helms to ignore their excesses.)

The poor and middle classes have considerably more difficulty obtaining illegal intoxicants. The many small criminal syndicates smuggle in various illegal drugs and sell them to anyone who can meet their high prices. These drug syndicates make substantial profits, but the majority of the Realm's citizens cannot afford the drugs they are selling. Officials in the Thousand Scales know a great deal about these syndicates and carefully monitor their activities using Charms, spies and paid informants. As long as these syndicates remain small and antagonistic, they cannot import sufficient amounts of drugs or reduce prices low enough to cause significant social problems.

As a result, the Black Helms put a stop to any attempts at mergers or long-term alliances between criminal syndicates by arresting and enslaving everyone involved

in these efforts. Nonetheless, the Dynasts have no desire to completely wipe out these syndicates. The leaders of all of the local drug syndicates regularly pay large bribes to both the Guardians of the Realm and bureaucrats in the Thousand Scales, providing a significant source of income to the coffers of those who help police the Realm's drug trade. Also, these syndicates offer a relatively harmless place for highly ambitious and amoral mortals to go. The Dynasts would far rather have these people peddling intoxicants to shopkeepers than engaged in activities that might actually threaten the safety and stability of the Realm.

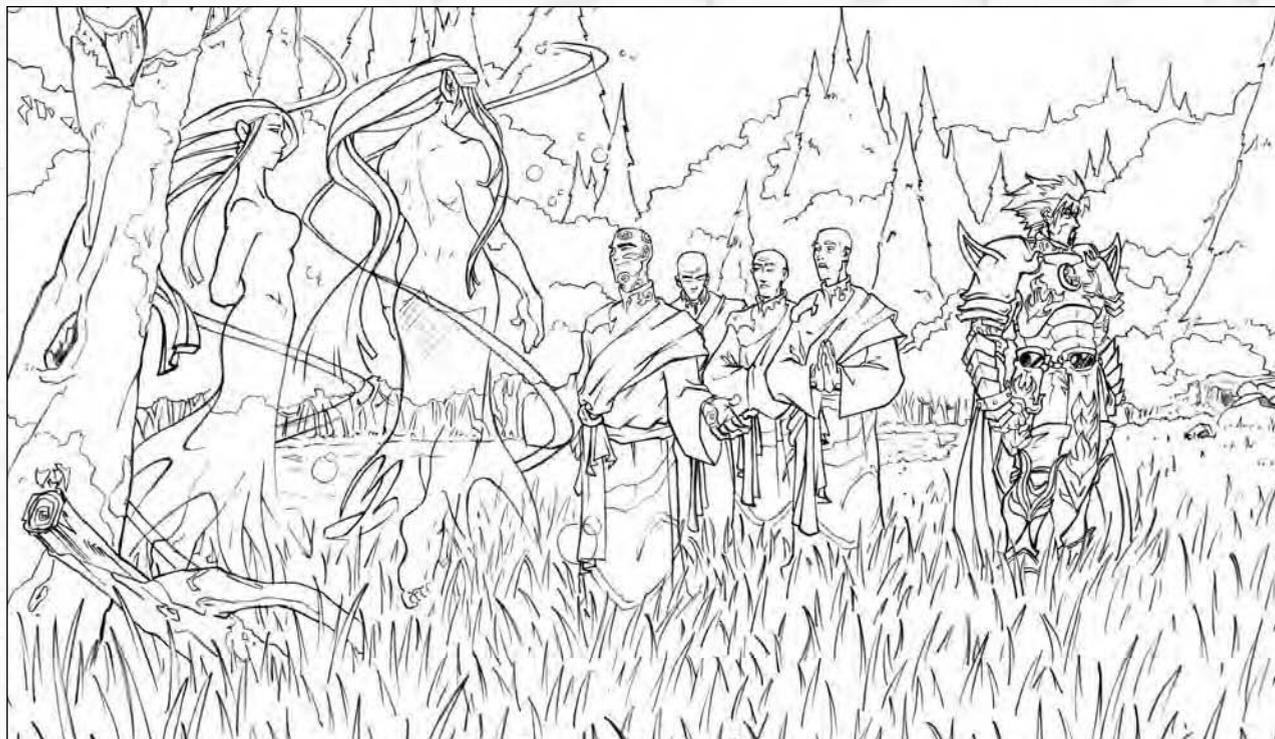
THE LIVES OF THE GOD-BLOODED

The Dynasts attempt to maintain a precise social order: Ordinary humans serve, and the Dragon-Blooded rule. In addition, the Dragon-Blooded and carefully licensed thaumaturges are the only individuals who are supposed to manipulate the powers of Essence. Unfortunately, reality is far more complex than this simple vision. Two groups disturb this rigidly ordered view of the Blessed Isle: Dragon-Blooded Half-Castes and the God-Blooded. The first is the easiest for the Dynasts to deal with. Among the Great Houses and the patricians, Half-Caste children occupy a place halfway between mortal children and the Dragon-Blooded. Many who are born to patrician families are usually fostered into one of the 11 Great Houses, and both they and the Half-Caste children of the Dynasts often go to secondary school. Once they graduate, some become minor functionaries in the Realm's vast bureaucracy, while others gain positions of minor distinction within the Imperial Army, the Imperial Navy or the Immaculate Order. Patrician Half-Castes who stay with their families typically gain positions of importance in their family. In fact, their longevity and other advantages typically mean that they become the heads of their families. In contrast, Dynastic Half-Castes who do not go to secondary school remain forever in the shadow of their Dragon-Blooded relatives, and the best they can expect is to earn distinguished but minor positions in their households.

Dragon-Blooded men frequently dally with commoner women, however, and the result is occasionally a Half-Caste child born into a commoner family. Like any commoner, they have the option of attempting to gain wealth and distinction by joining either the legions or the Immaculate Order. Most do so because their natural abilities allow them to rise in rank until they are just below the Dynasts. Few are willing to pass up the chance to number among the wealthiest and most powerful mortals in the Realm. Some, however, choose to remain outside of the imperial power structure. Some of these Half-Castes become famous traders, renowned entertainers or exceptionally powerful thaumaturges.

The lot of God-Blooded born in the Realm is even more complex. By their vary nature, God-Bloods are evidence of improper relations with gods, elementals or demons. Their disreputable parentage is considered nothing more than a minor fault if they are born into one of the Great Houses.





Since the Dragon-Blooded are the rightful intermediaries between humanity and the spirits, the children of an Exalt and one of these inhuman beings gains a certain degree of legitimacy. Depending upon their particular gifts, these children are strongly encouraged to join the legions or the Immaculate Order. Because they often possess unusual Charms allowing them to interact with gods or demons with great ease, most are urged to join the Immaculate Order, and a few have distinguished themselves as having special talents at hunting down and punishing rogue gods. God-Blooded Dynasts who do not choose one of these two paths are frequently encouraged toward scholarly pursuits or others lines of work that will keep them out of the public eye. Some attend the Heptagram, while most others find unobtrusive jobs such as joining the staff of the Imperial Library.

Under the laws and customs of the Immaculate Philosophy, God-Bloods with one parent who is a commoner or a patrician are living proof of a serious religious offense.

Depending upon the exact circumstances of their conception, their mortal parents are often fined and occasionally disenfranchised. The Dynasts are rarely wasteful, though. They strongly encourage all such God-Bloods to join the legions or the Immaculate Order, where their special talents can be put to the service of the Blessed Isle. The Dynasts foster young God-Bloods with disenfranchised or dead mortal parents into the Immaculate Order, and they send official recruiters to other God-Bloods when they reach their teens. A few God-Bloods refuse these generous offers and must live in a society where most mortals fear them and the Dynasts either distrust or ignore them. Like Half-Castes who refuse Dynastic employment, most become traders, entertainers or thaumaturges. Some become wanderers, assassins or other sorts of criminals. (The ability to dematerialize allows them to execute crimes impossible for ordinary mortals to perform.) Today, an increasing number of such God-Bloods are working for or with one of the increasingly daring rogue gods who have begun to plague the Blessed Isle.



THIS ONE MUST SPEAK TO HIS REGENCY OF MATTERS MOST URGENT.

HEY SURE, SENATOR. GOT A LAW FOR ME TO SIGN?



IT COMES TO THIS ONE'S ATTENTION THAT HIS REGENCY REGULARLY...

...PLEASURES HIMSELF TO CERTAIN PASSAGES IN THE IMMACULATE TEXTS.



WHOA... IS IT MIDDAY ALREADY?



THIS ONE HUMBLBY WONDERS IF THIS PRACTICE MIGHT CEASE.



NO THANKS. THE MOUTH OF PEACE HERSELF REGARDS IT AS A HOLY ACT.



BUT, SIR... ACTORS FROM HOUSE CYNIS HAVE BEGUN TO DEPICT YOUR... BEHAVIOR ON STAGE.

HEY, GREAT.



NOT GREAT. THEY HAVE NO RESPECT FOR THE IMMACULATE ORDER OR THE SCARLET THRONE.

YOU MUST RENOUNCE THIS PRACTICE.



AW MAN... BUT I CAN'T GAINSAY THE MOUTH OF PEACE. HOW WOULD THAT LOOK?





CHAPTER THREE

THE IMPERIAL GOVERNMENT

For centuries, the Scarlet Empress has cared for this government she's created. She has nurtured it and pruned it like a decorative bonsai tree, gradually shaping it into a symbol of extraordinary patience and craftsmanship—meant more to appease and distract than for functionality. And like a bonsai, the Realm's government grew, flourished and ultimately survived at the whim of its caretaker.

Savants who have mediated on the nature and structure of the Realm's government have come to realize this fact, which has caused them to wonder exactly why the Empress would go to such trouble for such a result. They speculate that perhaps the Empress was not as competent as she seemed or that she designed her government with nothing but cynical disdain for the very notion of government and created this... mess as a grand joke. In fact, though, the Empress was neither an idiot nor a satirist. She designed the best of all possible governments based on the circumstances she dictated.

By her design, all the true power of the government rested in her hands, though the day-to-day work of ruling and

managing the Realm was the responsibility of layer upon layer of bureaucracy. The Deliberative Senate did the legwork of proposing and ratifying new legislation. The ministries of the Imperial Service (also known as the Thousand Scales) brushed and stamped and rolled and filed every piece of important documentation that was the lifeblood of the empire. Spies maintained strict scrutiny over the bureaucracy, rooting out corruption or dissidence. Powerful wandering officers enforced the laws in the farthest reaches of the empire. Each of these branches fed back into their central core, always upholding the power and glory of the Scarlet Empire.

Yet for all her founding efforts, the Scarlet Empress never actually divided up any real power. The real power in her government rested solely in her own hands, and the system she created is rife with overlapping authority, redundant levels of bureaucracy, inherent internal conflict and built-in divisiveness. Rather than rendering her government a monument to inefficiency and plunging her civilization into ruin, however, the Scarlet Empress pulled off a masterwork of sleight of hand.

She created the illusion of a division of power and provided a vast playground for her most treacherous and ambitious underlings to test each other and waste their energy. While her underlings fought for advantage, she retained the only true power worth having. And with it, she made sure that her government appeared to function efficiently.

Now, the Scarlet Empress is gone, and this government of contradiction and confusion must exert its seeming authority without its true guiding spirit. While it still retains its ideal purposes—making the laws, maintaining the empire and protecting its people—the government is in for a trial by fire the likes of which it was never truly prepared to face.

MAKING THE LAWS

Ideally, the Empress would drive every lawmaking initiative. In her absence, this responsibility falls on her Regent, Tepet Fokuf. All things being equal, however, the true responsibility falls on the one body the Empress never intended to have it—the Deliberative Senate of Exceedingly Judicious Nobles.

THE EMPRESS

At every point on any diagram of authority in her government, the Empress was the one actually in control. She could propose legislation to the Deliberative at any time, and she had a resounding veto on any legislation that cleared both chambers of that body. The spies who watched over the various ministries all reported back to the Empress

and did her dirty work at her command. The wandering law officers, the magistrates, were appointed by the Empress and undyingly loyal to her. Nothing of any importance happened in the government that was not done at the behest or under the direction of the Empress herself.

And although corruption will eventually pervade any authoritarian bureaucracy, the Empress allowed much of that corruption to proliferate by design. Rooting out that corruption kept various competing government agencies busy and distracted, and no single corrupt official could do much serious harm to the entire system. The system was designed with so much superfluous redundancy that corruption would have had to have been not just pervasive, but total to effect any lasting deleterious change. That also ignores the existence of the Empress's secret police and the capacity in the average sniveling bureaucrat to expose corruption and betray it to the Empress for his own personal advancement. As clunky and worm-eaten as the Scarlet Empress's government might seem, it was designed to be just the way it is so she could focus on the real problems of ruling Creation from the center.

AND YET...

The only real problem in such a system is what to do once the designer's hand weakens or lifts, which is the problem facing the Realm today. With the Empress gone, all the redundancy and internal conflict built into the government is beginning to bog everything down. Ideally, the Empress would be the one who breaks through the bureaucratic logjams and resolves disputes (whose only real purpose was to





enhance the Empress's perspective on a given matter anyway). Now, she's gone, and she's apparently not coming back, so her government that wasn't technically designed to work is functioning true to form.

Only three things could possibly break this destructive pattern of bureaucratic entropy. The best thing would be for the Empress to return. If she came back, perhaps this Time of Tumult would fizzle out and things would get back to normal after some bloody housecleaning among the Dynasts. What's more likely is that someone else will take the Scarlet Throne and inherit the mantle of the Empress's powers. Two serious contenders are in the running right now, but neither one is in a strong enough position to make a move. What's least likely—though gaining some popular support—is that the government could learn to get along without the Empress. The reforms that would make such a radical thing possible would need to be sweeping and vast, and a civil war would almost certainly break out, but history tends to look back on such upheavals as mere growing pains if their outcome is worth the effort.

FOR NOW, THOUGH...

In the meantime, a weak old man casts furtive glances at the Scarlet Throne, appearing baffled by how he was chosen to sit in it. His name is Tepet Fokuf, and he is the August Lord Regent of the Scarlet Throne. Fokuf is the epitome of the figurehead ruler, chosen by the squabbling Dynasts of the Great Houses as the man least offensive to them all. None of them would dare sit on the Scarlet Throne as its regent, but they all agreed that *somebody* had to.

That somebody turned out to be a harmless old nobody who is the antithesis of the Empress. He doesn't understand how "his" government works, he's never demonstrated a will to power, and he allows himself to be swayed by whatever charismatic argument is most recent. Senators, noble scions, ministers and officious satraps all do their best to win over the malleable Regent and have him sign and seal official documents that give them whatever they want. His only redeeming quality is that he endures all this with a placid smile and doesn't begrudge anyone their abuse of him. He merely bides his time in the throne room every day until he can retire to his personal chambers to "exhaustively study" the racier passages of the Immaculate Texts. Then, maybe he'll have a nice supper and take a nap.

What's troubling about Regent Fokuf is the possibility that he isn't as oblivious as he seems. He's lived all his life immersed in the political games played by the Great Houses. It is possible—though hopefully unlikely—that he has been playing every one of the Great Houses for fools, lulling them into a false sense of patronizing disregard of him. After all, in the Regent's hands now lies every power the Scarlet Empress ever claimed for herself. Such power is too dangerous for any truly ambitious Dynast to try to grab right now, but the Regent was chosen precisely for his lack of ambition. Did he cultivate

his vapid mien precisely for that reason? Worse, did he and the Scarlet Empress actually work out this whole elaborate charade decades ago in order to stress test her Dynasts' true loyalty to the Empress?

These possibilities are remote, to be sure, but the fact that no one can ultimately disprove them is cause for unease.

THE DELIBERATIVE

The Empress established the Deliberative one century after she came to power. She had no intention to share power with squabbling lawmakers, of course, and she had no wish to honor the ancient structure of the First Age by emulating it. Instead, she created the Deliberative both to quell a burgeoning rebellion of several tributary states and to insulate her divine authority while seeming to divide it among her most honored subjects. In fact, while the tributary states still seceded, she still ended up relegating the tedious work of lawmaking to a bunch of bickering bureaucrats (who thanked her for it), while simultaneously making sure that real power over the creation of laws rested firmly in her hands.

THE DESIGN OF THE DELIBERATIVE

When she founded the Deliberative, the Scarlet Empress devised strict rules for all of that august body's behaviors. The rules describe everything from how new Senators should be appointed to the rules of debate. In time, the latter rules of order have acquired unquestionable authority, and the process of initiating debate on the Deliberative's floor has become ritualized to the nth degree. Such was the Empress's self-congratulation over the mess she had wrought that she even visited the Greater and Lesser Chambers in disguise to hear the debates and enjoy the show. Those Senators who were aware of this open secret presumed that the Empress visited to check up on their behavior, so they advocated for even stricter adherence to the Empress's rules of order.

Regent Fokuf never visits the Deliberative. He trusts that the Senators of the Greater Chamber know what they're doing. If they didn't, he reasons, they wouldn't have deserved the Empress's appointment in the first place. Such deductions are only yet further evidence of why Fokuf is the right man for his job.

THE CHAMBERS

The Deliberative consists of two chambers, the Greater Chamber and the Lesser Chamber. Members of both chambers are called Senators or Deliberators. In the Greater Chamber, Senators sponsor petitions that, if approved, then move to the Lesser Chamber. In the Lesser Chamber, a motion can either pass or be overturned by a two-thirds vote. If the petition passes both Chambers, it becomes an imperial decree and law of the land, unless vetoed by the Empress (now the Regent).

The Senators of the Greater Chamber are all Dragon-Blooded members of the Scarlet Dynasty, each having



been appointed by members of their Great Houses and approved by the Scarlet Empress. The Senators of the Lesser Chamber are appointed by the Greater Chamber and approved by the Empress. That chamber's membership consists of representatives drawn from the ranks of the merchant and patrician classes, as well as tributary lords. There are only a few Dragon-Blooded members of the Lesser Chamber, and those few wield considerable power among their peers. Their hope is to become powerful enough and influential enough to warrant an appointment to the Greater Chamber someday, though this ambition is just the sort of thing that helps keep a Lesser Chamber Dragon-Blood right where he is.

In fact, picking members of either chamber is often no more than a tool to neutralize political threats. History shows that the best way to deal with firebrand upstarts is to subvert them into the establishment in the futile hope of making things better from the inside. By the same token, putting representatives from each of the 11 Great Houses in the Deliberative keeps the Dynasts happily convinced that they have a guiding hand on the tiller of imperial policy. The Empress always encouraged these idealistic beliefs among Senators of both chambers with wry bemusement.

It was within the Empress's power to propose any petition in the Greater Chamber, and her sponsorship was critical to the passage of controversial ones. The idea that the Empress might not approve of one's proposed legislation was usually more than enough motivation to sway the fence-sitters. The Empress also reserved a veto of any passed piece of legislation, which could be overturned only by a subsequent unanimous vote in both chambers. Rather, the overturn vote needed be *nearly* unanimous, thanks to the "Obstructive Naysayer" rule. In a rare concession to the Deliberative's wheedling, the Empress long ago updated her rules of order such that if only one Senator votes in a way opposite the rest of his fellows, the vote is still considered unanimous. Of course, there is no "Obstructive Naysaying Duo" rule, which makes the concession practically meaningless. Should the Deliberative ever dare try to overturn an imperial veto, the Empress usually had no trouble swaying at least two Senators to her way of thinking. (The only time the Deliberative ever stood up for itself and defied the Empress by overturning her veto—three times, no less—she had the willful legislators slaughtered and replaced with more dutiful successors.)

The Empress also built in a subtler check on Senatorial power: the fact that there's no fixed number of Senators. Since one of the primary functions of the body is to placate upstarts, she wanted the flexibility to make room for lots of appointments if a volatile political situation demanded. As a result, the Deliberative stays relatively small in prosperous times and swells in bad times. The reason this flexibility remains a check on the Deliberative is that new Senators favorably disposed to support the Empress could be pumped into the Chambers in tough times to alter the balance of power in the Empress's favor.

SUCCESSION

Another false concession of power made at the Deliberative's founding is the fact that the Empress bestowed upon it the power to approve the succession to the Scarlet Throne. All that both chambers have to do to approve a new ruler is support him or her by a two-thirds majority vote. Yet, even now, the chambers can muster only a thin majority to back a weak regent. The political situation is just too precarious for any serious contender to even whisper aloud her ambition for the Scarlet Throne.

If some candidate were to make a political play for the Scarlet Throne, achieving the necessary majority in either Chamber is merely wishful thinking. The Empress chose her Greater Chamber Senators with an eye toward fractious divisiveness, and an imperial succession vote would be the most important piece of legislation ever to arise in the Deliberative. What might begin as heated debate on the Senate floor will almost certainly end in civil war if advocates on every side of the issue are not extremely wise and reasonable. The best many Senators can hope for, should any of the theoretical contenders act on their potential, is that some loophole can be found (or implanted) in the law to allow for a cunning compromise. The Regency can't go on like this forever. Time is running out on the Deliberative's stopgap measure.

BECOMING A SENATOR

The Dragon-Blooded members of the Greater Chamber come only from the Great Houses. It is an honor to have a House member selected, and it keeps the family's interests from being trampled in debate. Deliberative appointments are generally celebrated with banquets or even auspicious marriages. Naturally, these social events are designed to ingratiate future political allies, snub expected rivals and secure formative alliances between Senators.

Once selected, a Senator of the Greater Chamber must journey to the Imperial City for her formal investiture, which takes place at the opening of a meeting of the Deliberative. A Senator who arrives late for her investiture is already behind in the great political game of the Deliberative. As a result, the amount of effort current Senators put toward summoning their new appointees can reveal how important that appointee's voice will be in deliberations to come. A highly valued appointee might have a scale of troops from his House's pet legion dispatched to hustle him to the Imperial City for his investiture. A Senator whose appointment came as a grudging compromise between die-hard rivals might find his boat harried by privateers, his luggage "mistakenly" held up for inspection at port and his palanquin overturned by hooligans in the street. It's unheard of for Senators to condone or arrange the actual assassination of prospective colleagues en route to their investiture, but those outside the Senate who rely on crucial upcoming votes going a certain way might not be above it. It is, therefore, wise for members of the appointee's family to take steps to ensure the safety and prompt arrival of their selected Senators.



Lesser Chamber Senators are not selected directly by the Great Houses, but by the members of the Greater Chamber. That distinction is a fine one in the grand scheme of things, of course. Though she did not appoint Lesser Chamber Deliberators directly, the Empress also exerted pressure on the Senators of the Greater Chamber to choose Lesser Chamber Senators. As a result, the Senators of the Lesser Chamber are picked from the wealthiest patricians, merchants and tributary nobles for their pliability, their wealth and their potential to be useful to their betters. The Lesser Chamber is also one of the best places to stick loud-mouthed political dissidents in order to either pacify them or keep a close watch over them.

As far as leaving the Deliberative and divesting oneself of rank goes, three ways exist to do so. The first is to be summarily removed by the Empress herself, a tactic she frequently employed when her Senators showed too much initiative or resistance to her. The second is exile, and the third is death. The Empress reserved the power to reinstate any disgraced Senator, but in her long rein, she did so only half a dozen times (and only when it was politically effective to show such magnanimity).

The Empress also reserved the power to dissolve the Deliberative completely. She never felt it necessary to have this power expressed in official records, or to warn the Deliberative of its existence, but she did have occasion to use it a little more than a century ago when the Delibera-

tive made a point of overturning three successive imperial vetoes. In response, she stationed a legion outside the Palace of the Deliberative and ordered her soldiers to disperse the Senators once their session got under way. Every member of the Lesser Chamber was killed that day, as were a majority of Greater Chamber Senators. (The rest were exiled.) The Empress had a new roster of Greater Chamber Senators appointed after that, and they appointed new Senators to the Lesser Chamber. While the Empress did not need to use this unspoken authority again, the threat of it has loomed ever since. The notion that Regent Fokuf might exercise it someday is laughable. The thought that the Roseblack, Tepet Ejava, will do so if she becomes Empress (or in order to become Empress) is not nearly so funny.

THE OFFICES

The most powerful office in the Deliberative is that of the Master of the Deliberative, who oversees the Greater Chamber's debates. Also attached to the Greater Chamber is the Incorruptible Secretary, who tallies all votes. These two roles have Lesser Chamber reflections in the Master of the Lesser Chamber and the Scrupulous Monitor of the Will of the People. The Greater Chamber also has the Guardian of the Enlightened Discourse, who commands that chamber's Guardians of the Deliberative, an elite security force charged with protecting the Senators from all threats—including one another. Similarly, the Protector of the Debate commands

those guardians responsible for safeguarding the Lesser Chamber. Beyond that, all Senators are purported to be equal. There is no doubt, though, that a Senator of the Greater Chamber outranks one of the Lesser. Within each chamber also exists a largely invisible hierarchy of alliances, allegiances and blackmail that ensures a rigid pecking order.

All offices are voted on at the first session of the new year, though a no-confidence vote can be called at any time. If such a vote succeeds, all officers are removed from their posts, and no new business can be brought to the attention of the Deliberative until a new Master of the Deliberative is in place. New officers are elected by a two-thirds majority in the Greater Chamber and a simple majority in the Lesser. In both chambers, no-confidence votes require a two-thirds majority.

THE GREATER CHAMBER

Any power the Deliberative actually has rests in the Greater Chamber. An appointment to the Greater Chamber carries with it more prestige and, indeed, more authority than one to the Lesser. Greater Chamber Senators have right of way in processions, are served first at formal occasions and have the right to displace a Lesser Chamber Senator from her seat at any state function. And that's on top of the power Greater Chamber Senators have to appoint Lesser Chamber Senators in the first place.

When the Deliberative is in session—from the first day of Ascending Air to the last day of Descending Earth—only these Senators can introduce a motion into debate. Each motion needs a sponsor and a pair of seconds, who compose what's called a Declaration of Harmonious Intent. The Declaration is a scroll consisting of the proposed motion and testimonies from its sponsor and seconds that it will blend harmoniously with the existing laws of the Realm upon approval.

As each Declaration is received, it is read in its entirety to the Greater Chamber as the Senators' scribes furiously write it down. The Master of the Deliberative then calls for a formal vote to determine whether the Chamber is willing to debate the Declaration. If the majority accedes, the Declaration is burned in a brazier kept to the left of the Master's chair—and woe be unto the scribe who didn't get the whole thing transcribed. If debate is refused, the Declaration is returned to the sponsor as a badge of shame. Some petulant Senators (especially Fire-aspected ones) burn their returned Declarations themselves, but most just have a slave throw them away instead. Enterprising historians, dejected Senators, collectors and political malcontents all vie for possession of these rejected Declarations. It has become a popular pastime in recent decades to compare yesterday's failed Declarations to today's passing legislation in hopes of finding ironic similarities. Certain collectors of eclectic esoterica pay unreasonable sums of money for rejected historical Declarations of Harmonious Intent that closely match modern laws.

Once the day's Declarations have been dealt with, the Master of the Deliberative then formally opens the debates,

THE PETITIONER'S LINE

Every Declaration of Harmonious Intent must be hand delivered by its sponsor to the Master of the Deliberative at the beginning of a day's session, and the line to do so forms early every day. Jockeying for position within the line of petitioners has become yet another self-important political ritual in the Greater Chamber, and allowing a Senator to advance past one in the line is the sort of favor that can actually reap political dividends down the line. Of course, the most effective way to make friends in the petitioners' line is to invite someone relatively close in power, experience or influence to cut ahead of you. Allowing someone too far beneath himself to cut ahead can make a Senator seem foolish or disingenuous. Reaching too high above oneself to let a senior Senator cut ahead is not always effective either. The most senior Senators expect to be allowed to cut in front of their least experienced peers, so a junior Senator is really only likely to attract a distinguished senior's notice if he fails to allow him to cut in line. Snubbing a senior Senator might earn a newbie the temporary respect of the victim's rivals, but it's certain to earn him the victim's cold, lingering wrath.

starting with any petitions left over from the previous day's discussion or tabled in previous sessions. When controversial proposals generate extensive debate, days and days of un-debated Declarations can pile up. The Master of the Deliberative decides the order in which the proposals reach the floor, granting him one of the only real powers associated with his position.

When debate opens on a particular petition, the sponsoring Senator is given the chance to orate in favor of it first. Once the sponsor is finished, the rest of the Deliberative may join the debate. The Master of the Deliberative chooses the order of the debate, which grants the office yet more power. Rare is the Master who will put off an eloquent speaker indefinitely or simply refuse to allow him to make his case. Instead, a Master might allow several subsequent dunderheads to speak out in favor of a proposal he finds distasteful, then have a brilliant orator who agrees with him stand and mop the floor with them. If the Master is feeling especially ruthless, he can then allow a stammering junior appointee fresh from his investiture to speak up next in the proposal's defense.

When debate on a petition finally dies down, a vote is called for and tallied by the Incorruptible Secretary. If a simple majority approves, the motion goes to the Lesser Chamber to dare its disapproval. If a majority disapproves, then the petition is considered denied and debate moves on to the next Declaration.





Should a debate on the Greater Chamber floor degenerate into frustrating deadlock, the motion described in the Declaration can simply be tabled until a prescribed later date when everyone has had a chance to meditate on it (or meet privately to discuss it, more likely). If the vote to table the motion succeeds, the petition is removed from the floor and discussion of the next begins. A canny Master of the Deliberative can then capitalize on the lingering frustration of the deadlocked debate by following it up with an even more controversial Declaration for the fractious Senators to fight over. In so doing, he can stall upcoming Declarations that he finds objectionable or indirectly push back critical Declarations on which he wants certain absent Senators to vote when they are next available.

THE LESSER CHAMBER

The Lesser Chamber of the Deliberative can vote only on those pieces of legislation passed down from the Greater Chamber. The Master of the Lesser Chamber solemnly reads each motion that the Greater Chamber has passed, then debate is opened. In theory, the Master of the Lesser Chamber calls the order of the debate just as the Master of the Greater Chamber does, but in practice, debates in the Lesser Chamber immediately erupt into shouting matches and unbroken streams of interruptions that the uninitiated find intimidating. Making things that much more chaotic, any member of the Lesser Chamber can call for a vote at any time during the debate. That motion must be approved by the Master of the Lesser Chamber and then voted on by the entire body. If two thirds of the Senators agree to the vote, the actual vote proceeds. Otherwise, debate rages on.

When a vote has been called, the Scrupulous Monitor records each Senator's vote and tallies the results. As in the Greater Chamber, all votes are public. If a two-thirds majority votes aye, the motion passes. It becomes a decree and goes to the Empress (the Regent these days) for consideration. If more than two thirds of the voting Senators vote in the negative, the motion is defeated. In such instances, a scroll bearing the text of the motion is returned to the Greater Chamber, bound in twined black and red ribbons. (Unlike failed Declarations of Harmonious Intent, these defeated motions are not rare enough to be so highly prized by collectors.)

It is easy to conceive of the Lesser Chamber as an automatic approving machine for the decrees of the Greater Chamber, but such is not entirely the case. First of all, many Senators of the Lesser Chamber are so desperate to justify their existence that they comment on every piece of legislation proposed, regardless of the signal-to-noise ratio of their contributions. When such long-winded Senators are lucky, tenacious erosion of their audience's will to argue (or live) earns them grudging capitulation in exchange for blessed silence. When they're unlucky, they're declared Obstructive Naysayers and frog-marched outside—often to the sound of thunderous applause.

Second, many of the current stock of Lesser Chamber Senators envy and hate the Senators of the Greater Chamber,

and nothing gives them greater pleasure than to stymie their betters. Bribes or implied threats from above can help get the Lesser Chamber in line—some rare junior Senators have even been swayed by appeals to their sense of duty to the Realm—but mostly, the Lesser Chamber Senators derive too much satisfaction from disrupting the plans of the Greater Chamber. The fact that all of the current Lesser Chamber Senators owe their political careers to appointments descending from the Greater Chamber only makes this obstinacy all the more baffling.

A third reason for friction between the Chambers is the growing influx of Lesser Chamber Senators who actually believe they can make a difference in the Realm. Guided by nothing more than conscience or some rare sense of ethics, they have taken it into their minds to strike down laws they consider unjust or bad for the Scarlet Empire. While such idealistic grandstanding is not uncommon among new patrician appointees or elevated officials from backwater satrapies in the Threshold, such upstarts usually learn their hard, cold lessons about the way things work and settle down in time. A timely crisis of conscience has recently rallied one of the Lesser Chamber's most influential Dragon-Blooded Senators to this unlikely banner, however, giving its proponents unexpected traction in Lesser Chamber debates. His sudden, unexpected adoption of patriotic idealism has even inspired some younger Senators in the Greater Chamber to do the same, earning him the everlasting enmity of the Deliberative's most cruel and jaded elder statesmen.

MAINTAINING THE EMPIRE

The bureaucracy that maintains the Scarlet Empire—known officially as the Imperial Service and colloquially as the Thousand Scales—consists of all the brush-wavers, judges and accountants who execute the decrees of the Deliberative. Each level of government is supposed to be responsible for the one below it, and everyone is supposed to look out for corruption on the levels below them. This responsibility is but an idealistic veneer lacquered over an uglier reality. The true design of this web of ministries, departments, councils and committees is not as much to perpetuate the functions of empire but to obscure said functions from the empire's citizens.

Until recently, the Imperial Army, the Magistracy (and the innumerable ministries overseen by its magistrates) and the All-Seeing Eye all worked in harmony, with the hand of the Empress balancing their rivalries. Her absence, however, has propelled the ministries of the Imperial Bureaucracy into a position of greater authority at the expense of the other two. What's more, the ministers of the bureaucracy have even waged a revolution (in miniature) against their nominal overseers, the magistrates.

These ministers are appointed officials who serve in the actual Imperial Bureaucracy itself. Drawn from the ranks of mortals as well as the occasional Dragon-Blood, the minis-



OFF THE FLOOR

Considering how it was designed, it is no surprise that little of true importance is resolved within the bounds of the Deliberative's normal operating procedure. Yet, it can still be effective at what it does, thanks in large part to the work that is done off the debate floor. The cloakrooms, meditative gardens and shadowed corridors that surround the Deliberative's meeting halls provide perfect places to cut secret deals.

Outside cooperation between Chambers is not unheard of either, though it is less common these days. The Dynasts of the Greater Chamber are not above promising social or political favors to Senators or children of Senators in the Lesser Chamber in exchange for votes from the Lesser Chamber that support the Dynasts' positions. Technically, the strict letter of the rules of conduct that govern the Deliberative forbids this trade, as does the spirit in which the entire body was created.

Of course, many things are *technically* forbidden...

ters officially have their powers severely limited by law. Yet, just as the number of tasks the maintenance of the Realm requires is huge, so also is the ministers' number legion. Using the laws and regulations of the Realm as a noose, they have slowly drawn their powers tight around the once-proud magistrates and seem intent on either harnessing them or grinding them into dust.

ENTERING IMPERIAL SERVICE

The life of a bureaucratic minister is something that many Realm civilians desire, if not for themselves, then for their children. The obvious advantages inherent to such a position include safety, security and respect. Merchant fleets can be set upon by pirates, and the Guild makes ever more headway squeezing Realm merchants out of the Threshold every day. The soldiers of the legions are pawns in the Great Houses' power games, when they aren't trying desperately to put down rebellions or snuff out the zealotry that surrounds the rampant Anathema. The Order of the Immaculate Dragons offers some of the same benefits as the bureaucracy, but with many fewer openings per year and no hope of a pension or a lavish retirement fund.

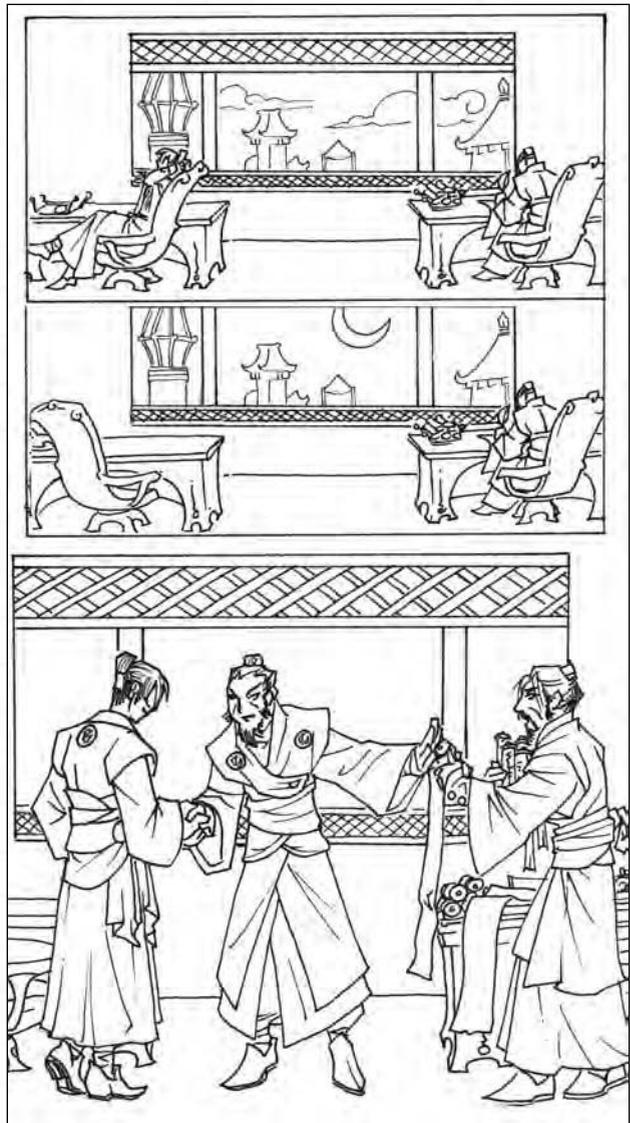
Indeed, the life of an imperial bureaucrat involves lifting nothing heavier than paper and brush all day, while dressed in finery that would bankrupt the average citizen. If one cannot hope to be Exalted by the Elemental Dragons, one could do worse than to "settle" for the opulent life among their Thousand Scales. And to dwell in the Scarlet Empire's thriving Imperial City—or the Imperial Palace itself, for those truly blessed—why, that's a dream beyond imagining.

Tosay that the truth is somewhat different beggars the concept of understatement, but it is in the Imperial Bureaucracy's

interest to maintain the illusion. If the masses clamor and compete for positions in the Bureaucracy, the ministries can pick and choose at their leisure. They thereby assure themselves a constant supply of talented, eager potential recruits.

But how does one start out in the Imperial Bureaucracy, making his dreams of sinecure and avarice (or duty and devotion to the atavistic romantic) into reality? The best method is to be born into it. Just as the Great Houses adorn the heights of Realm society, so too do the first families of the ministers run its government. Of course, the Imperial Service is a meritocracy—or so claim the jaded, the cynical and the naïve—but entrenched families with long service records take every precaution to make sure that their offspring are the ones acknowledged to have the most merit. Many of them even command private armies, and they recruit the best and brightest offspring of the Great Houses as their servants.

The second best way to get involved in the Imperial Bureaucracy is to be born into one of the Great Houses. Granted, the patricians govern the Realm while the Dragon-





Blooded rule it, but the Houses exert plenty of control over the Bureaucracy. The Dragon-Blooded make every effort to marry their mortal children into prominent patrician families, which gives them influence over (and agents among) the patricians. Serious corruption and collusion is supposed to be kept to a minimum by the ministers' internal auditing process, and the Empress's power is even supposed to allow the patrician ministers to deal with the Dragon-Blooded as equals. Yet, the Empress is gone, and only the most powerful, connected, corrupt or foolish patricians in the Bureaucracy stand in the Great Houses' way if they don't have to.

Finally, perhaps the worst way to ascend into the Imperial Service is to work hard, study one's material and apply oneself with due diligence to being the best worker one can be. Granted, some anecdotal evidence suggests that working hard and being good at one's job will garner one the notice of entrenched ministers and bureaucrats, thus earning one a well-deserved position of respect and acclaim in the Bureaucracy. Such evidence is almost certainly fabricated, however, circulated by propagandists and hereditary bureaucrats to encourage hard, diligent work in naïve souls who lack the guile and initiative to exert their own will to power. This is not to say that no one in the entire history of the Realm has ever been awarded a juicy government post as a direct reward for hard work and good faith... it's just never happened to any person that any given bureaucrat can actually name.

THE MINISTERS

In the churning bureaucracy of the Imperial Service, there exist well over 100 bureaus, departments, ministries and offices, each assigned specific areas of oversight and responsibilities. They range from the miniscule (the Office of the Imperial Overseer of Civilian Airships, consisting of one minister and one clerk) to the mundane (the Righteous and Accountable Ministry of Weights and Measures) to the massive (the Humble and Honest Assessors of the Imperial Tax). The responsibilities of each ministry have been set down in a massive tome known as the Imperial Registry, which is the final authority on all disputes between ministries.

THE IMPERIAL REGISTRY

The Imperial Registry runs for more than 3,000 pages of lists dating back to the earliest days of the Scarlet Empire. This document changes constantly, such that each new imperial decree alters the description of the imperial service. When such a change is called for by a new decree, a skilled calligrapher must modify the original Registry, and (ideally) runners head out for each of the Realm's provincial seats of government to update those copies as well. Short of being consulted by one of the gods before making a move in the Games of Divinity, being called upon to make a change to the original Imperial Registry is one of the highest honors a mortal calligrapher could ever receive.

The Imperial Registry's covers are plates of beaten brass, inlaid with gold and silver characters. The cover has one orna-

mental lock, to which the Respected and Impartial Keeper of the Registry keeps the single key, and the book rests on a bare lectern in a bare room inside the Imperial Palace. In the next room over, dozens of calligraphers toil eternally to transcribe copies of the book, which are to be distributed to the Realm's provincial seats of government. Every office and ministry keeps a copy of the Registry, and any employee worth her office spends many hours each week examining the changes in regulations to make sure her power remains secure. It is also a good idea for the Realm's magistrates to be well versed in the Registry's laws so that they can make sure ambitious ministers in the protectorates aren't overstepping their authority.

Subordinate to the Keeper of the Registry is a team of legal scholars who do nothing more than travel the Realm resolving disputes over authority between ministers. To qualify for the post, these roving arbitrators must memorize the entire book and be unflinchingly incorruptible. To help safeguard that incorruptibility, every decision these scholars make in matters of bureaucratic authority is taken down and delivered to the Imperial City, where it is reviewed by auditors to make sure it is the correct decision. If it is, the decision is logged as a legal precedent. If it's wrong—that is, if it directly contradicts a previous imperial decree recorded elsewhere in the Registry—the mistake is noted in the arbitrator's permanent record and he has to answer for it when he reports for a periodic performance review. (The ruling stands in the matter on which he ruled, however, until the aggrieved party appeals the ruling and a new arbitrator is dispatched to hear the case.)

Should his services be called for, an arbitrator is sent as soon as possible to hear arguments from everyone involved. He then deliberates for a period of between three days and two weeks, privately calling additional witnesses and otherwise considering the evidence. When he makes his pronouncement, it is final, and he continues on his way. By tradition, an arbitrator must leave the city by sundown on the day he makes his decision, so that the winning side will not be tempted to reward him. (The quick departure also makes it harder for the losing side to "reward" the arbitrator.)

Of course, both rules are little more than nominal good-faith concessions to a suspicious populace. The means of bribing interpreters of the Registry could fill a book larger than the Registry itself. It usually starts before a minister actually calls for an arbitrator, with the minister sending runners to butter up every arbitrator in the area with gifts. It doesn't stop when the arbitrator gets to the city either. Arbitrators are gifted with everything from fancy clothes to exquisite concubines—all provided not by the interested parties (of course), but by anyone seeking to curry favor second-hand. If a merchant prince of the Guild realizes that an unfavorable ruling by an arbitrator will allow an imperial bureaucrat to cut in on his business, he will suggest to the arbitrator that some courses of action are more prudent than others. If a clever malcontent wants to sow divisiveness between a litigant and the Imperial Bureaucracy, he can approach an

incorruptible arbitrator with a clumsy bribery attempt on the litigant's (unwitting) behalf.

The penalty on an arbitrator who abuses his position, however, is a terrible one. The most common punishment involves removing the tongue and hands of the offender. The offender then has a tablet detailing his crime affixed to his neck, and he's set loose to wander the roads of the Realm as a warning to all and sundry. Those who conspire to bribe an arbiter are punished as well, with such penalties as exorbitant fines, removal from office, exile or even execution.

THE MINISTRIES

Despite its antagonistic design and its in-built dependence on the Scarlet Empress, the machine of her empire has not completely seized up yet without her. The largest ministries of the Imperial Bureaucracy enjoy widespread recognition, authority and wealth. This is not to suggest that they won't self-destruct in time if nothing is done to reform them, just that they will be the last to fall if things keep going as they are. Some of the largest include:

THE HUMBLE AND HONEST ASSESSORS OF THE IMPERIAL TAX

This heavily policed ministry not only assesses the imperial tax but collects it as well. The threat of corruption at the ministry's various levels was once mitigated (where not completely expunged) by the strict scrutiny of the All-Seeing Eye and the oversight of the magistrates, but the Eye has filmed over since the disappearance of the Empress, and the magistrates are hunted men. As a result, the local tax collectors have become very cozy with the Great Houses (largely to the common man's detriment). In reaction, some of the most notorious bandits and highwaymen have been granted an unusual boon in the farthest imperial provinces. They can take greater risks stealing larger chunks of those governments' tax money, because the regional governors are too afraid of exposing their own corruption to call for help from the imperial government. The only thing such robbers have to worry about is the intervention of a wandering magistrate—or the fury of a righteous Anathema who means well—and most are more than willing to take their chances.

THE IMPERIAL TREASURY

The one main check on the tax-assessors' power is that they have no authority to spend the money they collect. Every jade bit of revenue must be handed over to the Treasury, which then authorizes the tax collectors' expenditures. In her day, the Scarlet Empress derived most of her income from these revenues, doling most of it back out to pay for the upkeep of the Realm. (Not all of it, though. She didn't become the most fabulously wealthy being in Creation leading trade caravans.) The ministers who minded her fortune for her were her most loyal and trusted servants, not to mention her best paid. Her nigh-impregnable treasure manses were (and remain) guarded by demons she summoned personally, as well

as some of the Realm's most elite Black Helm troops. The Realm's income might be drying up now that the Empress is gone, but the current fortune will abide—perhaps beyond the outbreak of civil war.

THE WISE AND KNOWLEDGEABLE ADVISORS OF FOREIGN TRIBUTARIES

The Realm's satraps—all Great House Dynasts—and their personal staff compose the leadership of the Realm's Foreign Office. These Dynasts oversee the gathering and paying out of a subject kingdom's tribute to the Realm. In theory, this job is a simple one involving nothing more than clicking the beads on an abacus and making marks on a tally sheet, but in reality, it's a challenging interplay of power politics and managerial skills. Making a country wealthy enough to generate constant revenue streams for the Realm is good. Making it wealthy enough to afford to improve its army so it can revolt against the divinely ordained leadership of the Realm is bad. The Foreign Office works closely with the legions and has been in danger ever since the army was gutted and restructured to best suit the Great Houses.

THE ETHICAL AND DILIGENT INTERPRETERS AND MAINTAINERS OF THE IMPERIAL CODE OF LAW

The extensive bureaucratic work of seeing to the recording and disseminating of changes in the law falls to this ministry, which employs a veritable legion of scribes, arbiters, essayists and legal thinkers. Their duties include not only the maintenance of the physical Code of Law itself, but the production of copies of the Code and all educational materials used in the Realm for the teaching of the law and the philosophy of the law. They poll experts when changes are made and craft essays on the thinking that went into a change and the systemic ramifications of such change. What this means, in practice, is that they are legal librarians who are able to find and research material from the Code to keep the more active agencies of order from being bogged down with that tedious duty. Still, it is a large ministry, and its long-term utility for conspiratorial forces is very large. The Great Houses know this and have seeded it liberally with ministers loyal to them for centuries.

THE HONORABLE AND HUMBLE CARETAKERS OF THE COMMON FOLK

Satraps oversee and collect the people's tribute from satrapies; prefects oversee and collect taxes from the Empress's people on the Blessed Isle. She owned all the land and property on the Blessed Isle (and only rented it out to the Great Houses and citizens), and the prefectural taxes formed the bedrock of the Empress's budget. Now, the prefectural establishments are the tools of the Great Houses, many of which are trying to secure for themselves ownership of the property for which the Empress has made them pay for so long.





THE ALL-SEEING EYE

Working in the shadows to maintain the Empress's rule is the All-Seeing Eye, the imperial secret police. Its existence is widely feared throughout the Realm, though its agents and methods are not fully known. It is seen as both a heartless conspiracy of bloody-minded killers—symptomatic of the abiding treachery, paranoia and mistrust in its founder's heart—and an ugly necessity in this Age of Sorrows—staffed by morbid patriots who at least have the decency to conduct their dirty work in secret. A collection of spies, assassins, observers and informants, it is the invisible blade the Empress held to her closest subjects' throats. Fear of the Eye's attention has been an effective check against nascent conspirators, rebels and other riffraff for centuries, as a simple indication that the Eye might already be onto some illicit activity is enough to sap the life out of that illicit activity. After all, it's better to give up a risky, politically dangerous illicit idea for fear that the Eye has caught on and be wrong, than it is to do the reverse.

The Scarlet Empress established the All-Seeing Eye a mere decade after her rise to power, chartering it as her means of observing and controlling the rest of the Realm. It is primarily populated by members of the publicly disgraced House Iselsi, whose membership in the Eye is something of an open secret among the knowledgeable elite. When House Iselsi's coup attempt of several centuries ago failed, the Scarlet Empress took steps to appropriate the House's resources rather than destroy it outright. Part of appropriating said resources involved pressuring talented Iselsi family members into doing the dirty work that keeps the Realm functioning smoothly. Whether she had to provide new identities and relocate her new pawns as an alternative to execution or she had to kidnap a reluctant agent's beloved family members to ensure cooperation, the Empress always did what needed to be done. Some new agents even thanked her for the opportunity. These erstwhile traitors have since risen through the ranks of the All-Seeing Eye and become its masters, trainers and most pervasive Dragon-Blooded agents.

Technically, the hierarchy of the Eye reports to the Esteemed Minister of the Treasury, Bal Keraz—a ruthless, 180-year-old Dynast who oversees much of the Thousand Scales bureaucracy. The Scarlet Empress also made sure that the Eye reported directly to her. With her disappearance, though, the Eye's members report to no one, and the Eye has suffered hard times. The organization is not only the secret police of the Realm, but its most important last line of defense, and it is coming undone. The mere thought that the All-Seeing Eye might be watching them still terrifies the leaders of the Great Houses and the ministers in the Thousand Scales, but the agency is losing more actual range and influence by the day. Were its reputation not already so fearsome, it would certainly have collapsed by now.

Yet, without the Empress's patronage, the enemies of the All-Seeing Eye are tentatively taking revenge on the

SECRET MASTERS

A better-kept secret about the hierarchy of the All-Seeing Eye is the fact that the utmost ranks are rife with Sidereal Exalted of great age and power, all affiliated with the Bronze Faction. These Sidereals are not only the true guiding hand on the All-Seeing Eye, but its most talented and subtle assassin agents.

agency in small ways. Known Eye agents are being discredited, exposed, and even killed, which has forced many spies deep underground and left vulnerable those agents stuck in the field. The security forces of the Great Houses have grown so bold as to subvert (or outright assassinate) those spies within their own ranks whom they've exposed. The lucky spies who've managed to keep their affiliation secret long enough to realize the danger they are in must now hide behind false identities in lands far from their homes. There they wait, growing ever more bitter that their service to the Realm is being undone by petty, bickering would-be tyrants.

Making matters worse, Bal Keraz has used his influence to allow the agency's slush funds to be depleted, and he's cut its budget on more than one occasion. He does so not to gut the agency or make it less effective, but in order to confirm his position of authority over it. Since he's technically supposed to be in charge and he controls the purse strings, he sees no conflict of interest in throwing his weight around.

Today, operations of the All-Seeing Eye in the Thresh-old are being spread ever thinner by uprisings and growing discontent, especially with the number of Anathema fire-brands on the rise. Even the operation of the Wyld Hunt has decreased in efficiency, as the Eye's Sidereal astrologers must turn their attention to the doings of the Great Houses, rather than the emergence of the Anathema. The Eye was once able to count on the malleability (some would say "faithful gullibility") of the Immaculate Order to see that the Wyld Hunt ran smoothly on the Eye's terms, but as the Time of Tumult grows more chaotic, more Realm citizens have sought refuge in religion. This new blush of panicked reliance on the church has increased the influence of the Immaculate Order, which now uses that influence to direct the Wyld Hunt more as it sees fit. It has grown ever more difficult for the All-Seeing Eye to steer the Wyld Hunt and make sure that it is being used and deployed properly.

Naturally, the real powers behind the All-Seeing Eye—the assassins and spymasters whom even the most knowledgeable of the Scarlet Dynasty believe to be nothing more than Iselsi Dragon-Bloods—are gravely concerned with what is happening to their bureau. To safeguard themselves and their organization, therefore, they have been releasing key pieces of tracer information to the Esteemed Minister of the Imperial Treasury (as well as those he influences and is influenced by in turn) watching to see where that information surfaces. Doing so



gives the Eye a keen insight into how information circulates among its enemies, as well as who is snapping at the bait it drops. Such information-gathering exercises often result in the sacrifice of agents in the field, but no truly highly placed spy or informant will be hung out to dry like that without a solid expectation of a concomitant reward. The Eye has even used these tactics to perform a little internal housecleaning, getting rid of agents with no abiding value and forging borderline agents into cannier, more capable survivors. That these latter survivors will appreciate the Eye's gambling with their lives is not always a given, though, and there is no more dangerous threat than a trained spy and assassin who has been abused by his callous handlers.

RECRUITMENT

Unlike the other two branches of the Thousand Scales, the All-Seeing Eye actively recruits its own members. Some prospective members are soldiers or officers in the Imperial Army. Others are talented clerks in important ministries with no hopes of advancement. Still others are well-connected patricians or even minor nobles in the Scarlet Dynasty. The recruiters of the All-Seeing Eye do not hesitate to consider peasants, slaves or even Immaculate monks should circumstances necessitate. If a prospective agent has skills that will serve the Eye well, is in a social position that regularly makes her privy to important information or simply has the right combination of patriotic zeal and keen wit, the Eye's recruiters will draw her in no matter who she is.

The All-Seeing Eye is probably the most equal-opportunity organization in the Realm. Sidereal Exalted astrologer-assassins regularly work with streetwise fences and otherwise-ignored slaves, all chosen, placed and paid according to their skill and usefulness. Despite the veneer, though, most of the Eye's best and most trusted agents are Dragon-Blooded—mostly talented outcastes and Iselsi fugitives. The reason the Eye relies on such “undesirables” is that their loyalties are the least likely to be divided by Great House power-mongering, and they are the easiest citizens for whom to provide false cover identities. It's much easier to insert an outcaste Dragon-Blood from the Threshold into the society of the Blessed Isle in the guise of a far-flung provincial governor promoted to a position in the big city than it is to take a Dynast from the big city and falsify a new identity for him. It's also easier to rely on such an outcaste because he knows how it feels to be an outsider observing the polite society that has heretofore wanted nothing to do with him. The only real danger in doing so is if the implanted agent becomes too comfortable in his cover role within a Great House and begins to feel like a true member of the unwitting family that has welcomed him.

Regardless, those whom the Eye deems worthy of recruitment—due to valuable skills, or because they managed to uncover an Eye operation with no formal training—are secretly given a sign marked with a single lidless eye. Those who are clever enough to recognize the symbol for what it represents, and to hold their silence, are openly



approached and taken into the fold eventually. Desperately unfortunate are those who cannot refrain from spreading the word of what they've received, though. Should the confused prospect take the strange symbol to a mentor, or should he let some unsuspecting family member stumble across it, his life is forfeit.

WHAT THE ALL-SEEING EYE SURVEYS

The All-Seeing Eye has one main function, with multiple other individual duties arrayed beneath it. That main function is to ensure the continued existence of the Realm by any means and at any cost. There is no single way to uphold that function, though, so the Eye's missions are many. They include monitoring the tributary states of the Threshold for signs of willfulness and insurrection, spying on the Great Houses of the Realm for the same, maintaining and subtly directing the Wyld Hunt and standing at the gates of the Realm's vast influence and watching for trouble from without.

Many of the All-Seeing Eye's actual missions complement those responsibilities the magistrates take upon themselves, and fierce rivalries spring up between members of those organizations over the interference each perceives in the actions of the other. The Scarlet Empress used the magistrates to stymie the ambitions of the Eye while simultaneously using the Eye to do the same against the magistrates. Luckily, despite their other problems resulting from the Empress's disappearance, the Eye's agents are far more numerous than the magistrates, and they operate far more subtly. The Eye's power is much more strictly regulated, however, and much of its day-to-day resources go toward auditing the mundane operations of the Thousand Scales.

FINANCES

Thanks again to the influence of Bal Keraz, monitoring the Thousand Scales' revenues and receipts is the most important (if least exciting) of the All-Seeing Eye's duties. If no one were keeping tabs on the tax revenues collected from the tributaries and the prefectures, the Realm would hemorrhage more jade than a wounded god of pecuniary excess. Therefore, the Eye has long had access to, if not actually placed agents in, every customs office and counting house. Many of those observers have been exposed and subsequently bribed, threatened or otherwise forced to turn a blind eye to burgeoning embezzlement schemes and corruption. With the Eye blinded to such indiscretions, crooked nobles and merchants are in much better positions to fiddle with the tax revenues they surrender to the Realm. While money still finds its way to the Imperial Treasury, the amount of it decreases every year. (Some tributary governments have even taken to secretly hiring privateer bandits to raid tribute shipments and turn a portion of the spoils back over to the criminals who hired them—anything to keep the resources out of the Realm's hands.)

Of course, when an Eye asset uncovers concrete proof of embezzlement or other willful corruption, the Eye is still

plenty willing and able to take action to deal with it. Depending on the nature and severity of the guilty party's scheme, the Eye passes and executes sentences, which are carried out in the Eye's own subtle idiom. Such sentences include privately warning the offender to return the illicit funds, stealing the missing funds back directly from the offender's coffers, spreading slanderous lies to publicly humiliate the offender and cost him his position, and even getting word to an overzealous local magistrate. Corrupt agents of the Eye have been known to employ that latter tactic in hopes of the resulting confusion being distracting enough to cover their own tracks when they are up to no good.

THE WYLD HUNT

Among its most dangerous and fearsome agents, the All-Seeing Eye also employs a surprisingly large number of astronomers and diviners who are dedicated to locating the reborn Anathema. Working closely with the diviners of the Immaculate Order (though usually on the sly or acting as a double-blind backup to those diviners), these agents of the Eye are the ones who call down the Wyld Hunt when signs indicate that an Anathema has reemerged into the world. Once the Eye is convinced that a new Anathema is destined to rise, the diviners work hard to provide their best estimate as to where the threat will do so. Agents, observers and informants are all then dispatched to the area that their results suggest, all of whom scour the local area at the Eye's behest for the slightest hint of where the presaged Anathema will turn up.

Once agents of the Eye have finally located the Anathema, they get word back as quickly as they can to a scout, an Immaculate or a magistrate who will call the Wyld Hunt forth. Officially, calling and coordinating a Wyld Hunt is the Immaculate Order's job, which is just as the All-Seeing Eye prefers, but at least one agent of the Eye usually rides with the Hunt during the chase. This agent makes sure the hunters do as they are bid and that they do it well—and that they actually hunt down the right person. Granted, one's Anathema nature makes itself very plain once an attack by the Wyld Hunt has begun, but if the Hunt comes down on an innocent mortal or God-Blood (likely as a result of Anathema trickery), a Hunt might not realize as much until it's too late. Such has happened in the past—the most recent incidents occurring in the Threshold cities of Gem and Chiaroscuro, as well as in far-flung Greyfalls. The former two incidents involved Hunts for canny Anathema assassins, one of whom has ties to a Southern cult of worshippers of the demon Sondok. The latter focused on a masked Anathema insurgent attempting to stir up dissent among the Nuri support staff of Greyfalls' government. In each of those cases, however, the All-Seeing Eye minders of the Hunt allowed the mistakes to be carried forward, as the falsely identified targets the Hunt rolled up on were corrupt ministers already under investigation by the Eye. While the Anathema in each case did manage to escape, and the leaders of each Hunt were publicly humiliated, the



Eye still counts each Hunt as a partial success.

With fewer agents in the All-Seeing Eye's employ these days, however, more Anathema are slipping away from even the best-trained Wyld Hunts. Even when the signs of the arrival of a new Anathema are noted, there is simply not enough manpower available for the Eye to see the abomination hunted down and slaughtered. Likewise, the sheer number of newly reborn Solar Exalted has shocked the overwhelmed Wyld Hunt. The Eye's youngest and most zealous agents find this situation intolerable and have taken steps to establish a Wyld Hunt manned entirely by members of the All-Seeing Eye. Unlike the unmistakable, blazing display of power that a normal Wyld Hunt puts on, however, this nascent cult of Anathema-killers relies on the Eye's favored techniques of stealth, cunning, ambush and assassination. As a result, it can field fewer agents per Hunt with the same expectations of success and expose them to less outright danger than a normal Wyld Hunt would face. In fact, the biggest challenge these assassins face in carrying out their work is beating the official Wyld Hunt to a target once a diviner warns of another Anathema's imminent rise.

PRESERVING THE PEACE

The common perception is that agents of the Eye are everywhere, and anybody could be one, so no word spoken out against the government goes unheard. The perception is a far cry from the truth, especially these days, but it aids the Eye in its duties nonetheless. This perception has even worked to help ward off some of the Eye's actual enemies. High-ranking agents in the organization have begun to circulate a rumor that the All-Seeing Eye is well aware of where the Scarlet Empress is, why she has been absent and when she plans to return. Fortunately, none have yet dared to call these agents' bluff (if they are bluffing), and no one has made any overt, sweeping moves against the Empress's pet intelligence organization.

Regardless, the Eye does funnel considerable resources toward forestalling potential conspiracies. Frankly, it's easier to deal with a few burgeoning conspirators skulking in the shadows than it is to hold back a revolutionary army on the battlefield. When evidence of treason arises—as it regularly does in this Time of Tumult—careful deliberation precedes any actual overt action. The general rule is that the more power and influence the guilty party can wield, the more subtle and circumspect the All-Seeing Eye must be in its actions. A loud, drunken mortal braggart who mouths off in a whorehouse about wanting to kill his tributary government's satrap and free his people from Realm control might turn up the next morning in an alley with his throat slit. House Iselsi, on the other hand, tried to carry off an assassination and a bloody coup against the Scarlet Empress herself after spectacularly failing to pacify the River Province...

In most cases, a hint that the Eye is indeed watching the traitors is enough to send everyone scurrying back into

safety and social nicety. In a small percentage of cases, each of the conspirators might be stolen from their beds at night, rushed to a hidden Eye installation, locked in an otherwise empty room together and left there for hours—and all the while, none of their abductors reveal their identities or say a single word. Upon their eventual release, most such conspirators have learned their lessons. Sometimes, however, death is the only solution. An assassin might quietly execute a minor conspirator to warn the remaining traitors, for instance. The Eye has also been known to convince the local magistrate to put on a public execution, complete with a denouncement of the involved dissidents and a recitation of the traitors' crimes. A magistrate's showing up out of the blue and unraveling a complicated conspiracy with no visible effort is undeniable evidence to even the most ignorant layman that the Realm's spies truly are everywhere.

Of course, it gets that same message across regardless of whether the alleged dissidents are involved in a real conspiracy.

WATCHING THE FRINGE

For all the effort it puts into safeguarding the Realm, the All-Seeing Eye does not focus exclusively inward. One last, though not inconsequential, aspect of its labors is to gather valuable intelligence beyond the sphere of the Realm's influence. Every major city of the Threshold, and several well beyond, have agents in place whose duties are to observe, to recruit and, on rare occasions, to act to defend the Realm. If an up-and-coming Sijanese criminal cartel is using the traffic of ghost flowers as cover for smuggling body parts out of the crypts of revered Dynasts, the All-Seeing Eye will put a stop to it. If the armies of the Fair Folk are about to overrun the far-flung city of Greyfalls, the All-Seeing Eye will make sure that the garrison commander there is prepared. If the Lunar Leviathan has found some way to raise the sunken city of Luthe, the All-Seeing Eye will make sure that the agents of the Bodhisattva Anointed by Dark Waters are too distracted to take advantage of the situation first.

PROTECTING THE PEOPLE

In this troubling, dangerous time—potentially the worst Creation has seen since the Usurpation—the responsibility to protect its people is the most serious one the Realm's government has. Threats come from within (in the form of corruption, rebellion and lawlessness) and from without (in the form of Anathema, divine unruliness and foreign aggression). While the All-Seeing Eye shares in the responsibility for watching out for such threats, different branches and appointees of the government must actually do the work of protecting the Realm's citizens. The task of upholding the laws within the Realm and in its external provinces falls on the magistrates and the Guardians of the Realm, as well as on the Realm's courts. Defending the Realm from external threats is the purview of the Imperial Army and the Wyld Hunt.



THE LAW

The Imperial Code of Law, like the Imperial Registry that is technically an offshoot of the Code, is a living document lengthy enough to warrant an entire ministry to oversee it. It contains every law and precedent-setting judgment or interpretation made since the earliest days of the Empress's reign—and sections of it date back to the Shogunate. Though it has spawned several schools of thought and dozens of ministerial offices, it is not a literal accounting of proscribed activities as one might expect. It is, instead, a collection of ideas about the nature of law, accompanied by annotations of every major decision and thinking based on that collection.

Imperial law is a fluid system with regular changes being introduced around a stable, central ethical core. The Immaculate Philosophy provides this core with its ideas of a celestially ordained order and the importance of knowing one's place in it. This is not an official stance on the part of the government or the Immaculate Order, it is simply a result of generations of Immaculate thinking throughout the Realm. The Immaculate faith is the religion of the Realm, and the Realm's Code of Law is a clear reflection of that.

As such, the Code is not a strictly explicit list of commandments or set of clear definitions of what is criminal. There is no need for such a list. Every citizen of the Realm knows the ethics of the Immaculate Order. It permeates their culture and society. Everyone knows what is right and wrong when it comes to matters of theft, negligence, murder, rape and violation in all its forms. The Code, then, is a procedural and interpretive document. It serves as a foundational ethical document that details the imperial understanding of order, from which every agent of the law can then be assumed to draw correct judgments.

MAGISTRATES

Magistrates are those lone appointed heroes who roam the satrapies and prefectures of the Realm to dispense justice on evildoers and protect the citizenry in the name of the Scarlet Empress. They investigate potential uprisings among the Realm's tributary kingdoms, they catch tax-dodgers, and they root out dangerous threats that tributary lords can't handle. Magistrates also act as independent investigators in complex trials and help manage crisis situations in times of disaster (be it pulling people out of the rubble when starmetal falls onto an inhabited city or walking into a burning building and collapsing it from within to keep the fire from spreading). Each task the magistrate performs is for the good of the Scarlet Empire and its tributary states—either enforcing its laws, protecting its citizens or punishing its worst criminals and terrorists.

Magistrates wander the land either looking for trouble or forcing it to come to them. Normally, if anything going on in a given region demands a magistrate's attention, the overburdened or frustrated local government will send runners to find her immediately. This is assuming, of course, that the local authorities want to incur the magistrate's attention. When they don't, it's up to lesser government functionaries or even dutiful citizens to seek out the magistrate independently and plead for her help. The most proactive magistrates also employ networks of spies and informants in the lands they travel, so as not to have to wait for honest, honorable people to step forward. Sometimes even the best and most honorable people won't stand up against injustice unless they already know they can count on the immediate support of a powerful magistrate. To do otherwise shows either remarkable faith or a thundering lack of foresight.

Magistrates most often work more or less alone. The average magistrate employs a single scribe and perhaps a warrior or two as a bodyguard. The former records all of the magistrate's deeds for inclusion in the Realm's official histories, the Realm's Code of Law, and whatever piece of popular propagandist literature the scribe has accepted a sideline commission to write. (Magistrates are also accountable for their actions, though only to the Empress, so it behooves them to maintain fastidious records of what they are doing.) The bodyguards magistrates employ are usually not necessary per se, as every magistrate is a powerful Terrestrial Exalt in his own right, but the bodyguards provide invaluable distractions in ambushes or other situations when a magistrate is indisposed.

Different magistrates rely on different forms of support staff to get their work done. Some walk a predetermined route through the lands they consider their protectorate, paying off a vast network of snitches, gossips and undercover agents to keep them informed of the protectorate's general disposition. Others cultivate relationships with auditors working within the Imperial Bureaucracy in order to keep tabs on the health of the area. Still others rely on members of the All-Seeing Eye whom they've unmasked, extorting carefully gleaned information in return for the magistrates not blowing the agents' cover. Some rare few even work directly with the satraps, prefects or provincial governors to help maintain order.

ARCHONS

Aside from their normal support staff, magistrates also have the power to recruit subordinates called archons. These individuals can be Dragon-Blooded or otherwise, but they are typically criminals, young revolutionaries or outcasts a magistrate has saved from execution or exile. Should they accept the magistrate's offer to serve the Realm, they are bound to obey that magistrate's orders. They can be called upon to find evidence, locate witnesses, spy and defend the magistrate with their own lives—whatever best suits the skills for which the magistrate called upon them.



Archons

These individuals owe their survival and freedom to their magistrate's influence, and their fortunes are tied to the magistrate's. Each archon's life is bound up with the life of the magistrate he serves, as well, for if the magistrate's life should end, so too must that of the archon. For such a penalty to be invoked, however, another magistrate first must know that one of his own has fallen and, second, must find the fallen magistrate's surviving archons. Considering how difficult and time-consuming such a search can be, some older magistrates have taken it upon themselves to devote their entire careers to tracking down renegade archons of fallen magistrates.

The only real hope a surviving archon of a slain magistrate once had for the future was the possibility of being appointed a magistrate himself and taking up the slain one's protectorate. Such has happened in the past, though not often, but only the Scarlet Empress ever had the power to make someone a magistrate. With her gone, surviving archons have no hope, and that makes them desperate, hunted creatures.

BECOMING A MAGISTRATE

The only way to become a magistrate is to be appointed by the Scarlet Empress. She needs no approval or ratification, so her word on the subject is final. In Her Imperial Majesty also lies the sole authority to strip a magistrate of his position. Considering the Empress's care and discretion in appointing

magistrates, though, she very rarely had to divest a magistrate of his powers. (The last time she did so was almost two centuries ago when she summarily stripped every magistrate she had elevated from House Iselsi of honor and rank.)

In her mercy, the Empress plucked many magistrates from prison or worse, so that they might choose between death and service to the Realm. Having been spared thus, the magistrates pledged their considerable skills to the service of the Realm. Almost uniform among them is a deep personal loyalty to the Empress herself, which is almost unheard of in the Imperial Service. Those who are not loyal—or worse, are corrupt—face a hard road ahead, as not only their better devoted compatriots spare nothing to hunt them down, but angry locals, spirits of justice and honor-bound Lawgivers do so as well.

Once appointed, there is no formal training for magistrates. They are simply given their badges of office, instructed in their duties, informed of the limits of their new power and told to familiarize themselves with the laws of the Realm as best they are able. In some cases (especially if the magistrate in question has been far removed from society for a long time), a newly appointed magistrate is assigned a scribe and historian who also happens to be fluent in current Realm laws. Older magistrates also shadow the younger ones to keep tabs on their performance and provide assistance when doing so doesn't interfere too much with their own duties.



RESPONSIBILITIES AND BENEFITS

When they are in the field, magistrates can perform a wide variety of tasks, and they enjoy some significant perks for performing them. Magistrates can confiscate any property, execute any sentence and exercise their will and powers any other way they want. They serve as the visible manifestation of the Empress's will, so anything they do in her name must be just and unquestionable. In theory, this power has no limit save the Empress's direct opposition to one of their decrees, and such opposition was only likely to arise well after the decree is issued if some offended party had the courage and the clout to appeal the magistrate's sentence to the Empress herself.

Magistrates have no set routes to patrol or territory for which they are responsible. Any place in Creation over which the Realm claims dominion is considered the purview of a magistrate. The average magistrate will make his home in a single town, often a provincial capital, and establish a far-ranging patrol route. This route (and the Realm territory it encompasses) is known as the magistrate's protectorate. No magistrate is required to establish a protectorate, but all magistrates are expected to respect each other's protectorates. By tradition, no magistrate can overrule another in that other's own protectorate unless the other is demonstrably corrupt, incompetent or acting counter to the Realm's best interest. Putting down a magistrate in his own protectorate is a risky proposition, however, as the evidence that he deserves it must be overwhelming enough to forestall all suspicious questioning. Plus, the damage done by usurping him—not only to the protectorate, but to the Realm's image in that protectorate—must be considerably less severe than that of leaving the corrupt or incompetent magistrate in power. For this reason, most magistrates mind the business of their own protectorates and leave their neighbors to deal with their own affairs. When honor, law or their conscience requires they do otherwise, though, it is best to rope in at least one other magistrate to lend the effort an air of legitimacy and the strength of numbers.

Once every five years, a magistrate must report to the Imperial City with his associated scribe (if he's got one) to detail his deeds and judgments. At that time, the Empress reviews the work the magistrate has done (comparing it to the reports made on the same magistrate by the All-Seeing Eye). With the disappearance of the Empress, though, magistrates have become notably reluctant to answer the five-year summons. They don't know if the Regent can (or will) strip their power from them when they do, and they don't want to expose themselves to the enemies they might have made in the field besides. Some have grown corrupt without this oversight, accepting or extorting bribes from the officials in their protectorates or the bandits who plague them. Others continue to function in the far reaches of the Realm as best they can, calling on favors from those who have valued

their judgments in the past when times grow harsh. Some even relish the opportunity the disappearance has provided them to carry on about their work undisturbed. After all, a magistrate can range much farther afield if he doesn't have to make the long, regular treks back to the Imperial City every so often.

As for what magistrates are actually called upon to do, a number of responsibilities fall upon their shoulders. The following are just a random sampling of the most common ones:

ACTING AS JUDGES

Magistrates often hear suits or are petitioned to serve as judges in cases of murder and other heinous crimes that occur in their protectorates. They have the power to render judgment and levy sentences. A magistrate can also observe an official court proceeding without acting as judge himself if the local judge has the situation well in hand. His doing so can help maintain order if the trial in question is especially emotionally charged (such as if a hapless Ghost-Blooded asylum-seeker from a neighboring shadowland has been accused of opening the city's gates to an invading army of the dead), or it can lend legitimacy to the proceedings (if, for instance the populace is unjustly suspicious of its judge). Some magistrates do nothing but act as wandering judges in their protectorates, maintaining a staff of agents in each city whose sole job it is to round up, question and protect witnesses in various cases.

HUNTING BEASTS

The simplest expression of this responsibility is the idea of magistrate as shepherd. With stout staff in hand (representing the righteous authority vested in him), he watches over his docile flock and chases away the wolves who seek to steal his sheep. In popular heroic fiction commissioned by the Scarlet Empress, magistrates are the ones who rescue hapless maidens from evil monsters, storming the monsters' lairs and slaying them where they stand. In the past, beasts were generally regarded as just that—animals or monsters that preyed upon the Empress's subjects. In the modern day, however, magistrates are expected to hunt any and every sort of "beast" that troubles decent people, including lawless fugitives, troublesome ghosts, ambitious Fair Folk and even those Anathema who escape the notice of the Wyld Hunt. The most recent instance of a magistrate seeking to purge a young Anathema on his own ended in tragedy, however, when the Water-aspected Peleps Gerik fell in battle with a Solar Exalt named Swan from the Coral Archipelago. Initial reports from survivors of that incident claim that the Anathema also died in that battle, but such reports have been greatly exaggerated before.

DEALING WITH UNQUIET SPIRITS

If a spirit or ghost is refusing to behave—an increasingly common occurrence these days—a magistrate is generally called for. The expectation is that the magistrate



will demonstrate to the spirit or ghost the folly of its ways. Out of respect for not only its own low place in Creation, but for the Dragon-Blooded magistrate's high one, the spirit is then expected to amend its behavior so that life gets back to normal. It behooves the magistrate in this situation to show the spirit its due respect so as not to rile the other spirits of its court. Some spirits will not see reason, though, so sometimes a magistrate has to smite the offending entity. When that regrettable necessity arises, the magistrate is best served to call upon local members of the Immaculate Order. The Immaculates are expected to defer to the magistrate for the duration of their cooperation. (Such arrangements also hastily arise on those rare occasions when a foolish magistrate-sorcerer summons a demonic servant that proves too powerful for him to control.)

ROOTING OUT CORRUPTION

When suspicion grows that a satrap, prefect or minister is corrupt, it is the magistrates who are called in to investigate the matter. This duty is perhaps the magistrates' most important one, though perhaps for different reasons today than might have existed before. In the past, evidence of corruption in a Realm official was considered a slap in the Empress's face, an unpardonable insult. It was through her magistrates that the Empress expressed her displeasure with her willful, crooked ministers and other officials and kept the rest of them in line. Today, though, the Empress is gone, and her will is entirely the purview of precedent and guesswork. Therefore, some magistrates have taken it upon themselves to crack down on this rampant criminality as the only means of keeping the Realm from disintegrating entirely into chaos. As a result, it is these magistrates who garner the most enemies and have had the most to lose since the Empress's disappearance.

LIMITATIONS ON MAGISTRATES

Although the magistrates enjoyed tremendous power and not inconsiderable influence, this is not to say that their power went unchecked. One of the most important precautions the Empress took when she created the position was to forbid her magistrates from acquiring wealth. Thus would they be the poorest inhabitants of the Realm and consequently its humblest. Yet, since all citizens are duty-bound to accede to any and every request a magistrate makes, to say that a magistrate is poor is an overstatement of the lifestyle. (No man who can "requisition" a penthouse apartment in any provincial capital within his protectorate and demand three square meals of expensive delicacies without being expected to pay for it can hardly be considered poor.) What's best about this imperial stricture on the position is that it makes magistrates hard to bribe. After all, what could a magistrate possibly be offered that would compare to what he is already entitled to?

Granted, the stricture against wealth is not much of a true limitation, but this Time of Tumult is probably the

worst time in the Second Age to be a magistrate. For one thing, no one has any authority to appoint new magistrates to replace those who fall in the line of duty. It is conceivable that Regent Fokuf could exercise this aspect of the Empress's power himself, but he lacks the drive or the will to do so unprompted. Any one of the "supplicants" who has the Regent's ear (from the eldest Senators of the Deliberative to the scions of the Great Houses) could recommend certain Dragon-Blooded heroes for the Regent's consideration, but doing so would be inherently dangerous for them. Those trusted advisors wouldn't have to worry about potential refusal, of course, as the Regent would willingly go along with their recommendations without question. Using the malleable pawn to exercise such direct influence on the Realm, however, could break the influence armistice that the Regent's appointment represents. It's one thing to convince Fokuf not to veto a piece of legislation that has been forged in the fires of the Deliberative's debate floors. It's quite another to use the Regent to place someone from your House above the law for your personal benefit.

What's more, as the magistrates' numbers dwindle, those they have hunted or ruled against in the past are now looking for revenge. From corrupt ministers to escaped bandit kings to disgraced Dragon-Blooded whose villainy gives the Realm a bad name, everyone with an axe to grind with a magistrate knows that now is the time to act. Magistrates are powerful and canny warriors, to be sure, but when their enemies have sufficient power to threaten them, embattled magistrates now have nowhere to turn for official support. Even the ministers of the Thousand Scales are reluctant to support their erstwhile overseers, as a reduction in the presence and power of said overseers only makes a corrupt minister's life that much easier.

To make matters worse, many surviving magistrates were once criminals or outcasts themselves before their appointments. Most have powerful enemies who resent their undeserved elevation, and those enemies are making their presence felt. Villains with plans to snatch up the Scarlet Throne and those who feel they have been wronged by magistrates are making their moves with little interference. At the same time, members of the All-Seeing Eye are taking this unexpected opportunity to carve out some of the magistrates' power. Since the Empress's disappearance, many magistrates—from the most heinous and corrupt to the weakest and most naïve—have been assassinated. Others have been arrested, brought to trial, and executed for perceived treason. Only political influence, espionage, and raw physical power can protect the magistrates who are left from being eliminated altogether. The situation is so desperate that some hunted magistrates have fallen under the sway of enterprising, opportunistic Solar Exalted who promise either righteous justice for or sweet revenge against those who have turned a noble profession in the Empress's service into a magistracy of hares.



THE GUARDIANS OF THE REALM

While the magistrates are the most famous and influential individual agents of the Empress's law, the fearsomely clad Guardians of the Realm (a.k.a. the Black Helms) are the face of imperial law and police power to most of the peasants and patricians of the Realm. This fact, of course, subjects the Black Helms to every imaginable variety of underclass griping, and makes them out to be the villains of most of the peasantry's tales of oppression. The common perception is that the Guardians of the Realm represent everything that's scary and wrong about law enforcement by the government, while magistrates are lone heroes driven by nothing more than a noble understanding of justice. The sudden appearance of the Black Helms is a sure way to empty a marketplace or focus the attention of everyone in a farm field on the ground beneath their feet. Even citizens who've done nothing wrong find the presence and authority of the Black Helms intimidating. This vicious reputation the guardians have earned is not entirely inaccurate, as the Black Helms count more than a few bullies among their number. They also have the power and right to judge a peasant or dispossessed person on the spot without turning to the courts, which makes them even more fearsome to the lower classes. That being said, Guardians of the Realm are just men and women doing a hard, thankless job, and there are as many different ways to do that job as there are guardians to do it. For every bully with a shield and truncheon, there's a local woman who's a Black Helm simply because she felt called to make maintaining peace and order her occupation.

Patricians detained by the guardians are brought before the judges of the imperial courts, as long as there is a reasonable case to be made against them. The guardians have a fair amount of latitude in deciding whom to prosecute. Guardians may hold patricians or citizens for up to a week without prosecuting them, although if a prisoner is particularly influential this can cause problems, and the Black Helms hurry the process along. Peasants and the disenfranchised may be held for up to a month, but holding peasants for extended periods of time without a good reason is considered evidence of inefficiency and laziness among the guardians. As noted, guardians may settle minor charges against citizens or peasants without recourse to courts. Punishments for citizens include fines or simply spending up to a week imprisoned. More serious crimes, whose punishment can be death, disenfranchisement or exile must be taken before the courts, as must any accused who is a patrician or a Dynast.

Upon officially entering the fold, all Guardians of the Realm take an oath to uphold the stability and order of the Realm and to preserve the well-being of its people and material assets. The underlying thought behind using so simple an oath is that it's easier to indoctrinate all guardians with one basic core idea than it is to bewilder individual Black Helms with the vastness of the ever-evolving Code of Laws. As a result, most guardians who have not achieved officer



rank usually deal with criminals and other ne'er-do-wells in the most timely and decisive fashion they can think of, rather than complicating their lives studying intricate procedural matters. They simply move in, remove the problem, and move on. Doing so can include anything from putting a rowdy drunk's arm up his back and marching him home to sleep it off, to raiding the warehouses frequented by a smuggling ring and rounding up the perpetrators for trial. This is not to imply that the Black Helms are necessarily discourteous or violent in all cases. They are just trained to be efficient and orderly before they are diplomatic or crafty. It's the job of their officers to worry about the minutia of the law and tell the rank-and-file what to do.

It is a prefect's job (or that of her staff) to make appointments to the Guardians of the Realm. Although the Deliberative is technically supposed to approve any appointments or promotions to the rank of dragonlord, doing so is largely an ink-stamped formality. Even the malcontents of the Lesser Chamber seldom rally against the appointment of prominent guardians to that rank. In this manner do the interests of the prefect and the Great House that supports her become what decides how many guardians any given town or area has and how they are distributed. Officials who rely heavily on these police forces for legitimate (or other) reasons will make sure that many guardians are easily appointed or promoted in the area in question. Those who prefer to rely on their own private troops or who would rather not risk having the police around to get underfoot or expose their troublesome governance, make sure that Black Helms are scarce. In general, all large cities or similar population centers have a minimum of one Black Helm dragonlord and appropriate manpower for such an officer. Some coastal ports with heavy trade from the Threshold, and many marketplaces such as Arjuf, support as many as five dragons of guardians with a full complement of officers and a monolithic civilian bureaucratic staff. Conversely, even the smallest hamlet or collection of farmsteads has at least one, though preferably two, guardians posted there full time.

In rural and small towns, the majority of guardians are peasants. Here, either one or two guardians are posted from a larger town or one or two locals will be given the job. Locals are typically taken to a city for a few weeks and given training for the job, then returned to their town. They earn a small salary and their job is to settle problems among the peasantry and to send for help when they face any serious problems. They may levy fines against citizens or hold them for trial in a city, but all of their judgments against citizens are subject to review if the citizen can find a sympathetic ear among the guardians in the nearest city. These peasant guardians do not have the authority to do anything more to a patrician than detain him until help arrives, and they may not touch a Dragon-Blood. When confronted with one of the Dragon-Blooded who is obviously breaking laws, they are ordered to call for assistance.

ASSETS AND EQUIPMENT

Presence is the greatest asset of the Guardians of the Realm, greater even than their prerogative to use force to preserve order or their highly efficient means of long-distance communication. Their colloquial name, the Black Helms, is a testament to their skill at using force of personality and intimidation as their tool of choice in most matters, in addition to describing their imposing appearance. The uniform of the guardians is standardized, with variations stemming only from workmanship. Gleaming black helmets are often worn with full-face masks, circumstances permitting, along with black gauntlets and buff jackets with imperial scarlet trim and details. The quality of a Black Helm's kit depends largely on the budget available for that region's forces and the diligence required by local officers in maintaining the equipment. In more rural posts, uniforms are weathered and threadbare, while the guardians in the Imperial City are the very picture of careful attention to detail in production and maintenance of their uniforms. These choices in garb have an obvious and immediate impact on the populace at large. The guardians cut a very imposing figure when fully and properly attired, especially in groups.

The Black Helms make use of a few different configurations of weapons and team sizes when actual force is called for, based on the needs of the situation and the location. The average squad or patrol makes use of small shields and clubs as primary weapons and carries short swords for more dangerous circumstances. Guardians can also be armed with spears and bows when needed. Their unit size is usually increased to make proper use of such weapons. As with their armor, the quality of their weapons varies based on location, with shoddy weapons in neglected or remote posts contrasted with the uniformly exceptional weapons of the showpiece patrols of Imperial City. The minimum unit size for a patrol, in optimal conditions, is three guardians—two to watch over one another in case of trouble and one to move to alert help. In especially dangerous areas, more troops are added as needed, up to and including large, legion-style flights and military formations. In extreme emergencies (or when a spectacular show of force is required), Black Helms employ such artifact weaponry as shock pikes, Essence twisters or haze shield generators for area defense. (See **Wonders of the Lost Age**, pp. 76, 132 and 92, respectively, for these artifacts' traits.)

Guardians are typically skilled riders, sprinters and endurance runners. Mobility is as great a boon to these imperial police as it is to the legions, and the Black Helms make extensive use of horses and runners for both tactical and communication purposes in their regular routines. Additionally, it is common practice for a patrol to send one or more of its number off to alert the nearest guardian post in the event of any sort of conflict or trouble. Also like the legions, the imperial police make use of a swift and sophisticated communication network. It is of the utmost importance that news about bandits or wanted criminals is disseminated as

widely and quickly as possible to other guardians. To this end, heliography, post riders and carrier birds of various species are used to make sure that the Black Helms as a whole are well informed and never more than a few hours from the chain of command.

GUARDIANS OF THE REALM

Description: These traits represent a scale of Black Helms that would be stationed in the Imperial City.

Commanding Officer: Varies

Armor Color: Black with scarlet trim and a scarlet pentacle on the back and chest.

Motto: "Break it up!"

General Makeup: 25 mortal peacekeeping officers, armed with iron-banded cudgels and tower shields, wearing reinforced black buff jackets, black gauntlets and black masked helmets.

Overall Quality: Excellent

Magnitude: 2

Drill: 3

Close Combat Attack: 3 **Close Combat Damage:** 3

Ranged Attack: — **Ranged Damage:** —

Endurance: 6 **Might:** 0 **Armor:** 2 (-3 mobility)

Morale: 3

Formation: When a scale of Black Helms is deployed, such as in response to a growing riot on the street, the troops form one long line, standing shoulder-to-shoulder. (In cramped conditions, such as a narrow street, they stack up several parallel rows.) They then march forward slowly, banging their cudgels against their shields in a dread rhythm that saps the will of any half-hearted, would-be rioter.

THE IMPERIAL FORCE

There are some criminals in the Realm that no mortal agent is equipped to handle. There are some crimes that no purely mortal force has any business speaking out against. For such cases, or when the powers that be prefer to make use of more trusted operatives, an elite subsection of the Guardians of the Realm is called in. That subsection, the Imperial Force, performs those dangerous or high-profile actions that the Black Helms cannot. It deals with criminal Dragon-Bloods or spirits, it patrols key imperial centers, and it harnesses the power of Essence and artifacts to especially thorny police matters. The Imperial Force makes up the Realm's special police, its imperial guard. It is the most skilled group of bloodhounds in the world today—save for the Wyld Hunt itself, which hunts only one particular type of quarry.

The Imperial Force consists of mortals and Terrestrial Exalts. The force's mortals are drawn primarily from the most talented and powerful veterans of the legions or the Black Helms, as well as the hardiest monks of the Immaculate Order. Mortals in the Imperial Force have access to a vast array of artifacts, weapons and armor that allow them to serve alongside the Dragon-Blooded against terrible, inhuman threats against which no mortal without such access could possibly stand a chance.

Any Terrestrial Exalt who works as part of the Guardians of the Realm is automatically part of the Imperial Force branch. Terrestrials might work as officers over the mundane Black Helms of the common police force, but they are paid an Imperial Force salary, and they stand with their Imperial Force brethren when dicey circumstances necessitate. Dragon-Blooded among the Imperial Force are usually former legionnaires or Immaculate martial-art students. There are also many sorcerers among the Imperial Force, and many of them know plenty of spells that help them investigate with supernatural prowess or pull the truth from witnesses' minds with little interference. Knowledge of divination techniques is also common. For Dragon-Blooded veterans, service with the Imperial Force is a way to apply existing skills to an occupation that doesn't require extensive travel or retraining.

As the ebon helm is the best-known feature of the Guardians of the Realm, dragon armor is indelibly etched in the minds of every citizen as the hallmark of the Imperial Force. The Empress spared no expense in outfitting her imperial police, and examples of all five of the main elemental armor configurations (see **Wonders of the Lost Age**, pp. 84-87) are in the Imperial Force's possession, as well as many variant models. These suits of armor are what come to mind for most when the Imperial Force is mentioned. A team of Exalts wearing vine armor can quickly and safely manhandle even an experienced Essence-wielding foe, and it is the Imperial Force's typical response to orders to apprehend a suspect.

Though far less common than among the soldiers of the rogue Seventh Legion, ashigaru armor (see **Wonders of the Lost Age**, p. 79) is in regular use by the mortal troopers of the Imperial Force. The most trusted and able of the mortal Dragon Handlers (as members of the Imperial Force are called) also frequently make use of sentinel defense force armor (see **Wonders of the Lost Age**, pp. 81-82). Sentinel armor is similar to ashigaru but specifically designed as a defense/site security model, sacrificing strategic mobility and stealth capabilities for tactical mobility, hard defensive strength and area-control capability.

These mortal operatives are equipped with more than just armor, a requirement if they are to meaningfully stand against Exalted or spirit targets. Practically every item of their kit is at least of exceptional quality and is often elementally empowered as well. Making mundane armor and equipment magically light or making them protect the user from the extremes of environment are common enhancements. Also common are talismans of all sorts (see **Exalted**, p. 379) including walkaways and good luck charms. Their weapons are the best that are available and are artifacts of no small power in many cases. These items are less efficient in the hands of mortals, of course, but that small edge of magical power can mean a great deal, especially if the items in question are specifically applicable to the task at hand and designed for mortal use.

Easy to overlook is the power that a mixed group of Dragon-Bloods and mortals can bring to bear when they

have all drilled to fight while under the influence of the many Terrestrial Charms that enhance the capabilities of the user's allies as well as herself. The Imperial Force's mortal troopers are very familiar with these Charms, and training to make the most effective use of the Essence boost is a high priority in Dragon Handler training. While lacking the punch of artifacts, Immaculate martial arts and special training in tactics to use against Essence wielders provides the foundation upon which these very skilled mortals develop their vital prowess. It is worth stating once more that the Dragon-Blooded do not lightly train mortals in techniques that could be turned against them. To a man, the mortal members of the Imperial Force are trained in anti-Exalt combat. The loyalty of such a fighter must be beyond reproach to receive this level of trust, and the Deliberative approves every single person named to the Imperial Force.

IMPERIAL FORCE SCALE

Description: These traits represent an "average" scale of Dragon Handlers stationed on the Blessed Isle in the Imperial City.

Commanding Officer: Varies

Armor Color: Various colors of jade, with black helmets.

Motto: "Stop, in the Empress's name!"

General Makeup: 25 Dragon-Blooded in dragon armor, wielding Essence-powered weapons.

Overall Quality: Elite

Magnitude: 2

Drill: 5

Close Combat Attack: 5 **Close Combat Damage:** 5

Ranged Attack: 4 **Ranged Damage:** 4

Endurance: 9 **Might:** 5 **Armor:** 6

Morale: 5

Formation: It is thankfully rare for an entire scale of Dragon-Handlers to be needed on the scene at one time. Normally, only one fang will actually mobilize per Terrestrial Exalt who has run afoul of the law. An entire scale might be called into emergency action if a powerful Anathema (or, Dragons forbid, a circle of the same) evades the Wyld Hunt and turns up inside the Imperial City.

THE IMPERIAL COURTS

When they are brought before an imperial court, patricians, mortal members of the Great Houses and Dragon-Bloods may all ask for a trial by a jury of their peers if they do not wish a local judge of the Thousand Scales to decide their fate. Any punishment to be levied is still decided by a judge, however. Many Dynasts exercise this option because the vast majority of local judges have strong loyalties to one of the Great Houses, and none wish to be tried by an ally of their rivals. In contrast, a single local judge decides the fate of all commoners who are not punished by the guardians. Commoners have no right to appeal these decisions.

Trials of patricians and Dynasts are often elaborate and lengthy affairs, with the accused calling character witnesses

and sending her friends and relatives out to uncover information about her accuser. These assistants also frequently attempt to determine the identity of the person who actually committed the crime—or the identity of someone who can be conveniently framed for it. Defendants who lack a detailed knowledge of the law typically ask for a relative or close friend to represent them. When possible, patricians attempt to persuade one of the Dragon-Blooded to represent them. Given the complexity of such trials and the elaborate formalities that must be followed to try a member of the upper classes, such trials can last for several days, especially in the case of serious crimes where the penalties can be extreme.

Trials of commoners are quite different. While the accused is always allowed to speak in his own defense, the judge can cut him off after a few minutes. Thereafter, beyond making a speech after all the evidence has been presented, the accused must remain silent unless he is addressed by the judge. Trials of commoners are usually brief affairs and rarely last more than a few hours. In most cases, a judge can try two cases an hour, and near the end of the day, if the judge is tired, sometimes she decides cases considerably more rapidly.

PUNISHMENTS IN THE REALM

Punishments on the Blessed Isle are unlike those in most of Creation. The Scarlet Empress saw little to be gained from either imprisoning or maiming offenders, since both forms of punishment become drains upon the state. To maintain the strict division between slaves and the remainder of the Realm's population, no legal resident of the Realm can be enslaved. Although they can be killed without recourse or trial, even the disenfranchised cannot be enslaved.

Instead, there are five common punishments used in the Realm: fines, disenfranchisement, loss of status, exile or death. Fines are the typical punishments for all property crimes against commoners or patricians, for minor violence such as public brawling, for attempted violence where no one is harmed and for accidental murder. Fines are typically set at three times the value of the goods stolen or destroyed, with one third of this payment going to the victim and two thirds to the Realm.

Violent crimes against commoners committed by Dynasts or by patricians with close allies in one of the Great Houses are also typically punished by fines. Given their great wealth, such fines can be quite large, especially in the case of serious offenses such as multiple murder. Property crimes committed by a commoner or a patrician against one of the Great Houses or any of its members is considered treason and so is punished by death.

More serious crimes committed by peasants have one of two punishments: disenfranchisement or death. Death is reserved for heinous offenses such as multiple murder or arson, or for all forms of treason. Other crimes are punished by disenfranchisement. Punishments for citizens are largely identical, except that some of the less serious crimes that would result in a peasant being disenfranchised are more





often punished by loss of status. The citizen is permanently demoted to the status of a peasant and set to work the land on an estate owned by one of the Great Houses.

Punishments for crimes committed by patricians and members of the Great Houses are treated somewhat differently. Patricians and mortal members of the Great Houses are never disenfranchised. Instead, they can be fined, executed or exiled for some period of time, usually set at somewhere from five years to a lifetime. Occasionally, when the courts wish to set an example but the accused are sufficiently well connected to avoid execution, they are punished by reduction in status to become citizens or even peasants. This is considered a punishment almost as extreme as execution, not to mention a profound disgrace. Most who are given this punishment either find a way to flee and become exiles or commit suicide to avoid being forced to till the land or perform similar menial tasks. For Dragon-Blooded, the imperial courts have only three punishments: fines, exile and death.

COMMONER COURTS

The imperial courts have little interest in disputes over contracts or other questions involving property that occur solely between commoners. In such cases, commoners must rely on an informal but long-standing tradition of “commoner courts.” These unofficial courts have no authority over patricians or Dynasts and no official standing. In the interest of maintaining public order, however, and in return for a small monthly payment, members of the Guardians of the Realm typically work with their local commoner courts to make sure that its judgments are carried out.

Commoner courts are found in both large cities and small farming villages, and are used by peasants and citizens alike. Unlike the official courts, commoner courts usually treat citizens and peasants as equals, in large part because the peasants greatly outnumber the citizens and giving them equal standing is the only way to make them accept the validity of these courts. All decisions in commoner courts are decided by a respected and learned individual who is an unofficial judge. These judges are usually citizens, because few peasants are literate and judges are supposed to be widely read individuals who are well versed in the Immaculate Philosophy. Commoner courts specifically exist to resolve conflicts that do not involve official crimes. They are often called to settle issues of inheritance, contract disputes and other complex matters involving the ownership and transfer of property. Because everyone involved is taking time away from their work, trials rarely last longer than a few hours. The judge of this court almost always attempts to get everyone involved to agree to a fair settlement, at which point the various parties all split the costs for hiring the judge. If mutual reconciliation proves impossible, then the judge makes a decision based upon the merits of the various parties’ claims, and the loser must pay her fees.

THE IMPERIAL ARMY

The Imperial Army’s orders are simple: to obey the Scarlet Empress or, in her absence, the Regent (and through him, the Deliberative). The rest is just details. In theory, if tomorrow the Regent called for the legions to raze the Arjuf prefecture to the ground, the legions would do so or die trying.

The Empress once commanded as many as 81 full legions, each with 5,000 front-line soldiers and half that many skirmishers and auxiliaries, all of whom would kill or die at her whispered command. In these fallen days, however, only 30 legions remain—plus the notorious Vermilion Legion. Making matters worse, few of these legions actually fight or even mobilize at their full strength.

Once the Empress disappeared, imperial funding set aside to support the troops did so as well. The loss of the Empress’s guiding, unifying intelligence over the legions was an even greater blow, and the chain of command that remains in place is a poor substitute. The legions were not designed to be as internally fractious as the bureaucratic ministries were, but without a mandate for ongoing monetary support and a singular cohesive leadership in place, they are in just as dire straits. The other branches of the Thousand Scales take larger and larger bites out of the military’s budget, and the scions of the Great Houses have begun to divide up the legions between them for their own personal uses (and abuses).

With each passing day, the Great Houses of the Scarlet Dynasty have more to say in where the legions are deployed. They pay for the posting, so the legions go where the Great Houses need them. This new reality has proven undeniably advantageous to the Great Houses, who no longer need to mount private armies to look after their interests. (Nor do they risk the specter of treason for doing so.) What’s more, officer commissions within the legions are now awarded as prizes to faithful servants of the Great Houses, rather than as rewards for long and skillful service. Professional officers have not been done away with entirely, but the number of experienced, competent officers is shrinking rapidly while the number of untalented dolts appointed for petty reasons rises equally quickly.

STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION

At full strength, an imperial legion consists of 5,000 front-line infantry soldiers (both men and women). The legions take no cavalry with them when they move out, which makes it much faster to send them hence and dramatically reduces the complexity of the logistics involved in deployment. If a legion intends to employ cavalry, it co-opts that of the local potentate instead. It’s for this same reason that no legion deploys with siege equipment. It’s much easier to travel with a scale’s worth of engineers and have them build such equipment on site than it is to lug siege towers across unfriendly terrain.

Legions also tack on talons of archers or slingers, numbering about half the regular legion’s size and largely considered to

THE THOUSAND CORRECT ACTIONS

The training manual known as *The Thousand Correct Actions of the Upright Soldier* details the proper action to be taken in any conceivable situation, from striking camp after a successful campaign to facing a superior foe in an uphill battle during the dead of night in the middle of Calibration. It covers every battlefield tactic from open-field legion maneuvering to small-unit house-to-house urban combat, as well as the proper forms of address and acceptable levels of familiarity between soldiers of different ranks and stations. A commander who follows the Thousand Correct Actions, knows to halt his troops' march well before nightfall so everyone can properly entrench, change out their socks and ensure access to clean water before everyone's too tired. A soldier who internalizes the deep wisdom of the Thousand Correct Actions understands that his life might be sacrificed to gain a military objective, but it will never simply be thrown away. When an officer's actions are Correct Actions, his soldiers' faith and obedience is unswerving and victory is assured.

be expendable, even by their own commanders. Such soldiers are only lightly armored, if at all, and are not accounted part of the legion proper. Each legion also travels with a slave-tended baggage and supply train. A single wing under the command of the quartermaster (second only to the legion's commander) guards this train. With the baggage train also comes the legion's support, consisting of smiths, armorers, fletchers, coopers, cooks and other miscellaneous personnel. These attached slaves and laborers can number up to a quarter of a legion's strength, but no general worth a damn would even consider putting weapons in these extra hands.

A general is the commander in charge of a legion. Beneath her are 10 colonels (or dragonlords), each in charge of a single dragon, with the chain of command determined by seniority. Generally, four of those 10 dragons are heavy infantry, and the other six are medium infantry. The skirmishers and missile troops make up between four and six loosely organized dragons outside the legion proper. Management of all these subunits is the purview of a flight, a formation of dragons put together to see to some specific task. Normally, a fielded legion uses three dragons of heavy infantry in one flight, along with two medium infantry dragons and a dragon's worth of skirmishers. The legion's remaining reserve heavy infantry dragon and all the rest of the skirmishers stay back under the legion commander's control. The most senior dragonlord in the flight leads it.

Beneath each dragonlord is a pair of wings, and a major (or winglord) commands each one. Two talons make up a wing, and a captain (or talonlord) is in charge of each one. Talons each consist of five scales, each under the command

of a lieutenant (or scalelord). The bottom of the command structure is a five-man unit known as a fang, each commanded by non-commissioned sergeants.

RANK

Terrestrial Exalted compose most of the Imperial Army's senior officer corps. It is possible for a mortal soldier to achieve an officer's rank, but these individuals rarely rise above the rank of winglord. The Dragon-Blooded do not enlist in the ranks without an exceptional reason—be it to thumb her nose at a hated parent, cousin or rival, or to entertain her jaded peers with her artful condescension. Such gestures, however, are regarded as symbolic only, and woe be unto the mortal staff sergeant who does not defer to his enlisted Dragon-Blood soldier.

EQUIPMENT OF THE IMPERIAL ARMY

To the jaded theorist, the only real power the legions wield derives from their numbers and their rigid discipline. At its height, the Imperial Army boasted more than 600,000 troops, all in matching armor, carrying matching gear, and all marching in step to the rhythm of the Scarlet Throne's whim. Like the Black Helms, the legions relied as much on presence and reputation to overwhelm their foes as they do on strategy and force of arms. Some would even say it doesn't matter how powerful the legions actually are as long as the troops mass in large enough force and march in step with utter confidence.

The religious zealot might counter this theory by claiming that the true power of the legions derives from the divine mandate of the Terrestrial Exalted in charge. To the Dragon-Blooded is given the power and wisdom to ensure the safety and upright behavior of the masses, and the legions' soldiers are extensions of that power. As the units of each legion metaphorically compose the bodies of glorious, powerful dragons, the army's Terrestrial Exalted officers are those dragons' hearts, minds and souls. Theirs is the true power that makes the enemies of the Realm tremble.

Regardless of philosophy or cynicism, however, one fact that cannot be ignored is that the strength of an army relies heavily on the quality of its equipment. From mundane supplies to First Age and Shogunate relics, the Imperial Army is outfitted better than any enemy it could choose to face.

In the beginning, after the Great Contagion and Fair Folk invasion when the burgeoning Realm first set about to rebuild its army's ranks, the burden of providing mundane equipment fell largely upon its provincial soldiers. When he first reported for duty, each soldier provided 100 liters of dried rice and three liters of salt, which was stored in the nearest provincial armory and reissued when the legion mobilized for war. Individuals were also responsible for providing a bow, bow case, bowstring, 50 arrows, a quiver, a long sword, a short sword, a whetstone, a rain hat, a bag for carrying rice, a canteen, a bag for carrying salt, a pair of leggings and a pair of straw sandals. In addition, each group of 10 men was

to furnish a tent, two copper trays, two small pots, a hoe, a grass scythe, an axe, a hatchet, a chisel, two sickles and a pair of metal tongs. Each group of 50 soldiers was to provide a flint, a bundle of tinder grass and a handsaw. Should a man or group not be able to provide the necessary up-front supplies, he could either return home in shame or purchase the essentials he lacked from the legion's quartermaster (usually by allowing a garnishment of his wages). These items were not returned to a soldier or his family if he retired or was killed, so early military campaigns netted the Imperial Treasury a tidy profit—which the Empress could either reinvest in supplying her military or sell off in bulk during times of peace.

In the modern day, much of this basic equipment can be provided to an enlisting soldier, especially with so many legions having been recently disbanded (at which point, their gear and supplies were absorbed into the remaining legions). A soldier can expect to be given a dagger, a chopping sword, a small shield, a spear, a buff jacket, a helmet, a sturdy uniform appropriate to the climate, as well as the training to use and care for every piece of his gear. He can also expect to be housed and fed regularly in return for his valued service. The life of a soldier is never leisurely, but military service is certainly preferable to backbreaking labor or abject poverty. And while service in the legions is not the glorious, respectable profession it once was, it does provide discipline and training in certain mundane skills that can serve a hardworking soul well all the rest of his life.

The relative quality of a soldier's gear and training, of course, depends on his proximity to the Imperial Manse and the importance of his assignment. The lowly enlisted man in a peaceful, far-flung satrapy might have to make do with a buff jacket, pot helmet and short sword, while the satrap's personal guards all carry polearms and protect themselves with visored helmets, crested shields and cuirasses of strong steel. The enlisted man stationed at Arjuf on the Blessed Isle probably carries an exquisite sword and shield, with a fancy all-weather lined buff jacket and a helmet designed as much to intimidate as to protect. The upper echelons of that soldier's enlisted ranks are decked out full articulated plate armor and carrying weapons with names and storied pasts—not to mention talismans and charms that the average peasant laborer would pay a month's wages for, should they be unlucky enough to need them.

IMPERIAL LEGION HEAVY INFANTRY

Description: These traits represent the Third Storm Scale, a moderately well-known scale within the 23rd Legion that helped to drive back the barbarian army of the Anathema Sleeves of War in the Valley of Two Storms by breaking a charge of buck-ogres and killing more of the beasts than any other scale in the legion did.

Commanding Officer: Scalegord Cynis Denovah Avaku of Ways

Armor Color: Crimson, with orange and yellow trim

Motto: "Give no ground!"

General Makeup: 25 mortal heavy infantry soldiers armed with spears and target shields, wearing reinforced breastplates of fine construction and masked helmets.

Overall Quality: Excellent

Magnitude: 2

Drill: 4

Close Combat Attack: 4 **Close Combat Damage:** 3

Ranged Attack: — **Ranged Damage:** —

Endurance: 8 **Might:** 0 **Armor:** 3 (-4 mobility)

Morale: 4

Formation: This scale's commanding officer is its only Dragon-Blooded member, but the scale rarely deploys alone. Normally, it and four other scales deploy as a talon at minimum, and the five scalegords form a sworn brotherhood that leads from the front.

IMPERIAL LEGION MEDIUM INFANTRY

Description: These traits represent the talon known as the "God-Scotching Patriots" of the 15th Legion. The talon earned this name after forcing the army of rebellious peasants and bandits raised by the river god Crying Okoto to quit the field after less than one hour of fighting.

Commanding Officer: Talonlord Nellens Fucian

Armor Color: Crimson, with black and white trim

Motto: "Don't run! Don't hide!"

General Makeup: 125 mortal medium infantry soldiers armed with slashing swords and bucklers, and wearing lamellar armor and pot helmets.

Overall Quality: Excellent

Magnitude: 3

Drill: 3

Close Combat Attack: 3 **Close Combat Damage:** 2

Ranged Attack: — **Ranged Damage:** —

Endurance: 6 **Might:** 0 **Armor:** 2 (-2 mobility)

Morale: 3

Formation: The talon consists of five scales, each consisting of five fangs of mortal troops. The Dragon-Blooded commanders of each of the five scales form a single sworn brotherhood, and the talonlord of the talon forms a sworn brotherhood with the other talonlords and the winglord who make up and command his wing.

IMPERIAL RANGED SKIRMISHERS

Description: These traits represent a dragon's worth of archers and slingers attached to a standard imperial legion.

Commanding Officer: Varies

Armor Color: Brown, with crimson trim

Motto: None

General Makeup: 500 soldiers armed with long bows or slings, wearing pot helms and reinforced buff jackets.

Overall Quality: Good

Magnitude: 5

Drill: 2

Close Combat Attack: — **Close Combat Damage:** —

Ranged Attack: 3 **Ranged Damage:** 2

Endurance: 5 **Might:** 0 **Armor:** 1 (-1 mobility)
Morale: 2

Formation: A dragon of ranged skirmishers normally consists of one talon of slingers and three talons of archers. The command personnel at the scale and higher level are normally Dragon-Blooded officers, just as in the infantry, but on average, only those at the dragonlord or general rank are any better suited to command than any mortal would be. By custom, a Dragon-Blooded officer in a unit of this variety is primarily responsible for defending his unit in battle, rather than leading it.

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT

While the might conferred to the Imperial Army by its stock and care of mundane military hardware is not inconsiderable, its most feared power comes from its enduring artifact equipment. A Dragon-Blood is a powerful asset on the battlefield—worth any scale of mortal soldiers—but his power increases dramatically when he's armed with a jade reaver daiklave and protected by articulated jade plate armor. (And that's only the most mundane of the artifact equipment the Realm makes available to its exemplary warriors.)

No matter how far it might have fallen in the centuries following the High First Age, the Realm still maintains factory-cathedrals and other facilities for the production of artifact weaponry and armor. From powerbows to goremauls, from jade plate to haze-shield generators, the Realm takes pains to outfit as many of its most valued officers as possible with accouterments of war befitting their Exalted station. And where standard requisition procedures fall short, the noble family heads of the Great Houses see to it that their offspring are outfitted appropriately for war. With the Great Houses taking ever tighter control of the legions and embedding their children at the legions' heads, it behooves them to provide as much magical materiel as they can put together. After all, every advantage they can provide the heads of their pet legions is another advantage those legions can put toward achieving their Houses' goals.

Aside from its officers' personal arms and armor, the military can deploy a nigh-unrivaled supply of magical equipment (from arms to transport vessels). In its land-based arsenal, it maintains eight battle carriers, more than a dozen siege striders and five indomitable conquest platforms. It also outfits its fortresses and fastnesses—as well as its mobile infantry units—with Essence cannon, implosion bows, wall eaters, lightning ballistae, glorious scythes and Essence twisters. For moving troops by air, the Realm maintains a modest fleet of warbird single-pilot craft, as well almost two dozen *Manta*-class skyships. Used to circumvent impenetrable ground defenses or break sieges, these latter air transports often carry fangs of elite “drop troops.” These troops wear ashigaru armor and make use of jump harnesses and shock pikes (or fire lances) to assault entrenched troops from overhead. (See **Wonders of the Lost Age** for descriptions of these artifacts.)

The Realm's naval indomitability is all but assured as well, thanks to superior technology. In addition to the five elementally themed battle fleets of mundane construction, the Imperial Navy boasts a wealth of First Age and Shogunate artifact vessels, as well as modern ships built on those relics' same design. It maintains a dozen *Whirligig*-class fast couriers, half again that many *Resplendent Dolphin*-class submersible vehicles and several dozen *Swift Midday Brilliance*-class light warships. It can also supplement its various battle groups with more than two dozen *Glorious Dragonfly*-class patrol boats. The flagships of the fleet, however, are the Realm's handful of *Dawning Sun Indomitable*-class heavy battlecruisers. Despite drifting into disrepair since the end of the First Age, these awesome artifact vessels still outclass everything else on the water. (See **Wonders of the Lost Age** for descriptions of these artifact vessels.) All throughout the West and along the eastern coast of the Inland Sea, it is a high honor to be able to provoke the Realm to such an extent that it unleashes such a ship against you. (Of course, the significance of the honor is often lost in the grip of the bowel-clenching terror of facing such a fearsome vessel.)

Finally, the most effective and recognizable symbol of the awesome and majestic might of the Realm's military is its warstriders. The Realm divides almost 200 warstriders among its remaining 30 legions, most of which it circulates in high visibility parades, occupation deployments and symbolic raids. Most of the Realm's warstriders are of the “common” designation, although some 20 percent are modified scouts, 15 percent are of the noble variety, and one is even a red-jade royal warstrider (though that last is the Empress's personal warstrider and has never seen actual use). Houses Cathak and Sesus each maintain one warstrider fang per legion they control, House Tepet has none left after its losing battle with the Bull of the North, and the other eight houses divide control of the remaining warstriders as evenly as they are forced to.

IMPERIAL WARSTRIDER FANG

Description: Due to scarcity and the difficulty of repairing them, warstriders are rare commodities in the Imperial Army. As such, they are normally used in low-risk, high-visibility operations such as raids on bandit strongholds, regime changes on foreign soil and festival-day parades on the Blessed Isle.

Commanding Officer: Varies

Armor Color: Varying colors of jade.

Motto: Varies

General Makeup: Five warstriders of “common” designation with variable weaponry, plus about 50 auxiliary personnel.

Overall Quality: Good

Magnitude: 1

Drill: 4

Close Combat Attack: 5 **Close Combat Damage:** 6

Ranged Attack: 4 **Ranged Damage:** 6

Endurance: 7 **Might:** 5 **Armor:** 8 (-6 mobility)

Morale: 4





DOOMSDAY EQUIPMENT

For all of its mundane might and its stock of artifact equipment, the Realm boasts two types of military equipment that far exceed anything else any other military can put forth. These devices include the Thousand-Forged Dragons and the Realm Defense Grid. Even the upstarts of the renegade Seventh Legion tremble when they contemplate these mighty and eternal constructs.

THOUSAND-FORGED DRAGONS

The Thousand-Forged Dragons are 30-foot-long metal dragons with 20-foot wingspans that can fly up to 100 miles per hour. Their paws sport talons the size of grand daiklaves, and rows of serrated orichalcum fangs are set in the monster's hinged jaws. They can suck a demesne or manse dry of Essence in a matter of moments, breathe their stolen Essence back on their targets as a ray or pulse of explosive energy, or destroy not only themselves but everything for miles around them in a self-destruct blast of terrifying scope. Fortunately (though the Great Houses might disagree), many of the command codes for the abiding Thousand-Forged Dragons have been lost, so only a fraction of those that still exist can be used today. Should anyone find and discover how to reprogram one of these monstrosities, however, the consequences for his enemies would be disastrous.

THE REALM DEFENSE GRID

More powerful than even the scattered war manses of the Blessed Isle, the Realm Defense Grid was the Empress's consummate hold-out weapon and final deterrent. With it, she literally saved Creation from the Fair Folk, raining fire, eerily silent scouring winds, living lightning and other horrors of Essence given fixed form. Very few who are still alive today remember exactly what the Realm Defense Grid does, but everyone knows what scale of carnage it is capable of and that it can be controlled by a single person working alone. For centuries, that one person has been the Scarlet Empress. Only she knew how to even gain access to the controls, much less make them work, and how she gained this knowledge is a mystery. Whether she read it in an ancient text, tortured it out of a Sidereal Exalt or bargained it out of a demon, the secret has disappeared with her. If any of the contenders for the Scarlet Throne knew how to operate the system, she would have stepped up and proven it by now (likely cinching her place as the Empress's successor), but none have done so. This eases the minds of those rebellious provinces whose loyalty to the Realm has been contingent only upon this fearful deterrent, but it strikes terror into those who are wiser. After all, if it was only the successful activation of the Realm Defense Grid that pushed back the Fair Folk's crusade of madness last time—and no one knows how it works now—what will spare Creation this time if the Fair Folk should attack again?

Formation: The warstriders in a fang are supported by one ground guide, two fangs of scouts and three fangs of heavy infantry to the front, with one sorcerer, one fang of medics and a handful of other miscellaneous aides and technicians to the rear.

Of course, what's even better than the access the Realm has to such resources and its ability to manufacture more is the fact that the Realm can actually train its warriors to utilize such equipment. Sure, it's nice for him when some lost egg digs up a "magic sword" somewhere in the hinterlands, but he's still just one man inexpertly waving around a weapon he doesn't really understand. A soldier of the Realm entrusted with a wonder of significant power, though, has received rigorous and extensive training to make sure he knows not only how to wield it, but how to put it to its best tactical and strategic effect. What's even better is that the rest of the officers in his sworn brotherhood have received the same training, and they've *all* been trained how to work together and work their skills in tandem.

RESTRICTION OF SPECIAL EQUIPMENT

For all the knowledge and skill it can put toward the deployment and use of its high-level artifact weaponry, however, the Realm actually demonstrates great reluctance to do so in the modern day. *The Thousand Correct Actions of the Upright Soldier* downplays the utility of such fantastic equipment and counsels officers against a reliance on it. Why risk the expense of a wall eater, it argues, when it's cheaper to employ a team of engineers to build a catapult that can achieve the same effect in time? The manual urges restraint, so that an officer will never sacrifice competent strategy, discipline and resourcefulness for flash and thunder.

Nonetheless, a deeper pragmatic reality underpins this wise reasoning. The truth is that the technology simply isn't there anymore to mass-produce and maintain the most powerful of the Realm's artifact weaponry. As chaos multiplies in this Time of Tumult, the Realm must think conservatively and reserve its most potent assets for its direst emergencies. In the past, the Empress might have sent a *Dawning Sun Indomitable*-class flagship at the head of a fleet intent upon

razing the island hideout of some troublesome gang of Western pirates. Such a deployment would be extremely effective not only in achieving the military goal, but also in demonstrating the Realm's might to its own Western provinces—thus quelling thoughts of rebellion or tax evasion. Today, though, pirates such as the Lintha Family go seemingly unchallenged as long as they don't attack the shores of the Realm directly. The resources simply aren't there to chase it down and destroy it utterly without suffering crippling losses as a result. So instead, the Lintha Family goes on about its business, the victimized masses wonder why their government won't stick up for them like it would have years ago, and other villains are encouraged by the Realm's inaction.

The gobbling up of the Realm's military assets by the Great Houses (and the subversion of the same for the Houses' own ends) has only exacerbated this top-end decline and resultant lawlessness. Now, as the center struggles to hold, the perpetual conflict at the fringes of the empire increases. Bandits, pirates, rebels and even entrepreneurial arms dealers in the Guild have all noticed and begun to take advantage of the Realm's withering military presence in the Threshold. This only makes the Realm's undefended far-flung citizens angrier and more prone to defy and disrespect their rightful overlords, which leads to more lawlessness. What doesn't occur to these ungrateful peasants is that, if an army of the Anathema were to lay siege to the Blessed Isle, the Realm would need every piece of artifact equipment it had on hand. Honestly, with so much at stake back home, who really cares

if a few pirate attacks or bandit raids out in the Threshold go unanswered in the short term?

SPECIAL LEGIONS

Of the 30 legions that compose the Imperial Army, most have been co-opted by crafty scions of the Great Houses. The loyalties of the soldiers to the Realm notwithstanding, these legions exist now to do the bidding of the Dynasts. Out of the entire army, only two legions don't fall neatly into any one House's camp—one by design, and the other by circumstance.

THE LEGION OF SILENCE

The Legion of Silence is eternally faithful to the Scarlet Empress. Its soldiers do her will and guard her Imperial Manse without hesitation and without question, for that is exactly what they are bred and designed to do. Unlike any other legion, the Legion of Silence actually consists of slave conscripts whose tongues have been cut out and testicles have been removed. Dragon-Blooded sorcerers of Houses Cynis and Sesus created these soldiers after the failed Iselsi coup attempt, breeding large, tough, obedient soldiers and boosting their power with secret sorcerous Charms. These broad, blank-faced soldiers wield polearms and carry shields, and their bodies glow with sorcerous sigils and ornate red and black tattoos. They don't so much follow orders as act according to their "programming," and only the Scarlet Empress can implement or change said programming. These soldiers compose a full legion, but unless the Scarlet Empress returns



or her personal records can be found, there will be no more. While the physical processes for breeding and augmenting a soldier as one of the Silent still exist, the secret Charms that made the Silent even stronger, tougher and more obedient was kept by the Empress alone. (The Cynis and Sesus sorcerers who originally developed these Charms tragically vanished after the legion debuted.)

Those of the Silent who remain are deployed around the Imperial Manse and other important sites around the Imperial City. With the necessary authorization from Regent Fokuf, up to a scale of these intimidating soldiers can be dispatched to accompany high-ranking Dynasts who travel abroad.

SILENT SCALE

Description: These traits represent a standard scale of Silent Legion soldiers.

Commanding Officer: Varies

Armor Color: N/A

Motto: None

General Makeup: 25 sorcerously bred eunuch super-soldiers armed with polearms and with tower shields bolted deep into the thickened bones of their forearms. They wear no armor, but sorcerous augmentation provides the same protection as chain swathing without the mobility penalty.

Overall Quality: Excellent

Magnitude: 2

Drill: 5

Close Combat Attack: 4 **Close Combat Damage:** 5

Ranged Attack: — **Ranged Damage:** —

Endurance: 12 **Might:** 3 **Armor:** 4

Morale: —

Formation: Silent Legion soldiers are created and housed in laboratory cloisters within the Imperial City. Unless they're being repaired, rearmed or decommissioned for parts, they remain on duty where they are stationed.

THE VERMILION LEGION

Those fortunate enough to secure a post in the Vermilion Legion as either enlisted men or Dragon-Blooded officers learn their station in life the moment they hear the legion's more common sobriquet: the Red Piss Legion. This legion is the ignominious hideaway of the disgraced, the drunk, the politically inept and the insubordinate who've been punitively reassigned. It is the legion to which one sends his sons or daughters when he wants those children to die in service to

the Realm—or, rarely, to get tough in a hurry. Its soldiers are deployed into the worst hellscape of modern combat, their lives considered worthless by the Great Houses and the other legions alike.

Yet, the Red Piss Legion soldiers on. It survives the most pitched and supposedly one-sided battles into which it's thrown, defying all odds and boggling the minds of those who sent their rivals off to die. This is not to imply that the legion never suffers severe casualties—it certainly does—but the survivors of every mission come back tougher and stronger and better warriors. Their battles might burn off the fat of useless, incompetent officers and soldiers, but the lean fighting force left over is a power with which to be reckoned. And with the fearsome Roseblack, Tepet Ejava, in command of this legion, its potential is unsettling to consider.

VERMILION LEGION WING

Description: This arctic-trained heavy infantry unit was named "Two-Day Fast" after the Battle of Five Fangs, during which Tepet Elana defended more than 2,000 fallen and wounded soldiers from ravenous Varajtul cannibals for two days until reinforcements arrived. Tepet Elana has since moved on, but her wing retains the name to commemorate her victory. The vast majority of its troops are mortals, but the commander and his two talonlords form a sworn brotherhood of Dragon-Blooded. The five Exalts who command the individual scales within the wing also make up a sworn brotherhood.

Commanding Officer: Winglord V'neef Teraka (Air-aspected)

Armor Color: Brilliant, scarlet red, with white trim

Motto: "Vermilion blood washes away the past!"

General Makeup: 250 mortal heavy infantry soldiers, armed with spears and tower shields, wearing reinforced breastplates and pot helmets.

Overall Quality: Excellent

Magnitude: 4

Drill: 4

Close Combat Attack: 3 **Close Combat Damage:** 3

Ranged Attack: — **Ranged Damage:** —

Endurance: 8 **Might:** 1 **Armor:** 3 (-4 mobility)

Morale: 4

Formation: The Two-Day Fast is currently engaged in piracy suppression operations with the rest of the Red-Piss Legion in the Southwest.



BE CALM. TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED.

THEY'RE... THEY'RE GONNA KILL ME...



HE'S HERE!

THEY'RE HERE...



OUT OF THE WAY, MONK!

WAIT. WHAT HAS THIS MAN DONE?

HE'S A BELIEVER IN THE ANTITHESSES! HE ESCAPED OUR RAID ON HIS HERETIC CELL.



IS HE THE CELL'S LEADER?

NO.

THEN HIS ONLY CRIME IS IGNORANCE. HE JUST NEEDS A PROPER EDUCATION. ALSO A PHYSICIAN.



NO! WE WERE ORDERED TO WIPE OUT THE ENTIRE CELL! STAND ASIDE!



ONLY IF YOUR ORDERS ARE RIGHTEOUS WILL YOU BE ABLE TO TAKE HIM FROM ME.



CHAPTER FOUR THE IMMACULATE ORDER

THE NATURE OF THE IMMACULATE DRAGONS

At the core of the Immaculate Philosophy sit the five Immaculate Dragons. Although their names are used long and loud by monks and the Dragon-Blooded Host, most—even many among the Great Houses—do not understand the intricacies of Immaculate theology in relation to these five legends.

IMMACULATE VS. ELEMENTAL DRAGONS

It is first and foremost imperative to understand the difference between the Elemental Dragons and the Immaculate Dragons. The Elemental Dragons, according to Immaculate doctrine, are the sum Essential total of Creation's primal make-up. Birthed by the Primordial Gaia, the five Elemental Dragons are the foundation of Creation in the same way that the wheels of a wagon are its foundation. The wagon is not only built atop the wheels, but the very presence of the

wheels makes the contraption a wagon. Without them, it may be many things, but it is not a wagon.

The Elemental Dragons are purest primal elemental otherness—their forms are too pure to be made manifest in Creation. Yet, in Immaculate theology, the Elemental Dragons are not aloof or uncaring. They are simply distant, out of a desire to preserve the great Creation of their mother. Even from their distance, however, the Elemental Dragons could not miss the horror the Anathema wrought on their mother's Creation, threatening to rend it asunder and disperse its totality into the chaos of the Wyld.

The Immaculate Order does not comment on the nature of the Elemental Dragons, believing them to be beings of utter transcendence. The Immaculate Texts teach that mortals can never wholly understand the Elemental Dragons, so it contains no commentary on these transcendent beings. What mortals and Exalted can understand of the Elemental Dragons is present in the Immaculate Dragons, so the Order has nothing to say on the matter of the Elemental Dragons.

The Immaculate Texts do not say whether the Immaculate Dragons were born with their power or if they were merely Dragon-Blooded somehow elevated to the Immaculate state. Indeed, it is considered a secular waste of time to contemplate the origins of the Immaculate Dragons. It is sufficient that, at the time of greatest need, the Elemental Dragons made themselves manifest in Creation as the Immaculate Dragons. What's important are their teachings and the deeds they performed while thus manifest.

EMULATION VS. WORSHIP

Secondly, it is inappropriate to render up worship to the Immaculate Dragons (to say nothing of the Elemental Dragons). They are not part of the godly bureaucracies. Instead, the Elemental Dragons made themselves manifest in the Immaculate Dragons in order to show mortals the correct means of emulating the ineffable dynamic that the Dragons themselves embody.

The Immaculate Dragons are not gods to be worshipped, but rather are the foremost inspirations for enlightened behavior. Through their example, mortals may understand proper action in accordance with the human experience in the cycle of rebirth. Therefore, to worship the Immaculate Dragons is to lose sight of the message that they taught: Through proper action in successive lifetimes, mortals may one day embody the very powers that the Immaculate Dragons did. To *worship* a thing that one should aspire to be is foolishness, shackling oneself to a base existence instead of striving for true spiritual ascendance.

DAANA'D

Arbiter of the Immaculate Complaint

Capricious and rebellious was Daana'd, the Immaculate of Water, a maiden from the Far West. Although many claim that their arrogant refusal to obey is in emulation of this Immaculate Dragon, the rebellious ways of Daana'd were not the result of such blind vanity. Rather, Daana'd understood the need within each being to be wholly sufficient within itself. She bowed her head to none, for those who wished her to do a thing were not enlightened until they did a thing themselves. Likewise, she did not seek for others to do things on her behalf, for she was the very embodiment of capability.

Although the Anathema sought to lure her into their thrall, she spurned them, eschewing the seductions they laid before her. She turned aside all offers of power and wealth, asking what followers of Daana'd call the Question of Virtue: "If I did not gain these things on my own virtue, do they have worth?" In all cases, the answer is a resounding *No*.

When the Anathema were thrown down, it was Daana'd who swam to the bottom of the deepest sea to lock away the gate to the Underworld, preventing them from returning to trouble the world of man. Her followers teach that, in this action, she taught true freedom: the freedom of dependence upon the cycle of death and rebirth to enlighten one. Instead,

the freedom-loving and self-sufficient seeker might find their enlightenment here and now.

Daana'd's mon is the Crashing Wave That Swallows, symbolic of the plunge one must take in accepting full responsibility for oneself, without reliance on others.

THE UNMANLY BABBLER

The Antithesis of Daana'd is the Unmanly Babblers. The Unmanly Babblers depends on others to do everything for him and finds his worth only in the praise of others. He cannot solve his own problems, and he whines until others do it for him. He cannot see that the true answer to every problem lies in his own Essence.

EMULATING DAANA'D

Mortals seek in Daana'd the inspiration for self-sufficiency. They understand that this is not selfishness—those in need are not ignored. In fact, the truly enlightened seeker tries to inspire others to self-sufficiency, aiding them where they are weak, that they may depend on themselves in the future.

Dragon-Blooded who truly follow Daana'd understand that all of the riches in the world are nothing before the ability to do for oneself. Those who truly seek to embody her Essence should work toward self-sufficiency as complete as possible. Daana'd's teachings are considered vital for Water-aspected Dragon-Blooded to overcome their faults, for their elemental nature inclines them toward dependence on social interaction and chains of command.

HESIESH

Reciter of Loud Hymns and Efficacious Prayers

Though none ever saw Hesiesh use his mighty control of burning Essence, few who gazed upon his brilliant face could doubt the power contained within his frame. Like the paper of a lantern cover that is too close to the burning wick, the body of Hesiesh seemed as though it might ignite at any moment from the power within him.

Calm and reserved was Hesiesh, who understood that the proper flow of Essence should be continued in all things. Therefore, he never wasted his own personal power and was careful to render up the proper prayers to the Celestial Bureaucracy, that mortal Essence might be transubstantiated into divine power, all according to the intention of Creation.

The Anathema sought to lure Hesiesh into a battle frenzy, into exhausting his volatile Essence, but Hesiesh refused to take their clumsy bait. He battled according to the strength of his own limbs and the sharpness of his mind. When the battle was done and the Anathema lay as corpses waiting for the fall of night to rise up, confident that their foes had exhausted all of their Essence, only then did Hesiesh unleash his power, burning their bodies to pure, white ash.

Hesiesh's mon is the Three Candles Lighting Darkness, symbolic of the sudden flare of power and enlightenment that comes from the timely application of proper resources and behavior.





THE ILLIBERAL CHURL

The Antithesis of Hesiesh is the Illiberal Churl, who observes tradition because it is expected of him. The Illiberal Churl does not see the Essence at the heart of hallowed ways. He retains himself out of deep selfishness, rather than restraint.

EMULATING HESIESH

Mortals seek in Hesiesh the inspiration for tradition and an understanding of the past, though not a slavish devotion to old ways. They seek only genuine contemplation of these methods, adhering to them because they save time and energy. Tradition becomes tradition because it works. Followers of Hesiesh uphold tradition and precedent and are the ones most involved in the Immaculate Order's catechism.

Dragon-Blooded who truly follow Hesiesh understand that in tradition lies success. Innovation for innovation's sake is simply vain. Honoring those who came before and maintaining tradition is key to such devotees. Hesiesh's teachings are considered vital for Fire-aspected Dragon-Blooded, for their fiery Essence inclines them toward swift action and personal vainglory. In the hallowed, reverent traditions and solemn contemplation of Hesiesh are Fire Aspects enlightened.

MELA

Petitioner of Clouds Accordant to the Call of Battle

The eldest of the Immaculate Dragons, called Resplendent in Perfection, Mela was a mighty warrior. Strong in body,

mind, spirit and Essence, Mela taught those around her to settle for no less than personal perfection. A warrior-savant without peer, Mela was the very embodiment of glory.

Mela was never content to rest on her laurels, always seeking greater and greater tests for herself. She accepted that glory was the due of the successful and skilled, but she did not seek accolades, for they were ultimately empty. Accolades did not stand between Mela and the Anathema in the dusk of the First Age—only her perfection did.

Mela's battles with the Anathema were many and well lauded. She oft arrived at the forefront of a storm, driving aside the puling, corruptive fires of the Anathema and blanketing the battlefield in cold, pure mists and wind. To Mela, victory was the natural course of events to those who strove the greatest. What foe could hope to equal the challenges that a truly righteous heroine might lay before herself?

Mela's mon is the Transcendent Fan of the Five Winds, a reminder that, while nature brings wind, those who are strong and cunning may bring it for themselves.

THE SICKLY WHORE

The Antithesis of Mela is the Sickly Whore, who is beautiful and glorious to behold, but who uses that glory for the degradation of self and others. The Sickly Whore collects the accolades that are the favors of her many lovers, allowing the world to use her for pleasure in return for cheap, empty baubles.

EMULATING MELA

Mortals seek in Mela the drive toward perfection. Mela, who taught men how to wield Essence even though they were not Exalted, believed that in the pursuit of perfection in this lifetime, a man might better prepare his spirit for the time between lives. Mela's teachings allow men to understand that virtuous action and striving toward perfection give them leave to claim a place closer to the Dragons themselves in the next incarnation.

Dragon-Blooded who truly follow Mela understand that glory is hollow and fleeting, and only in the perfection of oneself and one's Essence is lasting enlightenment found. The teachings of Mela are considered valuable to Air-pected Dragon-Blooded, whose mercurial Essence lends to them an air of either extreme focus in one area or useless diletantism. Going halfway in either direction is unacceptable. The Dragon-Blooded Host should aspire toward perfection in all things.

PASIAP

He Who Illuminates Both Worlds with Majesty and Power

The great warrior Pasiap was a pillar of strength in the war against the Anathema. Never did he turn from the field in fear, nor did he succumb to the Anathema's taunts with fury. In all instances, it was said that Pasiap had only to place himself so that his back was to the Imperial Mountain, and it was clear to all who saw him that he stood at the Center of All Creation: unmovable, resolute, strong and enduring.

Pasiap taught his followers that there was no difference between the Essence of the self and the Essence of Creation. Did not the Exalted and gods draw into themselves the power of the dragon lines? Control of one's Essence led to control of the Essence around one. Likewise, in shaping the things of the world, the shaper was himself shaped.

Time and again the Anathema tried to destroy Pasiap. When he proved too mighty, they instead threw down those things he had created, in hopes of driving him to anger or despair. The Immaculate Texts say that he but smiled and thanked his foes for the chance to build again. When the wars against the Anathema drew to a close, Pasiap remained incarnate to teach men the ways of controlling the Essence of the earth. He is considered the father of geomancy, where once that art was the sole province of the Exalted and Anathema.

Pasiap's mon is the Omphalos Triumphant, the symbol of the Imperial Mountain, the center upon which all of Creation is balanced, the spoke between Heaven and the lands of mortals, reminding the Dragon-Blooded that they, too, must act to join the propriety of Heaven with the realities of Creation.

THE OSTENTATIOUS PEASANT

The Antithesis of Pasiap is the Ostentatious Peasant, who does not understand that the true glory in fine possessions

is not in the having of them, but in the making. The solid, honest work ethic evades the Ostentatious Peasant, who sees only the riches of those around him without seeing the hard work they have put into acquiring them. The Ostentatious Peasant sees only the rewards of hard work, rather than the enlightenment that is effort's true reward.

EMULATING PASIAP

In Pasiap, mortals find that the reward for hard work isn't luxury—it is the enlightenment of a job done well and with care. Architects and builders revere Pasiap, whose gift to them is the knowledge that, with every brick they lay and every wall they stand, the sweat of their brow has firmed their tread on the path to enlightenment.

Dragon-Blooded who truly follow Pasiap understand that the wealth of the Great Houses is nothing if it does not reflect the hard work and dedication of those who possess it. The wealthy are to be admired, but only if what they have reflects their resolute effort. Earth-pected Dragon-Blooded are often taught to curb their Essence-driven pride and focus on things of the material world that are the bane of those who would be enlightened. But rather than eschewing it, they are reminded that it should stand for something. Wealth and respect are the natural result of hard work, nothing more.

SEXTES JYLIS

He Who Hath Strewn Much Grass

Compassionate Sextes Jylis was loved by all the people of Creation. Kind and unwilling to see those around him suffer, Sextes Jylis could not bear the pain caused by the Anathema. Sextes Jylis is the responsible healer, who bears great knowledge and the potential to do great harm. Yet, he is willing to do a small, immediate harm to prevent a greater one, and thus, Sextes Jylis, Beloved of Creation, raised his bow against the Anathema.

It was not in war, but in the peace that followed, that the followers of Sextes Jylis take their inspiration in his story. The Immaculate of Wood wandered Creation after the destruction of the Anathema, rebuilding toppled mountains and setting fallen trees aright. To the wounded, he brought relief of pain and healing, and to destroyed fields, he spread clean, new grass.

Though the Anathema sought to corrupt Sextes Jylis into using his powers irresponsibly, he could not be tempted. He knew that the rash use of the great and terrible power that was his legacy could bring disaster and ruin, and he dedicated himself to uplifting Creation. The Anathema could not understand his ways, and so failed.

Sextes Jylis' mon is the Leaf Upraised in Vigor, the emblem of growth, renewal and life, symbolic of the first plants to arise from the shattered fields of battle.

THE INCONSIDERATE HORSEMAN

The Antithesis of Sextes Jylis is the Inconsiderate Horseman, who is neglectful and short-sighted. This horseman





does not take the time to go around the field he encounters, instead trampling it under his mount's hooves simply because he is in a hurry and has the power to do so.

EMULATING SEXTES JYLIS

Mortals seek in Sextes Jylis the inspiration for mindful action and compassion. To take rash action is to risk trampling the fine things of life and to risk harming those who have done nothing to deserve it. In mindful action, a job may take a little longer for one man, perhaps, but if it brings joy to two, then surely that is a wiser investment.

Dragon-Blooded who truly follow Sextes Jylis understand that compassion is the source of happiness, both to those who give it and those who receive it, but it must be tempered by responsible forethought. The teachings of Sextes Jylis are considered valuable to Wood-aspected Dragon-Blooded, for whom the verdant Essence of their aspect lures them into either the fulfillment of needs immediately and rashly or moves them to crippling pity for living things around them. Enlightenment comes through balance.

THE IMMACULATE PHILOSOPHY

The Immaculate Order emphasizes several core concepts to those who would follow its teachings. There are five Noble Insights that all students must understand and internalize in order to be truly counted among the faithful. It also teaches the five Diligent Practices that the faithful must undertake in order to embody the teachings of the Order. Through Noble Insight and Diligent Practice, an adherent to the Immaculate Philosophy is ennobled and elevated, made closer to the perfection of the Immaculate Dragons.

THE NOBLE INSIGHTS

The core concepts of Immaculate belief are signified by the Noble Insights. These concepts are absolute across Immaculate orthodoxy. All sub-traditions of the Immaculate Philosophy believe these to be true, though they might not all agree on the best ways in which to incorporate them and might have differing conclusions about them. Ultimately, the Noble Insights teach Cooperation, Reincarnation and Perfection.

THE FIRST NOBLE INSIGHT

All beings in Creation are constantly dying and being reborn, ascending and descending the Road of Enlightenment. Those who are Exalted are very close to the end of the Road, while insects and plants are near the beginning. Most sentient mortals are somewhere near the middle.

To mortals, this Insight is essential for understanding their place in Creation. The First Noble Insight brings clarity and an understanding of one's place. Only those who understand their intended role may successfully perform that role.

Likewise, this Insight is what gives the Dragon-Blooded the right to rule in matters both secular and religious. Exalted adherents are taught, however, that this isn't privilege, but

responsibility. Even those Exalted to the Dragons have not completed their walk. It is simply that the heights of the journey are in sight.

THE SECOND NOBLE INSIGHT

As beings approach the end of the Road, they approach the infinite perfection of Essence that is the Elemental Dragons, who hold Creation together.

To mortals, this is the promise of one day Exalting as part of the Dragon-Blooded Host, and of being born into one of the Great Houses. Literally, this is the promise of a fine, high life of wealth and power for those who live according to the Perfected Hierarchy. It is also the unspoken agreement between lord and peasant: Obedience to the nobility is not simply expected, but a compact through successive lives. If a lord does not behave in ways appropriate to his station, he will not return as a lord. Likewise, if a peasant is faithful, respectful and obedient, he will be rewarded for this diligence by being elevated to a higher station in the next life.

To the Dragon-Blooded, this Insight emphasizes the importance of their position. They are not merely powerful overlords—they share in the power and responsibility of holding together the very fabric of Creation. Those who do not hold to this ultimate responsibility will not be reborn to it, until they prove themselves after lifetimes of mortality.

THE THIRD NOBLE INSIGHT

Working in solitude and striving to surpass their lot in life, all beings in Creation draw away from the perfection of the Elemental Dragons. Working together and accepting their present incarnations, all beings in Creation mimic the Elemental Dragons and approach their perfection.

To mortals, this is the understanding that in acceptance comes enlightenment. By acknowledging their place in society and working hard to best master their skills and succeed in what is expected of them, they work to hold the very fabric of Creation together. By doing so—by finding holiness and perfection in even being a humble street-sweeper, for instance—mortals can prove their dedication to Creation and earn a greater responsibility over it in successive lives.

To the Dragon-Blooded, this is an admonition to work toward building civilization and empire. Allowing chaos and strife to enter into a thing of great order opens the gates to the Wyld, allowing it to erode the very fabric of Creation. It is why a cruel and dishonest Dragon-Blood who works within the system is more highly regarded than a kind and wise one who departs to live his life alone somewhere in the Threshold.

THE FOURTH NOBLE INSIGHT

The Dragon-Blooded, who were the disciples and children of the mortal incarnations of the Elemental Dragons, are leading the Immaculates toward that degree of perfection.

To mortals, this Insight is what grants the Dragon-Blooded families the right to rule. It is proper to follow those



who are the children of the Immaculate Dragons. Who better to teach how to properly emulate the Dragons but their own children? It is also proper to follow the wisest. By dint of their Exaltations and long lives, the Dragon-Blooded are the ones who are wise in drawing closer to the Essence of the Immaculate Dragons.

To the Exalted of the Dragons, this is the statement of utmost responsibility. It is why the Immaculate Order frowns on greedy and intemperate Dynastic Dragon-Blooded, for they are not providing proper examples. It is too easy for base human nature to poison the carefully gathered wisdom and enlightenment of lifetimes of service with such distractions. Dragon-Blooded who are not aware of their duty in leading mortals toward behavior that will elevate them are not worthy of their Exaltation.

THE FIFTH NOBLE INSIGHT

The Anathema, who reject the Elemental Dragons and obey only their own ambitions, are drawing Creation toward despair and ruin.

To mortals, this is precautionary. To obey one's own selfish ambition is the way of the Anathema, who are demons. The faithful of the Immaculate Order are taught to expect the Anathema to be glorious and winsome. They are demons in their ultimate aims, not in their direct actions. They might heal, teach and praise mortals, but ultimately, they are feeding their own ambition. They pull men and women away from their proper role in this

lifetime, away from lessons that the soul must learn on its way to Exaltation.

To the Dragon-Blooded, this Insight is the basis for the Wyld Hunt. If, as the Children of the Dragons, they acknowledge that they share in the responsibility for keeping Creation whole and sound, then they must fight against that which would destabilize it.

THE DILIGENT PRACTICES

The Diligent Practices provide the framework for correct action in the Immaculate Philosophy. Simple belief is not enough—the faithful live their beliefs through correct action.

THE FIRST DILIGENT PRACTICE

Hear a recital of an Immaculate Text at least once a month, in the company of at least 17 other followers of the Philosophy.

In hearing the words of the Immaculate Dragons and those who were closest to them, the faithful discover words of wisdom when they need them. The sutras that make up the Immaculate Texts are not simply words of spirituality, they apply to all elements of the life of mortals. They act as a guide toward the Higher Road that leads to Exaltation.

The requirement that the Immaculate Text be heard in the company of others emphasizes that community and commonality are the foremost practices of the devoted. By working together to understand their purpose, mortals and Exalted alike grow to understand their respective places in Creation, which strengthens the ties of Creation itself.

THE SECOND DILIGENT PRACTICE

Respect and honor spirits only according to the calendar and in the specific rites set down by the Immaculate Order, giving each spirit its due only insofar as it serves the harmony of Creation. Worship no spirit, elemental, small god or Anathema at all.

As the ties that hold Creation together, it is the proper duty of mortals to contribute to the power of the Celestial and Terrestrial Bureaucracies. But the gods and spirits of the world do not have the right to rule the lives of mortals. Gods have their duties as surely as mortals and Exalts do, and to try to gather power over things that are not under their aegis is wrong and prideful. Therefore, the Immaculate Order is careful to shield mortals from the undue influence of godly beings.

The Immaculate Order teaches that the Dragon-Blooded are the only ones spiritually strong enough to deal with powerful gods and spirits without being corrupted by them. Therefore, it is forbidden for mortals to engage in actual worship of individual gods. Instead, mortals may participate in the rites that glorify the gods as a whole, while Dragon-Blooded monks tend to the individual rites of the Hundred Gods (the name for the multitude of divinities in Creation and Heaven).

For this reason, the Immaculate Order is aniconic. The mistrust of animal symbols dates back to the First Age, when many animals were associated with the cults of the Unconquered Sun or Luna, and it has evolved into a general cultural prohibition against the depiction of gods. Only in the temples of those gods may statuary or depictions be erected, and they may be shown only when a Dragon-Blooded monk is performing their rites. All other times, they are locked away and hidden from view.

It is also considered ill luck to depict the Immaculate Dragons, who are best represented with their simple mon symbols. There is no prohibition against depiction of the Elemental Dragons, however, for they are so transcendent that human worship is irrelevant.

THE THIRD DILIGENT PRACTICE

Imitate in word and deed the honorable behaviors of the five Immaculate Dragons, the mortal incarnations of the Dragons of the Elements. Emulate the thoughts appropriate to your incarnation as decreed by the Immaculate Dragons.

This is the core for all morality and ethical behavior to adherents of the Immaculate Philosophy. Mortals are expected to try to emulate all of the Immaculate Dragons, when and where they can. Self-reliance, adherence to tradition and restraint, compassion, the search for perfection, the holiness of hard work: These are the true virtues of the Immaculate adherent.

The Dragon-Blooded are assumed, by tradition, to emulate one Immaculate Dragon above others. Most of the time, this is the Dragon that corresponds to their aspect. A Fire Aspect manifests spiritual spontaneity and rebelliousness in his very anima, so the teachings of Hesiesh will likely benefit him the most. Sometimes, however, that is not the

case. In some instances, a monk might suggest to a Dragon-Blood that she seek out the teachings of one of the other Immaculate Dragons.

THE FOURTH DILIGENT PRACTICE

Obey the Dragon-Blooded, who are the descendants and disciples of the Immaculate Dragons and are so close to enlightenment that their commands cannot cause a soul to stray from the Road.

There are those among the Dragon-Blooded who claim that this Diligent Practice demonstrates the innate righteousness of the Dragon-Blooded. Certainly, that is what the Immaculate Order teaches the un-Exalted who follow its beliefs. In truth, though, those Dragon-Blooded who learn anything about the Immaculate Faith are taught that this Diligent Practice does not mean that all of the Terrestrial Exalted's whims and commands are righteous. It simply means that while one of the Princes of the Earth may command a man to take unrighteous action, men will not be led astray by obeying that command. It is the proper place of mortals to obey the Exalted, and in the fulfillment of that destiny, men draw closer to the Essence of the Dragons.

The Immaculate Order emphasizes to its Exalted adherents, however, that they are still responsible for making sure that their commands are righteous and proper, in keeping with the proper order of Creation. In short, while the commands that one of the Dragon-Blooded Host gives to a mortal cannot draw that mortal away from enlightenment, it can pull the Dragon-Blood further from it.

THE FIFTH DILIGENT PRACTICE

Resist the commands of the Anathema to the fullest degree of the abilities of your present incarnation, and do not fall into despair.

This Diligent Practice emphasizes two things: the understanding of the terrible sway of the Anathema, and the fact that mortals have only so much resistance to them. For this reason, the Immaculate Order considers those mortals who follow the Anathema to be as much victims as those the Anathema slay. In either case, what can mere mortals do to stymie the will of such demons?

Of course, by this token, those Dragon-Blooded who fall to the sway of the Anathema are responsible for their own weakness. They carry the Essence of the Dragons and are heirs to the blood of those who overthrew the Anathema once, at the height of their power. The Immaculate Order's orthodoxy has no pity for those who fail to resist the demons, though those who have actually encountered the Anathema before are more likely to understand, given the power of the demons that possess them.

THE ORDER OF IMMACULATE DRAGONS

The faith of the Immaculate Dragons is administered by the Order of Immaculate Dragons, a religion with monastic and temple-based traditions, as well as ascetic and itinerant



off-shoots. The acknowledged heads of the Order of Immaculate Dragons are the Dragon-Blooded, and this is accepted as right and proper. After all, those who will outlive mortals by entire generations should be in the position to apply the long wisdom they gain.

BECOMING AN IMMACULATE

The process of joining the Immaculate Order as one of its monks is long and arduous. A would-be monk must present himself to the monks of the subdued Procession of Gray, the small, unassuming monastery in the heart of the Temple District of the Imperial City. The Procession of Gray is a standard monastery, with one difference. At any given time, its courtyard may be packed with kneeling postulants, clad in the gray robes of their station. These postulants seek only to be noticed by the Paragon of Sextes Jylis from the window of his office that overlooks the courtyard or on her way to the Scarlet Chapel in the Imperial Palace.

The Paragon of Sextes Jylis notices everything, it seems. Those who come to the Procession of Gray must not arrive with their heads already shaven. To do so is to suggest that one is already suited for the Order, and only the Paragon of Sextes Jylis may make that decision. Those who come from powerful families are likely to wait the longest, especially the Exalted, who are expected to exceed the mortals around them in their capacity to withstand the rigors of fasting, lack of sleep and constant kneeling on the cobblestones of the courtyard.

Occasionally, monks require that postulants aid them in some small task. Afterward, they are expected to return to their places. At night, all postulants are shown to a single dormitory overseen by a monk, there to sleep on bare wooden floors until just before dawn. When they are not sleeping or assisting monks, postulants are expected to remain kneeling in the courtyard. In the middle of the day, they are brought a single shallow bowl of rice to eat; water is brought to them four times a day. Most postulants continue this process for a few days, but it is not unheard of for it to go on for weeks for those the Paragon suspects may still be wrestling with pride, particularly Dragon-Blooded postulants.

All it takes is a nod from the Paragon as she passes on her way to tend to important business to make a postulant an acolyte. When this happens, the monks around the Paragon hurry to the side of the new acolyte, to take him into the inner adytum of the Procession of Gray, where he is given a meal of rice, chicken and fruit and a small cup of watered wine. After this meal, the head of a new acolyte is shaved completely. He is thereafter given a freezing cold ritual bath of cleansing and an acolyte's robe. At this time, the monk attending him gives him a new name, and the new acolyte takes his oath of service.

THE PILGRIMAGE

New acolytes are given a week to recuperate from the ordeal of the postulant and to learn the basic sutras and martial-arts stances required of all novice monks. After this

time, regardless of the season, a new monk is expected to undertake the pilgrimage by foot from the Imperial City down the Great Coast Road to the Palace Sublime, in Incas Prefecture. Acolytes are given only their robes, a walking staff and a begging bowl with which to beg for food or money to buy food along the way.

This is often a humbling experience for monks, especially for those who come from Dynastic or patrician families. These pilgrims are forbidden from using Essence or force to get their food, and they certainly may not break any laws. The communities between the Imperial City and the Palace Sublime are accustomed to these begging monks and are willing to give food to those who are sufficiently humble. But a new monk, even one with Dragon-Blooded heritage, who approaches the task of begging with arrogance or expectation is in for a rude shock.

Finally, after weeks of travel by foot and by begging rides with those who have wagons, the new acolyte arrives at the Palace Sublime. He is taken in, fed, bathed and his head shaved again. He is given any medical attention that may be necessary from his long and arduous trip and given a place in the monks' cells as a monk of the First Coil.

THE COILS OF THE IMMACULATE ORDER

The Immaculate Order teaches that the Road of Enlightenment wraps around and around, like the long, sinuous body of a dragon coiled around a great pillar. In the normal process of living, a being remains where he stands on this winding Road, moving perhaps a few steps up or down.

Those who dedicate themselves to the Immaculate Dragons, however, may advance greatly in their place. Through diligent service and practice of the Immaculate Philosophy, they can move their spirits not simply one or two steps along the path, but up to the spiral of the road, or coil of the dragon, above where they now stand.

The behaviors of the various Coils are required for several reasons. The first is to set the monks apart from the rest of society, constantly reminding them that they are held to a higher standard. Secondly, these voluntary limitations teach the monk discipline and allow him to focus his energy and attention on things of a spiritual, rather than secular, nature. Many of the things that provoke lust, greed and envy are forbidden the Immaculate monk.

Immaculate monks speak of this symbolic structure as the Five Coils. They are not so prideful as to claim to have any control over where a monk's soul actually stands—they simply find use in these five "levels" of devotion to the Immaculate Philosophy. A monk of higher Coils is expected to exemplify the ideas of the Order more than one of lower Coils, adhering to stricter requirements of behavior and service. The Five Coils were first described in *The Gentle Rule*, a text supposedly inspired by Daana'd that describes the proper running of monasteries, including the division of work, methods of dress and the like. All monks are expected to study *The Gentle Rule*.



FIRST COIL (BACKING [IMMACULATE ORDER •])

The majority of a monk's strictures are established when he takes his vows as a monk of the First Coil. It should be noted that some of these strictures change as the monk increases in Coil, and to assume the strictures of a higher Coil is considered an act of vanity and presumption.

Appearance: A monk of the First Coil is required to shave his head, and keep it shaven, though the monk may wear facial hair. Such monks are forbidden jewelry and tattoos.

Celibacy: A monk of the First Coil must take a vow of celibacy, under the belief that sex is too great of a distraction and lure from the spiritual endeavors of a true Immaculate. Masturbation is not forbidden, however.

Diet: The strictures of the First Coil forbid the eating of red meat and the consumption of intoxicants or narcotics.

Name: At the end of her time as a postulant, a monk of the First Coil is given a new name, one meant to divorce her from her old life and reflect something of her inner nature. It is usually a diminutive or even slightly embarrassing name, such as "Cricket" for the high-jumper or "Little Brook" for the monk who can't quite still her tongue.

Poverty: A monk of the First Coil takes an oath of poverty, vowing to own nothing. Even the clothing on his back belongs to the Order. Any money given to a monk of the Order, by tradition, has been given to the Order.

Vestments: The garb of the First Coil is a simple hempen robe, belted with rope. The robe may be decorated with modest trim, which usually adheres to the traditions to which the monk belongs (monastic, temple or ascetic). The monk may also wear a broad-rimmed hat and sandals.

SECOND COIL (BACKING [IMMACULATE ORDER ••])

All of the strictures from the First Coil remain in effect, with the following exceptions:

Diet: A monk of the Second Coil is expected to consume no fowl, in addition to the dietary strictures of the First Coil.

Name: Upon being given the linen belt of the Second Coil, the monk may change his name. A monk may reclaim his birth or family name, though doing so is a sign that one's family will still play a role in one's life (though there is no stigma for doing so). Many monks ask a mentor or respected figure to name them. By tradition, this is a serious name, one that truly reflects the holy figure the monk is becoming.

Vestments: As First Coil, save that the hempen robe is cinched up with a linen belt. This belt is generally undyed, unless the monk is a devotee of one of the Immaculate Dragons, in which case it may be black (Daana'd), white (Pasiap), blue (Mela), red (Hesiesh) or green (Sextes Jylis).

THIRD COIL (BACKING [IMMACULATE ORDER •••])

All of the strictures from the Second Coil remain in effect, with the following exceptions:

Diet: A monk of the Third Coil is expected to consume no sweets, sorbets or coarse grains in addition to the restric-

tions of the First and Second Coils.

Status: The monk may hold the position of abbot, vartabed or sybil, depending on the need for someone to hold such a position and the tradition in which the monk works.

Title: The monk is addressed by lessers as "Honored One" or "Reverend," and when his name is used, the prefix "Honored" is applied to it ("Honored Nine Rivers," for instance). Only speakers within the Order need use these titles, though those outsiders who wish to win favor might do so.

Vestments: The monk of the Third Coil may wear a robe of soft linen, often left undyed, or dyed to reflect the monk's devotion to a given Immaculate Dragon. He wears a belt of woven wool.

FOURTH COIL

(BACKING [IMMACULATE ORDER ••••])

All of the strictures from the Third Coil remain in effect, with the following exceptions:

Diet: A monk of the Fourth Coil is expected to consume no meat whatsoever and to drink nothing but tea and water, while continuing the strictures from the First through Third Coils.

Exaltation: Only the Dragon-Blooded hold ranking of the Fourth Coil.

Status: Should the need for such present itself, the monk of the Fourth Coil may hold the position of lama. The monk is almost guaranteed to hold the position of abbot, vartabed or sybil.

Title: The monk is addressed by lessers as "Most Enlightened Master," and when his name is used, the prefix "Master" is applied to it.

Vestments: As Third Coil, but the belt is made of silk.

FIFTH COIL

(BACKING [IMMACULATE ORDER •••••])

All the strictures from the Fourth Coil remain in effect, with the following exceptions:

Diet: A monk of the Fifth Coil consumes only rice, bread, vegetables, tea and water.

Status: Most who hold the Fifth Coil are elder lamas. The Mouth of Peace and the Immaculate Paragons are all chosen from those who stand on the Fifth Coil.

Vestments: The monk of the Fifth Coil wears a robe and belt of silk.

THE MOUTH OF PEACE

One of the most powerful people in the Realm, the Mouth of Peace acts as the conscience of the Scarlet Empress, counseling peaceful resolutions and the secularized search for enlightenment in all things. The position is named for the office's traditional role in counseling the Dynasty against warfare. Because she sits so closely to the Empress, the Mouth of Peace also acts as the secular-dealing head of the Immaculate Order. She takes on such things as the disbursement of

imperial funds to the Immaculate Order, situations where the Immaculate Order and imperial government or Great Houses clash and a variety of other circumstances.

It is the intent of the Immaculate Order that the spiritual leadership of the Order, the five Immaculate Paragons, be disturbed with secular, mundane matters as little as possible. As a result, though, the Mouth of Peace wields quite a bit of power, for she is generally the primary contact and point of authority between the Immaculate Order and the secular world. In fact, those outside the Order generally assume that the Mouth of Peace is the leadership for this massive faith (which is mostly true).

The Mouth of Peace is considered a sacrificial figure, a being of great enlightenment and spiritual power who makes the sacrifice of sullyng herself with the necessity of involvement in politics, secularism and mundane tasks. It is understood that she does these things so that others—particularly the Immaculate Paragons—do not have to. Nonetheless, few are those who are granted permission to see her in her Contemplative Chamber atop one of the towers of the Palace Sublime. Only high-ranking members of the Dynasty, the elders of House Iselsi (who have taken up sanctuary in the Palace Sublime), the Sidereals and highly placed members of the Immaculate Order are permitted audiences.

The Mouth of Peace is expected to give up everything when she assumes the role: all political connections, family ties, friendships. The one who is made the Mouth of Peace even surrenders her name, for the Immaculate Order teaches that the Mouth of Peace should be a single entity, throughout the history of the Immaculate Order. The Mouth of Peace does not speak out against the actions of previous Mouths of Peace, but is expected to act in accordance with them.

The current Mouth of Peace is an Earth Aspect formerly of House Mnemon. Of course, this family tie does Mnemon herself very little good. In fact, it is a source of aggravation that this granddaughter of hers will not accede to her ambitions and aid her. The Mouth of Peace has also refused Mnemon's attempts to have the heart of the Immaculate Order moved to within the walls of the Imperial City. Her predecessor was a scion of House Iselsi who never truly abandoned her House affiliation (resulting in, among other things, her murder at the hands of unknown forces when the House was finally officially dismantled in RY 570). The current Mouth of Peace, however, has created a definitive separation between her origins and her role, so she will not move the entire Order for political reasons. She has also begun some traditions that are likely to continue with successive Mouths of Peace, including the tendency to leave the Contemplative Chamber in disguise once every few years or so and travel the Realm incognito to ascertain the spiritual state of her people.

THE IMMACULATE PARAGONS

In terms of hierarchy, the five Immaculate Paragons are beneath the Mouth of Peace, but this is for a simple reason: The top of a hierarchical structure is, of necessity, a political one, and the true spiritual leaders of the Immaculate Order should

be distanced from such things. The Immaculate Paragons are considered living saints and bodhisattvas, men and women of Exaltation so potent it marks everything they do.

Invariably, these are some of the few Dragon-Blooded whose Essence transcends the normal heights of the Dragon-Blooded (often climbing as high as an Essence of 6+), so that they literally wear the element of their Exaltation on their bodies. Such souls are taught to be close to unity with the Dragons once more. The Immaculate Paragons are acknowledged as greatly compassionate souls who have delayed this unity in order to help elevate the rest of mankind.

When an Immaculate monk is recognized as one of the Immaculate Paragons, he abandons all old ties of tradition and House, should he retain any. Unlike the Mouth of Peace, however, each Paragon should be remembered by the Order, so they take names reflective of the lessons they see themselves as having to teach Creation and the faithful. That way, simply by speaking their names, their message and teachings are remembered.

The Paragons are always Dragon-Blooded, with an aspect appropriate to the Dragon that they serve. They are all masters of at least one of the elemental styles (again, of the aspect appropriate to the Dragon they emulate), and most of them are masters of multiple ones.

THE PARAGON OF DAANA'D

The Paragon of Daana'd is expected to oversee the pursuit of liberation and self-fulfillment in the lives of the righteous. This duty, which names the Paragon of Daana'd as "The Most Capable and Liberated," is a difficult one, for it applies not only to the individual, but to the Immaculate Order as well. It is the Paragon of Daana'd's responsibility to make sure that the Immaculate Order does not become too reliant on any outside force, lest it find itself either beholden to another or in danger when something happens. That the disappearance of the Scarlet Empress did not do more damage to the Immaculate Order is directly traceable to this endeavor by successive Paragons of Daana'd.

The Paragon of Daana'd is also a seeker of social justice. If public censure by the Immaculate Order isn't sufficient to curb the whims of a tyrannical or incompetent prefect or governor, the followers of this Paragon instigate "The Blossoming of Sorrowful Violence." This act is an uprising led by the Immaculate monks of a local monastery, maintained until reparations are made to those the lord has harmed, at which point the monks return to their peaceful lives.

In many ways, the Paragon of Daana'd seeks to do two things for the common man: to make certain that the people know enough to carry on their adherence to the Immaculate Philosophy in the absence of a monk and to institute social justice on their behalf. As such, many monks who follow this Paragon are considered rabble-rousers and troublemakers, but they are careful to remember that order is what the Dragons built. It is considered irresponsible to rise up against a social order without a plan for a better one.



The current Paragon of Daana'd is Bride of Justice, an older Water-aspected woman. Her once-fiery anger at the Great Houses—a result of being born an outcaste—has cooled into a calm determination to see that those responsible for the Realm's social ills are held up to public accountability for their part in such. She is notorious for her public declamations against important government figures and their excesses. The elders of House Cynis have expressed their dislike of Bride of Justice on more than one drunken occasion.

THE PARAGON OF HESIESH

The Paragon of Hesiesh is expected to act as the voice of reason and calm deliberation among the Paragons and the Immaculate Order as a whole. It is he who must pay attention to any sign of shift away from orthodoxy without good reason. This role has earned the Paragon of Hesiesh the title of “The Suitor of Sutras,” for he is said to “court” respected traditions and teachings the way an ardent lover courts his beloved.

The Paragon of Hesiesh is expected to counsel restraint in the Immaculate Order, and the Paragons of Hesiesh and Daana'd often find themselves at odds with one another. Arguments between the two are referred to as “The Ten Thousand Gouts of Steam.”

The current Paragon of Hesiesh is a Fire Aspect formerly of House Cathak named the Red Coal Bodhisattva. His words

of calm are said to emanate from the center of his serene, enlightened spirit like the heat from a hot coal, bringing the warmth of peace and deliberation to those who need it. The Red Coal Bodhisattva and the Bride of Justice are very close friends. Rather than this lessening their official conflicts, however, it escalates them, for neither seems beholden to restrain themselves, knowing that whatever the outcome, their friendship is unlikely to be negatively impacted.

THE PARAGON OF MELA

The Paragon of Mela is expected to watch for the signs of war carefully, that the righteous might be ready for it. This duty, which is given the poetic title of “The Eye upon the Horizon,” is one taken very seriously. This does not, however, refer only to actual war, but to any element that might be a danger to the pursuit of enlightenment. The Paragon of Mela takes reports of heresy very seriously, and many of those who are devotees of Mela watch for signs of such. Anything that threatens spiritual perfection is worthy of the attention of the Paragon of Mela.

The Paragon of Mela is also expected to be the foremost defender of the faith. Although this has never come to pass, it is she who will act as the Immaculate Order's general should it be necessary to mobilize the Order to war.

The current Paragon of Mela is the youngest of the Paragons, an Air Aspect named Righteous Typhoon. Elevated in the years since the Empress disappeared, Righteous



Typhoon believes that the Immaculate Order should take the opportunity of her disappearance to transform all of the Realm into a powerful theocratic nation, with no division between legal and religious laws. She preaches that, in such a nation, a citizen's foremost concern would be his own enlightenment, rather than the coffers of his masters, and she advocates the use of force in achieving this. Of course, the other Paragons have counseled against this, as has the Mouth of Peace. There does seem to be some measure of support for her growing in some of the more fundamental levels of the Immaculate Order, however.

THE PARAGON OF PASIAP

The duty of the Paragon of Pasiap is to act as the "Raiser of Stones," a builder and creator. Always incredibly skilled in architecture—including the design of manses—the Paragon of Pasiap oversees the construction of new temples and other structures for the Immaculate Order. His role extends beyond this, however, for he acts as the apportioner of the Immaculate Order's resources, allotting those resources the Mouth of Peace secures for the use of the Immaculate Order, from money and food to artifacts and the hearthstones of the Order's many manses.

The Paragon of Pasiap is to represent the understanding of the greatest weapon that Creation has against the erosion of the Wyld: civilization. The Paragon of Pasiap teaches that Creation was once larger, but with the deaths caused by the Contagion and the subsequent fall of civilization, the walls that held back the storm of the Wyld fell, and madness breached the world. As a result, those monks who follow the teachings of Pasiap tend to be vehement missionaries, seeking always to bring civilization to those places that are without it.

The current Paragon of Pasiap is the oldest of the Paragons, an ancient Earth Aspect with flesh like white marble known as Foundation of Prosperity. The devotees of Pasiap under Foundation of Prosperity have gone a long way toward the accomplishment of what he views as Pasiap's foremost goal: the building of prosperity, which builds civilization.

THE PARAGON OF SEXTES JYLIS

The Paragon of Sextes Jylis, unlike the others, is not based out of the Palace Sublime. Instead, the role of this Paragon is that of "The Sower of New Seeds," a poetic reference to his role in accepting postulants into the Immaculate Order and then planting them within the Immaculate Order. The Paragon of Sextes Jylis is based out of the Procession of Gray, the monastery in the Temple District of the Imperial City. It is considered appropriate that this Paragon acts in this role, for he must embody the very compassion of the Immaculate Dragon of Wood. He must take pity on those who come from the secular world and are burdened by it, accepting them into the peace and discipline of the Immaculate Order not out of desire for power, but out of love and compassion.

The Paragon of Sextes Jylis also acts as the master of the Scarlet Chapel, a huge temple structure situated within

the Imperial Palace capable of holding many thousands. The Scarlet Chapel is the official temple for the Great Houses, though its daily services are sparsely attended and usually only by those who intend on being viewed as faithful and devout. Still, the Order considers it appropriate for the most compassionate of the Paragons to be the public priest for the Great Houses, hoping that they will learn something of compassion.

The current Paragon of Sextes Jylis is named Peaceful Reflection of Compassion, for he hopes to teach the world's peoples to find compassion first for themselves. He believes that once a soul finds Sextes Jylis' true compassion—that which is stern, yet loving—for herself, she cannot help but discover that same compassion for those around her.

LAMAS

Beneath the Mouth of Peace and the Paragons are the lamas of the Immaculate Order, wise monks with years of experience and leadership to their credit. All lamas in the Immaculate Order are Dragon-Blooded, as befitting men and women in a position such as they are in.

Difficult is the road a lama walks, for he must learn to balance the demands of the political Mouth of Peace with those of the enlightened Paragons—a task that often resembles a juggling act. Outsiders point out the difficulty in which lamas find themselves and wonder why it isn't made simpler—why is there no definitive chain of command? The wise know the answer to this, however. A lama's first master should be his own wisdom, balancing the needs of the secular world with the demands of enlightenment.

Lamas oversee geographical locations, acting as administrators for the abbots, vartabeds and sybils of each of those locations. In this role, they are expected to know what is going on in their territories, that they may counsel the Mouth of Peace and the Paragons properly. In theory, there must be at least one lama for each geographical region and satrapy, but this isn't always the case (particularly away from the Blessed Isle). A lama is supposed to spend half of every year in the geographical region he oversees and the other half at the Palace Sublime.

THE CLOISTER TRADITION

The cloister tradition is a strong one in the Immaculate Order, with nearly half of all monks following it. Rather than acting as intercessors for the people, the cloister tradition teaches Immaculates to sequester themselves from the bustle of daily life in remote monasteries. In these places of serenity, the cloistered monk may focus on his Essence and its development, seeking to emulate the Immaculate Dragons—who moved through life remaining apart from the banality of the mundane world—as close as anyone can.

In the Immaculate Order, the cloistered monks serve a valuable purpose. It is from cloistered monasteries that most copies of the sutras come, as one of the spiritual tasks





undertaken by these men and women is the hand-copying of the Immaculate Texts. Additionally, cloistered monks study the martial arts significantly more often than those of the other traditions, and when trouble with a god or other spirit is reported to the Immaculate Order, it is usually to a cloistered monastery that the request for aid is sent.

The men and women of the cloisters have established something of a frightening reputation to the common folk, for they rarely see the monks of the cloisters until the need for Immaculate martial arts comes about. Then, they are grim warriors who come with sutras on their lips and terrible elemental Essence about their fists.

Cloistered monks wear only the basic vestments of monks of the Immaculate Order. A given cloister might have a unified pattern of trim at the edges, though, such as the wave motif of the Heavenly Cloister of Sapphire, in the western part of the Blessed Isle, or the Unyielding Perseverance Keep's pattern of diamonds with a single dot in the middle of each.

THE ABBOT

The head of a cloistered monastery is an abbot or abbess, a wise elder monk who has served in the Immaculate Order for many years. These men and women understand their duties quite well. They are there to oversee the monks within their monastery and very little else. They drive their

subordinates toward martial and spiritual excellence relentlessly, seeking to push them until their common weaknesses hinder them, and then to push them some more, allowing them to overcome those weaknesses. A cloistered abbot may be a grim, insulting master of the martial arts or a kindly old man given to meditation and philosophical talks over tea, but he is always one thing—driven. Most of the Paragons are chosen from lamas who once served as abbots.

THE TEMPLE TRADITION

The tradition best known by the common folk of the Blessed Isle, the temple tradition is the part of the Order that sees to the adherence to the Immaculate Calendar and the performance of the rites to the Celestial and Terrestrial Bureaucracies. Temple monks are the Immaculates who deal most often with the common folk, and their penchant for wisdom and strict watchfulness against heresy is legendary.

Ultimately, the temple tradition exists for two reasons: to see that the appropriate rites are performed for the gods of the Celestial and Terrestrial Bureaucracies and to see that people understand the Immaculate Philosophy. Where cloistered monks live the Philosophy, teaching by example and answering the questions of the curious, temple monks seek to make those around them understand through the use of parables, prayers and readings. Although they practice the martial arts as well, temple monks spend

more of their days overseeing the various rites of propitiation, teaching the common folk and performing rites of passage for them.

Temple monks often wear prayer shawls, each marked with the symbol of the temple to which the monk belongs. They also often wear pectorals or belts hung with the symbolic representations of the gods to whom they are performing rites. Most such decorations change daily, though.

THE VARTABED

What the abbot is to a cloistered monastery, the vartabed is to a temple. An elder monk known for his wisdom and understanding of the Immaculate rites, the vartabed is responsible for training the monks under him in the maintenance of the Immaculate Calendar and the education of the populace. Where abbots have a reputation as being distant and unsociable, vartabeds are usually assumed to be quite socially engaging. A vartabed understands that the Immaculate Order wields no small power, as entrenched as it is in society. It is his responsibility to make sure that this power—like all that in the Immaculate Order—is wielded in accordance to the tenets of the Immaculate Philosophy. Every one of the Mouths of Peace has been chosen from among the ranks of lamas who were once vartabeds.

THE ASCETIC TRADITION

There is a third tradition of monastic practice in the Immaculate Order. Although it is not an officially recognized or organized one, the ascetic tradition is quite strong. At any given time, perhaps one in 10 monks in Creation is pursuing an ascetic path, and many Immaculate monks, whether temple or cloister trained, undertake asceticism in order to deepen their understanding at some point in their lives.

Simply put, the ascetic tradition seeks to escape all of civilization. Unlike cloistered monks, ascetics don't sequester themselves behind high monastery walls; unlike temple monks, they don't seek immersion in the daily life of the Realm. Instead, the ascetic monk flees cities and goes into the wilderness, in order to simply dwell there for a time.

Most ascetic monks put themselves through a very difficult existence, eating only insects and roots, drinking only cool river water and living either exposed to the elements or within naturally occurring shelter. All ascetic monks believe that the denial of the body's needs is the method by which the soul is purified and enlightened. Therefore, most ascetic monks remain on the edge of sleep deprivation, starvation and exposure, mortifying their bodies in order to elevate their souls. These monks often acquire a supernatural reputation among the common folk, who attribute to them amazing abilities for their sacrifice and dedication.

Ascetic monks are invariably dressed in tattered vestments, or are nearly naked, clothed only in what they can make by hand, or what superstitious peasants leave out for them at the mouths of their caves.

THE SYBIL

Ascetics have no leaders, in the fashion of cloistered and temple monks. It is, after all, not necessary. Most ascetic monks remain ascetic for just a few years at a time, returning to their home monasteries nearly dead of exhaustion, when they have gained whatever insights they sought or when their responsibilities pull them home once more.

A rare few ascetic monks, however, do not pursue this life. These men and women undertake the ascetic tradition permanently, believing that, as the Immaculate Dragons wandered Creation in order to understand their Essence, so too must they. When such a monk achieves the kind of renown in the Immaculate Order that would elevate other monks to the position of vartabed or abbot, the lamas simply begin referring to him or her as a sybil.

Sybils are often sought out by other monks seeking wisdom. Many teachers instruct the monks beneath them that, in order to truly undertake the ascetic tradition for a time, they must seek out a sybil in order for her to impart some wisdom to them. Sybils invariably dwell in remote regions, the proverbial old man on the mountain or seer hidden away in a cavern. Additionally, many of them do discover refinements of their Essence that are unique to the insights that come from prolonged ascetic practice. Most stories that discuss strange ascetic monks who are capable of working miracles refer to sybils.

OTHER TRADITIONS

Though the three foregoing traditions are the most common within the Immaculate Order, there are a few other ways of following the Immaculate Philosophy.

ITINERANT MONKS

An itinerant monk is, in many ways, a monk who adheres to all three of the major Immaculate traditions. Such monks travel from place to place, seeking wisdom in the wilderness

THE CELESTIALLY GUIDED ITINERANTS

Occasionally, a monk's skill, piety and devotion to the Immaculate Philosophy is noticed by the Mouth of Peace. Such figures may be chosen to join the Celestially Guided Itinerants, an order of wandering agents of the Mouth of Peace. What the magistrates are to the Thousand Scales, the Celestially Guided Itinerants are to the Immaculate Order—bringers of scrutiny and justice, in adherence with the laws of the Order and the will of the Mouth of Peace.

The Celestially Guided Itinerants are tremendously skilled investigators, and are all Dragon-Blooded. They answer only to the Mouth of Peace and are notorious for their ability to stumble into false tithing scams, corruption in monasteries and other symptoms of the fact that, for all their preaching of perfection, the Immaculate Order is still manned by fallible mortals.





through starvation and deprivation in the fashion of an ascetic. Yet, they also seek out communities that do not have an Immaculate presence nearby, performing the rites of passage and propitiating the local small gods properly, in the fashion of a temple monk. Itinerant monks are often quite skilled in the martial arts, as well, for they seek out masters of the martial arts to train them in their journeys. They are the monks most likely to be called upon to use them, in order to deal with the dangers of the road and wilderness.

At some point in their lives, most monks are instructed to undertake an itinerant existence. Sometimes, this is just after their training at the Palace Sublime is over, before they report to their new monasteries. Other times, this is after a period of years, or just before a monk takes over a monastery as vartabed or abbot. Many monks see a period of itinerancy as a rite of passage, used to mark dramatic changes in the monk's existence.

Most itinerant monks adhere to a strictly scheduled route of travel, allowing them to come to know the people along that route. When such a monk shows up, many marriages that have been put off are held and celebrated, babies that have been born since he was last through there are named and blessed, and any problems with local spirits are reported to him to deal with. As a result, it sometimes seems that where an itinerant monk goes, celebration follows.

SOCIAL DUTIES

Regardless of their tradition and style of service, all Immaculate monks are expected to fulfill a variety of obligations. Some traditions focus on certain of these duties more than others, but all understand that these duties are all absolutely important and seek to fulfill those they are capable of to the best of their ability.

SEARCH FOR RELICS

In hearing the words and understanding the message of the Immaculate Dragons, mortals and Exalted are brought closer to enlightenment. The more an individual hears and understands, the closer he might come. Therefore, it is considered an important duty of every Immaculate monk to search for relics of the First Age, especially writings that contain the words of the Immaculate Dragons. Such findings form the basis for the Immaculate Texts. Even those that are not the words of the Immaculate Dragons or their apostles are still considered important, allowing Immaculate scholars to better understand the context in which some sutras were spoken.

CULTIVATION OF ESSENCE

Every monk is responsible for aiding others in the cultivation of their Essence. First and foremost, of course, an Immaculate monk must not neglect her own development, but she must also aid others where she can. In some cases, this aid involves training young Dragon-Blooded (particularly outcastes) how to use their Essence, but this duty is not limited to the Princes of the Earth. A mortal who learns to find resolve, acceptance and self-reliance in his life's duties

is said to be cultivating his Essence, as is one who learns the sutras. Many monks strive to teach all who wish to learn the techniques of meditation and the basics of the martial arts. Exalted monks are also taught that they should assist their mortal brethren in learning the techniques of awakening their Essence, where such is possible.

EDUCATION

Immaculate monks are also beholden to teach those around them. This teaching focuses primarily on the Immaculate Texts and the Immaculate Philosophy, though it is understood that mortals are enlightened through education of any kind. As such, all monasteries are required to take in children from the age of five to nine and educate them, usually using the holy sutras as the basis for learning to read.

RITES OF PASSAGE

The passage through a single life, while just a blink in a soul's walk along the Road of Enlightenment, is still noteworthy. Rites of passage serve to bind a community together, thus building civilization. The Immaculate monks perform all weddings, binding in union new couples. Monks also perform the naming ceremonies of new children, who are simply called "boy" or "girl" until such a ceremony has taken place. Rites of adulthood, funerals and many other such ceremonies are usually performed under the watchfulness of the Immaculate monks as well.

DIVINE INTERCESSION

Dragon-Blooded monks are expected to act as intermediaries between men and gods. It is a tenet of the Immaculate Philosophy that the Princes of the Earth are the only ones with the moral and spiritual fortitude to withstand the influence of the gods without losing their will. As such, the Immaculate Order not only oversees all the rites of all the gods (theoretically, at least) in Creation, in accordance to the Immaculate Calendar, but its monks also go to small gods to represent mortal populations. Such occurrences are usually sufficient to cow most small gods, who fear the supernatural martial prowess of the Immaculate monks.

MISSIONARY WORK

The Immaculate Order maintains that, through the spread of understanding of one's place under Heaven, Creation is strengthened. Therefore, one of the Immaculate Order's foremost efforts is in missionary work. The missionary efforts of the Immaculate Order are not limited to teaching mortals the truths of the Immaculate Philosophy, however—they also extend to local gods. Normally, when the Immaculate Order achieves sufficient influence in an area, it builds a monastery and populates it.

Then, as the mortal monks go forth and teach the sutras and Philosophy to the common men of the area, the Dragon-Blooded monks seek out the local gods, calling on them to

bow before the righteousness of the Immaculate Way. Those who defy the monks are fought with supernatural martial arts. Then, once gods and commoners have been swayed to the Immaculate Philosophy, most abbots invite the local leaders of an area to the monastery, believing that once the commoners and the gods of the area adhere to the Immaculate Philosophy, the leadership can do nothing but accede as well.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

The monks of the Immaculate Order—particularly those monks who hold the ideals of Daana'd close—teach that each being is a potential bodhisattva and so should be treated accordingly. Everyone in Creation has a place, and to fight against that place is wrong, but that does not give one the right to abuse those below one. Immaculate monks are notorious for protesting the tyrannies of rulers in front of their palaces, refusing to be moved and indeed, willing to sacrifice themselves in some instances (if only to prove how strongly the Order opposes such a situation). They will even go so far as to lead uprisings, and the Paragons of the Immaculate Dragons have spoken out against the excesses of even the Great Houses in the past.

THE IMMACULATE CALENDAR

The Immaculate Order maintains the Immaculate Calendar, a massive archive of gods both large and small in Creation and in Heaven. This calendar records not only the identity of a god, but the proper ritual used to propitiate it. Gods are given direct worship only by the Immaculate monks, who understand that it is the proper place of those in Creation to render up worship to those in Heaven. They do not believe, however, that every individual god has the right to coerce more worship than it is due from vulnerable mortals.

As such, the more powerful the god is, the more frequently it is given worship. The Celestines are worshiped on a daily basis by all the temple monasteries. Heavenly gods are likewise rendered worship at the Palace Sublime and other major temple monasteries, with more important gods being worshiped more frequently.

When a local god agrees to adhere to the Immaculate Philosophy, its rites and days of worship are entered in the local copy of the Immaculate Calendar, and the monks of that temple perform the rites when its proper ritual days come around. Most local gods do not receive more than a few days of worship a year.

The Immaculate Philosophy's rituals incorporate worship of the Celestial Bureaucracy in a general way. Temple monks lead the faithful in sutras and rituals that glorify the gods in general, rendering up the proper obeisance of mortals without favoring any one god over others. The Immaculate Order teaches that the gods are properly worshiped in this fashion. Although the monks know what gods are being revered on a given day, the ritual that is performed by the laity is the same every day, with the monks symbolically gathering that worship and apportioning it to the appropriate gods.

For this reason, the Immaculate Order is careful to search out heresy. It isn't as though gods are not worshiped, all gods are worshiped in accordance with their duties under Heaven. Therefore, by the teachings of the Order, additional and direct worship not only exposes mortals to the potentially corrupting influence of divine majesty, which may cause them to veer away from their search for enlightenment, but it gives the god more worship than it is due. It is, in effect, either bribery or blackmail, depending on the nature of the god in question.

Heresy is answered with direct, swift action. The Immaculate monks call out the heretic gods to combat, preferably in the presence of their erstwhile cult. Once the god has been beaten either into submission or dispersal, the mortals are reminded of their duties to seek personal enlightenment, not to provide power to a greedy little god. The difficulties they are praying to be alleviated are part of their natural existence and meant to challenge them. By meeting those challenges, they take steps on the Road of Enlightenment; by running to a spirit to do it for them, they lose their footing.

As a result of these painful demonstrations, many gods on the Blessed Isle are quite terrified of being accused of heresy. At the first sign of any direct worship potentially developing around them, it isn't uncommon for a god who has experienced Immaculate retribution to not only refuse to allow people to worship him, but to be the one to report the would-be cult at the nearest Immaculate temple!

THE WYLD HUNT

The Wyld Hunt is not technically part of the Immaculate Order proper. Strictly speaking, it is a special organization, partly religious and partly secular, overseen by both. In actuality, though, the Wyld Hunt receives most of its support from the Immaculate Order. Even if this wasn't always the case, with the disappearance of the Scarlet Empress, the Imperial Bureaucracy has many more issues on its hands.

MEMBERSHIP

There are two kinds of Wyld Huntsmen, who are usually referred to as harriers, or shikari. The most common is the errant shikari, a hunter who maintains a life outside of the Wyld Hunt. Errant shikari are not supported by the Wyld Hunt and usually have duties outside the Hunt chapter house, be they to the Immaculate Order, the All-Seeing Eye, the Imperial Army, their House or other masters.

Less common, but highly praised, are hosted shikari, harriers who have dedicated their lives to the aims of the Wyld Hunt. These are men and women who have usually given all their personal wealth to the Wyld Hunt as a whole and are supported by it. Hosted shikari own nothing, but they are also the first ones to be given the resources of the Wyld Hunt in the field. The numbers of hosted shikari have swelled somewhat in recent years, as more than a few scions of House Tepet have signed up, wanting to fight the threat of the Anathema in these days after the slaughter of the Tepet Legions.

RANKS

The Wyld Hunt answers to two forces: the Mouth of Peace and the Committee on Matters of Venerly, a bureau of the All-Seeing Eye that oversees the secular matters of the Wyld Hunt, keeping track of supplies and payroll, transfers of soldiers and resources and the like. It also acts as the channel by which information from the All-Seeing Eye reaches the Wyld Hunt.

The Mouth of Peace is advised by the correctors, a council traditionally made up of monks who have served with the Wyld Hunt and monks that have not, in equal numbers. The correctors monitor the workings of the Wyld Hunt, order reports on campaigns and perform audits. The correctors and the Committee on Matters of Venerly often work to perform the same deeds, each reporting to their differing superiors. They maintain a fairly strong rivalry, and more than one canny exarch has used this rivalry to his chapter house's advantage, playing each side off one another.

Individual chapter houses are run by exarchs (Backing [Wyld Hunt] ●●●●●), Immaculate-trained hosted shikari who act as the heads of chapter houses and oversee the administration and training of its resources. Exarchs almost never go into the field, though more than one has strapped on his old armor after a particularly devastating loss of a cadre.

Below the exarchs are the ostiaries (Backing [Wyld Hunt] ●●●●), who act as the generals for the chapter houses, overseeing the operation of the cadres, including organizing them. The ostiary acts as the right-hand man for the exarch in a chapter house.

Each chapter house has between two and four venerers (Backing [Wyld Hunt] ●●●) each. When a cadre is formed, it is a venerer who acts as the head of that cadre, and the venerers are expected to know the capabilities of those beneath them. The venerers of a chapter house form a council that advises the ostiary and the exarch.

Finally, within a given cadre, there are simple shikari (Backing [Wyld Hunt] ●) and those harriers who are more experienced and have survived campaigns against at least four Anathema. Such heroes are referred to as amercers (Backing [Wyld Hunt] ●●).

CHAPTER HOUSES

Once, there were 11 chapter houses spread across the Blessed Isle and the Threshold. Now, with the sudden drop in imperial funding and the Great Houses working to consolidate their own power, only six remain, only one of which is in the Threshold (specifically, in the North, near Cherak). Chapter houses are always manses under the leadership of an exarch and ostiary.



CADRES

Any given chapter house has a large number of amercers and shikari, with a handful of venerers to act as cadre leadership. A chapter house always maintains approximately half of its membership as established cadres, teams who work and train together routinely, getting to know one another's weaknesses and strengths, drawing on the nature of the Dragon-Blooded Exaltation to improve one another. Many established cadres are sworn brotherhoods.

The others form the basis of ad hoc cadres, cadres put together as a team under a given venerer on a case-by-case basis. This arrangement sacrifices some of the benefits of established cadres in exchange for supreme flexibility and the ability to tailor the team's membership to the needs of the mission.

Originally, cadres of the Wyld Hunt consisted of two to five Dragon-Blooded, with a host of soldiers and an assortment of aides and support for the cadre. The Immaculate Order and the All-Seeing Eye originally tried to make sure that they had at least one of their own in each cadre.

With the changes that have shaken Creation, however, the cadres have grown. No longer do Anathema move alone through Creation. Instead, they seem to have appeared in numbers great enough to find one another and band together. Now, a cadre generally consists of five to 10 Dragon-Blooded harriers, with a proportional swelling in support. The Immaculate Order has tried to make certain that it has at least two monks in any cadre, and the All-Seeing Eye has done the same.

TEMPLES & MONASTERIES

The buildings and manses of the Immaculate Order are generally put to a variety of uses. Like most of the Dragon-Blooded Host, the Exalted monks of the Immaculate Order prefer to use a manse for their purposes, but they will work with whatever is available.

THE PALACE SUBLIME

The largest temple of the Immaculate Order, the Palace Sublime seems quite indefensible, made up as it is of a pair of immensely tall towers and a squat, square keep. Nonetheless, it is home to no less than the Mouth of Peace and four of the five Immaculate Paragons. It is the heart of the Immaculate Order, and none has ever dared attack it.

At the top of one of the towers is the Contemplative Chamber of the Mouth of Peace, and the next few floors beneath that are appointed for her staff. Above the Contemplative Chamber is a small, modest office wherein Chejop Kejak, head of the Sidereal Bronze Faction, resides, watching out over Creation from one of the tallest towers anywhere.

The Palace Sublime is a confusing maze of temple spaces, monastic training grounds, offices, council chambers, meditation quarters and vaults of riches and artifacts. The monks who dwell here are one of two kinds: the very young, undergoing their first training after their pilgrimage, before being sent on

to another monastery somewhere, or the very experienced, lamas, Celestially Guided Itinerants and a variety of others. Among these scuttle the bureaucrats, under-secretaries and minor functionaries who keeps the monolithic Immaculate Order running.

The Bronze Faction likewise considers this the closest thing it has to a headquarters in Creation, and many nights see three or four of the most unlikely secretaries, monks and others gathered atop the roof, watching the stars in the sky closely.

THE CLOISTER OF WISDOM

Less than a day's travel from the Palace Sublime lies the Cloister of Wisdom, one of the four officially recognized secondary academies. The Cloister is sponsored by the Immaculate Order, whose goal is to teach students who attend the Cloister how to be proper Dragon-Blooded in the eyes of the Immaculate Dragons. Those on the outside of Dragon-Blooded society assume that those who attend the Cloister end up joining the Immaculate Order, but in actuality, only a relatively small percentage ever wind up doing so.

There are many in Dragon-Blooded society—including such luminaries as Cathak Cainan, the head of House Cathak—who attended the Cloister. These Dragon-Blooded have no common destination after the Cloister, but wherever they end up, they bring with them a solid grounding in Immaculate morals and ethics, a firm grasp of the Immaculate Texts and a clear understanding of their duty as the Princes of the Earth.

The Cloister of Wisdom prides itself in turning out students who are many things: devout, clear-thinking, innovative and adept in combat. The techniques perfected by the Immaculate Order in the training of its monks were adapted for the purposes of the Cloister.

TEACHERS

The dominie of the Cloister of Wisdom is the lama Repentant Blossom of Winter, a powerful Air-aspected Immaculate and sorceress several centuries old, with snow-white eyebrows beneath a finely shaven pate and a serene countenance. Repentant Blossom has mastered both the Air and Earth Dragon Styles of Immaculate martial arts and a smattering of Terrestrial styles, and she has the knowledge of up to the Form Charm of Water Dragon Style. She is rarely seen on the grounds, for her time is usually taken up in expanding the education of those the Cloister employs as teachers. Part of their payment for teaching at the Cloister is the privilege of learning at her feet. Some of these teachers include:

- *Mnemon Araha*: Responsible for lessons of ethical statecraft and politics, Mnemon Araha is the daughter of Mnemon herself. A potent Earth-aspected Dragon-Blood, Araha fully supports her mother's aspirations, though she acknowledges that this support must not be permitted to taint her role as a teacher here.



• *Hitayasha*: Claiming to be an outcaste who grew up in the Scavenger Lands, Hitayasha is actually Iselsi Hitayasha. In addition to the lessons in herbalism and healing for which she is known, Hitayasha also recruits for the All-Seeing Eye, a fact Repentant Blossom is aware of and supports. Hitayasha is careful to keep her familial ties secret, though she believes that Mnemon Araha suspects.

• *Silk Tide*: The famous poet and historian Silk Tide is not a Dragon-Blood. In his youth, he toured the Blessed Isle, performing his epic historical poetic works for the Great Houses, who vied to be his sole patron. He always made clear that his loyalty was to the Scarlet Empire as a whole, rather than any one House, a stance that found him favor with the Scarlet Empress. When he performed for her, Repentant Blossom was in court, and afterward, she invited him to take up a teaching post at the Cloister of Wisdom when he wearied of travel. Rumor has that he and Repentant Blossom are lovers, but the truth is almost more intimate than that. She has taught him to awaken his mortal Essence through the use of martial arts.

STUDENT LIFE

Students sleep in large, same-sex dormitories, separated by years. The accommodations are quite plain—the students sleep on bamboo mats—and the food is nutritious but simple. Students rise with the sun to perform devotions and spend the rest of the day in study and meditation. Each student is responsible for knowing what areas he is weakest in. Students are also responsible for seeking out those masters who can help them improve themselves. No master keeps track of a student's progress, so it falls to the student to strengthen himself through study and practice. The core of education here is broad: There are many masters with many talents, from religious training to combat tactics and from mathematics and engineering to social interaction and proper etiquette. But there are three categories in which all must excel. First and foremost, all students must demonstrate mastery of their minds by learning the techniques of meditation. Secondly, students must master their bodies through the martial arts. Lastly, students must prove their mastery of spirit by learning Charms and the manipulation of their personal Essence.

Students of the first year spend time working on nothing but those three areas. When he shows sufficient mastery, a student may seek out other masters to learn from them. There are no set schedules that students must follow. The masters of given subjects simply make it known that they will be in a given place at a given time, and those who show up will learn what they have to teach. Each year, a student is expected to seek out the masters who are teaching the things he desires to learn and to beg those masters to be allowed to come to their classes.

Unlike other academies, the Cloister of Wisdom does not permit a student to remain there for more than seven years. Students are expected to be serious learners and to learn as much as they can. The masters constantly drill into their students the fact that they have only seven years

to learn all the Cloister of Wisdom has to offer. Once that time is over, it is done.

This does not mean that classes are easy, though, by any measure. A student who does not excel in a master's class will be removed from it, banished and told to never return. A master who banishes a student will never accept that student into one of his classes. The masters also keep track of how many classes students are taking and adjust daily chore schedules appropriately. A student who is lazy and does not take many classes, or who finds himself banished from classes, often finds he has the hardest backbreaking labor. The masters are clear in this. Those who do not work to enlighten themselves and gain knowledge will quickly wish they were given the privilege to do so once more.

Students who live at the Cloister of Wisdom are expected to adhere to at least the First Coil living requirements of Immaculate monks. Occasional slips are expected, but these should be spontaneous. Deliberately planning to break those requirements or worse, aiding others in doing so, is cause for punishment (usually in the form of additional chores).

The chores here are onerous and exceedingly menial. Students sand and oil the wood floors on every level of every building daily. Students also tend gardens on the grounds, prepare food and mend clothing. Those who excel in their studies, especially in their later years, are often given chores that lead to higher education, such as assignments to copy parts of the Immaculate Texts.

LAYOUT

The Cloister of Wisdom is a compound without walls or even true defenses. It is located in a valley in Incas Prefecture, with the easternmost of the surrounding hills ending suddenly in a cliff that overlooks the sea. The passage that leads down into the valley crosses a stream with a small footbridge over it. An arch depicting the five Elemental Dragons spans the steps up to the bridge, and a small sign next to the arch requests that visitors use the stone basin of salt water to ritually cleanse themselves before crossing the bridge.

There are three primary buildings here: the Cloister Temple, the Hall of Masters and the Garden Hall. The Cloister Temple houses not only a large temple to the Immaculate Dragons, but a large library and lecture halls, as well as quiet study and meditation cells, meant for only one person at a time. The Hall of Masters houses the masters of the Cloister, with its ground floor serving as a large dining hall for both masters and students. The Garden Hall is a large building that completely encircles a beautiful sand garden. The Hall has a wide variety of classrooms and lecture halls, and a strictly enforced policy of utter silence in the meditation garden, which has space for seated meditation as well as ample room for the performance of katas.

Scattered around the beautifully landscaped grounds are the five Young Dragon Halls, where students live. Each hall houses up to 25 students (up to the school's maximum enrollment of 125), but they are not always filled. Each of



the Young Dragon Halls is designed in a style that honors one of the Immaculate Dragons, with a meditation garden in the middle of the hall, open to the elements.

Each of these dormitories, where students sleep five to a room on bamboo mats, has a garden that the students within that given hall are expected to help tend. There are no official schedules or times for these chores—students are expected to simply honor their responsibility. Practically speaking, first year students are taken under the wing of older students and taught how to care for the garden of that hall. Generally speaking, a system tends to evolve where one of the older students takes on the responsibility of caring for his hall's garden and requests help from his dorm-mates. Those few who shirk these requests generally receive discipline at the hands of the older student, often through duels.

DEFENSES

The Cloister of Wisdom, like the Palace Sublime, has no defenses. The arch that lies at its opening has no gate, and the bridge that spans the shallow stream is a courtesy only. There are no walls, and the Cloister could be easily destroyed by anyone with a mind to do so. There is, however, one thing that prevents that: the Exalted within the Cloister. If, for some reason, someone chose to make herself an enemy in the eyes of the Immaculate Order and attacked the Cloister, she would still find herself up against some of the most competent martial artists in the Realm. Moreover, the Cloister lies only a half-day from the Palace Sublime, home to four of the Immaculate Paragons, four of the most powerful Essence-wielding Dragon-Bloods in all of Creation, to say nothing of headquarters for the Sidereal secret masters of the Order.

MONASTERIES

The Immaculate Order is perhaps best known for its monasteries, fine walled enclosures decorated with draconic iconography, dedicated to either all five of the Immaculate Dragons or one of them in particular.

CLOISTERS

Cloistered monasteries are meant for no one save the Immaculate Order. Consisting entirely of bare living spaces, ample training courtyards, martial-arts dojos and meditation rooms, cloisters do not have servants to tend to the inhabitants' needs, for the monks themselves perform these duties.

Most cloisters are quite defensible, with tall walls and the means of fighting off a prolonged siege. They also tend to boast impressive armories of weapons, and some cloisters might even have armed and armored monastery guardians at the gates and patrolling the walls.

TEMPLES

Temple monasteries, on the other hand, tend to be lavish, with beautiful craftsmanship. There are usually public worship areas (normally in a chapel dedicated to the five

Immaculate Dragons), as well as a few other areas for the celebration of rites of passage. Simple, small chambers can usually be found scattered about, meant for one supplicant to confer with a monk on issues of a private nature.

Behind these public areas are not just the living areas for monks, but also the individual temples or shrines for the local gods or for greater gods that the monastery is responsible for helping to directly worship. Such areas are strictly off-limits to non-monks, and even then, it is only the Exalted monks who carry keys to these chambers.

OTHER CONSTRUCTIONS

Monasteries are not the only structures on which the Immaculate Order depends. The following kinds of buildings are rarer than monasteries, but they do serve valuable purposes.

SHRINES

There are usually two kinds of shrines to be found: those to the Immaculate Dragons and those to local small gods in an area where there are no temple monasteries. The first shrines are usually set aside for itinerant and ascetic monks who find the necessity of a temple space (usually for performing rites of passage and the like for those who haven't seen a monk in a while). Such shrines are built simply, often out of local materials, featuring a large stone or wooden statue of a dragon, with a simple bed of sand in front of it for joss sticks.

The second type of shrine is a little rarer, as Immaculate monks don't like the possibility of cults springing up around the shrines of little gods. In some cases, however, it is necessary to perform the rites of a small god in a space dedicated to it. Such shrines are found only in areas where an ascetic monk or cloistered monastery provides the only Immaculate attention, and such shrines are always sealed behind heavily locked doors, the key of which remains in the possession of the Immaculate.

SCHOOLS

The Immaculate Order takes responsibility for teaching the children of non-patrician families that cannot afford tutors of their own. From the ages of five to nine, children from all over report to monasteries to learn the basics of reading, writing and mathematics, as well as a heavy dose of the Immaculate Philosophy. At the age of 10, however, children leave, continuing on to primary schools if their parents can afford it or to begin working toward the craft they will pursue as adults otherwise.

The Immaculate Order maintains a couple of primary schools, though, like other primary schools, they are for those who can afford to enroll their children there. Only one, the Academy of Those Who Tread in Sextes Jylis' Footsteps, is free. Children who reach the appropriate age and demonstrate admirable piety with a natural intelligence may be sponsored by the Immaculate Order to attend this primary school. Such students often end up as part of the Order itself, and the best among them can even find themselves with a sponsorship to the Cloister of Wisdom.



TOWER STONE,
GOOD EVENING.

EVENING?
IT'S THE MIDDLE
OF THE NIGHT, YOU
PUSHY SPIRIT.

WHAT'S SO
IMPORTANT YOU
COULDN'T SUMMON ME
IN THE MORNING?

I FOUND
HER SNOOPING AROUND
OUR CAVES, STONE. SHE
SAW... MUCH.

OH HELL...
SHE'S A MAGISTRATE.
IS SHE DEAD?

ONLY
SLEEPING.

WELL... SHE
WOULD MAKE A
GRAND SACRIFICE. NO
ONE NEED EVER KNOW
SHE WAS HERE.

WHAT ARE WE
GOING TO DO?



CHAPTER FIVE THE LAND

As the very pinnacle of Creation, the Blessed Isle is a virtual paradise compared to many places in the Threshold. It is the longest-settled place in Creation. Where many other lands have undergone cycles of civilization—falling to disaster or war then going through a cycle of wilderness, only to be civilized again—the Blessed Isle hasn't been an untamed wilderness since it was first coalesced from the Wyld. While disaster has threatened the Blessed Isle time and again, and plague and war have destroyed entire swathes of the population, the Isle has always quickly rebuilt. And rightly so, for it is the shining source of the light of civilization on Creation.

These literal millennia of cultivation have turned the Blessed Isle into something of a pastoral paradise. There are many vistas of natural beauty, but predators have been hunted to extinction through the Isle, with the exception of a few imperial game preserves and hunting refuges meant for the sport of the Dragon-Blooded.

The Essence of the Blessed Isle is carefully cultivated and channeled through sophisticated networks of manses and other geomantic structures. Likewise, the gods of the Blessed Isle are well aware of the dangers of prideful negligence of their duties. These factors, along with the influence of Exalted magics through history, have assured that the Blessed Isle remains prosperous and rich in resources.

As the center of Creation, it has perfect weather, for the climate here is a perfect balance of the influence of the other four poles. Although the places nearer the poles are often ravaged by these tremendous elemental weather patterns, by the time they reach the Blessed Isle, they are not only temperate, but made orderly, predictable and calm by the Elemental Pole of Earth, resulting in ample growing seasons.

As a result, the Blessed Isle sees five harvests of rice per year, an unheard-of bounty anywhere else, save a few breadbaskets in the Scavenger Lands. There are no petty gods of grain and vine that must be appeased, and none of



them are permitted to fall down on their promised gifts, for if they do, the Immaculate Order will send monks to deal with them properly.

All land travels downward from the Imperial Mountain, until it reaches the sea. The Blessed Isle is a place of rolling hills and wide prairies, divided by a few great rivers and mountain ranges. Its terrain is marked with the signs of centuries of powerful civilization—roads and aqueducts are in plentiful representation, as are small settlements every day or so along major roads.

THE IMPERIAL MOUNTAIN

The literal and symbolic heart of all Creation, the Imperial Mountain is the Axis Mundi upon which all of incarnated reality spins. It rises higher than any other point in the world and is literally visible from everywhere on the Blessed Isle (though some places can see it only on very clear

days). Upon its slopes is writ the history of all of Creation, and nearly every major figure in history has been here at one point or another. It is an inexorable lure and symbol of Creation itself for many, and it draws thousands upon thousands of pilgrims every year.

NATURAL FEATURES

The Imperial Mountain is the highest of all features in Creation, natural, divine or man-made. On its face can be found kinds of stone unknown in the rest of Creation, and its Essence is so powerful that there are a few demesnes located high on its slopes that not even the mightiest architects of the First Age could cap with manses.

GEOGRAPHY

The Imperial Mountain is the greatest mountain in Creation, and so, at its lower altitudes, it is very similar to

PREFECTURES AND DOMINIONS

The prefectural and dominion system is a method of establishing borders found almost nowhere else in Creation. Unlike systems of protectorates, kingdoms and other forms of organization found in the Threshold, they are not based on areas of defense. They are entirely bureaucratic creations, meant to make the jurisdiction of laws and taxes in those areas more efficient.

A prefecture is always based around a capital city. In most cases, the prefecture itself is named for the capital city, though a few exceptions do exist (Ventus Prefecture, for instance). The capital city of a prefecture technically “oversees” a number of smaller settlements within the prefecture. Essentially, any city that acts as a prefecture capital must have a population large enough to realistically support a bureaucracy. It takes a certain level of population to support an entire class of people who do nothing but keep track of taxes, laws and ordinances.

Dominions are special prefectures. In every case, a prefecture must have several traits before it can be upgraded to a dominion. All dominions possess multiple cities, any one of which is generally of sufficient size to act as a prefectural capital. Secondly, there must be many smaller settlements within that area. Generally speaking, a prefectural capital oversees anywhere from a half-dozen to two dozen settlements. If the city-to-settlement ratio exceeds this, it is generally a good sign that the area is productive enough to warrant an upgrade to a dominion.

One last trait is implicit in the difference between a dominion and a prefecture, and it alone is why some areas that might normally be considered dominions—such as the Juche and Scarlet Prefectures—are not. By imperial decree, dominions fall under the bureaucratic governance of one of the Great Houses. This distinction was originally instituted by the Empress as a means of subdividing her empire once its population became too large to effectively govern, without actually dividing up her power. By placing Great Houses in charge of dominions, she made sure that large Houses had quite a bit with which to occupy their time and resourcefulness, and gave smaller Houses something to which to aspire.

Unfortunately, the Realm had only really reached the level of civilization where such things were necessary in the last 300 years, during which time the Arjuf and Lord’s Crossing Prefectures absorbed several smaller prefectures around them and became dominions under Houses Ledaal and Tepet, respectively. It was considered unlikely that Juche would ever be declared a dominion, for that would mean putting the majority of the Empire’s source of wealth under the control of one of the Great Houses. It was equally unlikely that the Empress would cede governance of the Scarlet Prefecture to anyone else, either.

With her disappearance, no further dominions are likely to be established, as it requires the Imperial Seal to do so. Some of the Great Houses have begun applying pressure on Regent Fokuf to establish new dominions, effectively legitimizing the power those Great Houses currently have, but they are met with opposition from other Great Houses (particularly Houses Tepet and Ledaal, who know what kind of advantage they currently have).



mountain terrain elsewhere in the world. Its very base is a tree-covered slope that rises fairly rapidly. Beyond the tree line, only hardy, ground-hugging plants exist, including the amaranth blossom, a plant considered sacred to Pasiap. It is said that, during his battle with the Anathema, every drop of blood that Pasiap shed upon the Imperial Mountain turned into one of these ivory-hued blossoms. Alchemists and herbalists use these plants in concoctions meant to extend life and grant resilience.

Above the plant-line, the Imperial Mountain is stark and barren stone, often rimed with ice at nights and during most days. The pathways here are treacherous and not for the faint-hearted, even along deliberate trails such as the Spine of the Amaranthine Dragon. Eventually, however, as a traveler rises even above the layer of snow and ice found on other mountains, the Imperial Mountain continues, ever upward.

At this point, there are dangers, for the raw Essence of the mountain's peaks is sometimes treacherous, creating demesnes that cannot be capped by manses. These currents of Earth Essence have been known to crush the bones of those caught in their flows, to transform flesh into stone and to carry men along on waves of purest Essence, absorbing them into the very stone some distance away.

CLIMATE

The high peak of the Imperial Mountain is an absolute barrier to clouds and storms—there are no atmospheric conditions great enough that they pass above the summit of the Imperial Mountain. Therefore, all weather conditions break upon the wall of the Omphalos of Creation. Entire cloud systems bleed away their rain onto these slopes, and all the great rivers of the Blessed Isle have their genesis here.

Nonetheless, the weather of the Imperial Mountain is utterly temperate, cooling in winter and warming in summer. The vegetation on its lower slopes grows lushly and well, and its heights are chillingly cold.

ANIMALS

The lower forested slopes of the Imperial Mountain teem with wild animal life the likes of which is rare





on the Blessed Isle outside of hunting preserves. Herds of wild deer, boar and flocks of game birds are in abundance here, though there are also bears and the occasional smaller hunting cat.

Beyond the tree line, the numbers of animals grow smaller, with eagles and large hunting birds making their nests in the heights above the cascades of waters that form the headwaters of the Blessed Isle's rivers.

Curiously, though, some animals can still be found at these points and above. Many of the earth elementals of the Imperial Mountain, for no reason that sages or priests can ascertain, seem to mate with animals occasionally, creating a hearty breed of God-Blooded animals. The stone-tusk boars of the lower forests are particularly well known, as are the flint-claw eagles, which make their nests quite high above the layer that other eagles normally can.

WONDERS

As is appropriate for the very center of Creation, the Imperial Mountain is home to many spectacular wonders from every Age. Once home to gods, then the Solars of the First Age and finally to their Dragon-Blooded usurpers, all who have ruled the Blessed Isle have left their mark upon the face of the Imperial Mountain.

THE SPINE OF THE AMARANTHINE DRAGON

The Spine of the Amaranthine Dragon is the pilgrimage path used by those thousands of pilgrims every year who come seeking enlightenment in the place in Creation that embodies one of the Immaculate Dragons. This winding path begins at the foot of the Imperial Mountain four days outside of Juche in the Steady Foundation Pagoda. An entire community has sprung up around this monastery of the Immaculate Order, providing food, gear and guides for the pilgrimage, as well as accommodations for those about to undertake the grueling climb, or resting up from the same.

The Spine itself is a path that winds back and forth up the eastern face of the Imperial Mountain, dotted with shrines and manse-temples to Pasiap along the way. Most followers of Pasiap seek to make this trek once during their lifetimes, hoping to better understand the immortal Essence of the Immaculate Dragon of Earth.

The temples along the way provide sanctuary and places for meditation, as well as additional supplies for those who wish to continue to make the journey up the mountain. Each of these temples also gives those who make the journey there small embroidered badges that prove that the pilgrims made the journey to that temple. These sanctuary temples are situated so that a pilgrim might encounter one every three days or so.

This trip can take a healthy pilgrim approximately a month to reach the Victorious Ascendance of Mankind Temple, the highest temple to which the un-Exalted may journey (Exalted pilgrims often make this trip in about three weeks). At this site, pilgrims are taken aside and given per-

sonal advice on how to live up to the ideal of Pasiap's tenets in their current incarnation by Blissful Insight, the abbot of the Victorious Ascendance temple.

The Exalted may continue on to the Immaculate Temple of Ivory Resplendence, the temple situated just below the very summit of the Imperial Mountain. Very few pilgrims make it this far, for it requires another week and a half of travel for an Exalt to ascend the coldest, bitterest slopes of the Imperial Mountain.

Once they achieve the summit, most Exalts spend time meditating upon the very peak, in the spot that Pasiap was said to have sat and meditated before the great battle with the Anathema began. It is a moving experience in and of itself, but many Earth-aspected Exalts are said to receive powerful visions directly relevant to their path walking in the footsteps of Pasiap. Usually by this point, most Exalts fall into unconsciousness and are taken into the Immaculate Temple by the monks there.

The abbot of the Immaculate Temple is Abbot Vaicha, a powerful Earth-aspected Immaculate monk who has nearly reached the end of a Dragon-Blooded life span, and who shows the features of one who is in deep communion with the Essence of his element. It is said that Vaicha communes with the stones of the Imperial Mountain themselves. His ability to know what is happening on its slopes is disconcerting even to Abramchaia, the Bronze Faction Sidereal who acts as the guardian for the summit of the Imperial Mountain in the guise of Vaicha's right-hand man, Righteous Granite.

RUINS OF MERU

Near the very top of the Imperial Mountain, along its southern and western slopes, lie the ruins of Meru, the First City in Creation. Sages have ascertained that it once spanned the entirety of the Imperial Mountain, wrapping all the way around it, but only the southern and western portions of the city remain. Strange failures in the magics that maintained the city caused the northern portions to collapse sometime during the fall of the Shogunate, and the entire eastern face has been cleared by the Immaculate Order (and the Bronze Faction) during the construction of the Spine of the Amaranthine Dragon.

Of the remnants that adorn the slopes of the Imperial Mountain, none can be said to be anything other than awe-inspiring. Tall buildings of glossy black and white stone, fine colored glass and gleaming metal make up its glory. Even though many of its thoroughfares and streets are impassible thanks to the rubble of centuries of avalanche and high mountain weather beating apart buildings not meant to survive the eons, it is still clearly a city of marvelous wonders.

The approaches up the Imperial Mountain to the ruins of Meru are hazardous, indeed, haunted as they are by terrible creatures attracted to the remaining magical emanations of the city. When Meru was destroyed, the city's Essence itself was set alight by powerful sorceries, and its lines of Essence were severed from all outlying connections. As it died, Meru was



effectively cut off from the rest of Creation's Essence. Without the constant flow of new Essence down the dragon lines, Meru's environment has become stagnant and poisonous.

The gods and elementals that remained here were driven to madness by this poisoning of the spiritual energy around Meru, and these degenerate and base creatures yet haunt its rubble-choked ruins.

Dark Meru: The once-lush boulevards and hanging gardens of Meru were not the sum total of the city. Within the very stone of the Imperial Mountain were countless catacombs the size of entire cities by themselves, lit by powerful Essence engines run by Solar manses, so that the otherwise dark interiors of the catacombs were bathed in sunlight equivalent to that of the sky outside. It is in Dark Meru that the poor and un-Exalted of the city dwelt, for the mighty palaces and temples of the Exalted took up the entirety of its exterior. This was as it should be, however, for those in Dark Meru lacked nothing, and their homes were far more defensible than those of the Exalted without.

Now, however, the catacombs of Dark Meru truly live up to their name, for the engines that once lit and warmed them have long since been snuffed, plunging it into true darkness. Things dark and terrible prowl through this buried place, but it is said that the Mountain Folk are known to patrol Dark Meru as well, bound by ancient pacts. These catacombs extend all the way through the heights of the mountain, often providing access to sections of the mountainside ruins that are utterly sealed off otherwise. Some of the Sidereals claim to have even discovered passages that lead to other portions of the mountain's slopes—including into a forgotten cellar of the Immaculate Temple of Ivory Resplendence.

The Ancient Academy: The original name of the massive complex known to the Sidereal Exalted as the Ancient Academy is long lost. What is known is that this massive campus—which extends both above the ground and deep within Dark Meru—once served as the combined library, college and research facility into the arcane arts. Mortals, gods and Exalts all gathered there to share and expand their knowledge to the benefit of Creation as a whole. In its center sat the Glorious Arch, the orichalcum and starmetal gateway to Yu-Shan, the home of the gods.

With the fall of Meru, this place of enlightenment became a deathtrap, with poisoned Essence transforming even harmless artifacts into dangerous instruments. Tens of thousands died here during the Usurpation, and thousands have died in the years since, as Shogunate Era relic-hunters came seeking treasures at this once-great storehouse of lore.

The Bronze Faction now has a very solid grip on the Ancient Academy, to the point of clearing out many of its chambers, with the Glorious Arch as its core. The Sidereals have slowly recovered ancient texts and artifacts from its halls, rendering them safe where they can, and marking them as treacherous where they cannot. They have even managed to forge a pathway to an outer door, allowing them easy access to the surface of Meru from the gateway to Heaven.

At any given time, two to four Sidereals, usually Chosen of Endings and Secrets, man the Ancient Academy along with a small number of gods. These gods, of many different positions in the Celestial Bureaucracy, all have one thing in common: All were once gods that dwelt in Meru and were assigned to different positions in the aftermath of the Usurpation.

The Ruins of the Palace: In what seems to be the center of the ruins sits a crater that still crawls and smokes with poisoned Essence. Only by the strange circle of cracked and partially tumbled pillars along the outer edges of the crater, with one tumbling into its depths every few years or so, can one tell that this was once a place of great majesty and beauty.

In truth, these are the remnants of the Palace of Meru, where the Great Betrayal took place: a Calibration feast, with all of the Solar Exalted invited. Though not every Solar attended, there were enough of them to enact the first steps in the Usurpation. That day saw slaughter on such a scale that only a battle against one of the Primordials equaled it.

The destruction wrought there did not stay there, of course, but it is clearly the site that suffered the most desolation. The powers unleashed there have not been seen in Creation since, and the Bronze Faction gazes upon its wreckage and hopes that it never will again.

Even the Sidereals, however, know better than to remain here at Calibration. As the sun sets and night falls over the city, the Great Palace can be seen once again, and the sounds of music fill the ruined city. All those who remain in Meru cannot help but stare as the Great Betrayal plays itself out again and again, etched in the Essence of Meru forever.

The Unfallen Temple: None have ever actually traveled to the Unfallen Temple within the memory of any of the Sidereals who know of it. Indeed, it can be seen only from one of the topmost tower windows of the Ancient Academy. Those of the Bronze Faction who gaze upon it from that vantage cannot help but shiver inwardly, for it is very nearly the embodiment of what they have worked to deny: the power of the Solar Exalted.

The Unfallen Temple is the mighty gold, white marble and amber glass temple to the Unconquered Sun, where the ancient rites to the Unconquered Sun were performed at the height of the First Age. It served as the last redoubt of the Solar Exalted during the fall of Meru, and with their deaths, these powerful Solar savants and priests touched off an Essence conflagration that destroyed everything around the temple.

Now, the Essence of the area around the Unfallen Temple is stagnant, poisoned by the deaths of those who fell there. Moreover, it is significantly clogged by rubble fused into an impenetrable wall for a half-mile around it in every direction, so that the Temple itself seems to rise up out of a mound of formerly molten glass, steel, jade and orichalcum.

Likewise, the air above and around the temple is constantly filled with strange Essence manifestations of lightning and solar fire, which utterly destroy nearly anything that gets





too close to it. The Sidereals fear, however, that a powerful enough Solar who managed to get near might be able to survive the conflagration and enter the Unfallen Temple to reclaim it in the name of the Unconquered Sun.

OTHER RUINS

Other ruins dot the face of the Imperial Mountain here and there, usually remnants of small travel towns along the long-since-lost roads to Meru from the First Age. Most of these ruins, like the remnants of Meru, are found along the southern and western faces of the mountain. Some of them, however, can be found within a day's travel of the Spine of the Amaranthine Dragon, off the path for those who know what signs to look for in finding them. These ruins are usually marked with signs indicating that they are dangerous and should be avoided.

Manses lie at the center of many of these ruins. The majority of them are aspected to Earth, but a few near river headwaters are Water-aspected, and more than a few high above the clouds are Air-aspected. Some of them are in poor repair, while others are in perfect condition. Many of these manses are claimed by one of the Great Houses, the Imperial Bureaucracy or the Immaculate Order, but occasionally, an unclaimed manse can be found.

MANSES

The following are descriptions of a few of the better known manses that dot the face of the Imperial Mountain.

The Immaculate Temple of Ivory Resplendence (Earth Manse ●●●●●):

Literally the highest manse in all of Creation, the Immaculate Temple of Ivory Resplendence manages to tap just a portion of the power that is generated at the Seat of Pasiap, the summit of the Imperial Mountain. It is carefully tended by monks trained in geomancy, who perform daily rituals to bleed off excess Essence build-up as

part of their duties. In so doing, these monks contemplate the nature of Pasiap and his Essence.

Only the Dragon-Blooded are permitted entrance into the Immaculate Temple, where a massive shrine is kept in its uppermost levels, with a white jade statue of Pasiap seated in the lotus position. The wall behind the statue is entirely open and views the Seat of Pasiap, so that through tricks of perspective and subtle Essence-driven shifts built into the architecture of the room, the statue appears to be simultaneously in the room with the postulant, and seated in Pasiap's Seat. This is one of the few actual statues of Pasiap permitted by the Immaculate Order, who know that the Dragon-Blooded are too enlightened to render worship to the statue, unlike mortal adherents of the sect.



The Steady Foundation Pagoda (Earth Manse ••): The first step in the Pilgrimage of the Spine, the Steady Foundation Pagoda is actually much larger than a manse of its level of power need actually be. In fact, it is the center of a large town made up entirely of resources intended for the use of pilgrims and monks seeking to travel along the Spine of the Amaranthine Dragon.

DEMESNES

The farther up the Imperial Mountain one travels, the more primal the scenery becomes. As a result, the Imperial Mountain remains one of the few places on the Blessed Isle with natural, raw demesnes, uncapped by manses. Many of these sites show ruins that indicate the presence of former manses, but these sites are invariably of such power that they cannot be re-capped in this era.

These demesnes make travel into the heights of the Imperial Mountain dangerous, for there is no telling what elemental effects they might have on the average traveler. The majority of them have no real effect on those passing through quickly, even though the animals that live there might have their fur turned to the color and pattern of marble, or the beetles might have shells made of sandstone. Others, however, are more dangerous, potentially turning travelers to stone or entrapping them when they walk into patches of stone that randomly liquefy and petrify.

The Seat of Pasiap: This, the very peak of Creation, is one of the most powerful demesnes known to exist. Its power level cannot be measured by the normal methods of geomancers—it is clearly several orders of magnitude above and beyond those of normal demesnes. Those who sit and meditate in this site often experience profound feelings of peace and balance from sitting at the center of all things.

Those who come here must exercise caution, however, for spirits defend the sacredness of the site. The Court of the Omphalos, a gathering of powerful earth elementals, defends this site, and the elementals attack and hurl from the mountain anyone who treats this place with disrespect.

System: Meditating on the Seat of Pasiap, which takes only 10 minutes to perform and requires a successful (Wits + Occult) roll, results in the recovery of all Personal Essence. Dragon-Blooded recover all of their Personal and Peripheral Essence, and Earth Aspects receive a “phantom” pool of 10 motes that are spent as Peripheral Essence. This phantom pool of motes dissipates entirely after 24 hours unless it is spent.

NOTEWORTHY PERSONAE

For all its seeming barrenness and wilderness, a variety of important entities make the Imperial Mountain their home.

THE IMMACULATE ORDER

The Immaculate monks who dwell upon the face of the Imperial Mountain are often considered ascetics and anchorites by their brethren, for they prefer a life of harsh personal

testing as the means toward spiritual enlightenment. Many monks seek posts in one of the pagodas or monasteries here shortly after being released from their initial training in the Palace Sublime, but few stay.

Nearly every monk who does stay is a devotee of Pasiap, seeking to master the lessons of the Ivory Dragon, as embodied in the Earth Dragon Style of martial arts. These monks often undertake extended forays into the wilderness of the Imperial Mountain, taking only a small amount of food and other provisions. Once there, they starve themselves and sleep in the weather, seeking to deprive their bodies and enlighten their souls.

The monks of this area follow the teachings of Abbot Vaicha, seeing in him a bodhisattva who has delayed his own elemental enlightenment in order to bring his wisdom to those who follow the path behind him. Although the Immaculate Order frowns on the idolization of mortals or Exalted in this fashion, this prohibition has not stopped most of the monks who dwell here from taking him as the example of how to live by Pasiap’s ideals.

THE KEEPERS OF THE MANDATE

After the founding of the Scarlet Dynasty, the Bronze Faction approached the Scarlet Empress with concerns over general access to the Imperial Mountain. The Sidereals stressed the fact that they had no idea what kinds of heresies, spiritual traps and magical deadfalls the Solar Anathema might have left in their wake, and they urged her to devote a portion of the Realm’s resources to defending the Imperial Mountain from casual explorers.

As such, the Scarlet Empress decreed the Mandate of the Imperial Mountain (the first time that Mount Meru was ever referred to as the Imperial Mountain in Realm documents), which stated that its slopes were off-limits to the un-Exalted, save in specific areas set aside as pilgrimage paths.

To help defend and enforce this mandate, she decreed the establishment of the Keepers of the Mandate, a small force of foresters, mountaineers and monks who might travel the mountainsides and make sure that its holy purity remains inviolate.

The Keepers of the Mandate comprise a tiny group of Immaculate monks (several of whom are actually Sidereals dedicated to defending the ancient ruins of Meru and other First Age sites) and other Dragon-Blooded, usually taken from volunteers, outcasts and bastards. They are based out of the monasteries along the Spine of the Amaranthine Dragon, which care for them, feed them and prepare them to continue in their endeavors.

The Keepers of the Mandate travel the slopes of the Imperial Mountain quite extensively, moving along established patrol routes and traveling from one Keepers’ hideout to another. They have established hidden sanctuaries in caves and concealed valleys, allowing them to travel their routes in relative safety. Should one become badly injured, she need only make her way to one of these sanctuaries, where her brethren are sure to find her.

OTHER MAJOR FEATURES

A handful of other major features on the Blessed Isle also warrant attention. Without fail, each of them plays a major role in shaping the surrounding land and culture.

THE GREAT COAST ROAD

The Great Coast Road is a remnant of the First Age. It is a highway that nearly literally encircles the Blessed Isle. It is considered to begin and end at the Imperial City and is the largest single roadway in Creation. A number of other, smaller roads of varying quality and age spawn off from the Great Coast, for the inhabitants of the Blessed Isle have always incorporated the massive highway in all of their own roadway projects.

The Great Coast Road itself is crafted of a curiously hard gray-black stone, the surface of which is pebbled in order to provide traction. Ice never forms on the road, nor do snow or mudslides ever cover it. Moreover, damage to the road is never repaired by human hands. Indeed, no one knows how to work the stone of the road. Damage simply seems to disappear, sealing over with new material and smoothing over gradually until nothing remains of the damage.

All of this is due not to any magical powers inherent in the Great Coast Road itself, but due to the Ancient of Stone Journeys, the god of the Great Coast Road. In exchange for providing the maintenance to what is the cornerstone of the imperial infrastructure, the Immaculate Order has granted the Ancient of Stone Journeys quite a few sacrifice days in the Immaculate Calendar, more perhaps than might otherwise normally be due a god of his power.

Generally speaking, when the Great Coast Road passes through a prefecture, it is almost guaranteed that the capital city of that prefecture lies along the Great Coast Road. Additionally, all manner of roadhouses and caravansaries can be found along the length of the Great Coast Road, some in better shape and levels of upkeep than others. Bandits know better than to prey upon those who travel these roads, for more than once, the Ancient of Stone Journeys has seen their predations and reported them to the nearest Immaculate temple.

THE RIVERS OF THE BLESSED ISLE

If the Imperial Mountain is the heart of the Blessed Isle, then its rivers are its lifeblood. Providing water for the Isle's agricultural fields and rice paddies, as well as quick transportation within the island proper for trade, the rivers of the Blessed Isle keep the Realm alive and strong.

THE CARACAL RIVER

The Caracal River forms both the eastern boundary of the Arjuf Dominion and the means by which goods and soldiers from the heart of the Realm reach its southern edge. The Caracal is a deep river, with plenty of room for large-bottomed barges and heavy ships to sail its waters. It is clear that it was dredged deeper sometime during the First Age for this purpose.

The Shattered Bridge: A few days east of Tuchara, along the Great Coast Road, sits the Shattered Bridge, an ancient ruined bridge similar to that which spans the Imperial River. It was clearly an impressive piece of architecture, standing on thin supports that seem to jut out of the very bedrock of the river bottom. Architects who have studied it indicate that the bridge was once capable of being raised and lowered in order to permit passage of ships beneath it.

THE IMPERIAL RIVER

The Imperial River is born on the slopes of the Imperial Mountain. It is known that two of its headwaters are powerful demesnes (capped, of course, by manses), and a powerful line of Essence flows along its length. It is not uncommon to see strange spiritual manifestations on this river, as its powerful Essence draws a great many spirits. Indeed, a powerful river spirit that wears a dragon's shape commands the Imperial River Court. The Imperial River is not as deep as the Caracal, so most of its traffic consists of flat-bottomed barges, many of which are laden with the gems and jade of the Juche Prefecture, bound for the Imperial City.

The Scarlet Span: The Scarlet Span is perhaps the most impressive bridge in all of Creation. It stands high above the river, supported on arches of black stone high enough to permit even the tallest of riverboats easy passage.

THE SERPENTINE RIVER

The Serpentine River is the shallowest of the major rivers in the Blessed Isle (though it is still greater than most normal rivers). As a result, passage along its length can be dangerous, due to a variety of hazards, including white-water rapids and sudden waterfalls. As a result, most of the traffic on it consists of local fishing boats.

The Dam of Serpents: Near the mouth of the river sits the Dam of Serpents, an impressive dam of First Age architecture. Crafted entirely of black stone, it appears as nothing so much as a line of stone serpents rearing up out of the water, with incredible gouts of water pouring from their mouths. This dam serves two functions. First of all, it is a bridge permitting those traveling the Great Coast Road passage across the Serpentine.

Secondly, however, only half of the water that enters the dam is actually spat back into the river, to be carried away to the sea. The other half is shunted into a series of advanced subterranean aqueducts that carry water to agricultural centers in a several-hundred-mile radius around the dam itself. Architects and archaeologists suggest that, from the ruins found around the Blessed Isle, many of the other major rivers once had similar systems.

COAST OF XIANYU

The Coast of Xianyu is named for a long-ago hero who hunted down the pirates from the Scavenger Lands that constantly harassed the fishing and farming communities that dot the coastline. Although there are no pirates to be



found here any longer, the stories about their predations still exist. Many of the children (and more than a few adults) from this part of the Blessed Isle show a marked fascination with the trade of piracy—though after encountering the likes of the Lintha or other vicious buccaneers, they tend to discard these romantic notions.

The Xianyu Coast's largest prefecture is the Pangu Prefecture, in the southern part of the region, across the river mouth from the Imperial City. The other prefectures are primarily made up of farming or fishing communities. Inhabitants of the Coast of Xianyu speak a fairly accented Low Realm, which most denizens of the eastern Blessed Isle can recognize. Indeed, in the Imperial City, storytellers and theater troupes use approximations of this accent to mockingly indicate that someone is a hopeless country bumpkin.

CLIMATE

The climate along the Coast of Xianyu is pleasantly temperate, with warm, dry summers and cold, snowy winters. Its fields produce the full five harvests for which the Blessed Isle is famed, though the crops before the winter tend to be slightly stunted and are harvested just before the first frost. Occasional squalls come in off the Inland Sea, but they rarely build up to the terrible strengths that are found of ocean storms in the West.

ANIMALS

Few non-domesticated animals remain inland in this area, save for a variety of birds. There were once breeds of wild pigs in the area, but those were hunted to extinction two generations ago. Many sea birds still live along the coasts, though some of them have moved farther away due to over-fishing in some areas.

The mouth of the Imperial River is home to the scarlet crane, a brilliantly crimson, long-legged bird with a crown-like crest of feathers. Local legends say that the day after driving back the hordes of the Wyld, the first creature the Empress saw was a plain river crane. She was so overjoyed at this sight that she blessed it, granting it the right to wear her raiment and crown from that day on, as a message to all who saw it that she protected them. These same legends claim that these cranes will return to their former gray color on the day she dies.

PANGU PREFECTURE

Despite its nearness to the Imperial City, Pangu Prefecture is considered a rural backwater by most in the Blessed Isle, known only for its meat-preservation techniques, its feeding of the Imperial Army and its stories of long-ago piracy and heroic pirate-fighting. More politically minded folk recognize Time Rain's clever deals with the legions and wonder what he will do once someone else sits the Scarlet Throne.

NATURAL FEATURES

Pangu has a reputation as the breadbasket of the legions, and it is well earned. The farming communities here produce tremendous amounts of rice, grain and livestock meats. In fact, Pangu is renowned for its meat-preserving techniques, taken from sea-salt refineries from coastal towns along the Pangu coast.

Pangu Prefecture consists mainly of low-lying plains and coastal areas. The plains have served as agricultural fields and rice paddies for many generations now. The coastal areas have likewise been settled for many generations, and some of the towns have had to turn to sea-salt production to make up for an over-fishing of their local waters.

CITIES

There is only one large settlement in Pangu Prefecture: the city of Pangu.

PANGU

Population: 16,800

Governor: Sweet Crane, a large woman whose name is the only delicate thing about her. She is very watchful for those who would try to break the law under her leadership and is convinced that most people around her are crooks of one kind or another.

The city of Pangu is not particularly large, despite being the largest in the Xianyu Coastal area. Pangu is really the result of two separate settlements—a rice paddy agricultural area and a fishing town—situated quite close together and simply merging over time. When the imperial government decided to situate a small bureaucratic and military outpost between the two, the establishment of Pangu was complete. It is likely the only prefectural capital that has taken the name of the prefecture it is capital of, rather than the reverse.

TOWNS

Most of the towns of Pangu Prefecture fit one of two descriptions: a farming community or a fishing town. Farming communities are towns of a handful of clans and family groups, settlements that consist of a caravansary, a market and a couple of bureaucratic buildings, surrounded by farms on all sides. Fishing towns are usually slightly larger, with homes for those who support the fishing—or in more recent days, sea-salt production—of that town.

Blind Love (Pop. 1,750): One of the fishing towns of Pangu Prefecture, Blind Love is situated almost directly across the mouth of the Imperial River from the Imperial City. On clear nights, the lights of the greatest city in Creation can be seen there. Most of its citizens consider themselves caretakers of the sacred scarlet cranes that nest in the area. More than a little of their river-mouth fishing for mollusks and crustaceans goes to feeding these fat, crimson birds that wander peacefully through the town and its docks.

Unknown to others, Blind Love is home to a cult of Empress veneration—the reason for their fanatical care of the scarlet cranes, whose continued red hue is proof enough for them that the Scarlet Empress is still alive. Those who belong to this cult work to send their children to the Imperial Palace for one of the Great Houses, hoping for word of her return. But their veneration has a grim tone to it, as well, for every Calibration, the cult's elders sacrifice a single child who is deformed, crippled or otherwise imperfect, in prayer to whatever god or demon has the Scarlet Empress imprisoned, hoping to secure her release.

WONDERS

Few noteworthy wonders are to be found in Pangu Prefecture, for even the dragon lines in the area are fairly weak, diverted by geomancy to the nearby Imperial City.

It is said that there might even be one or two demesnes yet uncapped due to their remote location, but this is simply wishful thinking on the part of geomancers. Of the manses in the area, few are above the three-dot level of power, and such holdings invariably belong to either House Cynis or the Immaculate Order, for use as temples or monasteries.

The House of High Waves (Water Manse ●●●): On the shore of eastern Pangu, within a day's cruise by pleasure barge of the Imperial City, lies the House of High Waves, a Water-aspected manse built upon a high, sea-sprayed cliff. This is the closest thing that House Cynis has to a major family holding outside the Imperial City. When members of the House choose to get out from under the direct view of the other Houses, this is where they go.

NOTEWORTHY PERSONAE

The following are important individuals or groups found in Pangu Prefecture.

GOVERNMENT FIGURES

Prefect: The prefect of Pangu Prefecture is an older man named Time Rain, who is responsible for the fine deal that has seen to the prefecture's prosperity for the last 15 years. Mnemon Bata, in the Scarlet Prefecture, agrees to purchase all that the prefecture produces as long as the prices are kept low.

Magistrates: The magistrate Mnemon Ulkana, a young Earth-aspected Dragon-Blood defrocked from the Immaculate Order and turned away from Mnemon holdings for the shame, acts as magistrate in the Pangu Prefecture. Though none in the prefecture know the precise reason she was cast out, she is well liked by the people of Pangu and is often the guest of Time Rain and Sweet Crane. She has some skill in the Earth Dragon Style, but she is far from mastery.

HOUSE CYNIS

House Cynis maintains the House of High Waves, a pleasure palace located on the eastern shore of Pangu. The locals, who consider themselves quite moral, are not fond of these Dynasts, though they do provide an excellent boost to the local economy, as well as gossip fodder. Locals often charge Cynis servants a higher price than is normal and refuse to hire their children out to the House to act as servants, as everyone has heard what goes on in the House of High Waves. Therefore, the Cynis are usually forced to import slaves and servants to the palace, or to bring their retainues with them from the Imperial City.

OTHER PREFECTURES OF THE XIANYU COAST

Most of the other prefectures of the Xianyu Coast are fairly similar to Pangu, in terms of products they create and the general way of life. One other prefecture, however, is worth mentioning.

KAN-TOSHI PREFECTURE

The great pirate-hunter Xianyu is said to have built his great manse-headquarters in Kan-Toshi Prefecture, deep within a set of sea caves. No one has ever discovered such a site, though occasionally one of the young children of the fisher communities here finds a coin or piece of jewelry washed up on shore, and the stories begin again. Each new discovery is surely evidence of the great wealth that Xianyu is said to have stored away in his lair. Kan-Toshi's prefect, Tidal Pearl, has hired geomancers to search for it in the past, however, and she seems to have some knowledge that leads her to continue to do so.

THE JADE COAST

Unlike the sandy beaches of the Coast of Xianyu to the north, the Jade Coast consists mainly of rocky coastlines, including some of the most impressive cliffs on the Blessed Isle. At high tide, the waves roar against these tall, white walls like barbarians pounding fruitlessly at the gates of a great city.

The Jade Coast earned its moniker not for the deposits of jade that can be found here, but because of the proliferation of the rich. Successful merchants, patricians and Dynasts all consider this coast to be a prime vacation spot. The jade of the Jade Coast, therefore, is money, and the frequently glimpsed jade armor of arriving or departing Dragon-Bloods.

Because of this high value, the Jade Coast proper is dotted with impressive estates, manor houses and manses that take advantage of the fantastic scenery. Many lesser Dynasts dream of owning one of the famous manors situated high upon the cliffs, washed twice a day in the spray from the pounding surf below.

The cliffs of the Jade Coast make for excellent defenses as well. Rare and well defended are the few ports of call here, forcing ships that approach them to risk the military port of Sdoia or the bustle of Dragonsmouth.

Of course, the inner prefectures are wonderful farmland and usually produce ample food and luxuries for sale to the resorts along the Bay Highway and—to a lesser degree—to the Scarlet Prefecture.

Recognizing that there is little actual Dynastic influence in this part of the Blessed Isle, thanks to the overwhelming local influence of the Immaculate Order, House Sesus has turned its sights toward the prefectures and holdings of the Jade Coast. The potential exists there for great income, but pursuing it could bring the House into conflict with House Mnemon and the Order.

CLIMATE

Very temperate, the Jade Coast's summers are very hot and its winters fairly mild, with occasional cold snaps. It experiences quite a few storms when the weather heats up in late spring, through summer and early fall. As a result, many of the buildings in the area are built quite sturdily in order to stand up to storms, or made of simple hempen paper and thin wood, to allow them to blow over and be replaced cheaply and simply.

ANIMALS

The Jade Coast's flat areas don't have sufficient green growth to keep large herds of cattle or horses, though families often do own one or two such animals for work or dairy products. Such animals are hearty but unremarkable cattle, and a variety of other domesticated animals can be found here as well.

The area is well known for its coastal animals, however, from impressively large flocks of sea birds to the oceanic mammals that often come to bear their young in cliff-caves along the coasts. The deep seas along the coast are said to be home to large sharks (though not quite siaka) and other dangers. Fishermen who wish to make a name for themselves while on vacation often come to hunt for these large beasts and the massive tarpons that swim these waters.

THE SCARLET PREFECTURE

The Scarlet Prefecture is described in detail in Chapter Six: The Heart of the Realm.

INCAS PREFECTURE

Home to the Palace Sublime and two fair-sized cities, Incas Prefecture is easily the most important prefecture in the Jade Coast, aside from the Scarlet Prefecture proper. Of course, due to the strong influence of the pragmatic Immaculate Order, which frowns on wasteful behavior, the Incas Prefecture actually sees the least amount of the idle rich on holiday. More pious members of vacationing families, however, are known to take pilgrimages down the Great Coast Road to the Palace Sublime.

NATURAL FEATURES

Incas Prefecture is prime farmland. Unlike the other coastal prefectures, Incas Prefecture does not lack for food and other goods. Of course, many of these goods go to the Palace Sublime, but the prefecture is still prosperous enough to export a fair amount of its riches to other prefectures. Incas is known for its cattle and dairy products, as well as fruit (Jade Coast plums, used in some of the best brandy in the Blessed Isle, grow plentifully here), rice, grains and vegetables.

Sion and some of the small towns around it are known for their ample mulberry patches, which they use as fodder for silkworms, used to produce fine silks. Incas prefecture is known not only for its silks, however, but also for a hearty breed of cotton that is woven into fine cloth. The presence of all of this fine material is also responsible for the presence of many fine clothing designers, seamstresses and tailors in Sion and northern Incas.

The geography of Incas Prefecture is flat, flowing plains that actually run downward from the cliffs that form their sea-edge. As a result, rainstorms from the ocean that break upon the cliffs often result in ample natural irrigation that runs down from the cliffs in a thousand little streams and creeks.



CITIES

The cities of Incas Prefecture are entirely products of the presence of those from outside of the prefecture: the military, in the case of Noble, and the Palace Sublime, in the case of Sion. For the most part, the people of Incas are perfectly content to live their lives in pastoral ease, with only infrequent visits to larger settlements.

NOBLE

Population: 20,500

Governor: Owl Star, of the Owl patrician family of Noble. Star has been doing the best he can to reduce the troubles his city has come under lately.

Half military fortification, half marketplace, the city of Noble was originally built to repel Southern invaders in the early days of the Scarlet Empire. Once the locals determined that they could easily sell the goods they grew by coming here, a marketplace quickly grew up in Noble, and the city swelled in size. Eventually, it became the favored site for Dragon-Blooded forays into the southeastern jungles of Harborhead.

Now, however, such endeavors have all but ceased. In the days since the disappearance of the Scarlet Empress, Noble has had little to offer the Realm as a whole. With the reduction in time-wasting forays into the South and the minimal likelihood of having to repel Southern invaders, Noble is shrinking.

It is only the continuing presence of the Fire Fleet, under the command of Fleet Admiral Peleps Lundaer, renowned for being a very capable Wood-aspected Dragon-Blooded, that keeps Noble alive. In recent years, however, the Fire Fleet's funding has shrunk, reducing its numbers, for House Peleps (and in particular Lord High Admiral Peleps Sorugan) considers the Fire Fleet to be of little true necessity. As a result, the Fire Fleet has little of importance to do and sailors of the Imperial Navy consider assignment to it a choice position.

SION

Population: 33,000

Governor: Sapphire Silk, an ambitious young patrician. Silk has accepted the patronage of the Iselsi in return for acting as an agent for that renegade House.

Sion started as a small town of weavers and farmers. As time passed, however, the quality of its weavers and cloth-makers grew dramatically, and Sion silk became the standard by which all other fine cloth was measured among the Great Houses. In time, the ample and inexpensive cloth drew clothing designers and master tailors, and today, Sion is known as the place that produces the finest clothing in all the Blessed Isle.

Once a year during Resplendent Fire, the city hosts a great clothing and cloth festival. This festival features many fashion shows, some of them perfectly outrageous in their avant-garde pretensions, which are well attended by patricians and even members of the Great Houses. Many yearlong contracts for shipments of cloth to the Great Houses and other rich patrons are signed during this festival.

The wealth of the city is guarded by the Sion Guardians, led by Captain Oak. Unbeknownst to any, Oak is the son of a patrician mother (of Noble's Owl clan) and a Sidereal father. Oak remains in contact with his father, occasionally aiding him in his work for the Cult of the Illuminated. Oak has even helped to smuggle newly Exalted Solars out of the Blessed Isle before, by way of Noble. He is subtle and careful.

THE PALACE SUBLIME

Located just outside of Sion, the Palace Sublime is described in Chapter Four: The Immaculate Order.

THE CLOISTER OF WISDOM

Like the Palace Sublime, the Cloister of Wisdom is described in Chapter Four: The Immaculate Order.

WONDERS

Most of the noteworthy sites of interest in Incas Prefecture are capped manses, as the area has fairly strong dragon lines. Most such manses belong to the military or to the Immaculate Order.

NOTEWORTHY PERSONAE

Most of the important figures of Incas Prefecture are either bureaucrats of patrician blood or Immaculates, with few exceptions.

GOVERNMENT FIGURES

Prefect: The prefect of Incas is Ledaal Pial, a middle-aged un-Exalted scion of House Ledaal. House Ledaal managed to gain some measure of control over the appointment of a prefect through a complex web of favor-trading some 12 years ago, and Ledaal Pial has been prefect of Incas since then. He is quite content to live his life in the country here, for the House granted him a pastoral estate just outside Sion, where the pious Dynast can make monthly trips to pray and meditate at the Palace Sublime itself. Recently, Ledaal Pial was married to a much younger, newly Exalted outcaste with a great deal of potential whom House Ledaal wished to adopt into the House. She is currently serving in the legions, and Pial has met her only once—on their wedding day.

THE GREAT HOUSES

The Great Houses are actually poorly represented here, save House Iselsi (whose scions usually blend in with other functionaries in their disguises as agents of the All-Seeing Eye or Immaculate monks). Most of the Dragon-Blooded encountered in Incas Prefecture are likely to be Immaculate monks.

SDOIA PREFECTURE

Sdoia Prefecture is unlike many of the other coastal prefectures along the Jade Coast. Due to the prominence of the Wood Fleet in Sdoia proper, the entire prefecture seems quite aware of military concerns, having absorbed some of the military demeanor of its most frequent visitors.



SDOIA



The common folk of Sdoia Prefecture consider the citizenry of surrounding, holiday-oriented prefectures to be wasteful, fat and useless. Others view the people of Sdoia Prefecture as strangely obsessed with the doings and attitudes of the Wood Fleet.

NATURAL FEATURES

Sdoia Prefecture provides services and products of primary interest to shipping and fleet needs. The few agricultural settlements away from Sdoia usually produce either hemp, which provides more than half of the rope used by the Wood Fleet, or rough canvas used in sailing concerns. Sdoia Prefecture is almost entirely dependent on the market in Sdoia for its food needs, with the exception of the local fishing industry. There are also several cliff-side quarries that provide limestone and other softer stones for a variety of purposes.

Sdoia Prefecture's coastline consists of high cliffs, and the soil is fairly thin as well. The landscape slopes down gradually from the cliffs, and much of the land near the coast has pockets of standing, acrid water here and there, where soil has washed away to reveal limestone underneath.

CITIES

SDOIA

Population: 65,000

Governor: Saltwind Gull, a bitter patrician of middle-aged years. Although he always maintained his family's traditional respectful distance from the Wood Fleet, it served only to allow

one of his family's traditional rivals to usurp the position of prefect from them. He has gained great shame for this, but his current power allows him only to fume silently when he watches the Admiral of the Wood Fleet and the prefect, Rosecloud Hawk, dining together in the Jachin Teahouse, in Sdoia.

Sdoia is an impressive city, built into the face of a sea-cliff as it is. At the base of the cliffs sits an extensive system of docks, built two-tiered, allowing the lower docks to be used at low tide, and the upper to be used when the higher tides wash over the lower docks.

There are several "levels" of the city, along a zigzagging path up the face of the cliff, with buildings built into the very rock of the cliff. The city rises with the cliff-face and then spills out along the top of it. Although a fine rich neighborhood sprawls out within it, made up of several Immaculate temples, patrician homes and the House of Sweet Whispers (the manse that serves as the Fleet Command for the Wood Fleet), most of Sdoia is particularly nautical in nature. The majority of it consists of brothels, taverns and small street fish markets.

The Wood Fleet is indisputably the power in this city. Many establishments cater exclusively or almost exclusively to the men of the Wood Fleet's 1,555 ships. With the recent upswing in the Wood Fleet's fortunes, the town has grown as well. Sailors and marines with plenty of coin from successful voyages litter the streets, and the city has grown to accommodate their desire and ability to spend. Many merchants who have found the rising costs of operating in the Imperial

City disconcerting have hit upon Sdoia as a decent alternative destination for their goods.

WONDERS

Most of the manses of the area are claimed by the Wood Fleet (though administrated by House Peleps) or the Immaculate Order, including the House of Sweet Whispers, in Sdoia itself.

The House of Sweet Whispers (Water Manse ●●): The House of Sweet Whispers acts as the Fleet Command center of the Wood Fleet and is under the control of Fleet Admiral Peleps Polin.

NOTEWORTHY PERSONAE

GOVERNMENT FIGURES

Prefect: Rosecloud Hawk, of the influential Rosecloud clan of Xoyah Prefecture, won quite a coup against his family's rivals, the Saltwind clan, whose scions have traditionally held the post of prefect in Sdoia Prefecture, when he managed to get himself appointed to his current position. His plan was bound to be successful, however. When he set out from his family's estate in Xoyah, he'd done his research, discovering the Saltwind's traditional aloofness from military concerns. When he presented himself to Fleet Admiral Peleps Polin, the admiral quickly found work for him as a bureaucrat in Sdoia. It was only a matter of a few years before, with the patronage of the Fleet Admiral, Hawk was made prefect.

Wood Fleet Admiral: Peleps Polin, a Water-aspected scion of House Peleps, takes his duties patrolling the Scavenger Lands' waters quite seriously. His willingness to go beyond the traditional bounds of his position have allowed him to turn the Wood Fleet into a money-making venture, earning him the respect of his House. Were Polin born into nearly any other position in the world, he likely would have made a fearsome pirate, but he has turned his mercenary ways to the benefit of his family and the Realm as a whole.

HOUSE PELEPS

The power of the Wood Fleet in Sdoia Prefecture is the power of House Peleps in general. The House maintains several smaller estates, to serve as get-away places or to banish more troublesome House members to. It maintains several estates that require the administration of a fleet (in this case, of fishermen) and routinely loses money. These estates it uses to teach difficult scions how to manage a fleet effectively.

OTHER PREFECTURES OF THE JADE COAST

The majority of the other prefectures along the Jade Coast are typical agricultural prefectures. The only real exceptions include the Meadows and Talho Prefectures, which are almost exclusively coastal resort prefectures.

LAMKAET PREFECTURE

Lamkaet is like so many of the other prefectures along the Jade Coast. It is filled with rice-paddy communities that usually sell their goods at the market in Lamkaet Town proper. The prefecture possesses only one landmark of note: the Proven Worth Chapter House, one of the six still-active chapter houses of the Wyld Hunt. The Wyld Huntsmen of this prefecture have heavily influenced the peasants they encounter, who are unusually knowledgeable in the sutras and know the signs of Anathema as few do anymore.

THE WHITE COAST & THE PAUHA BASIN

No place in the Blessed Isle is better known for its wines and produce than the many orchard and vineyard plantations to be found all along the White Coast and the Pauha Basin. Possessing low-lying land with fine fertile soil that is perfect for growing trees and vines but tends to be leached of richness by normal field crops, the verdant hills of the Pauha Basin produce some of the best and sweetest fruits and berries in all of Creation.

Shogunate Era poets wrote of the Ten Thousand Hills of Sweet Abandon when referring to the lands now called the Pauha Basin, and most of their reasons for doing so are still valid. To this day, the plantations here host some of the finest wine festivals, leading to evenings of grand music, dancing, carousing and sweet drunkenness.

In between plantations are wild hillsides and hidden valleys, with an incredible array of natural vegetation not threatened by most wildlife. In these places grow a wide variety of herbs and plants used by herbalists, alchemists and sorcerers in their arcane works. The region is home to the so-called "scroll estates," large rental villas used by wealthy occultists as bases of operation for herb-picking forays, complete with basic occult libraries, workshops and ritual space. All of the workers in these places are slaves of House Ragara, which owns the majority of the scroll estates.

The beaches of the White Coast are well named, for most of the year, they are clean paradises of white sand. In winter, though, it is not unusual for these beaches to see terribly cold weather and for frigid storms to blow in from the North. The White Coast is well known for its small seaside towns and the incredible array of manse-lighthouses constructed by the famous Shogunate Era architect Bringer of Light.

It is said that so merciful was this great man that, when he died, he was raised into Heaven to join the Celestial Bureaucracy as the god of lighthouses. The precise truth to this legend is unknown, though it should be noted that the Immaculate Calendar does include worship days for a god of lighthouses known as Gentle Lantern-Bearer.

CLIMATE

The weather of the White Coast is mild most of the year, with respectable rainfall and few storms, save in winter. Then,

these areas see terrible cold fronts sweep down out of the North, bringing nearly all work above ground to a halt.

ANIMALS

The needs of agriculture along the White Coast have long dictated the presence of a variety of domesticated animals, as well as those marine mammals apt to be found in northerly coastal areas, including sea lions, seals and walruses.

CHANOS PREFECTURE

Unlike the rest of the White Coast and Pauha Basin prefectures, Chanos Prefecture is a rugged place with few comforts. The gateway to the frightening Shadowed Coast, it is hilly and usually too cold to properly support the orchards and vineyards of the rest of the area. Indeed, its rocky soil is poor, from centuries of over-farming with methods inappropriate to the land.

NATURAL FEATURES

Although its soil is poor for farming, the prefecture is a rich one nonetheless. Numerous mines and quarries dot the rocky countryside of Chanos Prefecture, providing marble, gemstones and some unique mineral substances of use to only alchemists and sorcerers. Many of the prefecture's small villages grew up near mines and act as processing centers for iron ore. As a result, a large number of the smaller creeks and streams in Chanos Prefecture are polluted by the runoff from this industry. Many artisans and skilled craftsmen also significantly boost the economy of Chanos Prefecture, having moved there in order to get working materials cheaply.

During winter, the mining towns build up what they call Winter's Bounty—a surplus of raw ore and materials, waiting for spring thaws to process. Those who normally work in quarries or processing mills usually take on winter jobs in the mines, further swelling the surplus.

Food can be had for little expense, due to the proximity of Chanos to the vineyards and orchards of the rest of the White Coast, and to the nearness of the Imperial River Basin and its many rice paddies and farmlands. A small company of merchants has become quite prosperous running the caravan routes between these breadbaskets and the material and tool wealth that is Chanos Prefecture's.

CITIES

CHANOS

Population: 47,000

Governor: Agate Blossom, a scion of the Agate clan of patricians best known for using his important bureaucratic position to convince theater owners to put on his Black Robe Discipline puppet dramas.

Chanos is known as the Gateway to the North. Many troops are moved from Chanos to the Northern satrapies and beyond. As a result, those soldiers the populace sees are one of two kinds: the kind that are about to depart for the

North, or the kind that have just returned from it. In both cases, they tend to be fairly grim men, and the attitude of the city reflects this. Chanos has a strong work ethic, with a soldier's attitude toward partying (i.e., do it while you can, for it could be your last chance).

Chanos is also known for its indoor entertainment. Many of the soldiers enjoy violence—both watching and participating—so many of the rougher taverns and caravansaries also have basement pit fighting leagues. One brothel, the Plum Blossom, even has fights between their whores, with two sets of bidding going on in addition to the normal betting pools: one to sleep with the winner, the other to sleep with the loser.

Not all of its local entertainment is so rough, however. Chanos is renowned for the Black Robe Discipline of theatrical performance. This style of puppet drama uses puppets half the size of men, crafted of porcelain and attached to the front of masked black robes. The movement of the puppeteer's feet moves those of the puppet, while the puppeteer controls its arm and head movement with his arms from above the puppet. Chanos is also home to an elite class of dramatists who specialize in taking old military stories and turning them into moving puppet plays.

The Air Fleet is also stationed out of the city of Chanos, and its roughly 1,400 ships occupy much of its dock space (though most of the fleet is away at any given time). Among these ships is the *Utmost Pledge of Victory*, the First Age flagship of Fleet Admiral Ragara Feria.

TOWNS

Tabuhareth (Pop. 1250): The mining town of Tabuhareth is a commodity hotly contested by the Great Houses. House Ragara claims it currently, and has done so for the last century. House Sesus recently pressed a suit, however, claiming that the town was part of the properties of an ancestral manse of House Sesus, according to a set of old legal documents from around the founding of the Realm. Of course, with no one to make a final decision in this matter, the forces that both Houses have dispatched have already clashed, and the magistrate who stepped in to arbitrate the issue was mysteriously murdered. Now, both Houses have sent out-of-favor scions to win back the town and its precious gemstone mine. Now, with the Dragon-Blooded presence on the scene, the damage can only become greater.

WONDERS

The manses of Chanos Prefecture are apportioned among many owners. No one House or organization can be said to hold most of them. Many of them are given to the use of the Air Fleet of the Imperial Navy, however, while the Immaculate Order has very few.

The Pillar Hall of the Righteous (Fire Manse ●●●): The Pillar Hall is one of the six remaining chapter houses of the Wyld Hunt. In recent years, however, the Righteous Brethren of the Pillars (as shikari from this chapter house are called) suffered a tremendous loss. Many of their fel-



lows died in attempts to destroy the Anathema known as the Bull of the North and his minions following the destruction of the Tepet Legions. To this day, it is grossly understaffed, and the Azimuth Spire in Arjuf has discussed returning the Pillar Hall to House Ragara and dividing up the remaining shikari among the other chapter houses.

Tojuun Palace (Earth Manse ●●●): The estate of Ragara Nova just outside Chanos city, Tojuun Palace has been a haven for the Dragon-Blooded prefect of Chanos since he was assigned the onerous duty of governing a mere prefecture. Tojuun Palace is known for its fantastic Dome of the Night Sky, with walls that become as transparent as glass when the bearer of the hearthstone wills it, to provide fine night viewing.

NOTEWORTHY PERSONAE

A variety of important figures resides in Chanos Prefecture.

GOVERNMENT FIGURES

Prefect: Ragara Nova is a Dragon-Blood with a reputation as a wastrel and a fop. He was assigned the prefecture as a means of getting him to shape up and take responsibility in his House duties. Against all expectations he seems to have done so, developing a keen military and tactical sense that his family has urged him to keep secret, maintaining his reputation as a useless scion and holding his adeptness as a surprise. Nova has also developed a long-distance friendship with Tepet Ejava, whom he met at a gala in Chanos many years ago. The two often talk for long hours into the night, thanks to Nova's refinement of Charms that allow speech with another on the wind.

Air Fleet Admiral: The vixen Ragara Feria is the Air Fleet's admiral, granted her commission through her incredible service in the Imperial Navy. Known as something of a seductress, Feria is also something much more than that: a powerful leader. Those who serve under her are fiercely devoted, to a degree that simple beauty could not ensure. She has been called upon to use her position for her House's benefit several times, and she has done so, despite considering such acts betrayals of the trust House Peleps showed her by making her a Fleet Admiral. The time may come soon when her loyalties are tested.

HOUSE RAGARA

House Ragara has more than a little influence in the Chanos and surrounding prefectures, to the point where it was able to position one of its own scions into the position of Air Fleet Admiral. Many Ragara consider one of the four Ragara estates within a week's ride from Chanos to be their proper ancestral home.

OTHER PREFECTURES OF THE WHITE COAST

The other prefectures of the White Coast vie with one another for the honor of finest wine producer in the Blessed Isle. The truth is, many of them make similar vintages—all of them fine enough to practically guarantee nearly any vintner fine, fat contracts with merchants for all the wine he cares to make. Life is simple and rustic in the White Coast and the Pauha Basin, far from the schemes and intrigue of the Imperial City.

THE IMPERIAL RIVER BASIN

To the minds of most of the Blessed Isle, there is no difference between the Imperial River Basin and Juche Prefecture. Indeed, Juche Prefecture takes up the entirety of the region. Despite the incredible size of this prefecture, it is still not accorded full dominion status because of its population density. Although it covers a vast area, the actual population along the Imperial River is fairly small, despite its being prime agricultural land.

The reason for this low population density is simple. Due to the importance of the Imperial River acting as a conduit for powerful Essence lines between the Imperial Mountain and the Imperial City, the Scarlet Throne has enacted severe laws and regulations to keep the Imperial River and its surrounding valley relatively pristine and wild. To change it too dramatically might shift the flow of Essence that provides a significant amount of power to the Imperial Manse. Therefore, to change the river overmuch endangers the power of the Imperial Manse, which endangers all of Creation in turn.

As a result of both incredibly high taxes and required geomantic maintenance on the part of those who rent property along the Imperial River, only the genuinely wealthy can afford land along its brilliant blue length. As a result, most of the farming estates are massive plantations, maintained by the Great Houses or patrician families. Extensive retreat housing has also been built for those who simply wish some time away from the chaos and intrigue of the Imperial City.

CLIMATE

The river basin of the Imperial River practically defines the term temperate. The favorable Essence that runs along it keeps the weather here mild, rarely too warm or cold. As a result, the lush green lands along the river are highly desirable property.

Those areas nearer the Imperial Mountain are typical for high-mountain terrain, with snow in its highest reaches much of the year. As a result, these areas are favored getaways during the truly oppressive heat of deep summer. Every House maintains a charming mountain chateau for precisely such escapes.

ANIMALS

The river basin lands are highly domesticated. Outside of a few kinds of birds and small rodents, the idea of a wild

animal is foreign here. The mountains of Juche Prefecture are also home to many eagles, wild goats and other high-mountain wildlife. Of particular note are the feared crag cats, a breed of hunting cat adapted for climbing nearly sheer rock faces. These cats often prey on sheep or goats that wander too far from their herds, and visiting Dragon-Blooded occasionally undertake hunting expeditions to kill many of these luxuriously furred creatures.

JUCHE PREFECTURE

According to imperial records, Juche Prefecture covers the entirety of the Imperial River Basin. The prefecture proper, however, extends only from the Dragon's Nest Range at the base of the Imperial Mountain to the headwaters of the Imperial River.

Juche Prefecture maintains the largest Dragon-Blooded presence outside the Imperial City. Every House has at least one or two properties here at the foot of the Imperial Mountain, as it is important for the Great Houses to lay claim to the symbolic center of the Blessed Isle and Creation itself. Moreover, since the need for hard labor is so great here, and only the Dragon-Blooded may own slaves, a Dynastic presence is utterly necessary here.

The farmers of Juche Prefecture are well-known sheep and goat herders. Of particular note is the Juche longhorn, known for its thick, soft wool that holds dyes well, making it a favorite for clothiers who craft warm clothing in bright colors for patrician and Dynastic customers.

NATURAL FEATURES

Juche Prefecture is made up of high mountain land, with just enough farming done in valleys to provide food for the local population (which is significant, given the vast slave populace). Juche Prefecture not only acts as the main source for jade used in coinage and artifacts in the Realm, but it is also the largest quarry source in the Blessed Isle.

Most of the settlements in Juche Prefecture are based around local farming, including goat herding, or a mine or quarry. The largest settlements are founded around both.

CITIES

JUCHE

Population: 130,000

Governor: Gemstone Jade, granddaughter of the prefect, Gemstone Opal, is the governor of Juche. The Gemstone clan traditionally considers the position of governor of Juche as an apprenticeship period before assuming the role of prefect later in life. Jade has a very strong relationship with the Mountain Folk. Although she is careful to maintain the public appearance of simply being an ally, she has taken a Mountain Folk lover. Jade is very careful to avoid any hint that the Mountain Folk have any control over her.

Perhaps the third most populous city in all of the Blessed Isle, Juche is a bustling center of commerce, art and bureau-





cracy. Rather than forcing bureaucrats in the Imperial City to rely on messages from the mine overseers and emissaries to the Mountain Folk, the Scarlet Empress established an extensive ministry in this city: the Imperial Ministry of Jade Management and Mountain Folk Relations. Now a huge and bustling bureaucracy in its own right, the ministry works closely with the Gemstone clan of patricians and other local figures of importance.

Three Mountain Folk emissaries dwell at the ministry proper: Alies Wildflower, Karlie Scarlet and Cory Stone. These three find themselves in a delicate situation since the disappearance of the Scarlet Empress. As less and less imperial attention has been paid to the ministry, its bureaucrats seem to cast about more and more for figures of authority. As a result, the Mountain Folk are careful to avoid meddling in the fragile politics of the Realm for fear of the wrath of the Dragon-Blooded.

Juche is also quite well known for its artisans and jadesmiths. An entire tradition of sculpting, referred to as the Juche School, exists, founded over 300 years ago by a skilled Dragon-Blooded sculptor who taught his apprentices this unique style.

Likewise, the Thundercloud style of armor-craft found its genesis here. This style, which uses fantastic animal and monster symbolism, embossing armor with images of terrible beasts from the edge of the Wyld, sometimes including fearsome masks and talons at the end of gauntlets. This style is considered very risqué in the aniconic culture of the Blessed Isle, and many who wear these gryphon, dragon and manticores-styled armors are considered quite rebellious.

In all, Juche is bustling and busy. There is little time for nonsense, and the rulers of the city are well aware of their importance to the Realm. As a result, the city is kept in excellent condition—or at least, the best condition that one can expect from a city whose primary population includes slaves, miners and quarrymen, and the merchants who deal in such goods.

TOWNS

Arum's Rest (Pop. 800): A small village, Arum's Rest has grown up around the V'neef estate of the same name. The estate itself is a horseman's paradise, meant as a place for stables and a center for the V'neef horse-breeding enterprise. More than a few of the Great House's scions retreat here during various parts of the year, seeking a simple life of horseback riding along the Imperial River's vistas for a few weeks. V'neef newlyweds are often sent here after their Imperial City wedding, arriving to find the entire village has decorated and prepared a festival to celebrate the continuation of the V'neef line.

WONDERS

As one of the cradles of civilization, the Imperial River Basin is home to many old ruins and ancient manses. The manses in Juche Prefecture are, almost to a one, owned by one of the Great Houses. The Immaculate Order or the Scarlet Throne owns those rare exceptions.

The Foremost Vault of the Imperial Treasury (Earth Manse ●●●●●): Located just outside Juche proper, the Foremost Vault

of the Imperial Treasury is a gargantuan building, with incredible defenses built into the manse. Additionally, a contingent of imperial legionnaires and a crack unit of Mountain Folk guardians serve as its defenders as well. All of the jade mined in Juche goes here. Since it is all technically the property of the Scarlet Throne, it is catalogued and sorted by quality and color. Much of the jade is minted into currency form here, by automated processes run by the Essence of the manse itself.

Additionally, the bearer of the manse's hearthstone can imbue a single mote of Essence into an outgoing shipment of jade, designating a final destination, down to the city level. This mote investment fades once the shipment reaches its destination, but until then, the bearer of the hearthstone can tell where every piece of that jade shipment is in Creation by simply concentrating.

A number of ancient ruins can also be found in Juche Prefecture. Many of them are ruins from the First Age, set deep in mountain valleys. Adventurous archaeology has long been an interest of many Dragon-Blooded, an endeavor encouraged by the Scarlet Empress in hopes of discovering useful ancient technologies or magics.

The Kleinen Har Dig: The site known as Kleinen Har (Old Realm for "Vault of Glass") is perhaps one of the best known continuing archaeological digs in Juche. Most of the work to be done here is fairly safe and dull, but it has uncovered more than a few magical, demonic and automaton guardians, necessitating a constant presence by Dragon-Blooded warriors and sorcerers. The treasures discovered have made it more than worth this necessity. More adamant and glass-like compounds have been discovered at this single site during the last decade of work here than in all other Realm archaeological sites combined.

NOTEWORTHY PERSONAE

Juche Prefecture attracts some very powerful and influential individuals.

GOVERNMENT FIGURES

Prefect: Gemstone Opal, the well-regarded matriarch of the Gemstone family of patricians, acts as the prefect for Juche Prefecture. She is a very strong figure and is known for her ability to hold her own in dealings with Dragon-Blooded. Those Terrestrial Exalts who deal with her assuming that she will bow and scrape to them because they are the Princes of the Earth are often disappointed and find themselves going away from their dealings with her with the impression of being scolded by an elder aunt. Of course, she is properly deferential to those who treat her with the respect that she has earned in running the prefecture impeccably for most of her life, a job for which she is training her granddaughter, Gemstone Jade.

GREAT HOUSES

Each of the Great Houses is represented in Juche. To not maintain some kind of holdings in this prefecture is con-



sidered inauspicious, placing oneself away from the currents of prosperity that flow out of the Imperial Mountain. Those who tell tales note that just before their fall, the Iselsi had sold off their holdings in Juche.

Of particular note in Juche Prefecture is the presence of House Nellens. House Nellens claims Juche as its primary holdings while it negotiates with House Ragara, seeking to gain appointments in a wing of the Imperial Palace.

OTHER PREFECTURES OF THE IMPERIAL RIVER BASIN

The majority of the prefectures south of the Juche Prefecture are referred to as the Imperial River Basin Prefectures. They are fairly similar and unremarkable, possessing ample farmland, with a scattering of orchards and pastures. Those prefectures that abut the Dhorash Mountains also boast occasional mines and quarries, but these tend to contain simpler ores and stone rarely exported and primarily used in the prefectures and the Basin in general.

THE DRAGONSWRATH PLAINS

The Dragonswrath Plains get their name from the hundreds of small rivers and creeks that descend from the

Mhaltin and Dhorash Mountains. Local legend states that these creeks and riverbeds are the talon-marks of the twin dragons Mhaltin and Dhorash, who despise one another. The landscape of the Dragonswrath Plains is fairly wet, and the rains that come in off the ocean and break along the mountain ranges in spring and autumn swell these bodies of water, turning the area into swampland.

Of course, this very same trait is what makes the prefectures of the Dragonswrath Plains perfect for growing rice. Many of the rivers have been diverted and dammed, creating ample rice paddies and the ability to open levee gates to water them. The prefectures of the Dragonswrath Plains are considered absolutely rustic and backward by the rest of the Blessed Isle. At best, the inhabitants are seen as unfortunates trying to carve a life out of swampland. At worst, they are said to be inbred swamp-folk only half a step above Wyld barbarians.

Nonetheless, the Dragonswrath Plains are known for a number of products, including fine leather from a variety of large reptiles that dwell in the region's waterways, and the produce of cranberry bushes and other select swamp foods. The cooking of the Dragonswrath Plains is quite spicy, and its cuisine is considered avant-garde in far-off places, including the Imperial City.



THE MHALTIN AND DHORASH MOUNTAINS

The Mhaltin and Dhorash mountain ranges encircle the Dragonswrath Plains like two cupped hands. It is thanks to these mountains that the Dragonswrath Plains see the amount of rainfall that they do. Few weather systems can manage to pass these high walls without dropping their precious rain.

Local legends say that these mountain ranges are not simply named after the twin, eternally warring dragons Mhaltin and Dhorash—they claim that the ranges *are* the dragons. There is perhaps some truth to this, for savants who have studied the dragon lines here indicate that they are strange and fluctuate dangerously, though the manses that cap them are in no danger of damage, unless a manse is truly mediocre in design.

Other dangers have cropped up in these mountains, however, since the disappearance of the Empress. Many bandit gangs have taken up refuge here. While the Dragon-Blooded of Pasiap's Stair are willing to hunt down and destroy the occasional bandit camp as a training exercise, most bandits remain unmolested by any real defense, save what the locals can provide for themselves. The bandits focus their efforts primarily on the prefectures of the Dragonswrath Plains, being careful to avoid bothering the more carefully watched prefectures on the other side of the mountains.

PASIAP'S STAIR

The only real Dragon-Blooded presence in the Dragonswrath Plains are the outcastes of Pasiap's Stair, the military academy that prepares non-Dynastic Dragon-Blooded who arise from the population of the Blessed Isle (or occasionally in a satrapy in the Threshold) for service in the legions. Occasionally, the school permits a few of its students to descend for infrequent rest and relaxation in the town of Amber Well, in Martiss Prefecture. Even though they are merely lost eggs by the reckoning of the Realm, these students are still Dragon-Blooded in a place that almost never sees Children of the Dragons other than the vartabeds of the scattered Immaculate temples. Therefore, they are accorded tremendous respect and deference.

SWEET RADIANCE

This island, off the coast of the Dragonswrath Plains bears two prefectures, Cliffrise and Saltmount Prefectures, named for the island's sole cities of any decent size. Until recently, the ruling patrician clans of these two prefectures, Clan Heron of Cliffrise Prefecture and Clan Blacklily of Saltmount Prefecture, were locked in a generations-old feud. Although this island was a natural stop-off point for merchants, who purchased many of the Dragonswrath goods here without actually having to venture into one of its tiny ports, it was considered of little worth, and the feud was largely ignored.

That is, until the coming of House Peleps. As part of his House's goal to control the islands off the Blessed Isle, Peleps Arkan arrived one day with a small fleet of personal

warships and marines. In short order, citing their feuding as a disturbance of the imperial peace, Arkan arranged to have the local authorities clap the feuding heads of the Heron and Blacklily clans into irons and threatened with execution if the feuds continued.

Unfortunately, while these tactics might have worked anywhere else in the Blessed Isle, the headstrong people of Sweet Radiance (like their cousins in the mainland Dragonswrath Plains) don't take to such methods peacefully. There is a full uprising brewing (organized by a mendicant monk of Daana'd, according to some reports).

Arkan has asked for more men, and the elders of House Peleps find themselves in a difficult position. They want the land, but if it becomes public knowledge that they arranged for the clumsy overthrow of patrician houses that were ruling just fine before their interference, there will be an official inquiry. Such attention risks an undesirable amount of public exposure.

The situation remains volatile.

SHADOWED COAST

The Shadowed Coast lives up to its name. Home to an island of strange occurrences, usually shrouded in storm clouds and sitting (sometimes literally) in the shadow of the Imperial Mountain, the Shadowed Coast has a reputation as an unpleasant, haunted place.

CLIMATE

The weather in the Shadowed Coast tends toward colder temperate climes. It often sees snow earlier than most other places in the Blessed Isle, thanks to the Imperial Mountain's bulk stopping the progress of the strong winter storms that often sweep from the Northeast and causing them to unleash their fury on the Shadowed Coast itself.

ANIMALS

The Shadowed Coast still contains many kinds of wildlife, a rarity on the Blessed Isle, some of which is even dangerous. The hills contain large populations of bears, hybrocs and smaller hunting cats, and the Dragon-Bloods of many Dynastic Houses come here to secure hunting permits from the prefect, one of the major sources of income for the prefecture.

VENTUS PREFECTURE

Made up primarily of farming communities, there is little in Ventus Prefecture that interests the rulers of the Great Houses save the hunting that its forested foothills provide.

NATURAL FEATURES

Ventus Prefecture produces more than enough crops to feed itself, selling the surplus to Chanos for the Ragara Legions. Ventus is known for its hardy, cold-resistant crops, which savants say are actually a product of the soil, somehow transformed to resist the worst chills by the miracle workers

of the First Age. It also boasts the largest orchards of sweet-tart apples on the Blessed Isle.

Its true draws, however, are the forested hillsides, peppered with Dynastic hunting lodges. These wilderness areas contain many substances used by healers, alchemists and sorcerers. There are also many deposits of sulfur, mercury and coal, though imperial decree forbids processing them, for fear of destroying the natural balance that provides the rare and valuable substances so sought by savants.

CITIES

BRIGHT OBELISK

Population: 11,800

Governor: Holly, a descendent of human and Mountain Folk blood known for her wisdom and impeccable manners, despite a questionable birth. In fact, her ability to win the favor of those in power is what put her in position as governor.

Bright Obelisk is named for the gleaming silver obelisk erected by its founders centuries ago, which is located in the center of the town square. Apart from a few Dynasts traveling to and from hunting lodges in the foothills, Bright Obelisk rarely sees any traffic, save for the occasional caravans who come here to purchase furs and rare herbs.

TOWNS

Blackwater (Pop. 1,550): Blackwater is a small mining town near an underground lake in the foothills. It is largely unremarkable save for that underground lake, which is an eerily silent, blue-black abyss. Water from the lake that is drawn up into a vessel retains its dark hue and slowly eats through whatever vessel contains it. The locals know better than to try to drink or even touch the water, for it irritates skin and numbs limbs. Those who investigate the lake have noted that sometimes movement can be seen just beneath the surface of the water.

WONDERS

There are few manses or ruins of any true noteworthiness, save for the ruins of the Versino on the Isle of Voices. Most of the manses and similar places of power here are apportioned among imperial holdings and a smattering of the Great Houses.

NOTEWORTHY PERSONAE

Government Figures

Prefect: Sage Lake, of the old moneyed patrician Sage family, is the prefect of Ventus Prefecture. The older man is something of a drunkard, tending to leave the day-to-day operation of the bureaucracy to Holly, the governor of Bright Obelisk who was once his assistant.

THE ISLE OF VOICES

Along the northern shore of the Blessed Isle, under skies that often see storms blowing in from the bitter North, lies

the Isle of Voices. Most who live on the Blessed Isle know of the Isle of Voices as a place where magic and demons live. To those who practice the arts of sorcery and thaumaturgy, it is a place of promise, where the knowledgeable and the wise reward the diligent with greater power. To everyone else, it is a place of terror, where sorcerers and demonologists need not restrain their sadistic urges as they must in civilization. The truth, most likely, is somewhere in between.

The people who work the land and sea around the island are quite knowledgeable in the folk magics common to peasantry, and even to some of the higher thaumaturgies of mortals. People who hail from the Isle of Voices are considered to be strange at best, mad at worst, for most people on the Isle of Voices have seen and experienced stranger and more arcane things than the average graduate of the Heptagram.

THE RUINS OF THE VERSINO

Once a school of sorcery, the Versino was nowhere near as prestigious as the Heptagram. Indeed, it was the Scarlet Empire's first attempt at creating a scholastic program. (What better field of study than the supremely dangerous sorcery?) Every precaution was taken, from establishing the place on a remote island far from innocents to making sure that there were no less than 20 Immaculate monks on hand at all times, to aid with spirits and demons and to act as the moral compass for sorcerers of questionable ethics.

Regardless, something went terribly wrong in RY 385. The precise nature of what happened is unknown, save that some agency was loosed on the Versino that its defenders could not overcome. Everyone there was utterly destroyed, save for a single student: the Empress's 16-year-old daughter, Mnemon.

The bones of the dead are now long since rendered into dust, but the screams of the dying can still sometimes be heard on the night winds there. The ruins have collapsed in on themselves into a pitted crater, and wards of salt and sorcery hem in whatever horrible, cursed things might yet dwell there.

THE HEPTAGRAM

The Heptagram is one of the four Great Academies of the Scarlet Empire. At any given time, there are no more than 70 regular students here, plus upward of 10 advanced students, directly apprenticed to one of the masters of the Heptagram.

The Heptagram is named for its symbol, a seven-pointed star. Each point of this star represents one of the great libraries of the academy. These libraries represent the greatest accumulation of lore in all the Realm, and those who study here know precisely how fortunate they are to have access to them. The students of the Heptagram study sorcery, demonology, alchemy, divination and Essence manipulation to a degree unseen anywhere else in the Realm (and comparable only in places such as Lookshy's own sorcerous academy or the great collegia of the Shogunate Era).



TEACHERS

- *Mnemon Duhalva*: The foremost alchemist at the Heptagram, Duhalva always stood likely to be appointed as the next dominie. At least, she did before the Scarlet Empress disappeared. Now, she knows that her future is questionable at best, and she has done everything she can to demonstrate her support for the Heptagram itself, going so far as to alienate members of her family who want her to use her position to the House's advantage. She knows that this is likely dooming her should Mnemon seize the Scarlet Throne, but she hopes that her loyalty will show through to any other.

- *Tepet Senex*: Called "Old Man" Tepet behind his back, Tepet Senex has been at the Heptagram longer than any other instructor here save the dominie. He desires the position of dominie when the day comes that Ragara Bhagwei sees fit to retire or die, but the old master of the Heptagram has thus far shown no desire to do either. Senex is the one most likely to question the dominie's decisions, but he considers this his sole prerogative. Dragons help anyone else who shows the position of the dominie disrespect in his presence.

- *Sorrowful Leaf*: A Wood-aspected Dragon-Blood originally from the East, Sorrowful Leaf is the acknowledged expert in the Heptagram on wood elementals and magical herbalism. She is covered in blue woad tattoos, which lend her face a particularly sinister aspect while she is teaching. She is never found without a wood spider nearby to act as her servant and bodyguard. It is known that she has some kind of pact with a court of wood elementals somewhere in the East.

STUDENT LIFE

Students may be taught at the Heptagram for a total of seven years, one for each of its libraries. It is rare that students remain for the entire length of this time, however, as they may graduate after they have completed four years of instruction. After an initial year in the Hall of Terrestrial Puissance, a student may choose what library he wishes to learn in his following years.

The classes are grueling. Early in the year, all of the students in a given library have group classes, as taught by multiple teachers, but as they begin to show proficiency, they find personal instruction to be most useful. It is also very difficult to achieve a passing notation in the libraries. Even those students who chose to complete only four years are unlikely to have attended for merely four actual years. In general, only half of those students who enroll for a year in one of the libraries actually pass muster. Those who fail a year have one of two options: to retake that year and hope to pass it a second time or to abandon that field of study forever. Those who move on or fail it a second time are dishonorably removed from that library and forbidden entrance into its halls ever again.

All of the students here learn the specifics of mortal thaumaturgy. While they learn these techniques, however, the instructors keep an eye out for those Dragon-Blooded who

show real talent with the mortal magics. Those who do are often taught those theories as they apply to Exalted sorcery. Most Dragon-Blooded students are puissant in Terrestrial Circle sorcery by the time they have completed two or three years, and they usually possess several Occult specialties in mortal thaumaturgy as well.

LAYOUT

There are 14 great buildings set up in a ring around a tall, central tower in the compound that makes up the Heptagram. Along the outer ring, the largest of these buildings are the Libraries of the Heptagram, and the smaller buildings between them are the dormitories. Each one of the dormitories is equipped with eating space, luxurious two-student accommodations, and personal laboratories and workspace appropriate to the library to which that dormitory is assigned. The Libraries include:

- *The Hall of Terrestrial Puissance*: A student's first year in the Heptagram is spent in the Hall of Terrestrial Puissance, learning the very basics of magic itself, as well as theories of elemental Essence. Students are taught the use of their Charms and gain an understanding of the ways that elementals work. They also study the nuances of elemental Essence, including ample study of the Immaculate Dragons and demesnes and manses.

- *The Hall of the Nesting Dragon*: The library where theories of mortal geomancy are taught, along with a deeper understanding of demesnes and manses. Those who show the aptitude are given private lessons in manse architecture design and building, which they may take over subsequent years even though they passed the first year.

- *The Hall of the Jade Cauldron*: Alchemy, herbalism and similar endeavors are the topics at the Hall of the Jade Cauldron, which teaches the properties of distillation and alchemical transformation.

- *The Hall of Ancient Lore*: The Hall of Ancient Lore teaches not only basic mortal enchantment technique, but also the art of artificing, the creation of artifacts. Those who excel here often take another year or two even after they have passed, in order to permit them to continue working with the masters of the Hall of Ancient Lore to develop these skills.

- *The Hall of the Cerulean Glyph*: The magical theories of warding and sanctification make up the bulk of this Library's curriculum. Those who understand the nuances of Exalted sorcery are likely to learn a variety of protective and warding spells here as well.

- *The Hall of Celestial Puissance*: The students of the Hall of Celestial Puissance learn about the vagaries of the Heavenly sky and those that dwell there. It is a course in not only the nature of those spirits referred to as gods and their culture, but also the insights into the nature of Fate so often reflected in the sky, through astronomy. Other forms of divination are studied here, as well, particularly Exalted sorcery of revelation.

- *The Hall of Verdigris*: Not all students are permitted entry into the Hall of Verdigris, the Heptagram's Library of Demon-

ology. Only those who have excelled in their previous classes and managed to acquire a sponsor from among the teaching staff ever receive invitations to learn here. In addition to the techniques of summoning demons by mortal means, students here also learn to do so by way of Exalted sorcery.

The central tower is called the Dominie's Tower, and it is a powerful (i.e., five-dot) Air-aspected manse. It contains the dominie's quarters and personal workspace, as well as the libraries of full Terrestrial sorcery. Rumor has that it also boasts vaults filled with artifacts and ancient wonders of the First Age. The bottom floor of the Dominie's Tower is the Great Hall, a huge chamber where the entire population of the school can be gathered.

There is a bell atop the Dominie's Tower that remains silent save by the will of the bearer of the hearthstone of the Dominie's Tower. Should this bell be rung, it is considered imperative that every student and instructor stop what he or she is doing and go immediately to the Great Hall. Needless to say, this bell rings only in emergencies, for fear of interrupting delicate magical operations and the disasters that usually come of doing so.

DEFENSES

The Heptagram is well defended, indeed. Even ignoring the fact that there are, at any given time, at least 40 Dragon-Blooded sorcerers (and a small handful of Sidereal sorcerers as well), the Heptagram grounds and the lands surrounding it for out to two miles are patrolled by bound demons. The grounds of the Heptagram are also well patrolled by elementals and automaton constructs.

Powerful spells of warding are woven into the walls of the Heptagram, spells cast not merely by the Dragon-Blooded, but by Sidereals wielding Celestial Circle Sorcery. Additionally, these Sidereals have woven the fate of the Heptagram to aid it in standing against foes and invaders. It is arguably one of the best-defended places on the Blessed Isle outside the Imperial Manse.

THE DRAGON'S NEST RANGE

The rocky mountain range that utterly surrounds the Imperial Mountain for miles in every direction is called the Dragon's Nest Range, as the Imperial Mountain sits in its midst, like a brooding beast in its nest. These mountains (which also include the Juche Prefecture) are fantastically rich in both Essence and mortal riches. Many of the valleys tucked away between peaks are also quite fertile, fed as they are by the rains that wash down the Imperial Mountain.

CLIMATE

Due to its elevation, the lands of the Dragon's Nest Range tend to be slightly colder than a typical temperate locale, which serves more to make the seasons more extreme in weather from one another than to mute any one of them. The summers here are quite hot, though some of the mountainside communities remain quite cool. Winters are heavy





and cold, with thick snows descending on the range from the Imperial Mountain.

ANIMALS

Unlike in some of the wilder mountain vistas in Juche Prefecture, Lord's Crossing Dominion has been settled for so long that wildlife here is relatively rare and unassuming. The wild bears and hunting cats of Juche are almost never seen here, save when they wander over from the wilds in that prefecture. There is plentiful hunting in the form of herds of deer and elk, as well as boar in some of the lower mountain valleys. The breeds of goats and sheep ubiquitous in Juche are found here as well.

LORD'S CROSSING DOMINION

Aside from Juche Prefecture, Lord's Crossing Dominion is the only prefecture within the Dragon's Nest Range. One of only two prefectures in the Blessed Isle to be denoted as a dominion, Lord's Crossing is quite important enough to the Realm to designate it such. Many of the settlements in the Lord's Crossing Dominion are quite old, dating back at least to the Shogunate Era.

NATURAL FEATURES

The mountains that make up the Lord's Crossing Dominion produce ample jade, marble and gemstones, as well as more common mining and quarry products. Additionally, the fertile valleys and riverside land produce large amounts of rice, vegetables, fruits and hearty cattle. Many agricultural areas also produce gorgeous high-quality cloth and silks. Finally, many of the settlements in the dominion take pains to provide fine quality bed-and-breakfast style accommodations for visiting patricians and Dynasts.

CITIES

LORD'S CROSSING

Population: 48,000

Governor: Red-headed Sawyer Shadow, said to have been born of a Dynast's un-Exalted daughter's tryst with a Southern prince and given to the Sawyer patrician family to adopt, acts as the governor of Lord's Crossing. She is a passionate woman with keen economic sense and dark good looks. Shadow currently plans festivals to help bolster the morale and economic stability of Lord's Crossing.

Lord's Crossing is a massive Shogunate Era city and the primary residence of House Tepet. A center of trade thanks to the exportation of the great riches of the dominion, the economy of Lord's Crossing Dominion has been cast into some chaos with the destruction of the Tepet Legions at the hands of the Bull of the North. Nearly every citizen of Lord's Crossing (and the dominion as a whole) lost a parent, sibling or child in that destruction, and morale is at an all-time low.

House Tepet isn't stupid, though—its elders are very careful to place themselves directly in the middle of those

who are grieving, rather than sit still to be eventually blamed. Parades of homage have been made, and the Great Memorial of Lord's Crossing is a massive marble wall, with the names of all those slain inscribed upon it. The scions of House Tepet are not held in higher honors in this Great Memorial but are rather scattered in and among the names of the simpler soldiers—a decision calculated to communicate the fact that House Tepet lost sons and daughters too.

Lord's Crossing is also well known for the Academy of the Wondrous Hall, a college of architecture that specializes in Air- and Earth-aspected manse design. It is also widely recognized as the foremost academy in the techniques of hearthstone adaptation.

PORTEE

Population: 7,500

Governor: Gempeak Thunder, a boisterous patrician of the Gempeak family. The Gempeaks have begun to look enviously at the wealth of the Whitecloud clan, and Thunder himself has begun to look upon the Whitecloud matriarch's widow daughter, Rose, as a potential wife.

Portee is dominated by two patrician families: the Gempeak clan and the Whitecloud clan. For decades, the Gempeaks were in a superior position, in terms of both wealth and political power. Part of that has changed recently, however. The matriarch of the Whitecloud clan, Whitecloud Orchid, has spent her entire life on the breeding of small, white lap dogs called "Portee ivories."

These little dogs have become quite fashionable among Dynastic families as perfect lap dogs for ladies and children. This sudden fad among the Great Houses has resulted in an incredible upswing in the Whitecloud fortune. As a result of both the Whitecloud breeders and the Starlight facility in Traiter, Lord's Crossing Dominion has gained the unlikely reputation as the source of many purebred animals.

As a result of the sudden arrival of Dynastic representatives seeking pets for their masters, Portee has built a number of fine new teahouses and luxury accommodations and makes quite a bit of money from them.

TRAITER

Population: 9,600

Governor: Starlight Black, a thin, noble-seeming man with close-shorn black hair and a trimmed beard acts as the governor for Traiter. He is accustomed to dealing with Dragon-Blooded hunters and soldiers and is not easily intimidated by mere mortals.

The Starlight family has made its fortune on the breeding of black, oversized, menacing dogs called "blackstar mastiffs." Unlike the sudden fame of the Whitecloud animals, the hunters and warriors of the Realm have favored Starlight hounds for over 100 years, and that trust has been repaid to the Starlight clan's family wealth many times over, making them the most powerful patricians in Traiter.

The Starlight clan maintains a massive estate on the outskirts of Traiter. This estate is only partially of use to the



family. The rest of it consists of extensive facilities for the breeding of the blackstars, as well as luxurious accommodations for would-be buyers, who are required to spend two weeks at the facility being introduced to and trained to handle their new hound. (Those who have been trained in the past need spend only a week getting to know their new beast.)

WONDERS

The vast majority of the manses in Lord's Crossing Dominion are owned by House Tepet, apportioned among their scions. Several of these manses no longer have hearthstones, those treasures having been seized as the spoils of war when their owners fell in combat against the Bull of the North. Even now, the elders of House Tepet agonize over whether to hire geomancers to alter the architecture of these manses, shattering the old hearthstones and beginning the growth of new ones. Several of these manses are quite powerful, however, and the risk and expense of changing them is great. The Tepets have many of the masters of the Academy of the Wondrous Hall looking into it, though.

NOTEWORTHY PERSONAE

There are many important figures in Lord's Crossing Dominion, thanks to the presence of House Tepet. Those in positions of importance are either firm allies of the Tepet family or strong enough to resist their influence.

GOVERNMENT FIGURES

Prefect: Carpenter Reason, who is working with Sawyer Shadow to rebuild the local economy, trying to balance the need to mourn with the need to get back on one's feet, including the re-establishment of the Tepet Legions. He is a self-assured patrician from a long line of patricians

HOUSE TEPET

House Tepet claims Lord's Crossing Dominion as its ancestral holdings away from the Imperial City. Nothing goes on here of which the Tepets are not cognizant, generally speaking. They are justly famous as fine hosts, often holding lavish summer parties when members of other Houses are in the dominion.

OTHER HOUSES

The sole presence that other Houses maintain in Lord's Crossing Dominion is in the form of summer vacation homes in the hills here, for use when the heat of summer drives them from the Imperial City into the cooler hills at the foot of the Imperial Mountain. Many of these summer homes are used as hunting lodges of some sort.

THE JAEN-HA PLAINS

Approximately half of the Jaen-ha Plains are taken up by Arjuf Dominion. The other prefectures of the Jaen-ha Plains tend to be farming prefectures, made up of small ranching and agricultural settlements.

CLIMATE

The lands of the Jaen-ha Plains are well regarded for their fairly warm climate, with fair, balmy winds that blow in from the South. The summer storms here are often spectacular to behold, and once every few years, the Jaen-ha Plains suffer a hurricane-strength squall, which the architecture is built to resist.

ANIMALS

Although the population of wild animals is practically non-existent there, nearly every variety of domesticated animal can be found in the prefectures of Jaen-ha. Additionally, many of the lands in this area are fine ranch land, with entire ranches specializing in breeding strong horses for pulling caravan wagons.

ARJUF DOMINION

Called the Passage into Fire due to its nearly exclusive use as the travel path into the South by those of the Realm, the Arjuf Dominion is one of only two actual dominions on the Blessed Isle. Its strategic influence and financial power warrant this bureaucratic honor, and its size reflects it. The Arjuf Dominion descends from the southern foothills of the Dragon's Nest Range, with the Caracal River as its eastern border.

NATURAL FEATURES

Arjuf Dominion is made up of coastline, river basin and foothills, generally speaking. It produces a fair amount of food, though the population of Arjuf Dominion is such that there is almost nothing left to export, save for the excellent quantities of sugar cane grown in the fields in southern Arjuf.

It might be said that Arjuf's primary product is trade itself. Many of the settlements in the dominion focus on trade, although their local agriculture is enough to provide their populations with food. Quite a few of the settlements are based around one or two merchants, many of whom owe fealty to one or two of the trade confederations of Arjuf. Those confederations are merchant companies that specialize in areas of the Blessed Isle, buying the unique products of those places, bringing them to the great markets of the Imperial City and Arjuf, and bringing needed goods to their target areas.

CITIES

ARJUF (CAPITAL)

Population: 225,000, though there may be up to half-again this number in the city during the height of trading season.

Governor: Rainbow Faith, a shrewd businesswoman with a great deal of influence at the city's docks and in the vast Arjuf Market.

Arjuf is the second largest city in the Blessed Isle, with a massive population. It has grown quickly, but it has not taken on the ramshackle appearance that many cities in similar





circumstances have, thanks to skilled governors and prefects and the wise governing of House Ledaal. House Ledaal quite carefully oversees infrastructural and civic necessities, and more than a few of its scions are themselves fine architects, city planners and sorcerers employed to aid in the improvement of the city using Exalted magics.

Arjuf is the most important port on the Blessed Isle, and it boasts an incredibly huge bazaar, the Arjuf Market. Ships docking in the city have their portage fees halved if they sell goods in the market, so it has an incredible variety of things for sale. It outshines even the markets of the Imperial City for the sheer variety of products, although the finest and most expensive items are usually reserved for the capital of the Scarlet Empire.

House Ledaal uses Arjuf as a port for its Threshold explorations. Moreover, the Imperial Merchant Fleet, responsible for patrolling the coastlines of the Blessed Isle, and for preventing piracy near the island, is based out of Arjuf as well.

NISHIMO

Population: 6,400

Governor: Carver Bear, an overweight former quarry master. Many in the city blame the Carver family for Nishimo's misfortunes, and Bear doesn't usually listen to such talk without answering with violence. "Bear-baiting" has become something of a local spectator sport, so Bear has become something of a recluse.

Once a booming quarry town that grew into a full city in the span of a generation or two, Nishimo was almost entirely abandoned after the quarry ran dry and its workers had to find work elsewhere. Only a few buildings made of the original local marble remain, as they were pulled down and sold for the marble during the hardest times, replaced by ramshackle wooden buildings in some cases. In others, there are simply empty, rubble- and weed-strewn mud lots where houses once stood, pock-marking the face of the city.

Criminals and bandits have taken up residence here, ranging out occasionally to prey on those prefectures that possess fewer defenses. At one point, Nishimo was in danger of becoming an openly bandit-dominated city, until House Ledaal dispatched one of its Dragon-Blooded daughters to identify and destroy the bandit leaders and installed Ledaal mercenaries in the city.

TUCHARA

Population: 21,000

Governor: Sweetsky Swan, the eldest son of the patriotic Sweetsky family. Though not an artist himself, Swan is well known as a patron of the arts, sometimes paying the apprenticeship fees for promising young artists, in return for receiving incredible works from them for his family's collection once they have attained skill and experience.

Tuchara began as an artist's colony, situated at a crossroads between iron ore mines and silver mines. As a result, many of the best smiths in Arjuf Dominion ended up here. In a short

period, Tuchara was growing, the population attracted by the wealth and success of the master armorers, weaponsmiths and manse architects that could be found here.

The genteel environment that grew up around this artist's haven is the direct influence of the Sweetsky family and its Ledaal patrons. As a result, the city itself is a masterpiece of urban planning, with many of the finest artists competing to create fine works for the city every year. Those who are chosen to work on civic projects are permitted to do their work in lieu of taxes. This plan, called the Sweetsky Initiative, has made Tuchara easily one of the most beautiful cities on the Blessed Isle.

One artist of note is called only Windrunner, the foremost armorsmith in the elemental style of armor design. Like other elemental stylists, his works incorporate smooth flowing lines, with elemental iconography and uniquely tinted steel that highlights certain elemental themes. An Air-pected Dragon-Blooded of uncertain origins, Windrunner is also an amazing jadesmith and artificer, though he rarely crafts artifact armor any longer, having grown weary of sneering legion officers marching off into the Threshold somewhere and losing his work.

TOWNS

Yarrowstalk (Pop. 8,000): The river-port town of Yarrowstalk has fallen on bad times. Once a major stop on the river route between Lord's Crossing and Arjuf, trade and travel in general has lessened with the tensions of late. More than this, though, Yarrowstalk is the headquarters for the Office of Harmony, the bureaucracy of the Wyld Hunt. Although the Office of Harmony receives the support of its governor (Ledaal Zavel, an un-Exalted Dynast of House Ledaal), the locals are a little less supportive.

With times as hard as they've become, they see that the Wyld Hunt's members do nothing to bolster their economy. The Wyld Hunt considers whoring and drinking unseemly, regardless of how it might put coin in the purses of locals. Therefore, the low tension builds between the locals and those who serve at the Office of Harmony and the nearby Wyld Hunt manse known as the Azimuth Spire.

THE HOUSE OF BELLS

The House of Bells is one of the four prestigious secondary schools of the Blessed Isle. A military academy meant to turn out not simply soldiers, but competent military leaders and heroes of the Dragon-Blooded Dynasty, the House of Bells is the first step for those who seek a great future in the legions. By unspoken tradition, those who have flunked out of the House of Bells will never hold a position of leadership in the Imperial Army. Those in power in the legions who themselves did graduate from the House of Bells make sure of that.

TEACHERS

Most of the instructors of the House of Bells are retired legionnaires who have a vested interest in making sure that

the cadets are taught, first and foremost, how not to endanger their fellows. These instructors are terribly harsh and demanding. The closest a cadet gets to praise in the House of Bells is when an instructor stops actively haranguing him for that day. In all other respects, the abuse—both physical and verbal—comes nonstop. Even if a given cadet is damn near perfect, she can be taken to task for allowing one of her squad-mates not to excel.

The dominie of the House of Bells is Cathak Eli, a Fire-aspected grandson of Cathak Cainan and a driven taskmaster. He carefully watches his instructors to make sure that they are rendering an appropriate military education to the cadets that he considers his property from the moment they arrive until graduation. Some of the other instructors include:

- *Dojin*: An Earth-aspected outcaste who served for many years in the Imperial Army, Dojin fought beside Cathak Eli for most of their mutual career. Dojin and Eli began as rivals, the Dynast often taunting the young graduate of Pasiap's Stair for his lack of lineage. But Dojin's personal honor always prevented any retaliation, and when the young soldier saved Eli's life when their legion encountered Fair Folk in the South, Eli's opinion of the young outcaste changed dramatically. From that day forward, Dojin and Eli have been inseparable, and there are whispers that they are lovers.

- *Tepet Chaio*: A woman of great honor, Chaio is very sensitive to her family's recent loss. Those who speak dismissively of the tragedy or berate Tepet cadets for the loss of the Tepet Legions earn Chaio's unending ire, and she is both vindictive and unforgiving. She expects unflinching excellence from all Tepet cadets, however, and often drives them to exhaustion, urging them toward improvement by whispering a litany that consists of the names of the Tepet scions who died in the engagement with the Bull of the North. She considers her great-uncle Tepet Arada a base traitor for his flight after the destruction, and she would like nothing more than permission to find him.

- *Ledaal Mazhorie*: The battlefield sorcery instructor, Mazhorie is an Air-aspected master of Terrestrial sorcery and is also quite skilled at dealing with spirits in wartime situations. He teaches Dragon-Bloods not simply how to use sorcerous advantages tactically, but how to combat them.

STUDENT LIFE

Students, who are called cadets, who arrive in the same year are grouped into a single unit. Within each such unit, the cadets are divided into squads, and each squad does everything together: attends lectures, eats, trains and fights other squads and class years. There is a strong rivalry between naval cadets and the rest of the House of Bells cadets, and fights between naval and regular cadets are incredibly frequent.

Individual cadets do not get graded. Squads do, though, and the testing here is such that the weakest link in a squad is almost always revealed. Thus does the House of Bells emphasize the need to see that one's fellows are as strong as possible, encouraging the weak to work hard and



cadets



the strong to help them. A squad that suffers from a truly inept squad-mate might arrange for additional work for its failure, and in some cases, even go so far as to arrange training accidents for its weak link.

Five days a week, the cadets attend morning lectures in the Four Keeps, receiving the finest training in tactics, strategy, military history, battlefield sorcery and logistics. During the afternoon, they are in the yard, practicing the nuances of direct combat and the techniques for putting what they learn in morning class into action.

Occasionally, squads of cadets are taken into the wildernesses nearby and simply left there to put in practice the techniques of wartime survival and guerilla warfare they are taught. These expeditions usually take up days on end and are quite hazardous.

It is not uncommon for fatalities and severe injuries to occur in training. Although skilled healers are on hand, a few fatalities occur every year. Cadets who die in training are buried in the Cadet's Rest, the small graveyard that visitors and new students to the House of Bells ride through on their way to the main compound.

LAYOUT

The House of Bells sprawls over several leagues of territory found southwest of Arjuf, south of the Great Coast Road. Its grounds include a variety of fields, a stretch of shoreline where amphibious assaults are practiced and a stretch of rocky terrain. A five-foot-high stone wall surrounds the entirety of the House of Bells compound, pierced by five gates.

A pair of villages called Sword and Shield stands on these grounds, intended primarily to provide food and menial labor for the House of Bells. These two villages have also been used in training exercises for assaulting and defending structured battlefields. They are also preferred off-hours recreational spots. Both of the villages have a couple of bars and teahouses, and Sword even maintains a brothel. Shield, with its less-impressive facilities is intended for lower classmen. Any student of less than four years who is found at Sword by upper classmen is usually beaten within an inch of his life.

The buildings on the grounds include the Students' Compound, a series of barracks, one for each of the seven years that can be found here, as well as facilities for eating, clothing care, hygiene and an armory. Nearby stands the Five Keeps, a set of large buildings set up with lecture halls and the living facilities of the instructors.

There are also miscellaneous buildings and structures scattered on the House of Bell's grounds, including Fort Misery, meant for the practice of siege warfare. Finally, along the coast, is a fortified military dock called the Port of Bells, meant for the training of Imperial Navy cadets.

DEFENSES

The House of Bells is defended by all of its students. All of them know that at any given time, they could be called upon to give their lives in the defense of this academy—even against one

of the Great Houses, should it come to civil war. The dominie and instructors of the House of Bells are some of the finest warriors in the Realm, and they wield potent weapons given to them by their Houses or the Realm for service rendered.

WONDERS

Most of the manses of Arjuf Dominion are claimed by House Ledaal. Of course, House Ledaal is quite supportive of the Immaculate Order, so quite a few of these manses are leased to the Order for use as monasteries and temples, and, in one case, as a base for the Wyld Hunt.

The Azimuth Spire (Air Manse ●●●●●): The Azimuth Spire, though a powerful manse owned by House Ledaal, was rendered to the Immaculate Order and Wyld Hunt as an act of piety on the part of the House. Since that time, it has become the primary headquarters for the Wyld Hunt.

The Palace of Vines (Wood Manse ●●●●●): The Palace of Vines is the massive, ancestral holding of House Ledaal in Arjuf Dominion, found a day's ride west of Arjuf proper. Currently under the household of elder Ledaal Caros, most members of House Ledaal have memories of time spent in its vine-covered halls, picking sweet berries from sunny, tucked-away alcoves while their elders met in council to discuss the family's future.

NOTEWORTHY PERSONAE

Arjuf Dominion boasts quite a number of important personages to the well-being of the Realm.

GOVERNMENT FIGURES

Prefect: Ledaal Maris, the mortal daughter of Ledaal Kamar, a powerful Dragon-Blooded sorcerer. Maris is ruthless and cunning, with one trait that makes her stand out from others in her position—she is fanatically loyal to her father. It is a common knowledge among the Great Houses that Maris and Kamar are lovers, though the two believe that their secret is unknown.

THE WYLD HUNT

The Wyld Hunt's primary headquarters is in Arjuf Dominion. As such, the Azimuth Spire headquarters is the center of Wyld Hunt operations. Most new members of the Hunt come here for training and placement at one of the other chapter houses, and when an imperial or Immaculate envoy pays an official visit to the Wyld Hunt as a whole, it is to Arjuf Dominion that he comes.

THE MERCHANT FLEET

The Imperial Merchant Fleet is based out of Arjuf proper, and its sailors and marines swell the population of that city.

• *Fleet Admiral V'neef Ririon:* The Water-aspected admiral of the Merchant Fleet, Ririon is a tall, gangly Dragon-Blood. Though not a particularly skilled warrior, he is an incredible sailor. He is eminently competent, and while not the most innovative tactician, he is intelligent and thorough, providing his deliberate methods success where less-diligent men might fail. He is very close to his

family and often spends time with his wife and children in his estate outside Arjuf.

HOUSE LEDAAL

House Ledaal claims Arjuf Dominion as its ancestral fief. As a dominion, Arjuf Dominion must be governed by one of the Great Houses, a task to which House Ledaal was assigned when that change was made. Although it has proven to be something of a drain on Ledaal resources, the House has made Arjuf Dominion run smoothly and without problems, administrating the bureaucratic processes and defense of this area almost flawlessly. Those members of House Ledaal who do not grow up in the Imperial City likely call one of the many Ledaal estates of Arjuf Dominion home.

OTHER PREFECTURES OF THE JAEN-HA PLAINS

The other prefectures of the Jaen-ha Plains exist in Arjuf Dominion's shadow. The southerly prefectures are major agricultural centers, growing fields of sugar cane and raising pigs, while those found farther north are excellent pasturelands for cattle, horses and sheep.

THE PLAINS OF RUSTED IRON

The Plains of Rusted Iron are broad plains scattered with fields of clay just under the surface of thin, poor soil. Agriculture is difficult here, save along the shores of the Serpentine River. Far more common are potters and porcelain-makers, craftsmen who have learned to use the abundant clay of the lowlands between the shore and the Serpentine River to craft fine works of art. Nonetheless, true craftsmen in these areas are rare, and most folk tend small fields of mediocre crops that probably wouldn't grow if not for the presence of auspicious dragon lines carrying Essence of enrichment from the Imperial Mountain.

The Plains of Rusted Iron have been named thus because they are the site of many ancient battlefields. There are more archaeological digs here than anywhere else in the Blessed Isle save the foot of the Imperial Mountain. Most are either sites where great battles of the First Age or Shogunate Era took place or the funereal grounds that resulted from those battles, with mighty domed burial sites built entirely of deep, red clay the color of rusted iron.

RADAMANT PREFECTURE

One of the many large prefectures of the Plains of Rusted Iron, Radamant is of a large size for the same reason that most of the others are: There are too few large cities in this area of the Blessed Isle and too few settlements in general. It is a bit more prosperous, due to having a coastline from which it might fish and harvest its own shells (so as to avoid having to buy them from Diu Xie), but Radamant is quite like most of the other prefectures here, save for one thing...

Deep in its interior, in a valley that springtime floods fill with water and clay, lies the Stalwart Temple. Its walls are covered

with a layer of caked-on clay, but those who happen upon it can tell that it is clearly an ancient manse. Reaching it is treacherous, however, for it requires navigating through wet clay-fields that can swallow horses and riders entire. A small court of earth and water elementals dwells here, and the gods are still bound by ancient pacts to defend the Stalwart Temple.

Although those masters that bound them there were destroyed long ago, the Stalwart Temple—a Solar manse (with a three-dot rating) and temple to the Unconquered Sun—yet remains undiscovered. The spirits here hide it, working together to sink it in mire and conceal its presence by illusions and misdirection. They tell tales among themselves of the Radiant Dowager, an ancient Solar queen, who will one day return here to reclaim the treasures she left behind.

THE STORM COAST AND THE AHBREM VALLEY

The land between the Storm Coast and the northern shores of the Serpentine River is often called the Ahbrem Valley, for the mountain range that cuts directly from the western coast to the Dragon's Nest Range. The lands here are quite wealthy and prosperous. In fact, it is likely that, should another dominion ever be established from among the Blessed Island's prefectures, it will be here.

The prefectures of the Storm Coast and the Ahbrem Valley are agricultural centers. Along the rivers are many rice paddies, with other agriculture (particularly tobacco, grains and other field-crops) ranging farther from the rivers. Mining is also prevalent in these areas, with the foothills of the Ahbrem Mountains pockmarked with mines and quarries.

THE AHBREM MOUNTAINS

Like most of the major mountain ranges on the Blessed Isle, the Ahbrem Mountains are believed to be a dragon. Unlike the dragons of the Mhaltin and Dhorash ranges, however, the dragon Ahbrem is thought to be kindly, like a favored uncle who is fond of giving gifts. Most of the peasants of the Ahbrem Valley understand that their prosperity comes, in one fashion or another, from the mountains. Indeed, the Immaculate Order is very careful to make sure that no cults to the dragon Ahbrem pop up in the wake of such superstitions. (It should be noted, though, that the Immaculate Order is unaware of any such dragon, if it does exist.)

CLIMATE

The Storm Coast is named that for a reason. Much of the year, storms come rolling in off the ocean, crashing on the Ahbrem Valley with great displays of thunder and lightning. Spring sees gentler weather, and late-summer and early-autumn hurricanes are rare, though not unheard of. Perhaps the bitterest time, though, is during the terrible blizzards of winter, when howling Northern winds descend on the lowlands between the coast and the Ahbrem Mountains.





ANIMALS

As with most of the Blessed Isle, wild animals are fairly rare here. Domesticated animals are quite plentiful, with a hardy breed of cattle bred to withstand extreme weather, and many sheep and goats roaming along the mountain ranges that mark the eastern and southern border of these lowlands. Of note, however, are the hearth-cats of Stargazer Prefecture, highly sought-after living relics of the First Age.

EAGLE PREFECTURE

Eagle Prefecture is called the Gateway to the West. It is also considered the ancestral home of House Sesus. Eagle Prefecture is quite far off from the bustle of the Imperial City and from the desperate bureaucracy at the foot of the Imperial Mountain. It is a serene place, overlooking the West.

NATURAL FEATURES

Most of Eagle Prefecture is coastal or riverside, and fish is one of the major foodstuffs of the people here. Most of the farmable land here is used as pastureland, to provide milk, cheese and meat to sell for high prices to the islands off the western coast.

CITIES

EAGLE'S LAUNCH

Population: 16,000

Governor: Orchid Sand is the son of the prefect. Although his father is of House Sesus, Sand doesn't have the same loyalty to that House. Even as a child, he could tell that it was watching him carefully. He worked to please the Great House, until he realized that his only worth was based on whether or not he Exalted. He has not and is unlikely to do so at this point. Indeed, he will happily take bribes from merchants who seek to make their passage easier, effectively countering his mother's efforts to harass them.

Eagle's Launch is a major port city along the western shore, and it boasts a deeply impressive market, with all manner of goods from the sea and the traders of the West. Eagle's Launch is also home to a variety of siaka- and whale-hunters, and these adventurers bring great riches to the city as well. (They also liven things up occasionally by hanging a new siaka corpse off a 50-foot platform at the Great Docks.)

TOWNS

Cloaka (Pop. 1,800): Prism Flame acts as the governor of Cloaka, and with good reason—her family is the richest and most influential clan of patricians in the area. The Prism clan breeds firemanes, incredibly fast horses known for their brilliant red manes. Every summer, the city of Cloaka hosts a series of horse races, a third of which are open only to Dragon-Blooded horsemen, allowing them to compete against one another for fine rewards, including the pick of the Prism herds.

Glalo (Pop. 750): Glalo is a small fishing town that has slowly readopted a body of quaint traditions from the

prefecture's past. In truth, these practices are the beginnings of a full-on heresy, leading to the worship of a variety of small, local gods. Unfortunately, a traveling Ragara recently discovered this state of affairs and reported it back to the Immaculate Order.

Guin (Pop. 600): In contrast to Glalo, Guin is a river town made up of fanatical adherents of the Immaculate Philosophy. Unfortunately, this fanaticism recently led to the torture and murder of an old couple for "unwholesomely propitiating spirits" (i.e., putting out milk for a materialized cat-spirit). This barbaric act shocked the town, whose people have covered the fact up out of fear of punishment. Meanwhile, a terrible river dragon has begun eating livestock and threatening fishermen, who must now go farther from their homes to escape its hunting grounds. Many believe that the river dragon was sent as punishment for the atrocity they committed, and the town is afraid to report it, for fear that its secret will be uncovered.

WONDERS

Most of the manses in Eagle Prefecture belong to House Sesus, with the Immaculate Order's monastery-manses and imperial holdings running a close second and third.

NOTEWORTHY PERSONAE

GOVERNMENT FIGURES

Prefect: Orchid Coral, a woman of tremendous political influence acts as the prefect for Eagle Prefecture. She is married to the Dynast Sesus Lilon, an un-Exalted scion of House Sesus. As a result of her marriage, she is quite loyal to House Sesus, which pays her quite well. She tends to badger those merchants and others who travel from Eagle's Landing to the Peleps-held Tongma Isle.

HOUSE SESUS

House Sesus considers Eagle Prefecture to be its ancestral holding away from the Imperial City. In recent years, it has worked to have Eagle Prefecture and some of the surrounding prefectures declared a dominion.

OTHER PREFECTURES OF THE STORM COAST

The majority of the prefectures in the Storm Coast and Ahbrem Valley are agricultural or coastal prefectures, with a smattering of mining towns.

AYREON PREFECTURE

Ayreon is an all-but-forgotten prefecture in the area. Ignored by Dynasts for quite a long time, it is an excellent example of a prefecture that develops in the shadow of the Great Houses, but beneath their notice. Dominated by a guild of weaponsmiths known as the Talon League and the Starfall patrician clan, Ayreon is home to both fanatical Immaculate devotees and heresies worshiping a lion god deep in the hills.

STARGAZER PREFECTURE

Like many of its neighboring prefectures, Stargazer began as a simple agricultural prefecture, growing crops to feed the rest of the Blessed Isle. But perhaps 300 years ago, the prefect of Stargazer Prefecture, Stargazer Aveal, made an interesting discovery in an old library: a book that talked about a variety of ancient wonders of the First Age. Among them were descriptions of a kind of cat that generated a great deal of heat, sufficient to maintain a comfortable temperature around itself. Most interestingly, however, its physical description bore similarities to many of the domesticated cats of the region.

So this prefect and her family, the Stargazer clan, undertook a program in secret, attempting to breed the ancient hearth-cats back into existence. For years, they bred the cats, encouraging the development of those animals that showed the traits of the ancient hearth-cat. Then, after 50 years of trial and error, the first hearth-cat seen in Creation since the twilight years of the First Age was born.

The Stargazer clan presented the creatures to the Scarlet Empress in court, and she was so pleased with the rediscovery that she officially changed the name of the prefecture to their family name. She also named the Stargazers the Imperial Keepers of the Bloodlines of Hearth-Cats and forbade anyone else to breed the animals, save by permission of the Stargazer family. Now the family is quite rich and influential, with many breeding catteries and more than 14 separate bloodlines of hearth-cats, which must be carefully cultivated to maintain their unique abilities.

TONGMA ISLAND

Save for a few coastal areas, Tongma Island is sparsely populated. Between the occasional pirate raid and other dangers from the sea, life can be fairly difficult on the island. A few farming communities exist toward the center of the island, away from the coast, but they don't produce sufficient food to feed the whole of its population.

CLIMATE

Tongma Island sees fine temperate island weather, with bright, warm summers and chilly winters with plenty of freezing rain. Lush spring storms often blow from the West during spring, providing fine, salt-scented warm showers that often turn into near-typhoons during late summer and early autumn. The occasional typhoon blows in from out of a stormy Western horizon, but for the most part, Tongma Island's weather systems are tame and comfortable.

ANIMALS

Tongma is home to an incredible variety of sea birds, as well as a cove of sea lions along its northern shore, in Sharu Prefecture. Other animals, including a breed of monkeys brought to the island from the West that have adapted to the cooler temperatures of Tongma, make their

homes here. Tongma also boasts a population of boar and herds of wild deer in the ample wilderness areas in the center of the island.

WAVEHOLD PREFECTURE

The central prefecture of Tongma Island, Wavehold Prefecture is home to the Water Fleet, perhaps the largest of the Imperial Navy's fleets. Wavehold Prefecture is almost entirely a naval prefecture, existing to provide one of the naval fleets a headquarters. It is only in the last 50 years or so that Wavehold has served the function. Before then, the Water Fleet was based out of Eagle Prefecture. It soon outgrew the bustling trading port, however, and the Imperial Navy moved its port of call across the stretch of sea that separates Tongma Island from the rest of the Blessed Isle.

NATURAL FEATURES

Wavehold Prefecture occupies the tallest points on Tongma Island. From the center of Wavehold, land sweeps downward toward the other prefectures. Away from the coasts, the land is fairly green and rolling, with more than a few naturally wild areas. The biggest of these forests, the High Wood, is said to be home to a mighty stag. According to local legends, it is the God-Blooded get of the forest god of the High Wood.

CITIES

PORT WAVEHOLD

Population: 24,500

Governor: Peleps Haru seeks to rectify the shame of his not Exalting by being at the forefront of his House's efforts to seize power on Tongma Island. To this end, he has installed spies in nearly every settlement of the over 300 that dot the island and is quickly ferreting out which bureaucrats in his employ do not work for him.

Port Wavehold is somewhat of a ramshackle city, as its large size is a very new phenomenon. When the Imperial Navy moved the port of call for the Water Fleet away from Eagle's Launch, it chose the then-smaller Port Wavehold for the honor of hosting it. Shortly thereafter, the city's population swelled dramatically, forcing the city bureaucracy to mandate a quick upswing in the infrastructure that nearly decimated its funds. It stabilized within a few years, though, and is now a bustling port city.

The city sits on a fairly steep downward slope that overlooks a deep-water harbor bordered by a crescent of land. On the outer horns of this crescent are two large pillars of red and black jade that burn with fire eternally, powered by a dragon line that runs the curve of the harbor. The docks here are impressively extensive, and the city is divided into three sections, separated by height on the slope and accessible among one another though tunnels into the slope upon which they are built. These three sections are Docktown, the Commons and Upslope, where patrician, Dynastic and rich merchant holdings overlook the rest of the city.

WONDERS

The manses and similar areas of Wavehold are not specifically held by any one faction. The Immaculate Order and the Water Fleet hold quite a few of the manses here, using them for their purposes, and now that House Peleps has turned its eye to the islands surrounding the Blessed Isle, it has begun securing several of these as well.

NOTEWORTHY PERSONAE

GOVERNMENT FIGURES

Prefect: Seagull Star acts as the appointed prefect. A member of one of the Five Families of Tongma, Star is doing everything in his power to prevent the usurpation of power that House Peleps clearly plans. Unfortunately, he is hard pressed to resist the Essence-powered administrative tricks that a skilled Dragon-Blooded bureaucrat has at his disposal.

Admiral of the Water Fleet: Ledaal Calin is the admiral of the Water Fleet, and he takes his job quite seriously. He is loyal to the Imperial Navy as a whole, but he is not willing to use his position to help House Peleps seize power on Tongma Island, perhaps the primary reason why it has not done so. He has also forbidden the men under him from taking part in such activities.

Elements within House Peleps have sought to get the man removed from power, but cooler heads have prevailed. After all, House Peleps must maintain a certain number of admiralities in the hands of other Houses. Additionally, the man is superbly suited for the job, and the Empress herself appointed him. Finally, no one really wants to be the admiral of the Water Fleet. The real reason House Peleps does not remove him is simple: He is an admiral of incredible skill, and should House Peleps seek to dominate the waters of the Inland Sea, they don't want Ledaal Calin as part of the opposition.

HOUSE PELEPS

Since the disappearance of the Empress, House Peleps has chosen to absent itself from the race of those seeking to hold the Scarlet Throne. Its scions have not turned their backs on power, however. Instead, they have decided to use this opportunity to cement their hold on as many of the small, bureaucratically unimportant islands that surround the Blessed Isle as they can. House Peleps has brought a great deal of its resources to bear on this island, sending in groups of bureaucrats and spies to determine who holds the power. It is only a matter of time before it belongs to House Peleps.

THE FIVE FAMILIES

The five most powerful families on Tongma Island maintain a long-standing alliance with one another, working to keep the lesser families in their places and power in their own hands. Never have they been more pressed than with the coming of the Peleps. Clans Seagull, Blue-star, Wave, Sweetwind and Sealion find themselves hard pressed. Their only defense is their secrecy. Not even the

Peleps realize how much influence the families wield. It is only a matter of time before they do, however, and the Five Families fear what might happen once that occurs. They pray for a resolution to the question of the Scarlet Throne, that they might request an interdiction from the Imperial Bureaucracy on this matter.

OTHER PREFECTURES OF TONGMA ISLAND

The other two prefectures of Tongma are simple farming and fishing prefectures, for the most part.

THE SILK & PEARL PENINSULA

The Silk & Pearl Peninsula is the closest thing to an untamed frontier the Blessed Isle has. Although it was clearly populated in the past—ruins all over the place attest to this fact—the population here hasn't risen significantly since the Great Contagion. The cities here are bureaucratic necessities. Rather than placing a prefectural government in a convenient large town, more than one of the cities of the peninsula was established by the Imperial Bureaucracy for the purpose of making it grow to meet the government's needs.

The majority of the settlements here are fishing villages and small trading port towns. The cities themselves serve as centers of trade, taking the extensive goods produced by the settlements and shipping them elsewhere on the island for sale.

The shallow seabeds that surround the peninsula are rarely of any real use for large ships. Only light ships are able to get anywhere near the shore. These shallows are home to countless miles of clam and oyster beds, which are the main product of the peninsula's fishing villages. The clams are coveted all over the Blessed Isle for their rich taste, and the oysters here provide the pearls for which this area is justly known.

Further inland is a wilderness, but not of trees. These lands show definite signs of having once been agricultural fields, but now they are merely the home to mile after mile of towering, whistling bamboo. Some of these forests have been cleared and the land planted with the already-native mulberry bushes, in order to cultivate silk-worms and the fine pearlsilk of the Silk & Pearl Peninsula, coveted for its strange, ethereal sheen and incredibly high price. The silk-makers here craft other, lesser forms of silk as well, for more common purchasers.

CLIMATE

The Silk & Pearl Peninsula is well known as a balmy, warm place, with gentle rains during the warm months of the year. Winters tend toward mildness, and the warm, wet air here tends to create large banks of fog most mornings, turning the bamboo forests into places of eerie, ghostly silence. The weather here is tended by the Principality of the Shore.

ANIMALS

The coastal areas are home to a variety of fish and large sea serpents, as well as the occasional pod of whales.



The farms here possess many of the typical domesticated animals, though smaller goats are preferred over cattle for milk. The forests of bamboo are home to a variety of animals, from small groups of wild pigs (not quite large or fearsome enough to be truly called “boars”) and a sizeable population of pandas.

NOTEWORTHY PREFECTURES

For the most part, the prefectures of the Silk & Pearl Peninsula are unremarkable. The prefectures themselves are quite large, due to the scarcity of settlements in the peninsula. There are too few large cities that are capable of acting as prefectural capitals, so those cities that do exist are required to oversee villages many times farther away than is normal. Most of these prefectures are reached by the Bamboo Road, a circular road that cuts directly through the incredible forest of bamboo in the center of the peninsula. It is not unknown for bandits to lurk among these dense groves, waiting for traveling merchants and other easy prey.

THE DAOSHIN PENINSULA

The Daoshin Peninsula is sparsely populated, with large prefectural borders due to the difficulty of finding appropriately sized cities to act as capitals of those prefectures. The Daoshin Peninsula’s prefectures are sparsely populated due to deliberate efforts, though, as their farms have been long since overworked, leaving much of the soil dry and dusty.

A decade ago, it was decided that the land here needed assistance. The Empress established the Ministry of Renewal, a special and temporary bureaucracy meant to reestablish the lands in the peninsula as rich, productive farmland. This ministry consists of the prefects of all the prefectures in Daoshin, as well as three Immaculate monks and a pair of Heptagram geomancers, and it is overseen by Ragara Usha, a Wood-aspected graduate of the Spiral Academy, appointed as the Minister of Renewal.

One of this minister’s first undertakings was to uproot the population of half the villages in the prefectures. These people were then moved to the Isle of Eternal Leaves, a large forested island off the coast of Daoshin that had recently been divided into two prefectures. These families were taught logging techniques, allowing them to continue to be productive by providing lumber to the needs of the Realm.

In the meantime, the prefects work to renew the farms that now lie abandoned, adding in soil components long since leached out. The Immaculates work with the spirits of the area, urging them to assist in the renewal of the land, as is their mandate under Heaven. (In some cases, they are assured a higher importance on the Immaculate Calendar in order to provide them with the Essence they need to work these miracles.) Meanwhile, the geomancers work to improve the power of the local dragon lines of fertility, aiding the work of the spirits through sorcery and geomancy.

By current estimates, the farms currently abandoned will be perfectly renewed in two years. At that time, the ministry will oversee the return of those families to their original homes, while leaving them the option of remaining and continuing to act as loggers and lumberjacks should they choose. Then, the second batch of farms will have to be abandoned, with those families moving either onto farms that are now abandoned or to the Isle of Eternal Leaves to work themselves.

The Ministry of Renewal estimates that in five years, it will have the entire Daoshin Prefecture producing more crops than it has in generations, as well as having established a new lumber economy for the prefectures.

CLIMATE

The Daoshin Peninsula receives many dry, warm winds from the South. This, combined with the slow degradation of the soil to a dry, dusty mass, was beginning to transform the formerly green fields of its prefectures into dry patches occasionally blown over by blinding dust storms. That condition has begun to improve somewhat, with the steps taken by the Ministry of Renewal, but the hot, dry winds still chase away much of the moisture of summer days. The Daoshin Peninsula is spared most terrible sea-storms by the Isle of Eternal Leaves.

ANIMALS

The Daoshin Peninsula proper has very few true wilderness areas left. The farms there usually maintain domesticated animals, but just in numbers sufficient to sustain a family. The Daoshin Peninsula is not a ranching or herding locale.

The Island of Eternal Leaves is a different story. Large herds of wild deer roam the forests here, as do wolves, boars and bears. Large raptors and strix can be found here as well, and the new families here are taught to watch carefully and never go into the forests alone. This proliferation of good hunting has attracted the attention of the Dragon-Blooded, who have begun to show up here in numbers.

EMERALD PREFECTURE

Based around Emerald Port on its westernmost spar of land, the Emerald Prefecture has seen tremendous growth in the recent past. As a result, those few settlements that already existed are becoming overcrowded, while other villages are being founded along its outer rim.

The forests of Emerald Prefecture are still lush and impressive, clearly holding many secrets. Recently, one of the first new lumber villages, Three Stags, discovered a set of ruins from the First Age. Although the explorers activated some kind of automaton defense that killed those brave enough to enter the ruins, it was clear that the place was a manse, lined with moonsilver in vital locations. The local prefect believes that this is some temple of the Anathema from the First Age and has dispatched a request for assistance.



Arjuf Dominion, a Magnitude 6 Dominion

Military: 2 **Government:** 3 **Culture:** 4

Abilities: Awareness 3 (Heliograph +1), Bureaucracy 3, Craft 3 (Famed Metalworkers +3), Integrity 2 (Religious Edict +1), Investigation 2 (Wyld Hunt Presence +3), Occult 2 (Immaculate Alliance with the Red Tables +3), Performance 3 (Organized Crime +3), Presence 3, Stealth 2, War 4 (The House of Bells +3)

Virtues: Compassion 3, Conviction 3, Temperance 4, Valor 3

Virtue Flaw: Temperance **Current Limit:** 3

Willpower: 7

Bonus Points: 30 **External Bonus Points:** 10

Notes: Prefect Ledaal Maris is a sorcerer with legitimacy in Arjuf Dominion. The dominion's bonus points have been used to buy one extra Temperance and Willpower, as well as for the various specialties. Arjuf's external bonus points are not assigned (allowing for easier Storyteller customization). The profits of the dominion's ubiquitous merchants depends on the region's stability. Therefore, its Virtue Flaw often manifests as an unwillingness of the population to accept change of any sort while in Limit Break, whether that change would benefit them or not.

Lord's Crossing Dominion, a Magnitude 6 Dominion

Military: 2 **Government:** 4 **Culture:** 3

Abilities: Awareness 3 (Heliograph +1), Bureaucracy 2, Craft 3 (Architectural Innovation +3), Integrity 3 (Shared Loss +1), Investigation 3 (Wide Contact +3), Occult 2, Performance 3 (Fool the Populace +3), Presence 3 (Military Spectacle +3), Stealth 2, War 4

Virtues: Compassion 3, Conviction 2, Temperance 3, Valor 4

Virtue Flaw: Valor **Current Limit:** 9

Willpower: 8

Bonus Points: 30 **External Bonus Points:** 5

Notes: Prefect Carpenter Reason is the dominion's legitimate sorcerer. Some of the dominion's bonus points were used to buy an additional dot of War and Willpower. The remainder are tied up in various specialties. Lord's Crossing Dominion's external bonus points are not assigned (allowing for easier Storyteller customization). A region that's always prided itself on the exemplary military service of its people, the recent loss of the Tepet legions has deeply wounded the dominion's pride. During Limit Break, the people of Lord's Crossing lose their will to fight, seeing loss as inevitable.

Eagle Prefecture, a Magnitude 6 Dominion

Military: 2 **Government:** 3 **Culture:** 4

Abilities: Awareness 2 (Heliograph +1), Bureaucracy 2 (Well-Placed Bribe +1), Craft 3 (Public Works +3), Integrity 4 (Tight-Knit Heritage +2), Investigation 3 (Conduct Interviews +1, Due Diligence +2), Occult 2 (Religious Zealotry +3), Performance 2, Presence 3 (Organized Crime +1), Stealth 3 (Agents Provocateurs +3), War 3

Virtues: Compassion 3, Conviction 4, Temperance 3, Valor 3

Virtue Flaw: Conviction **Current Limit:** 4

Willpower: 8

Bonus Points: 30 **External Bonus Points:** 7

Notes: Orchid Coral, the prefect, is a sorcerer with legitimacy in Eagle Prefecture. A number of its bonus points are tied up in an extra dot of Temperance and of Willpower. The rest make up its specialties. The dominion's external bonus points are not assigned (allowing for easier Storyteller customization). The piety of the people of Eagle Prefecture is without question (though it sometimes veers into heresy). The dominion's Conviction Virtue Flaw often drives the inhabitants to commit great atrocities in the name of religion while in Limit Break.



GO AHEAD, TIME RAIN. WE WON'T BE OVERHEARD HERE.



THANK YOU FOR SEEING ME, PREFECT MNEMON. I WON'T KEEP YOU LONG.

JUST GET ON WITH IT, RAIN. I'M MISSING THE PARADE.

AS YOU KNOW, I HAD A DEAL WITH THE EMPRESS. SHE MADE THE LEGIONS BUY FOOD FROM ONLY MY PREFECTURE, AND I KEPT PRICES LOW. WITH HER GONE, I FEAR THAT DEAL COMING UNDONE.



WHAT HAS THAT TO DO WITH ME?

YOU'RE THE EMPRESS'S GRANDSON. YOUR MOTHER MIGHT BE NEXT TO SIT ON THE THRONE. A SUGGESTION FROM YOU...



MY MOTHER AND I SELDOM AGREE, RAIN. SHE'D NEVER LISTEN.

INDEED. YOU WON'T BE PREFECT LONG IF SHE ASCENDS TO THE SCARLET THRONE...



THEN WHAT—

SAY YOU SUPPORTED TEPET EJAVA AGAINST YOUR MOTHER. IF YOU COULD PROVIDE A CONCRETE ADVANTAGE EJAVA WOULD VALUE YOUR WISE COUNSEL.



CHAPTER SIX

THE HEART OF THE REALM



Many of those who travel to the Scarlet Prefecture think of it as only the home of the Imperial City, but the capital takes up only a small portion of the prefecture itself. Ranging from the most metropolitan to the most rural, and from towering cliffs to gentle valleys, the Scarlet Prefecture truly is a diverse region. The Imperial City represents only a portion of its immeasurable variety.

NATURAL FEATURES

While the single most notable feature of the Scarlet Prefecture is undoubtedly man-made, travelers to this region are often surprised by the natural beauty of the prefecture. Even that beauty, however, is as often crafted as natural, the result of centuries of occupation by some of the most powerful individuals in all of Creation. Regardless, whether formed by nature or by the hands and wills of the Dragon-Blooded who have made their home there for generations, the “natural” beauty of the Scarlet Prefecture is a wonder to behold.

GEOGRAPHY

Although it is diminutive compared to some of the sweeping prefectures that span the Blessed Isle, the Scarlet Prefecture has been the single most important region in Creation for over 700 years. A scant 150 miles wide, it stretches from the Imperial City in the west to the eastern coast of the Blessed Isle, where Dragonsmouth, its principal port, is located. Juche Prefecture borders it on the western edge, and its northern and eastern edges are coastline, following the rocky shores of the Imperial Bay out to where it becomes part of the Inland Sea.

Bordered on one side by the Imperial River Basin and the other by the rocky Jade Coast, the prefecture largely consists of low rolling hills and shallow pastoral valleys. Near the eastern edge, the land becomes decidedly more craggy. The cliffs south of Yolin Am are among the highest prized lands on the Blessed Isle, outside the Imperial City itself. House Mnemon has a long-term lease on a manor house



and particularly extensive grounds just south of the city, but other of the Great Houses also find the dramatic cliff vistas well worth the equally lofty lease rates.

While the Imperial River technically flows alongside, rather than through, the Scarlet Prefecture, and it is not home to any other major river systems, the area does not lack for water. Thanks to the combined attentions of the Children of Pasiap and Daana'd, there is not a farming community or village in the Scarlet Prefecture without access to at least a functional well to provide them fresh water. In some areas, entire irrigation and aqueduct systems have been commissioned, although such projects are much more common on Dragon-Blooded estates or the wealthiest patricians holdings. The vast majority of the outlying prefecture relies on far simpler and less expensive methods of water distribution. The Imperial City, of course, has the finest and most advanced water-provision system in all of Creation. The Empress's recent disappearance and the possibility of a power structure change, however, have shifted attention that was once placed on municipal maintenance and improvement into more pertinent areas—such as political maneuvering and power-mongering.

CLIMATE

The climate around the Scarlet Prefecture is near to perfect, although how much of it is natural, and how much the result of almost a millennium of constant attention from Creation's most powerful Dragon-Blooded is uncertain. Five full growing seasons are possible in this area every year, and those who ply their trade by tilling the soil in the region are well rewarded for their labors. The gentle valleys serve to provide pockets of semitropical weather almost year round, while the rolling hills provide enough diversity of elevation to allow for chilly weather in the heights, although hard frosts are rare within the prefecture's borders. Even the coastlines, where storms would normally flail the rocky cliffs on a regular basis, are generally milder in climate than they would be without the influence of the high density of elementally aspected individuals who make their homes here.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Eight hundred years of occupation will take their toll on any area, and the Scarlet Prefecture is no exception. Much of the area's once abundant natural resources have long since been depleted in the Imperial City's incessant growth over the past eight centuries, despite the Terrestrial Exalted attention the region has received.

WOODLANDS

Especially around the Imperial City, once-forested lands have been cleared to allow the area to be used for building or farming. Those trees large enough to be harvested for building materials have long since been incorporated into dwellings, stores and craft shops within the city's walls. As the supply of building materials close to the city waned in the

third century of the Realm, construction teams were forced to look farther and farther away for materials to keep up with the ever-growing demand for new buildings. Forests across the Blessed Isle were cleared to cater to the Imperial City's incessant demand for expansion. Now, the deepest forests in the Scarlet Prefecture are those cultivated by the Great Houses able to afford the luxury of surrounding their dwellings outside of the city with large forested tracts of land.

MINERALS

Despite its proximity to the Elemental Pole of Earth, the Imperial River Basin is not overly laden with jade or other precious minerals, that being more the purview of the rugged hills and mountains closer to the Imperial Mountain. Occasional deposits of beryl and sapphire are discovered in the southern edges of the Scarlet Prefecture, but never in significant enough amounts to warrant a full-scale excavation operation.

WILDLIFE

As often happens with any area where the population of cities and farmlands steadily increases, the once-wild land of the Scarlet Prefecture has been tamed, and the vast array of flora and fauna that once could be found there has made way for cultivated crops and domesticated animals. Even more than the explosion of civilization, the presence of thousands of long-lived and adventure-seeking Dragon-Blooded has decimated the game population of the prefecture many times over.

Once thickly populated with boar, bear and stag, as well as countless smaller game species, the larger beasts have been predominantly driven away from the region around the Imperial City as land there is cleared for farming and dwelling space. For a sizeable wild population, one must travel far away from the city and the more sizeable towns of the prefecture. Even these areas are nowhere near as densely endowed with large game as they once were.

A plethora of small game can be found in the prefecture, ranging from hares and foxes to pheasants and quail. For the most part, those animals that remain in any significant numbers in the wild are those considered to be no challenge for aspiring Dragon-Blooded hunters. Near the Imperial City, however, their populations have been devastated by the hungry denizens who dwell in the low-class city that has sprung up outside the city's walls. For the most part—other than those on Dragon-Blooded reserves, protected by threat of death from city poachers—the only non-domesticated animals that remain around the Imperial City are scavengers who have adapted to the spread of civilization onto their once-pristine territories. Rats, crimson vultures, raccoons, wild dogs and feral cats slink through the crowded alleys and convoluted pathways in and around the Imperial City and have created their own niche there, and to a lesser degree around all of the villages, towns and cities of the Scarlet Prefecture.





AGRICULTURE AND RURAL COMMERCE

While the Scarlet Prefecture is no longer as richly endowed with metals or lumber as other regions of the Blessed Isle are, it is nigh perfect for agriculture. Chief among the agricultural crops of the area are luxury items, much in demand by the Dragon-Blooded and their patrician compatriots, but which do not travel well by ship or merchant caravan. These crops include delicate fruits, such as caimo—whose fragile, caramel-flavored flesh bruises with anything but the most vigilant care—and durian—a prickly fruit that has a picking season of only a single day between its green and overripe stages. While farmers also plant less care-intensive crops, it is the luxury items upon which they often place their hopes for rising above subsistence farming.

Of course, with delicate items, farmers prefer to be as close as possible to their preferred markets. Yet, as lease rates for land within a day's travel of the Imperial City cost more than most farming families could raise in an entire year, the lands within a 30-mile radius of the city walls are almost entirely leased to Dynasts and patricians. These extensive estates host manor houses and vacation homes for those who wish a respite from the hustle, bustle and crowding of the Imperial City.

Further out, however, especially in the 100 miles of land between the "estate ring" and the Jade Coast, several decent-sized farming communities can be found, along with other scattered rural undertakings. There are roughly a half dozen agricultural settlements in the Scarlet Prefecture of note. A few are true towns, including Nachin, Crescent Mills and the immodestly named Glorious Haven. Each such town boasts of thousands of permanent citizens, and each is auspiciously located along a major trade road into the Imperial City. Others, such as the villages of Juxu or Clear Creek, are off the beaten path and consist of little more than a grouping of a few dozen farm families large enough to support a simple market and teahouse.

TRANSPORTATION WITHIN THE PREFECTURE

Without the presence of major rivers within its borders, much of the travel that happens within the Scarlet Prefecture is done over land. Whether on foot, riding or by cart or palanquin, it is far easier, faster and very often safer to travel via the established roads. Not only are there conveniently located hostels and lodging houses for travelers along the main routes, but all but the most adamant brigands are kept clear of the imperial roads due to the presence of traveling legions of the Empress's troops assigned to the task.

THE GREAT COAST ROAD

While it completely circumnavigates the Blessed Isle, the Great Coast Road can be said to begin—and end—in the Imperial City. Stretching for many thousands of miles, the Great Coast Road is without peer in Creation in terms

of transportation routes. As is fitting, it spans the entirety of the Scarlet Prefecture, running roughly diagonally from its northwest corner to the far southeast where it takes a sharp southern turn and proceeds along the Jade Coast.

Many of the lesser roads in the Scarlet Prefecture branch off of the Great Coast Road, taking travelers to towns, farming communities or private estates. Some, such as the Bay Highway, are well maintained—publicly or privately—and are marked on maps. Others, depending on the frequency and density of travelers, and the wealth of their end destination, are less well preserved and patrolled.

Where the Great Coast Road traverses the eastern edge of the Scarlet Prefecture, it is sometimes called the Jade Coast Road. Those who travel its length are treated to some of the most amazing views to be found anywhere in Creation. The Jade Coast Road runs southward along the eastern coastline of the Blessed Isle and curving west at Sion, near the Palace Sublime. Many claim that the portion of the Great Coast Road along the Jade Coast was originally a pilgrimage path, but as more and more wealthy devout and aspiring pre-acolytes made the journey each year, the road was widened and improved to ease their travels. While the Jade Coast area of the Coast Road is patrolled by both imperial legionnaires and traveling monks of the Immaculate Order, the presence of well-paid caravan guards hired by nobles making the journey down the coast also contributes significantly to its safety.

THE BAY HIGHWAY (THE STRONG AND FLOWING THROAT OF THE DRAGON)

Running north-south from Dragonsmouth to the Imperial City, the Strong and Flowing Throat of the Dragon—often shortened simply to The Throat—is the remains of a First Age road. Also called the Bay Highway, it is still well cobbled for most of its more than 100-mile route, though some of the stones have had to be replaced after having been removed clandestinely for use in building projects along the way. At one point, the thefts were so debilitating to travel that the Imperial Bureaucracy was forced to make such theft punishable by a month's indentured service repairing roads in the prefecture for each stone removed. Since then, the road has remained mostly unmolested.

As the most common route for military and merchant shipments into the Imperial City, the Throat is well maintained and is the best-patrolled minor route in the Realm. Small villages dot its length, providing travelers easy access to accommodations. Many of the stopping places include well-cleared bivouac areas to accommodate merchant caravans or legions on the march, with an emphasis on providing the basic necessities rather than luxurious lodgings.

THE PATH OF PLEASANT HILLS

Beginning in the upscale town of Yolin Am, the Path of Pleasant Hills runs just over 100 miles, leading—as do all good things—to the Imperial City. It is, like everything



associated with Yolin Am, pristinely maintained and of immaculate appearance. From the town gate for an entire day's travel westward, the sides of the Path of Pleasant Hills are landscaped with dramatic groupings of bamboo and flowers by gardeners in service to the city, making sure that those who enter—or leave—the city will long remember their journey. This landscaping includes delicate pavilions where travelers might rest beside reflecting pools populated with domesticated waterfowl to foster a sense of serenity and gracious accommodation.

URBAN AREAS IN THE PREFECTURE

Obviously, as the largest city in all of Creation, the Imperial City stands alone as a model of urban civilization in the Scarlet Prefecture. When faced with such a striking primary example, it is easy for other notable locations to become eclipsed by its glory. A number of other towns of note exist within the Scarlet Prefecture, though.

DRAGONSMOUTH

As the largest port in the Scarlet Prefecture—with more than 60,000 full-time residents—Dragonsmouth is an avenue for most of the sea trade that supplies the Dragon-Blooded and patricians of the Imperial City with food and finished goods. The notion of goods flowing into Dragonsmouth, down the Strong and Flowing Throat of the Dragon to the all-consuming throngs of the Imperial City is not lost on those who make their living unloading cargo day after day in the port town.

Like the Imperial City itself, Dragonsmouth is built over and around the ruins of a First Age fortress. Unlike the capital, however, most of what once was “the Eternal Gate” fell before Dragonsmouth was reborn on the same site, victim to attacks by sea raiders and disrepair. Little remains of the former stalwart settlement save for a few elegantly crafted walls.

Upon ascending to the Scarlet Throne, the Empress made supply lines a major priority, and Dragonsmouth was founded on the ruins of the Eternal Gate. Taxes were poured into building not only the most extensive dock system on the Blessed Isle, but the Imperial Shipworks, rivaling the shipyards of the Western islands in efficiency.

To say Dragonsmouth is a loyal city would be an understatement. Only the most trusted bureaucrats and military leaders are stationed in the port city, so vital is it to fulfilling the needs of the Imperial City itself. The Governor, Cathak Brynna, is an un-Exalted human who served as the city's harbormaster for 20 years before being installed as its governor. Brynna has always felt the call of the sea. Her decades of work supervising first her family's interests in the imperial port and then those of the city as well have given her an understanding of the city on an intrinsic level. Brynna possesses an uncanny knack for knowing which situations can be allowed to work themselves out and which require her particular attention.

The city's new harbormaster, a position with only slightly less influence in the city than the governorship itself, is Nellens

Alamar, formerly head bureaucrat of House Nellens' fishing interests out of the Imperial Bay. Also un-Exalted, Alamar provides a good balance for the new governor's instinctive decision-making policies, tempering them with constant reminders of the laws and regulations of which she might not always wish to be reminded.

GLORIOUS HAVEN

Located at the southeastern edge of the Scarlet Prefecture, Glorious Haven caters to those who wish to enjoy the striking vistas of the Jade Coast but cannot afford to lease their own vacation homes there. Its permanent population is relatively small, numbering just under 5,000, and the vast majority of those who live in Glorious Haven all year are involved in the service industry in one form or another.

At any given time, there are easily as many visitors and guests in the town as permanent residents. Accommodations in Glorious Haven number more than 100 lodges—varying from small wooden houses of only a few rooms to the palatial Jade Auberge, which boasts of its ability to host rival Houses in its sprawling wings without the members ever having to meet. Glorious Haven welcome tens of thousands of guests every year, and those visitors pay royally for the privilege of enjoying one of the most dramatic landscapes the Blessed Isle has to offer.

Glorious Haven is just off the Great Coast Road, and its siren call is a temptation few pilgrims making their way south to the Palace Sublime can resist. Unlike Yolin Am, Glorious Haven does not cater only to the wealthiest of the wealthy, making it a popular stopping point for those who aspire to live the life of the upper crust without bankrupting themselves. Therefore, it does not retain the same bragging rights for the high society of the Realm that a stay in Yolin Am does. Those who visit are more likely to refer to their stay as “on the Jade Coast” rather than referencing Glorious Haven itself.

YOLIN AM

While many of the largest—and wealthiest—cities in the Realm are located directly along the Great Coast Road, the island-bay port of Yolin Am is several days off it, connected by the Path of Pleasant Hills. Yolin Am is set atop a majestic wall of cliffs, offering its 13,000 inhabitants a breathtaking view of the Inland Sea. Yet, it is not the cliffs that bring the hoi polloi flocking to Yolin Am, nor the view that has given the town its reputation. Like many of the cliffs of the Jade Coast, the ones upon which Yolin Am rests protect a small bay far below. Unlike other towns on the northern Jade Coast, however, the bay—and the gleaming green-sand beach it protects—is accessible from the cliff tops.

The bay beach is warm and tranquil, quite unlike the rest of the rugged Jade Coast, and has been valued for centuries as a respite destination for those desiring to “take the waters.” The bay is so shallow that Yolin Am is unreachable by water for any but the smallest of ocean-going vessels, but the inlet is ringed at a distance by a small chain of tiny





islands. While each is too small to support more than the most basic of structures, industrious architects have built an extensive docking system reaching seaward from this chain. This system sits at the edge of an underwater shelf that allows even the deepest-bellied sea vessels to put up in the expansive docks there.

Passengers bound for the Imperial City who wish to avoid Dragonsmouth can put into port at the Yolin Am docks and—for a fee—be ferried across the shallow inlet and up the cliffs to the town proper. This route avoids the port town of Dragonsmouth altogether, but the convenience is paid for by the added expense of the ferry and the likewise rich fee for riding in the artifact lift known as Gracious Ascent up the sheer cliff face. Therefore, the route is a favorite of traveling patricians or Dragon-Blooded who can both afford the expense and the bragging rights of having come into the prefecture through Yolin Am.

The town, for its part, has played up its elitist clientele, offering some of the most exclusive, extravagant and expensive lodging and dining to be found in the Scarlet Prefecture. For this reason, military or merchant vessels rarely use it, as the expense of ferrying large numbers of troops or extensive cargoes would be cost prohibitive. Plus, the city is not well suited to billeting legions inexpensively nor to handling any but the most luxurious of cargo.

Unlike most areas of Creation where peasants and disenfranchised are an expected and common part of the average population, Yolin Am is almost eerily devoid of them. Situated almost a full day's travel north of the intersection with the Throat, there is little reason for anyone but the wealthy—or those who cater to them—to travel into or out of Yolin Am. Osprey Yanisin, the city's governor, maintains a strict loitering law, which is stridently enforced. Those who attempt to avoid imperial scrutiny by bypassing Dragonsmouth without the ability to fit in with the upper crust of Realm society will quickly draw the attention of the Eagle's Talon, Governor Yanisin's utterly efficient Guardians of the Realm.

NOTABLE MANSES

Not all of the important features of the Scarlet Prefecture are located within a city. Nowhere in Creation are there as many dragon lines as on the Blessed Isle, and the Scarlet Prefecture contains some of the strongest in Creation. Two of the most powerful cross at the location of the Imperial Manse at the heart of the Imperial Palace, but a plethora of manses of each element exist within the region, ranging from fairly weak to very powerful.

FLAWLESS RILL FREEHOLD (WATER •)

Located at the site where one of the Scarlet Prefecture's purest underground streams comes to the surface, this manse is one of the most beautiful, if not powerful, manses on the Blessed Isle. Built by House Iselsi in RY 224, the Flawless Rill Freehold's walls are crafted of translucent rainbow obsidian, which rises up out of the first few feet of the spring bed,

forcing the water to run around and through the building's split-foundation base. The manse itself shimmers in the reflected light from the constantly flowing stream and remains cool and peaceful even during the height of summer. As the demesne beneath it is more powerful than the manse itself (level 2, compared to the manse's level 1), the Iselsi architects who created the manse channeled the extra Essence into a striking aesthetic effect. The energy lights the building from below, casting a beautiful silver-black glow into the spring, which is then reflected back up onto the manse itself.

After House Iselsi's doomed coup attempt, the manse was ceded to House Mnemon, and is the dwelling of Mnemon Araska, Water-aspected granddaughter of Mnemon Caras, who takes no end of pleasure at putting to devout use what was once a haven of "Iselsi treachery."

The Deepstone Pearl, the Freehold's hearthstone, allows the bearer to access the manse's illuminating influence even from a distance. The bearer's player may also add three dice to any sight-related physical Investigation rolls. The hearthstone glows with the same silver-black gleam as the manse while being used in this fashion.

THE ENDURING BREATH OF HESIESH (FIRE ●●●●)

While manses built over geothermal vents might seem to be the natural purview of Air-aspected Dragon-Bloods, the Enduring Breath of Hesiesh leaves no question as to its fiery nature. Situated over a millennia-old fissure that constantly spews explosively hot sulfurous steam into the air, this manse is as deadly as it is powerful. Save for the Dragon-Blooded members of House Cathak who hold it, few can tolerate continued exposure to the heat produced from the vent, even channeled as it is by the manse itself.

While many manses are designed as dwelling places, the living quarters at the Enduring Breath of Hesiesh ring the manse itself, which takes the shape of a giant dragon sculpture. It is constructed of mahogany-red obsidian, carefully crafted so that the blood-colored veins in each individual block flow to the next, giving the structure the illusion of having been crafted from a single stone. The sculpture—which is large enough to enter via a cunningly hidden door but inhospitable to any but the most stalwart Fire-aspected Dragon-Blood—is hollow and situated over the fissure so that the steady stream of elementally hot breath churns up through it, emerging from the dragon's mouth and nostrils. This feature is a trick of architecture rather than the Essence-diverting effect of many lesser manses. The expert architects who designed the Enduring Breath of Hesiesh did their job particularly well, and the manse channels Essence quite efficiently.

The entire manse compound sits atop a craggy hill in the southern lands of the Scarlet Prefecture and has been steadily churning out its sulfurous smoke since early in the Scarlet Empress's reign.

Hesiesh's Ember, the manse's hearthstone, calls upon the hostile environment within the manse to protect its bearer. When the bearer concentrates to activate the hearthstone,



the bearer and companions are protected from ranged weapon attacks. The hearthstone wraps its bearer in a cloud of thin, yellow mist that extends 10 to 15 feet around him. The mist, which has a particularly foul sulfurous smell, swirls around the hearthstone's bearer and pushes away any incoming missile attacks. Wooden darts and arrows are ignited and fall burning to the ground, while stone, metal or other non-flammable materials are deflected. Non-magical metal missiles soften upon contact with the mist, losing their aerodynamic abilities, and will be unusable if recovered.

Like the Terrestrial Circle spell Impenetrable Frost Barrier, this hearthstone gives any ranged attack against the bearer, or anyone standing within the mist, an external penalty equal to twice the bearer's permanent Essence rating and is limited to protection from missiles weighing less than 30 pounds.

FIRST AGE RUINS

The Seat of Splendor upon which the Imperial City was built is the most notable of the First Age ruins in the Scarlet Prefecture, but it isn't the only one. Some are located in known places of power. Others seem to have been placed by their First Age architects with seclusion in mind—though few places in the Scarlet Prefecture could truly be considered remote in this day and age. Many have been reclaimed, either repaired to be put to use again or dismantled to use the building materials for new structures. Others, however, are left untouched: either remaining undiscovered by some twist of fate, or labeled as haunted or cursed and avoided by all but the bravest (or most foolhardy) of souls.

CARTHAN'S WASTELAND

Located in the furthest southwest corner of the Scarlet Prefecture, Carthan's Wasteland is a mile-wide swath of desolate, rocky ground, quite unlike the rest of the surrounding area. While the fields around it are rich with thick topsoil and lush grasses, nothing grows in the ruined ground around what once was rumored to be a well established First Age town. All that remains are the wrecked vestiges of once-tall towers and sweeping archways, now broken off at jagged angles above the ground like a street-brawler's mismatched teeth, and many deep craters, large enough to hold an entire fang of soldiers. While other First Age ruins in the Realm have been picked clean, none but the most stalwart scavengers have ventured into the stony wasteland—and of those, only a few have emerged again. Even the Scarlet Empress has not sent official reclamation parties into Carthan's Wasteland, after the first five scales of troops she sent were swallowed whole in its rocky depths. Rumors have it that she has had better luck with sending small scouting parties, although, officially, the area is designated as forbidden entry, on pain of death.

PERSONS OF NOTE

As the center of the Realm, the Scarlet Prefecture boasts more than its fair share of notable individuals, both human

and Exalted, and an even larger population who believe they are of singular import. Prior to her disappearance, individual import was starkly clear: Those who had the Empress's favor were powerful (although, of course, not compared to the Empress herself), while those who did not scrambled desperately to acquire it. Now, however, things are much more uncertain. The leaders of the Great Houses hold a great deal of power, as do those who held important positions at the Empress's behest. Chejop Kejak is certainly a force with which to be reckoned. Although he resides primarily at the Palace Sublime, his influence and that of the Immaculate Order runs throughout the Realm. Less obvious, however are the various magistrates, ministers, merchants, patricians and politicians who are involved in a constantly evolving game of risk and luck just below the surface of the Scarlet Prefecture's society.

TEPET FOKUF

As the August Lord Regent of the Scarlet Throne, Tepet Fokuf is theoretically, the single most powerful individual in all of Creation. The reality, however, is quite different. Appointed specifically for his ineffectiveness and lack of ambition, Fokuf has proven to be even more of an empty figurehead than those who appointed him intended. After discovering that the Regent would literally sign and seal any document or decree placed before him, his self-appointed councilors have found themselves bombarded with petitions for the Regent's attention. These incessant requests and requisitions are quickly muddying and eating away at what little remains of the tentative power balance left in the Empress's absence.

The pressure of the Scarlet Throne rests heavily upon the Regent's shoulders. Never a strong-willed individual, Fokuf now spends the vast majority of his time hiding in his chambers in the Imperial Palace, engaging in increasingly bizarre behavior, leading observers to wonder which will crumble first, the Realm or its Regent.

MNEMON BATA

The headstrong human son of the head of House Mnemon, Mnemon Bata is the de facto prefect of the Scarlet Prefecture. As an un-Exalted mortal, Bata was not of primary import to his family until appointed to his position by the Scarlet Empress. Now, as head bureaucrat in the most important region of the Realm, his once-condescending siblings and cousins now find themselves scrambling to court his favor.

As prefect, Bata does an admirable job, or did before the Scarlet Empress's disappearance. While it is in his best interest to make sure that the prefecture runs seamlessly in her absence, he knows that the chances of him being retained if a new regime comes into play are almost zero. Therefore, he has implemented a clandestine twofold agenda since the Empress's absence stretched out beyond previous disappearances. First, he is doing what he can to tilt the scales in favor of a successor rising from his own House, while maintaining an outwardly impartial political visage. In case this scale-tilting is not effective, however, he is also amassing as much portable





wealth in the form of jade obols as possible, arranging for it to be sequestered at a private manor in the Threshold. He has no less than three sailing ships on long-term standby should he need to flee the Imperial City: one in Dragonsmouth, another ported in Yolín Am and a third in a tiny fishing village at the mouth of the Imperial River. If the chosen successor to the Scarlet Throne proves unlikely to allow Bata to retain his position—or his life—Bata’s preparations will allow him to make a discreet and speedy withdrawal from Blessed Isle politics with sufficient wealth to live out the rest of his existence in comfort. Or so he hopes.

OSPREY YANISIN

A quiet man of impeccable bearing, Osprey Yanisin is the governor of Yolín Am. Despite being the son of a long line of the city’s most noble patrician family, Yanisin is quite handily in the pocket of House Ragara, specifically the Calel household. While no one in Yolín Am would dare ruffle the Osprey family’s figurative feathers by speaking of it, it is commonly held that Yanisin’s father was not his mother’s husband, Cerf, but instead the young and vibrant Ragara Calel Marat. As is common for his family, Marat traveled from his home in Juche Prefecture in his youth, spending the majority of one summer coming and going—literally and figuratively—through Yolín Am. There, he was seen to spend an inordinate amount of time in the company of Cerf’s young wife, Yotaka. Yanisin was born early the next spring. Had Cerf not been nearly 30 years older than his young wife, or had they had previous children to carry on the prestigious family line, perhaps more note might have been made of the fact that Yanisin’s swarthy features were quite unlike those of his pale, blonde father. Instead, Cerf and the entire Osprey line welcomed Yanisin’s arrival, as the continuation of the family name. When his father passed on, Yanisin—now in his late 20s—was surprised to find himself appointed as his successor. Despite the strings House Ragara likely pulled to arrange the appointment, Yanisin has done a respectable job, maintaining the high standards his family established for Yolín Am centuries ago. As for the Calel household, it watches his career with interest from its private docks on one of Yolín Am’s ring of islands and from the extensive estate it recently leased in Yolín Am proper.

SPIRIT COURTS

Nowhere in Creation are the little gods favored with the diligence and grandeur with which they are given reverence in the Imperial City. Several thousand temples—dedicated to the spirits of everything from organized warfare to baked goods to beeswax—line the streets and pathways of the Imperial City’s Temple District, a greater concentration of non-Dragon dedicated temples than can be found in any one location anywhere else in the Realm.

In contrast, outside of the Imperial City’s formal structure for reverence, the heretical worship of the little gods is more tightly monitored—and punished—than it is anywhere else

in Creation. The Immaculate Order’s policy that the Dragon-Blooded are the only individuals in Creation who are capable of dealing with the spirits appropriately is strictly enforced, especially in the villages and farming communities between the Imperial City and the Palace Sublime.

This paradox—plentiful worship, but only from a very specific source—along with the rigid control enforced by the high density of Immaculate monks in the region, has led to some strangeness among the spirit courts in the Scarlet Prefecture. Here, the structure and hierarchy of the spirit courts remained uncorrupted by the absence of the Celestial Exalted. The rigid and regimental sacrifices offered by the Immaculate Order to the small gods eliminates a great deal of the jockeying for position that is found outside the Realm where spirits are often worshiped directly, tempting them to strive for power outside the Celestial Order. Therefore, despite the absence of the Celestial Exalted who were tasked to oversee them, the majority of the spirit censors in the Scarlet Prefecture remain on duty, and the spiritual bureaucracy carries on much as it always has.

Another side effect of the Immaculate Order’s strength in the area is that there is a higher proportion of “converted spirits” in the Scarlet Prefecture than in any other location in Creation. Assured of a constant source of sacrifice without fear of their adulation being commandeered by interlopers, many spirits in and around the Imperial City condone the constructed Immaculate Philosophy. While they are not a frequent sight, it is not unheard of for the less powerful of the little gods to spout Immaculate doctrine, to make appearances at Immaculate temples, even going so far as to purport the “truth” of the Immaculate faith to the humans they encounter. Some do so out of fear—either of other spirits or of the inherent threat that in an area so strongly devoted to the Immaculate Philosophy, their worship could entirely disappear without the Immaculate Order’s reverences. Others see the proselytizing as an easy way to increase the possibility they will receive added reverence, unconcerned with the deception as long as the sacrifices continue.

THE ALL-EMBRACING AND INTRICATE PROCESSION OF PAPER

Headed by Shin Lao, the God of Imperial Documents within the Scarlet Empire, the All-Embracing and Intricate Procession of Paper is one of the core spirit courts of the Imperial City. Reporting directly to the Goddess of Factual Writing Related to Imperial Procedures, Shin Lao has been responsible for ensuring the veracity of imperial documents for close to four centuries. (He was promoted to the position from the ranks of the Lesser Gods of Treaties and Treatises of the Imperial City, which he now commands.) As suits a spirit of his responsibility, Shin Lao appears as a venerable gentleman of modest dress and comports himself at all times with the utmost of decorum. A tiny pair of spectacles perches on each of his three noses, granting his six ink-black eyes preternatural sharpness. His tactic in adversarial

situations is one of unyielding and yet apologetic calm. He will wait for decades if need be, for a particular piece of paperwork to be handed in properly, but no power in Creation will convince him to hurry along an improperly filed form.

THE BRIGADE OF WESTERN-FLOWING BREEZES

While all spirit courts take their work very seriously, not all jobs are as mundane as processing paperwork. Bordered to the north by the Imperial Bay and the east by the Inland Sea, the entirety of the Scarlet Prefecture would be buffeted by sea storms were it not for the faithful diligence of Mar Surrease, the First Lady of Western Winds and her Brigade of Western-Flowing Breezes. Sweeping across the land, these air elementals push back the sea winds, wafting the Imperial City in gentle inland breezes. Mar Surrease takes the form of an ethereal gray-green mare with sharp white hooves, and she is always accompanied by at least one of the lesser spirits who report to her. Those spirits include Karga Shina, the elemental of western morning wind; Lu Far Win, the sneaky minor spirit of winds that carry away unprotected possessions; or Cho, the corpulent elemental of summer storms.

THE IMPERIAL CITY

The Imperial City is the ostentatious crown jewel set in the finely wrought diadem that is the Realm. Eight centuries of the greatest and most innovative of Creation's architects have

spent lifetimes stretching their dreams across the framework of possibility, striving to surpass their masters and mentors in glorious structural homage to the glory of the Scarlet Dynasty and the Elemental Dragons. Here, more than any other place in Creation, are combined the time, talent and resources to craft a city that truly reflects the majesty of the Elemental Dragons and those who represent them in Creation.

Unfortunately, eight centuries of imaginative craftsmen, each dedicated to outdoing those before them, have been granted an almost limitless amount of resources but a very finite space in which to work. Hemmed in by the limits of the city's resolute granite walls, architects have been forced in recent centuries to turn their eyes skyward as the limited space neared its capacity. As a result, the city's earliest buildings are often evidenced by their expansive footprint and diminutive stature, while recent structures (or architecture that has been recently expanded) tower above their elder siblings to sometimes ridiculous heights.

Jade is, of course, the pinnacle of building materials, reserved by expense for the Imperial Palace and the most elite of temples and Dynastic dwellings. But even in the obsidian walls of a merchant's shop or tenement, the unrivaled architects of the Imperial City showcase their creative genius, creating an overwhelming concentration of municipal beauty unlike any found elsewhere in Creation. Only the huts and hovels that surround the exterior of the looming stone city walls lack the





sometimes-chaotic but always impressive touch of Pasiap's Children. Nonetheless, they do their own part by playing counterpoint to the glory that is the Imperial City.

POPULATION

As befits the center of the Realm, the Imperial City is the greatest municipality in all of Creation. Well more than one million souls dwell within its crowded border walls, with hundreds of thousands more scrambling to survive in the makeshift perimeter town that clings to its exterior. More than half the Dragon-Blooded population of the Realm calls the Imperial City home. In the five years since the Scarlet Empress's disappearance, many who had previously dwelled elsewhere have been subtly summoned to the capital by their families as the Great Houses consolidate their potential claims to the long-empty throne.

When coupled with the influx of servants, slaves, functionaries and myriad hangers-on who accompanied them, the influx of Dragon-Blooded to the Imperial City in the last five years would be a significant increase to the city's population in and of itself. But far from self-sufficient, these newcomers also directly or indirectly create the need for a plethora of other individuals to cater to their needs. Merchants, chefs, tailors, jewelers, weapon- and armorsmiths, cosmetic crafters, apothecaries, shoemakers and scribes cater to the physical needs of the city's swelling upscale population, while playwrights, actors, musicians, singers, courtesans and poets fulfill a more esoteric but no less important role. Add in those who provide support or raw materials for these service providers, and it quickly becomes obvious why the already bloated Imperial City has swollen to the bursting point during recent years.

Although they make up the most important portion of imperial society—a fact they would never hesitate to confirm if asked—the Children of the Dragons are drastically outnumbered by the un-Exalted, even within the Imperial Palace. Human servants, slaves, artists, assistants, tutors and tradesmen number more than 300 for every Dragon-Blood within the city walls, and when the throngs outside the wall but still near to the city are taken into consideration, the ratio is closer to 400 to one.

Out of the human population, approximately one in every 20 individuals is related to one of the Great Houses in some way: un-Exalted children, patrician spouses, cousins by marriage and the like. Unfortunately for them, unless they are directly related—within a generation or two—by marriage or blood, there is a good probability that the wealth and power of the Great Houses has little effect on their day-to-day lives. After the heads of households, powerful Dragon-Bloods, less influential Dragon-Bloods and most powerful of the human relations siphon off as much of the family resources as they can, little is left to trickle down to those whose connections are less direct. Therefore, other than those directly descended from or married to one of the Dragon-Blooded, the vast majority of the human population lives life quite differently than those of the Terrestrial ruling class do.

The changes in the past five years have been subtler than they might have been, but things are changing nonetheless. In the upper levels of imperial society, belts are a bit tighter, purchases and expenditures a bit more thoughtfully weighed. Some of the jade once squandered on luxuries is now being stockpiled or diverted to more political or martial pursuits. Parties and extravaganzas are still thrown, but a bit less often, and waste is more tightly controlled. These decisions affect the common folk of the city more than those who make them. One traditional party cancelled might be of little concern to a socialite, but to those whose income relies on providing the food, flowers, clothing, gifts and entertainment, it is a devastating blow.

Within the city walls, mortal people worry about whether they will have enough to pay their rent and feed themselves and their children each day. Outside the city walls, in the makeshift town that has grown up around the capital, the number of concerned mortals is even larger.

There are several social classes within the Imperial City's human population. At the top—but significantly below the Dragon-Blooded—are those affiliated with the Great Houses. While they are seen as inferior and a disappointment to the families who expected them to Exalt, they are still apart from the rest of humanity by association with the Terrestrial Exalted. This status, and the connections provided by being raised within the Great Houses, affords them avenues of political and social power unavailable to most of the city. They are more likely than any other humans to hold positions of great responsibility. While it can never fully redeem them in their families' eyes, they still serve as useful tools to the Dynasty.

Beneath the Dragon-Bloods' kin are the patrician families of the city. Most are at least distantly related to one of the Great Houses in some way, although some merely aspire to join their houses with those of the Dragon-Blooded. Bureaucrats, the most powerful of the shipping magnates, merchants who traffic in the rarest of luxury items—while times are tighter now than in the past, these individuals are better off than most of the city's human population.

Far more numerous are the general population, butchers and bakers, weavers and tailors, those who provide the goods and services that the million or so common folk like themselves need to survive on a daily basis. At a similar level are the couriers, copiers, lowest level account keepers, political aides and secretaries—the lowest level of political and bureaucratic toadies who have but the smallest hope of ever clawing their way up the career ladder and out of this class to the one above it.

Below these not-wealthy/not-destitute exists a social category all to itself. While the indentured servants and slaves of the city normally have food, clothing and accommodations taken care of, they pay for their sometimes-luxurious lifestyles in bitter coin—their freedom. Either out of poverty or because of some civil penalty, indentured servants willingly give up a number of years of



their lives (most often five, but 10 or 15 is not unheard of), exchanging service for sustenance. The fortunate ones may use this time to learn a trade that will allow them to enter the general population with a marketable skill set at the end of their indenture. Others find themselves at a loss when freed from the rigorous guidance of their service contract and quickly find themselves slipping down to the lowest social division. The least fortunate either never regain their freedom or never had it at all, toiling away all their lives as some cavalier Dynast's personal property.

Even below slaves and indentured servants lurk those who, through choice or circumstance, have no gainful employment, few material possessions and generally exist through the contributions of others. Beggars, buskers and cripples hoping to wheedle a yen from those who have them to spare are a frequent sight in the Imperial City. Cutpurses and pickpockets prey upon the unwitting, and although the punishment for thievery is severe, starvation is more of a threat than arrest for most in these times of turmoil.

SIZE

Built atop and around the ruins of the First Age stronghold now known only as the Seat of Splendor, the physical sprawl of the Imperial City proper is hemmed in by massive walls on all sides. It stretches almost 40 square miles, a full third of which is occupied by the Imperial Palace and the palace grounds, leaving the remaining land hard pressed to accommodate the remaining more-than-a-million who make their home there.

As with all property on the Blessed Isle, every inch of the Imperial City's land belongs to the Empress, who leases it out to those who would live there. During her time on the Scarlet Throne, reducing or increasing lease rates was only one of a vast array of techniques at her disposal for indicating displeasure or rewarding benefit to her citizens. The rights to lease a plot of land might be revoked or extended depending on her imperial whim, although most property lines and rates were not overly tinkered with once set in place for the contracted number of years, barring significant justification on the part of the tenant. Since her disappearance, lease rates have steadily increased apace with the demand for living space as the Great Houses consolidate their families around them. While most of the Dragon-Blooded in the city maintain their primary residences within the Imperial Palace, many—especially the young and recently Exalted—also prefer to maintain off-premises dwellings for the purposes of relaxation away from the stresses of life among their rivals. When coupled with the thronging masses of humanity seeking to make their fortune—or at least sufficient wage to prevent starvation—there is scarcely an inch of the Imperial City that is not jealously claimed by one or more individuals for daily use.

To deal with the overcrowding, the architects of the Imperial City have employed a multitude of innovative techniques. Buildings are jammed into every available space,

and architects are constantly being hired to simultaneously create masterworks that glorify the patrician or Terrestrial families who patronize them, while expanding buildings out to the very perimeters of the space leased from the Empress. So great is the need for space that enterprising individuals have even been known to lease property on both sides of an existing thoroughfare and build over the pathway, connecting two barely useable small plots into one tall two-legged tower. In most cases, arches at street level are constructed to allow the public to continue to traverse the roadway. In some circumstances, however, bribes allow the right of thoroughfare to be waived, leading to a building being erected that completely blocks the flow of traffic midway down a path. Even the capital's main thoroughfare, the Five Talons Road, which once bisected the entirety of the Imperial City, swerving only to ring the Imperial Palace Grounds, has now been reduced to a half dozen sections, each separated from the others by some glorious new piece of construction.

With the exception of the extensive gardens and parks integrated into the Imperial Palace's grounds, land is at such a premium within the city's walls that almost none is spared for cultivation. Only the kitchens of the Imperial Palace have access to enough land to grow anything more extensive than potted herbs or citrus trees, allowing salad greens or vining fruits and vegetables to be cultivated without wasting valuable—and expensive—space. The vast majority of all products—especially foodstuffs—consumed by those who dwell in the Imperial City are imported from other places in the Realm.

ROADS AND TRANSPORTATION

Centuries ago, it is said, the Five Talons Road was so wide that an entire scale could be marched shoulder to shoulder down its length. Those days, however, are far in the past. Due to the intense crowding within the Imperial City walls, few roads are wide enough for more than a single ox-cart to pass down it unobstructed. Some have literally become footpaths between buildings that, through creative architectural expansion over the centuries, have swollen to consume every inch of leased space allotted to them.

Exacerbating the constrictions in recent years is the flood of traveling peddlers, entertainers and street-vendors who have flocked to the city, hoping to take advantage of the influx of Dragon-Bloods and patricians who have immigrated there in the wake of the Scarlet Empress's disappearance. Setting up their temporary booths and tents in any unguarded spot, these opportunistic business folk are only slightly less assiduous than the ever-present flood of beggars and paupers who have besieged the city streets.

DISTRICTS

While the Imperial City was more grown in fits and spurts than planned out, certain areas have homogenized out of the city's chaos over the centuries, resulting in districts devoted primarily to religion, commerce, entertainment and bureau-





cracy. That is not to say that one will not find teahouses in the Temple District or warehouses in the Garden of Crimson Pleasures—quite the opposite. Certain needs—food, access to jade scrip, lodging and the like—are common enough that grouping all access to them in one area of a city the size of the capital would be terribly inconvenient. The principal city districts, however, are where the greatest density and variety of a particular service or business can be found.

TEMPLE DISTRICT

Save for the Imperial Palace itself, nowhere in the Imperial City showcases the height and breadth of the architectural glory of the Blessed Isle as much as the Temple District. Second in size only to the space occupied by the Imperial Palace grounds, the Temple District boasts the majority of the city's 5,000 temples within its several square miles of hallowed ground. Perhaps 1,000 temples are strategically placed throughout the rest of the city, their locations carefully orchestrated by the needs of the Immaculate Order, but within the Temple District itself, one is surrounded by some of the greatest and most glorious religious structures in Creation.

Many of the city's temples are, of course, dedicated to the Immaculate Dragons. Indeed, with the exception of the private shrines of the Dragon-Blooded households, the majority of the temples found outside the Temple District itself are thusly devoted. Except on rare occasions, these public temples are open to the public, allowing citizen and patrician alike to enter for purposes of spiritual contemplation, prayer and listening to the sutras being read by the Immaculate Order who staff each temple. Many of these temples are among the mostly richly decorated and ornate buildings in the city. The Order might eschew personal wealth but, as an organization, it is immensely affluent.

Within the district itself, however, alongside grandiose temples to the Elemental Dragons are those dedicated to ablations for each of literally thousands of "small gods." These temples range from ostentatious structures where weekly devotions to the Celestines are held to small structures kept tightly locked save for the one day a year when a spirit of doorways or poultry is given the reverence the Immaculate Order has negotiated with it as proper. These ceremonies are not open to those outside the Order, nor are un-Exalted members of the Order allowed to perform them. It is the Immaculate Order's strict policy that it is only meet and proper for appeasement to come from the Dragon-Blooded, who, as more spiritually pure and advanced than humanity, have the moral and spiritual wherewithal to deal with them safely.

Much of the Imperial City has begun to deteriorate during the five years since the Scarlet Empress's disappearance. As the Great Houses shift their focus from their centuries-long quest to curry and maintain her favor, civic maintenance has plummeted in priority, and corruption is at an all time high. The Temple District itself, however, remains both luxuriously appointed and pristinely maintained, the Immaculate Order's absolute influence there having grown even more resolute in the Empress's absence.

Visitors to the Imperial City are sometimes surprised to see that the area's orderly influence seems to affect the areas outside the district as well, with some of the most well-maintained areas in the city currently being those directly outside the Temple District's walls. The reason, however, is simple. The Immaculate Order is currently the single most powerful organization in Creation, and none of the Great Houses associated with other areas of the city wish to appear weak or overtly focused on Dynastic politics in the Order's eyes. Unfortunately for them, however, the Order is not so shallow as to be unable to see past a few blocks of clean streets and scrubbed walls, so their efforts are, for the most part, wasted.

THOUSAND SCALES DISTRICT

Little happens in the Realm that is not dictated, regulated or recorded by someone in the Imperial City. From the number and variety of crops grown by a particular farmer to the length and material a patrician's robes are allowed to be, the Realm abounds with rules, regulations and all of the complications that come with them. The vast majority of these rules originate in the capital. Along with internal matters, entire libraries of policies dictate the manner of trades and treaties with the outlying districts and satrapies, as well as the sometimes-ambiguous guidelines for political or commercial interaction with Threshold areas. All in all, most matters of the Realm are firmly wrapped in a tangled knot of paperwork, a process deftly woven by the Scarlet Empress to make sure that all true decision-making power originated and ended with herself.

The Thousands Scales District lies at the heart of that knot. Whether business, legislature or foreign policy, all matters of state pass through the Thousand Scales District. Before her absence, this process allowed the Scarlet Empress to keep her reins on the Realm always near at hand. In the continued absence of her iron guidance, however, the denizens of the business district have begun to falter as some individuals suc-

THE OFFICE OF THE PARAGON OF SEXTES JYLIS

While the heart of the Immaculate Order lies to the south in the Palace Sublime, all entry to the Order must begin in the Imperial City. Here, in the small and subdued Procession of Gray within the Temple District, supplicants first approach the Order in the person of the Paragon of Sextes Jylis. It is not until after he accepts them—and there is no assurance of this happening, no matter how wealthy or influential their associations—that they may begin the weeks-long pilgrimage along the Great Coast Road to the Palace Sublime. This pilgrimage between the initial approval of a postulant and the official acceptance of the postulant as an acolyte is designed to allow the individual one last opportunity to change her mind. Few do, but after beginning the rigorous trials placed upon acolytes, many wish they had.



cumb to the temptation of personal gain while others attempt to hold the Realm together without her leadership.

Hundreds of accounting houses, trader brokerages, courtrooms and moneylenders fill the constantly crowded streets of the Thousand Scales District.

THE IMPERIAL TREASURY

Jade is the hearts' blood of the Realm, the element to which all wealth and power is tied. The Scarlet Empress's carefully implemented jade scrip program makes sure that her coffers are always full and that all finance, from the seemingly limitless reserves of the Immaculate Order to the copper yen exchanged by the Realm's peasantry are inexorably tied to the Imperial Treasury, and thus to her directly. The Treasury itself is, surprisingly, a rather dour building. Old enough to have claimed a rather vast footprint in the now claustrophobically crowded Thousand Scales District, this two-story marble structure squats at the edge of the district's main square like a serious and disapproving grandfather surrounded by a too-large petty and bickering family. Five carved columns support the pagoda-style roof, each inlaid with repeating patterns of jade that depict the treasury's stylized dragon badge. Armed soldiers selected from among the elite of each legion's infantry guard the treasury night and day, making sure that the precious contents of the building do not fall into the wrong hands. During the time before the Empress's disappearance, concern was greatest that some foreign invader—Anathema, Fair Folk or human ruler from one of the far off countries not paying homage to the Realm—might, by force or guile, make off with the Treasury's cache. These days, however, each Great House anxiously proffers a generous supply of its own loyal legions, unwilling to let the others dominate the guardian force and facilitate commandeering the Treasury and its priceless contents.

THE BANK OF THE SCARLET THRONE

As the largest financial institution in all Creation, the Bank of the Scarlet Throne is under the direct supervision of Bal Keraz, the head of the Imperial Treasury. The building itself dates back more than 500 years, being one of the first aspects of the Thousand Scales established under the Scarlet Empress's reign. Unlike other money-lending establishments, it is decidedly insecure in appearance, lacking the formidable walls, barred windows or reinforced doors of lesser banks. In the five centuries the establishment has been serving the Scarlet Throne, however, not so much as an eighth yen has gone missing from the bank's coffers. Roughly once per generation, some brave—and foolish—individual makes the attempt, either through stealth, guile, deceit or force. The would-be perpetrators are inevitably easy to recognize afterward: Their remains are found impaled on the banner post erected above the bank's front gates.

Rumors abound as to the nature of the guardian of the Bank of the Scarlet Throne, but only a select few are privy to the truth. These include Bal Keraz, of course, as well as the select host of Immaculate monks tasked with the weekly negotiated sacrifices to Sharpest Jade Bursar, the bank's

resident god. Dedicated solely to the tallying and security of every jade talent in the bank's possession, Sharpest Jade Bursar is an unblinking, incorruptible security force the likes of which no embezzler or thief could hope to thwart.

THE SPIRAL ACADEMY

Of the four secondary schools located on the Blessed Isle, the Spiral Academy is the only one that sits at the heart of the Realm itself. Its massive marble walls tower above other buildings in the Thousand Scales District, and its grounds are secure and heavily guarded, for the never-ending flow of reports, tallies and accounts that flow through the hallways of the Spiral Academy are truly the pulse of the Realm. For all that its students are looked down upon by graduates of the other three academies, the destruction of the Spiral Academy would likely be a fatal blow to the Realm, especially in the Scarlet Empress's absence. Not that any individual within the academy is of singularly vital import to the Realm's welfare, but the destruction or corruption of the sheer quantity of vital information held within its walls at any given time would be a devastating blow to the Imperial Bureaucracy.

By necessity, the Spiral Academy is not physically large. Space is of such a premium within the city that even an institution as vital to the health of the Realm as the Academy must constantly justify its need for the space it does occupy, and expansion would be nigh impossible. Compared to the sprawling grounds of the House of Bells or even the austere accommodations of the Cloister of Wisdom, the Academy is diminutive. Physically, of the four secondary schools in the Realm, only the Heptagram is smaller.

Yet, the Spiral Academy's 240 aspiring apprentice tallymasters and would-be bureaucrats outnumber the student population of any of the other academies, and the sparse living accommodations necessitated by their close quarters allows little to distract the studious from the tasks before them. Together, they process a veritable mountain of Realm paperwork each year, handling—in the guise of “apprenticeships” and “experience-building”—a sizeable portion of the mundane tallying, accounting, number-crunching and report processing that keeps the Realm functioning. As the students are not paid for this work, which is incorporated into their scholastic program, the Imperial Bureaucracy keeps its overhead very low and has amassed significantly larger coffers than it would without the Academy's free paper-pushing labor.

The Spiral Academy is administered by the Right and Responsible Office of Official Education, headed by the Minister of Education, Sesus Valtor, an un-Exalted son of Sesus Magel and Cynis Parovar. Valtor inherited both his mother's head for politics and his father's business sense, and both are inordinately proud of their son's position, even if he was not deemed worthy of Exaltation.

THE ONYX CURTAIN DISTRICT

Entertainment is only slightly less important than religion to the majority of the wealthy and powerful population of the





Imperial City, and the Onyx Curtain District rivals the size of the Temple District. While there is much profit to be made in the pursuit of leisure within the capital, however, the city's entertainment district lacks the direct financial backing of the Immaculate Order from which the Temple District benefits. For the most part, then, it is less richly turned out than its more pious neighbor. Exceptions exist, though. The Crane Theater, for example, is the oldest professional playhouse in the Realm, a tiny marble building whose few hundred seats must be reserved years in advance. In contrast, the Celestial Stage, while much newer, is capable of seating more than 5,000 at a time in its towering balconies that completely ring the elevated center stage and is a favorite of many of the city's population who cannot afford admission into the Crane.

As well as encompassing the greatest concentration of theaters, playhouses, concert pavilions and art galleries in Creation, the Onyx Curtain District houses the Honorable Institution of Culinary Delights, the Realm's premier school of cooking and food preparation. Around this establishment, some of the city's finest—and most exclusive—teahouses and restaurants sit in attendance to the epicurean temple where their masters were taught, and the richest Dynasts and patricians throughout the Realm clamor for its graduates.

Even for the less fortunate, visits to public play- or teahouses help ease the stresses of daily life within the Imperial City. From respectable establishments that are simply less refined versions of those that cater to the Dragon-Bloods and patricians to the wooden-slatted shacks that ring the exterior of the city walls, refreshment and entertainment is available to almost every class of individual who makes a home in the Imperial City.

THE GARDEN OF CRIMSON PLEASURES

While prostitutes—both male and female—are ubiquitous in any city, the eldest occupation is both organized and heavily taxed in the Imperial City by the Scarlet Empress. Therefore, those who ply the trade outside the imperial mandates will never be in short supply, nor will those who seek out the same in back rooms and dark alleys. To avoid disease and the strong possibility of a knife in the back, however, discerning customers who are looking for paid companionship most often make their way through the elaborate alabaster gates of the walled district known as the Garden of Crimson Pleasures.

While this small area comprises only a few dozen city blocks, the pleasures obtainable therein are as varied and numerous as flowers in the imperial gardens. At the center of the district stands a trio of buildings, each notable in its own way. Two are great sweeping towers, their obsidian walls stretching elegantly skyward in arcs and parapets that join only on the uppermost floors by a delicate skywalk. Balconies line both towers, each designed to accentuate the graceful long lines of the architecture as a whole. At ground level, the towers stand on either side of the main path through the Garden. In the space above the walkway between them flutters a string of bright silk banners that have been expertly

calligraphed with romantic—and earthy—poetry singing the praises of the “flowers” of the Eventide Conservatory, one of the Garden's two most elite courtesan houses.

Set behind the Conservatory, the third building should be dwarfed by the expansive and more modern towers. Yet, its marble walls gleam with understated grace, and its reputation exceeds that of the Eventide Conservatory. The marble building known only as Haven is the oldest of those in the Garden, a fact attested to by its single story and sprawling hallways. Its doorways and windows are covered in some of the finest stained-glass work in Creation, elegant patterns that, when lit from within, cast beautiful colored light out into the night.

Haven and the Eventide Conservatory have shared a civilized, but bitter rivalry since the Conservatory's inception several hundred years ago. Established early in the Imperial City's history by none other than Cynis herself, Haven long held sole true dominion in the Garden as a source of companions any patrician would be honored to have serving tea at his or her side while entertaining. After Cynis's death, however, her daughter Wisel established the Eventide Conservatory as a direct and lascivious rival of the more traditional Haven, which was inherited by her elder sister Belar. Although the siblings have long since come to terms with the unrest left in the wake of their mother's passing and handle the literal and figurative affairs of House Cynis jointly, both establishments remain active in the Garden. While their founders might have mended their differences, the courtesans of the two pleasure houses have not, and there is a constant effort on the part of each to entice clients from the other establishment. The sisters who head the Great House look the other way unless this rivalry escalates to undeniable criminal activity, as it encourages their employees to constantly put forth their utmost in an effort to please their clients.

There are three main classes of professional prostitute in Creation. Whores who trade sexual satisfaction for payment are the most common—in every sense of the word. Whether they work from street corners or small rented rooms in hostels, these men and women (or even children) rarely make more than the bare minimum needed to survive. This is the case even if they don't end up paying the largest share of their profits to a whoremonger in exchange for protection or other nefarious services.

Less common, and often more talented, are the professional “entertainers.” This class includes exotic dancers, singers of lusty ballads, those who write and recite erotic poetry and musicians with nimble fingers and talented lips—performers whose talents are for hire both on and off the stage. Of course, not all entertainers are for hire for sexual services, regardless of how earthy their subject matter might be. Some make a wage entirely on stage, avoiding the necessity of peddling other services to their patrons. With the steady increase in tax rates across the Realm since the Empress's disappearance, however, more entertainers are being forced to turn to prostitution in conjunction with their other performances in order to survive.

The rarest, and most elite, of those who nominally fall under the career of prostitution are the city's courtesans. While many ply freely in the flesh trade, sexual favors are far from the be-all and end-all of their repertoire. A skilled courtesan, such as those trained and employed by Haven or the Eventide Conservatory under the dominion of House Cynis, is educated in history, Realm politics, philosophy and literature. She or he—for just under 25 percent of the city's courtesans are male—is expected to be a talented poet, dancer and singer, performing well enough to entertain publicly in all of these as well as on at least one musical instrument. As masters of social interaction, courtesans are frequently called upon by discerning patricians to facilitate during intense negotiations, knowing precisely when a gentle word, an offer of refreshment or an apologetic interruption will best serve those who hire them. The absence of one trained in the courtly skills at treaty or trade negotiations in certain circles might even be seen as an insult to the guest, an unspoken statement that the host is confident enough of her capitulation to allow him to eschew the aid of a protocol connoisseur.

Those courtesans who Exalt either before or after their training have access to an entire world of new possibilities, incorporating special skills and Charms known only to their kind. Even without supernatural assistance, though, the courtesans of the Imperial City are renowned throughout Creation as the bastions of social intercourse.

Among those most highly acclaimed “blossoms” of the Garden of Crimson Pleasures, very few are Exalted, though

House Cynis has several members who have historically been known among the world's most renowned courtesans. Many, however, are un-Exalted family members—most likely to be Cynis or strongly associated with that House. Others—promising young people from across the Realm who aspire to the life of glamour and mystery afforded to these most elite social butterflies—may apply to train at one of the Garden's courtesan palaces. The shortness of their youthful existence, however, puts them at a strong disadvantage over those who study the arts before and after their Exaltation. Still, very few can afford the company of a Terrestrial Courtesan, even for a few hours, and so, there is a brisk business even for the less elite.

THE EMPYREAN BAZAAR

The vast majority of raw materials to supply goods and services to any large city comes from outside its walls. The Imperial City, with its huge population and limited space, imports almost all of its raw goods, and a large proportion of its finished merchandise as well. While many of these goods are bargained for before they ever reach the city gates, commerce of a more direct nature is rampant in the city as well, and nowhere more so than in the Empyrean Bazaar.

Raw materials are traded predominantly in the Open Market, a sector that encompasses many blocks of stockyards, auction houses, mercantile establishments and brokerages. Due to space constraints, many of these raw-goods dealers stock only a sample of their various wares, the majority of their stock being stored in well-guarded warehouses nearer to Dragonsmouth





for ease of sea-shipping. Imperial tariffs on warehousing are yet another of the complex threads the Scarlet Empress used to ensure her complete control over the Realm.

In other areas of the Bazaar, finished goods are more common. From clothing to carts and from furniture to fish-hooks, there are few things that cannot be purchased ready made at the Bazaar. Shops vary from massive, obsidian-walled structures with many stories owned by wealthy trading families to miniscule buildings wedged wherever their owners could afford to lease space. Unlicensed vendors lay out blankets or set up temporary stalls, which are moved as often as the city's Black Helms chase them off.

Few finished goods of paramount quality are bought and sold in the Imperial City. It simply isn't cost efficient for stores to stock a wide variety of the highest quality goods when the vast majority of those in the city cannot afford them. Merchants, low-level civil servants and laborers might purchase their rice bowls, combs or new slippers from one of the many stores in the Empyrean Bazaar. Mass-market goods of this nature, however, are unsuited for the demanding tastes of the upper class.

Should a Dragon-Blood—or wealthy patrician—desire a new robe, he would not go to the Bazaar to purchase the same and expect to return with it at the end of his shopping excursion. Instead, he would do business with the upscale Paragon Court, a region of the Bazaar that houses some of the most elite and expensive jewelers, scribes, tailors, shoemakers, armorers and artisans, all arranged around the First Age fountain and courtyard that gives the area its name.

While the most powerful might be sufficiently influential to summon even the most exclusive of the Paragon Court's artistes to their homes for private appointments, many enjoy the "see and be seen" atmosphere of the Paragon Court. For them, a shopping expedition is often as much a social outing of rivalry and one-upmanship as an actual acquisition of goods.

THE IMPERIAL PALACE

Covering almost a full third of the square footage within the Imperial City's walls, the Imperial Palace is a sprawling testament to the Realm's nearly 800 years of history. Here, more than any other place in Creation, the buildings and grounds stand in a slowly evolving record of the triumphs and failures of the Empress's reign. Generation after generation of Great Houses have schemed, plotted and risen in imperial favor, and as they have done so, their architects have made their mark on the palace grounds. Wings have been built or, as families grew in number and power, added onto and built higher and more ostentatious. And as households split off from the Great Houses or family lines fall out of favor, entire buildings and wings are emptied or fall into disuse. Sometimes they are claimed—and usually extensively remodeled—by those Houses that are currently more populous or popular.

LOCATION

The Imperial Palace sits directly in the center of the Imperial City, with the remaining municipal districts ringed

around it. While the city walls are more rectangular than circular, the palace grounds themselves have grown up centered around the Imperial Manse—no petitioner being willing to distance himself any further from the Scarlet Empress's center of power than completely necessary. As a result, the grounds are nearly twice as close to the north and south city walls as they are to those in the east and west.

The Imperial Palace itself is centered around the Imperial Manse, although none of the wings actually directly connect to it. Between the manse and the rest of the palace stretches the Scarlet Garden, a collection of beautiful flowering plants, trees and shrubbery. All feature crimson foliage or blossoms and are carefully selected to complement each other's periods of bloom and decline.

THE DRAGON GATES

There are five official entrance gates to the Imperial Palace's grounds, although the grounds themselves are not walled from the rest of the city, making entrance through the gates more a matter of protocol than necessity. Each of the five gates, built in the early years of the third century of the Realm, corresponds to one of the five Elemental Dragons. While not a temple, per se, each is dedicated to and glorifies the teachings of one of the Immaculate Dragons, and it is not uncommon to find trinkets and offerings arranged at the base of the gates, a practice that is tolerated—although frowned upon—by the Immaculate Order.

The gates' construction, which began soon after the unsuccessful coup attempt by House Iselsi, took more than 14 years to complete and was seen by some as the Scarlet Empress demonstrating that even the attempted revolution of one of her Great Houses was of little consequence to her. Other rumors state that the gates are somehow linked to a defense system centered around the Imperial Palace, designed to allow the Empress to single out for remote destruction any individual within the miles-wide ring created by the gates. She had this defense system installed, the rumors say, in case any of the Great Houses appears to be in danger of successful revolt. The truth behind this speculation remains unknown, but the possibility certainly exists. Coincidentally, none of the Great Houses have staged an overt rebellion in the more than four centuries since the gates' completion.

THE SCARLET PAVILION

While the heart of the Imperial Palace is certainly the Imperial Manse, no one save for the Scarlet Empress has entered it in well over 1,000 years, and no eyes in Creation save hers have seen inside and lived to hold the secret. Therefore, it is the Scarlet Pavilion—a massive construct of red jade and black marble—that most who have visited the Imperial Palace associate most closely with the Scarlet Empress.

Audiences with the Empress took place at her whim. Sometimes she forced courtiers and penitents to make their supplications while riding on horseback at the hunt. Others had to do so as they attempted to keep pace with her as she was



carried through the streets of the Imperial City in her elegant crimson palanquin. When it pleased her to have them do so, however, supplicants might find themselves kowtowing their way up a massive aisle lined with ornately carved pillars twice a man's height in diameter as they reverently approached the Scarlet Throne. While the Throne Room is large enough to house the entire population of a small village, it most often hosted only a handpicked few dozen of the Empress's courtiers, a selection of personal bodyguards and whichever petitioners she allowed to meet her at any given time.

The Throne Room is only one of more than 100 rooms in the Scarlet Pavilion, which include more traditionally sized offices, libraries, shrines and galleries. Since its construction, the entirety of the Scarlet Pavilion has been solely for the use of the Scarlet Empress. Staffed by those she has chosen personally, not even the Regent dares to use her space in her absence for anything but the utmost necessities. As a result, the Throne Room has seen only one court in the last five years—the one wherein Tepet Fokuf was named Regent. Other matters of state are handled out of the office chosen for him by the leaders of the Great Houses—an office from which he retires as quickly as he can to his own chambers in the Tepet Wing to neurotically contemplate the Immaculate Texts.

GREAT HOUSE WINGS

Of the 11 Great Houses currently in existence, only House Nellens has not yet claimed a wing of residence in the Imperial Palace, although it is currently in negotiation with House Ragara for a foothold in a wing for which Ragara's kin no longer finds use. Yet, even the Houses that maintain significant residence in the Imperial Palace also maintain holdings elsewhere. Those holdings include vacation homes and hunting lodges or permanent holdings in outlying satrapies they govern. In the case of House Nellens, the base of the household is actually outside the Imperial City in the city of Juche.

The term “wing” is somewhat deceptive when applied to the Imperial Palace. The palace is not one building with multiple wings branching off, but a collection of more than 900 buildings ranging in size from massive halls leased by the Great Houses to small shrines hidden within carefully crafted gardens where devout residents can often be found in contemplative meditation. Many of these buildings are connected through elaborate passageways. Some such pathways are enclosed hallways or exposed garden paths linking buildings at ground level, while others are lofty sky-passages that connect towers high overhead. Rumors suggest that architects in service to certain of the Great Houses have even designed underground passageways within the palace grounds, hidden from all but the head of the Houses' most trusted allies.

Each of the Great Houses (with the aforementioned exception of House Nellens) has a wing separated from the others as much as possible by creative architecture and landscaping. Of course, some wings are greater than others. It is a matter of pride to possess as vast a portion of the palace's grounds and

buildings as possible, and since the Empress's disappearance, each of the Great Houses has done what it can to wrangle as much of the property as possible for its own family.

GARDENS

To find a swath of green and growing land in the center of any municipality can be a surprise, but in a metropolis as overcrowded and claustrophobic as the Imperial City, bastions of greenery are few and far between. The only location in the entire city where expansive gardens—functional or aesthetic—are found in any abundance is within the Imperial Palace's grounds. Here, among the expansive wings of the Imperial Palace, are some of the most elaborate and ornate gardens this side of the Eastern forests. Tended meticulously, most have been in place since the earliest years of the Empress's reign, laid out in intricate patterns of beauty and grace long before space was a consideration for design. Ranging from ornamental to practical, they provide only a small portion of the food and foliage used by those who dwell within the Imperial Palace. Compared to the rest of the capital, though, the expansive stretches of green are an incredible luxury.

SERVANTS AND STAFF

Not all who dwell on the Imperial Palace grounds are Dragon-Blooded, of course, nor are they all family members of one of the Great Houses. Myriad trusted advisors, servants, councilors and slaves make their temporary or permanent homes alongside the more regal residents.

Some reside there out of necessity. For each of the thousands of Dragon-Blooded present in the Imperial Palace at any given time, there are literally dozens of human staff, each hand picked by those for whom they work. While those human servants who scrape vegetables, clean lavatories, tend the gardens and brush animals might find it preferable to maintain homes outside the palace, their doing so would be too inconvenient for those they serve. Therefore, they are normally afforded modest quarters in the palace area nearest their place of vocation. This arrangement is a mixed blessing, though. On one hand, it protects them from the increasingly steep housing rates found elsewhere in the city. (Few Dynasts would stoop to charging their live-in staff rent.) On the other hand, they are on duty at all times.

Others individuals are granted lodging, either interim or long-term, for a variety of other reasons. Tutors might live with Dynast sponsors for a period of several years, teaching their preschool-aged children until they are ready to go on to primary school. Others migrate through the prefecture teaching a particular specialty for a short time in a variety of locations. Tutors' quarters are normally private and of a modest size and luxury. They are better than lodgings in a tenement or apartment in other areas of the city, but certainly nothing like those that the Dragon-Blooded keep for themselves.

In contrast, slaves of Dynasts are most often housed in group dormitories. Only the most valued are allowed the privilege of private rooms and the potentiality to form mar-





riages and possibly raise children. This right is a bittersweet one for the slaves concerned. Dragon-Blooded families separate their slaves—sending them off to other slaves who act as wet nurses or foster parents—with just as much cold calculation as they do their own when they seem in danger of becoming too dependent on each other. Some slaves feel it better not to bear children at all than to risk having them separated at birth or during early childhood.

THE IMPERIAL MANSE

Sitting at the center of the Imperial Palace like an elegant spider at the heart of a web of chaos and cunning, the Imperial Manse is timeless. While the palace has grown up around it, the Imperial Manse appears the same today as it did on that fateful day when the sworn brotherhood that included the woman who would become the Scarlet Empress desperately found its way inside.

Physically, there are far more imposing buildings in the Imperial City. The manse itself is a squat tower of

THE SCARLET THRONE

Depictions of the five Elemental Dragons twine in upon themselves to form the Scarlet Throne, each bearing a body carved of red jade and a fierce yet noble head depicted in its elemental color. The entirety of the throne is carved from the purest jade Creation has to offer. Rumor has it that the Throne was created for the Empress by the Elemental Dragons themselves, as a sign of her rightful rule. The truth, however, is more sinister. Etera Hej, an un-Exalted commoner whose ability to sculpt jade was legendary in the early years of the Scarlet Reign, created the Throne at the Scarlet Empress's private request. Shortly after finishing the chair—his masterwork, which took more than three years of secluded effort to complete—Hej disappeared and was never heard from again.

Adding to the Scarlet Empress's impressive appearance, the five dragons depicted on the Throne appeared to come to life whenever she was seated there. More than one courtier made a hasty retreat from the imperial presence after watching in terror as the Elemental Dragons slowly stirred themselves to life around the Empress. While thusly animated, the Dragons fully assume their natural coloration, and have been known to snap threateningly at those with whom the Empress is even momentarily displeased.

On the single occasion when Regent Fokufdared to seat himself on the Scarlet Throne, the dragons writhed to life, rearing back to glare disapprovingly at the quaking pretender. Perhaps this explains his reluctance to remount the Throne, preferring to take what audiences he cannot avoid in more private chambers.

marble, encompassing no more than a few thousand square feet at ground level. It is a single story tall, and its tiled roof is entirely shingled in black jade shot through with gleaming gold metallic veins. It curves outward to end in four jade-steel spikes, which rise from each corner like gleaming dragon claws. Unlike many of the more than 200 other known war manses scattered throughout the Realm, the Imperial Manse does not conjure forth tornadoes or hurricanes, call lightning or shoot balls of flame. It has no need of doing so directly, as its depths contain the First Age engines from which a single entity may commandeer control of any of the other war manses—known or unknown—in Creation.

Along with exerting master-control over the Realm's Defense Grid, the manse grants its wielder the ability to manifest her image and voice in every city and village in the Realm simultaneously—as the Empress did when she announced her imperial dominion more than 700 years ago.

Beyond these functions, the Imperial Manse's abilities are largely a matter of speculation. The building itself is shrouded in mystery. In fact, no one save for the Empress herself is certain about exactly what element the manse is aspected to—and the Empress isn't telling.

In more than a millennium, no human or Dragon-Blood—save for the Empress herself—has ever entered through the Imperial Manse's black jade door and returned. Since her disappearance, many have contemplated braving the dangers that destroyed the other four members of the Empress's sworn brotherhood, hoping to snatch the Scarlet Throne for themselves. The leaders of the Great Houses have posted copious guards to prevent this, however, and although there are rumors of individuals clandestinely entering the manse, none have ever emerged.

HEART OF THE REALM

In recorded history, none but the Scarlet Empress herself has had direct contact with the Imperial Manse's hearthstone, an oval of smoky quartz crystal that glows with a golden inner light. The gem, known as the Heart of the Realm, has never been lent out to anyone since the Empress emerged clutching it in her shaking fist. It was often worn in the Imperial Crown, but it could also be set in any one of a multitude of other pieces of ornate jewelry the Empress had commissioned. A non-hearthstone duplicate was made of obsidian to allow craftsmen to complete all but the final touches on each item without having access to the Heart of the Realm itself. When as much as could be done without the hearthstone had been completed, the Empress herself would accompany a carefully selected contingent of guards to oversee the final stages and make sure that the Heart never left her direct supervision. Delicate—but impenetrable—silk gloves are worn by the craftsmen at all times during the brief moments they are allowed to handle the hearthstone. The penalty for any individual who knowingly or unknowingly touches the hearthstone is death.



Fokuf

As no one else in recorded history has wielded the Heart of the Realm, no one is certain of the exact extent of powers the hearthstone has bestowed upon her. Witnesses over the past 700 years have reported such a wide variety of abilities and powers to the Empress that it seems impossible she is truly capable of all of them, even with the assistance of the most

powerful manse and hearthstone in Creation. Yet, reliable accounts of the Scarlet Empress disappearing in a swirling cloud of Essence and reappearing halfway across the Blessed Isle—as well as her immunity to even the most powerful sorceries cast against her—lead many to believe that the Heart of the Realm is more powerful than any other hearthstone in Creation.

The Scarlet Prefecture, a Magnitude 6 Dominion

Military: 3 **Government:** 3 **Culture:** 3

Abilities: Awareness 2 (Heliograph + 1, Superior Diplomats + 2), Bureaucracy 4, Craft 2 (Architectural Competition +3), Integrity 2, Investigation 3 (Spy Networks + 3), Occult 3 (The Sorcerers of the Scarlet Throne +3), Performance 2 (Fool the Populace +1), Presence 4 (Proximity to the Scarlet Throne +3), Stealth 2, War 4 (Imperial Army Protection +3)

Virtues: Compassion 2, Conviction 5, Temperance 2, Valor 4

Virtue Flaw: Conviction **Current Limit:** 7

Willpower: 8

Bonus Points: 30 **External Bonus Points:** 18

Notes: Both Tepet Fokuf and Mnemon Bata are both sorcerers with legitimacy, though Regent Fokuf seldom exercises his power. The heads of the Great Houses primarily wield their considerable power behind the scenes as savants. The prefecture's bonus points are tied up in raising the dominion's Valor and Presence by one apiece and in its myriad of specialties. Its external bonus points are not assigned (allowing for easier Storyteller customization). The citizens of the Scarlet Prefecture are stubbornly loyal to the Realm. The dominion's Virtue Flaw leads the citizenry to continue following their leaders' directives even when they've been shown to be detrimental to their welfare if not flat-out self-destructive.

WEST OF ARJUF STANDS A RING OF FIRE, VISIBLE FOR MILES AROUND.

WITHIN, AT A TABLE OF VOLCANIC GLASS IS RAGOLY ALGDE OF THE WINGS CONJOINED IN LURE.

HE IS THE BLESSED ISLE'S LORD OF UNRIVALED FLAMES.

OR SO HE STYLES HIMSELF.

HOW TIRESOME HE HAS BECOME.

GOOD MORNING, IMMACULATE ONE. TO WHAT DO I OWE...

I CAME TO DISCUSS GEM, RAGOLY. THE TRIBUTE THE ISLE ASKS SEEMS EXCESSIVE, EVEN TO US.

WE'VE ONLY ASKED THAT IT PAY ITS YEARLY TRIBUTE IN FIREDUST THIS YEAR. FOR MILITARY PURPOSES.

BUT EVEN THE EMPRESS NEVER ASKED SO MUCH.

FIRES GENERATED FOR USES DEMANDED BY WAR ARE MY PRIDE AND PURVIEW, SIR. THE REQUEST IS WITHIN MY POWER.

THE SOUTHERN FIRE COURTS MIGHT DISAGREE. PERHAPS IF YOU INVITED AN AMBASSADOR-

NO! I WON'T SUFFER THE COURT OF THE ORDERLY FLAME'S INTERFERENCE!

AS YOU WISH.

FOR NOW.



CHAPTER SEVEN: GODS & CREATURES OF THE BLESSED ISLE

AMERU

God of Meru

Once, there was only great Meru, Jewel of the Gods. The city built by the gods themselves, set upon the slopes of the Omphalos of Creation, Meru was the place from which all the world was guided by the gods, then the Solar Deliberative. The city's god, Ameru, wielded great power in the Bureau of Humanity, as the embodiment of the Foremost City.

Then came the Usurpation, and in that violence, Meru was destroyed, rendered in many places to so much rubble tumbling down the slopes of Mount Meru (as the Imperial Mountain was once known). Ameru himself appeared in the city then, attempting to stop the destruction of his city, aiding in the defense of the Solars, but by the time he appeared, it was too late—the damage was done. Precisely what happened to him then no one truly knows. There are those who postulate that he was attacked by a coalition of Amoth, the god of ruined cities, and several powerful Sidereals, who

agreed to see to it that Meru was never again settled, giving Amoth unprecedented power.

Once, Ameru was clad in celestial vestments and armor befitting his station. He wore mighty pauldrons crafted of orichalcum, and his brilliant white and silver robes were inlaid with the pattern of a map of the interlocking streets and passageways of his city. In his hands he bore a tall stone staff, crafted of the heart-stone of the Omphalos of Creation and topped with an orichalcum replica of the Palace of the Deliberative.

Now, although his appearance has not changed overmuch, the god himself has. He appears sickly, his once lustrous mane of white hair falling—or torn—out in clumps, and his robes are tattered, threadbare and dull. His pauldrons sit in a corner, for they began to weigh too heavily on his weak back, and the pieces of his shattered staff lie on his desk. Ameru sits in his well-appointed office, a babbling lunatic and cripple. He still retains the small apartments attached to his office, and the services of a single godly scribe who learned to ignore



his rambling long ago, but Ameru's holdings and treasures have long ago been given up to other offices in the Bureau of Humanity—most notably Amoth City-Smter.

The traits that follow are for Ameru in his present form. Should some agency manage not only to rebuild Meru, but to reacquire his holdings from those who have them now, Ameru would slowly return to sanity and power, as the city's population and influence in Creation grew once more.

Sanctum: In the ruins of Meru sit the tumbled stones that once were the Civic Plaza of Meru, the grand bureaucratic headquarters to the city. In the height of its day, it hosted the Chapel of Ameru. Behind the Doors of Mystery lay only a small alcove, but those with the ability to see such things could see the entry to the sanctum of Ameru. This doorway is long since covered over in rubble, and the Sidereals who occasionally visit the ruins believe that something horrible has taken up residence there.

Motivation: None, due to the madness that has taken his mind. (Once, it was to see the City of Meru grow great and prosperous.)

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2; Charisma 1, Manipulation 1, Appearance 2; Perception 4, Intelligence 1, Wits 3

Virtues: Compassion 3, Conviction 1, Temperance 2, Valor 1

Abilities: Awareness 4, Dodge 2, Linguistics (Native: Old Realm; Others: High Realm) 1, Lore 3 (First Age +2), Martial Arts 2, Melee 2 (Daiklave +2), Occult 3, Resistance 2, Stealth 4

Backgrounds: Celestial Manse 2, Followers 1, Resources 3, Sanctum 2

Spirit Charms: Ameru was once capable of wielding tremendous power, including sorcery of the Celestial Circle, but he is now reduced to the following:

Hurry Home—Ameru was once capable of walking the streets of Meru with but a thought, journeying anywhere in its walls. He has not returned there for many a year, however. This costs 10 motes and a temporary Willpower.

Martial Power—Once a master martial artist, Ameru is still capable of spending three motes to harden his limbs, allowing his punches and kicks to inflict lethal damage.

Materialize—It costs Ameru 40 motes to materialize.

Measure the Wind—Though Ameru was once the canniest of bureaucrats, using this Charm to understand where those he spoke with stood, he almost never has any use for it any longer.

Join Battle: 7

Attacks: Though he is unlikely in his current state to engage in combat, should some outside intelligence manage to make Ameru fight somehow, he would use the following attacks. Clinch: Speed 6, Accuracy 5, Damage 2B, Parry DV —, Rate 1

Kick: Speed 5, Accuracy 5, Damage 5B, Parry DV 2, Rate 2

Punch: Speed 5, Accuracy 6, Damage 2B, Parry DV 4, Rate 3

Soak: 6L/7B (Divine potency, 5L/5B)

Health Levels: -0/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap

Dodge DV: 4 **Willpower:** 5

Essence: 3 **Essence Pool:** 55

Cost to Materialize: 40

Other Notes: None

FLASHING PEAK

Goddess of the Imperial Mountain, Shogun of the Hierarchy of Type in the Bureau of Nature

Appearing as a beautiful, eight-foot-tall woman made entirely of polished basalt, Flashing Peak is the goddess of the Imperial Mountain. More than this, however, she is also one of the two leaders of the Bureau of Nature, holding the position of Shogun of the Hierarchy of Type. Flashing Peak is one of the most powerful deities in Yu-Shan—only the heads of the other bureaus and the Celestines themselves are her equals.

All of this power is directed toward keeping the operation of her bureaucracy as true to the ways of the First Age as possible. She is uninterested in suggestions of divergence from this norm to account for changes in Creation or anything else. It has been good enough, and will always be good enough, if Flashing Peak has anything to say about it. She is the most strictly legalistic of the heads of Heaven's bureaus, applying the laws of Heaven as strictly now as she did during the First Age. She is not stupid, however. She is aware that many of the censors in this Age are corrupt and that those in charge of the enforcement Heaven's laws are deeply cynical.

Flashing Peak has never declared her preference for either the goals of the Gold or Bronze Factions. Indeed, she refuses to acknowledge that such a division exists. Anyone

who brings it to her attention is quickly dressed down, asked to kindly refrain from bringing the personal hobbies of Heavenly dignitaries to light.

Sanctum: Flashing Peak has incredibly opulent estates in Heaven, but she also maintains a modest sanctum from the days when she was only the goddess of the Imperial Mountain, before the casting down of the Primordials. The Seat of Pasiap, at the top of the Imperial Mountain, was once known as the Chamber of Flashing Peak, where those who were interested in visiting her sanctum stood to address her. Fortunately, it is simple for her to visit this site, as it lies less than an hour from the Glorious Arch.

Motivation: To keep the Imperial Mountain important and central to Creation, and to cause the Bureau of Nature to become just as important and central to Heaven.

Attributes: Strength 12, Dexterity 9, Stamina 20; Charisma 9, Manipulation 9, Appearance 6; Perception 8, Intelligence 9, Wits 9

Virtues: Compassion 2, Conviction 5, Temperance 4, Valor 4

Abilities: Athletics 4, Awareness 8, Bureaucracy 9 (First Age +2), Craft (Earth) 9, Dodge 4, Integrity 8, Investigation 5, Linguistics (Native: Old Realm; Others: High Realm, Low Realm, Riverspeak) 3, Lore 6 (First Age +2), Martial Arts 6, Occult 5, Performance 4, Presence 6, Resistance 9, Sail 3, Socialize 5, Survival 5, Thrown 8 (Basalt Tokens +3), War 5

Backgrounds: Backing 5, Celestial Manse 5, Contacts 5, Followers 5, Influence 5, Resources 5, Sanctum 3

Spirit Charms: Flashing Peak has all available spirit Charms. Some specifics are given here, however:

Avalanche of the Imperial Mountain—A terrible and fearsome supernatural martial artist, Flashing Peak is capable of dealing tremendous damage with her bare hands. She automatically inflicts lethal damage with her blows. By spending five motes, she may add five dice to her unarmed damage for the scene. Additionally, by spending a Willpower point before making an attack, she may inflict aggravated damage with that strike. This expenditure must be made before the attack roll is made.

Basalt Tokens—Flashing Peak can create sharp, rounded tokens of basalt, which are utterly unique. She often gives these to messengers, as proof that the message he bears is from her. She creates these tokens by simply spending one point of Essence each—up to five at a time. They dissolve into nothingness at the end of a scene. She can also throw these tokens as weapons.

Celestial Circle Sorcery—Flashing Peak knows all Celestial Circle spells and may teach them to others.

Donning Spiritual Armor—Through the expenditure of five motes, Flashing Peak may add her (Temperance + Essence) to her bashing and lethal soaks. By spending one point of Willpower, she may also add her Essence to her aggravated soak.

Essence Plethora (x5)—Flashing Peak increases her Essence Pool by 50.

Hurry Home—Through the expenditure of 10 motes and a Willpower point, Flashing Peak may not only appear anywhere



on the Blessed Isle, but as the head of one of the Heavenly Bureaus, she may also transport herself immediately anywhere within Yu-Shan. She must still use gates to move between Creation and Heaven, though.

Materialize—It costs Flashing Peak 95 motes to materialize.

Principle of Motion—Flashing Peak usually maintains a reservoir of 10 additional actions.

Reserve of Will (x4)—Flashing Peak has four additional points of Willpower at her disposal.

Shogun's Prerogative—While in Heaven, Flashing Peak may summon any single one of her subordinates in the Bureau of Nature to her side immediately. She does so only in times of danger or other emergency. She must spend a point of Willpower and a number of motes equal to the (Essence + Willpower) of the subordinate she is summoning.

Terrestrial Circle Sorcery—Flashing Peak knows all Terrestrial Circle spells and may teach them to others.

Flashing Peak has the First, Second and Third Excellencies for the following Abilities: Awareness, Bureaucracy, Craft, Integrity, Martial Arts, Resistance and Thrown.

Join Battle: 17

Attacks:

Clinch: Speed 6, Accuracy 15, Damage 12L, Parry DV —, Rate 1

Kick: Speed 5, Accuracy 15, Damage 15L, Parry DV 7, Rate 2

Punch: Speed 5, Accuracy 16, Damage 12L, Parry DV 9, Rate 3

Basalt Tokens: Speed 4, Accuracy 20, Damage 17L, Rate 5, Range 50

Soak: 25L/35B (Basalt flesh, 15L/15B, Hardness: 5L/5B)
Health Levels: -0/-1/-1/-1/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap
Dodge DV: 11 **Willpower:** 10
Essence: 9 **Essence Pool:** 190
Cost to Materialize: 95

Other Notes: Flashing Peak has a tremendous armory of First Age artifacts that grant her an incredible array of abilities above and beyond what is listed here.

JAGALZA

Satrap of the Realm

The numinous Jagalza is the Satrap of the Realm within the Bureau of Humanity. As the Satrap of the Blessed Isle, all City Mothers and City Fathers on the Blessed Isle answer to her, and she runs a tight ship, careful to make sure that they all adhere to the dictates of the Immaculate Philosophy. She is aware of the subtle nuances of every aspect of the Immaculate Order's interaction with gods not because she has any love for the Order, but because she despises it.

Jagalza has close ties to the Bronze Faction and frequently attempts to convince it to change the Immaculate Order's position on the worship of gods, to little effect. Since the disappearance of the Scarlet Empress, she has also begun speaking with Gold Faction members, seeking to do what she has always done—preserve the Realm, regardless of who rules there. Personally, she would prefer that the fractious and constantly warring Exalted did not rule at all, leaving such things to the gods, who are eternal and know their relationships to one another, but she realizes that is too much to hope for in this Age.

Jagalza appears as a seven-foot-tall woman in brilliant scarlet robes, once emblazoned with the symbol of the Scarlet Empress. Now, however, her robes shift through a variety of patterns, as the symbols of the various Great Houses appear and disappear, as a thousand minor events determine which House comes the closest to ruling. She wears an impressive moonsilver and starmetal headdress, set with three hearthstones, and she is utterly bald. Her eyes are a brilliant white hue the color of pale jade, and her skin has a luminous, slightly translucent quality, as though she were made of moonstone.

A servant-god always accompanies Jagalza, carrying the Utmost Censor, her moonsilver grand daiklave envenomed with strange poisons she acquires from the Division of Endings, in the Bureau of Destiny. This servant-god shapechanges itself into a suit of resplendent red jade and starmetal lamellar armor upon Jagalza as she takes a battle stance.

Sanctum: Jagalza does not maintain a sanctum in Creation, instead staying at one of her several opulent estates in Heaven.

Motivation: To make sure that the Realm stands for all eternity.

Attributes: Strength 6, Dexterity 8, Stamina 5; Charisma 8, Manipulation 8, Appearance 7; Perception 6, Intelligence 5, Wits 5

Virtues: Compassion 3, Conviction 4, Temperance 5, Valor 5



Abilities: Athletics 3, Awareness 4, Bureaucracy 8 (Bureau of Humanity +3), Dodge 6, Integrity 5, Investigation 4, Linguistics (Native: Old Realm; Others: High Realm, Low Realm) 2, Lore 5, Martial Arts 2, Medicine 3, Melee 6 (Daiklaves +2), Occult 6, Performance 4 (Dance +2), Presence 7, Resistance 6, Ride 3, Socialize 6, War 4

Backgrounds: Backing 4, Celestial Manse 5, Contacts 5, Followers 4, Influence 5, Resources 5

Spirit Charms: Jagalza has all the available spirit Charms. Some specifics are given here:

Celestial Circle Sorcery—Jagalza knows the following Celestial Circle spells and can teach them to others: Blood of Boiling Oil and Sapphire Countermagic.

Donning Spiritual Armor—Through the expenditure of five motes, Jagalza may add her (Temperance + Essence) to her bashing and lethal soaks. By spending one Willpower, she may also add her Essence to her aggravated soak.

Essence Plethora (x3)—Jagalza has access to 30 additional motes of Essence.

Geas—Jagalza may lay a geas upon a spirit, Exalt or mortal for the purpose of fulfilling her duties under Heaven or her Motivation. This is considered unnatural mental influence. Jagalza's player rolls her (Manipulation + Conviction) against the target's Mental DV. This Charm costs two Willpower points and requires the investment of a number of motes equal to the number of days she wishes the target to be bound by the geas, to a maximum of 28 days.

Materialize—It costs Jagalza 90 motes to materialize.

Principle of Motion—Jagalza normally maintains a reserve of 10 additional actions.

Reserve of Will (x3)—Jagalza has access to three additional points of Willpower.

Satrap's Prerogative—While in Heaven, Jagalza may summon any single one of her subordinates in the Bureau of Humanity to her side immediately. She does so only in times of danger or other emergency. She must spend a point of Willpower and a number of motes equal to the (Essence + Willpower) of the subordinate she is summoning.

Terrestrial Circle Sorcery—Jagalza knows all Terrestrial Circle spells and may teach them to others.

Jagalza has the First, Second and Third Excellencies for the following Abilities: Bureaucracy, Dodge, Integrity, Lore, Melee and Presence.

Join Battle: 9

Attacks:

Clinch: Speed 6 Accuracy 10, Damage 6B, Parry DV —, Rate 1

Kick: Speed 5 Accuracy 10, Damage 9B, Parry DV 4, Rate 2

Punch: Speed 5, Accuracy 11, Damage 6B, Parry DV 6, Rate 3

Moonsilver Grand Daiklave (The Utmost Censor): Speed 5, Accuracy 20, Damage 18L/4*, Parry DV 9, Rate 2

* Weeping Conclusion (poison); Damage 6L/minute, Resist 5L, Tolerance —/—, Impairment -4

Soak: 11L/14B (Divine lamellar, 8L/9B, Hardness: 5L/5B)

Health Levels: -0/-1/-1/-1/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap

Dodge DV: 11

Willpower: 10

Essence: 8

Essence Pool: 160

Cost to Materialize: 90

Other Notes: None

TACHI-KUN

Central God of War

The god of war for the center direction, Tachi-Kun is also the god of Exalted warfare, the patron of the tumultuous clash between those imbued with the power of the gods. In ancient days, when the Exalted marched to war, Tachi-Kun was there, overseeing the clash of battle-Essence, savoring every shake of the earth and mountain toppled by these heroes.

To say that Tachi-Kun has been disappointed with the warriors of the Blessed Isle since the Usurpation is something of an understatement. He finds the Dragon-Blooded focus on unit tactics and dog-packing to lack the honor and glory of the ancient wars, when Solars took to the field against their foes, each a hero in his own right.

This isn't to say that Tachi-Kun doesn't support the Bronze Faction, of course. He is too wise to see the suspicious disappearance of Darunla, the wolf-goddess of the East who supported the Solars, shortly after the Usurpation as chance—especially given that Sunipa, who favors the Dragon-Blooded, was soon after elevated to the position of war-goddess of the East. Tachi-Kun acknowledges that the Dragon-Blooded are mighty warriors; they are simply not heroes, in his mind. But then, foot soldiers rarely are.



Tachi-Kun maintains a strong rivalry with Voharun, the crow-god of Northern war. Once, in the time of the Solars, Voharun and Tachi-Kun were strong allies, but they have not gotten along since the Usurpation. Neither, however, will reveal the reason.

The central god of war is nearly eight feet tall and powerfully built. He wears an incredible suit of starmetal and jade superheavy plate, with an impressive dragon-face helm. He wields Terrible Mountain Cutter, an impressive divine grand grimcleaver. He is a superb martial artist and soldier, excelling at the use of Charms to their best effects in combat.

Sanctum: In the Imperial City, there is a temple to Tachi-Kun that is opened only during his festival day. Nonetheless, it has become a tradition for legionnaires who visit the city for the first time to come and see the outside of the temple. Within this temple is an archway behind the altar, and those passing immaterial through the archway may enter the opulent warrior's sanctum of Tachi-Kun. The god spends most of his time in his estates in Yu-Shan, however.

Motivation: To foster battle that features incredible Exalted heroes.

Attributes: Strength 10, Dexterity 12, Stamina 8; Charisma 6, Manipulation 5, Appearance 5; Perception 7, Intelligence 5, Wits 7

Virtues: Compassion 2, Conviction 4, Temperance 3, Valor 5

Abilities: Archery 4, Athletics 5, Awareness 6, Bureaucracy 5, Craft (Earth) 4, Craft (Fire) 4, Dodge 7, Integrity 6, Investigation 4, Linguistics (Native: Old Realm; Others: Flametongue, High Realm, Low Realm, Riverspeak) 4, Lore 6, Martial Arts 5, Medicine 3, Melee 7 (Grand Grimcleavers +3), Occult

5, Performance 3, Presence 6, Resistance 5, Ride 4, Sail 4, Socialize 4, Stealth 3, Survival 3, Thrown 4, War 7

Backgrounds: Backing 4, Celestial Manse 5, Contacts 5, Cult 2, Followers 5, Influence 5, Resources 5, Sanctum 3

Spirit Charms: Tachi-Kun has all available spirit Charms. Some specifics are given here, however:

Donning Spiritual Armor—Through the expenditure of five motes, Tachi-Kun may add his (Temperance + Essence) to his bashing and lethal soaks. By spending one point of Willpower, he may also add his Essence to his aggravated soak.

Essence Plethora (x3)—Tachi-Kun has 30 additional motes in his Essence pool.

Materialize—It costs Tachi-Kun 80 motes to materialize.

Principle of Motion—Tachi-Kun regularly maintains a pool of eight additional actions.

Reserve of Will (x2)—Tachi-Kun has access to two additional Willpower points.

Shapechange—In the midst of a battle, Tachi-Kun can change into a great and terrible dragon, with wicked scything talons and the ability to fly.

Spirit Cutting—Tachi-Kun may attack a physical opponent when he is dematerialized, or he may attack a dematerialized one when he is material. Doing so costs one mote per attack.

Terrestrial Circle Sorcery—Tachi-Kun knows all Terrestrial Circle spells and can teach them to others.

Uncanny Prowess—By expending two motes, Tachi-Kun may add his Valor to any Dexterity-based roll that has to do with his areas of godly influence, such as combat.

Tachi-Kun has the First, Second and Third Excellencies for the following Abilities: Awareness, Dodge, Integrity, Martial Arts, Melee, Presence and War

Join Battle: 13

Attacks:

Clinch: Speed 6, Accuracy 17, Damage 10B, Parry DV —, Rate 1

Kick: Speed 5, Accuracy 17, Damage 13B, Parry DV 8, Rate 2

Punch: Speed 5, Accuracy 18, Damage 10B, Parry DV 10, Rate 3

Divine Grand Grimcleaver (Terrible Mountain Cutter): Speed 6, Accuracy 24, Damage 24L/4, Parry DV 10, Rate 2

Soak: 19L/23B (Divine superheavy plate, 15L/15B, Hardness: 10L/10B)

Health Levels: -0/-1/-1/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap

Dodge DV: 13 **Willpower:** 9

Essence: 7 **Essence Pool:** 145

Cost to Materialize: 80

Other Notes: None

THE ANCIENT OF STONE JOURNEYS

God of the Great Coast Road and Travel on the Blessed Isle

The Ancient of Stone Journeys is a well-known god, for his shrines dot the length and breadth of the Great Coast Road, ready to be opened by the nearest Immaculate on one of his several sacrifice days. Travelers do not ever leave



tokens of worship or even thanks at the doors to these small huts, for the Ancient of Stone Journeys is a staunch adherent of the Immaculate Philosophy. Many travelers do stop and picnic in the shade of the great sycamores that grow near his shrines, though, and sycamores are sacred to the Ancient of Stone Journeys.

The Ancient himself is a tall, impressive figure, some seven and a half feet in height. He wears impressively large boots shod in white jade and long, flowing traveler's robes, secured with a wide leather belt hung with pouches and bags. He carries with him a large sycamore staff shod in white jade, as well, and this weapon (which takes the traits of a grand goremaul) can be used to utterly destroy rubble, fallen trees and other things that obstruct the Great Coast Road. The large bag of water that he carries with him has healing properties, both for mortals and for the road itself, allowing him to pour water on cracks and other damage to the road in order to "wash away" such occurrences. The god has long hair and a beard the color of the Great Coast Road's stone, and his eyes are the brilliant blue of the horizon on the Blessed Isle.

The Ancient spends very little time in his otherworldly sanctum. He can usually be found walking the length of the Great Coast Road, observing it for damage, obstructions or signs of banditry. He can easily will himself anywhere along the road, but walking the road in this way allows him to make a complete circuit of the road in two weeks. During Calibration, the Ancient hosts a fine celebration in his sanctum, inviting all the gods of the Court of Tireless Treadings, a court consisting of road gods and other minor travel deities

throughout Creation. Traditionally, the Empress sent a gift to his sanctum during this time, a habit that Mnemon has taken up in her mother's absence.

Sanctum: The Ancient's small temple in the Imperial City bears an immaterial portal that leads to his opulently appointed suite of rooms. In these rooms, furnished with very large furniture and high ceilings, the Ancient allows himself to sit and relax. Any other time he is encountered, he is standing and walking.

Motivation: To maintain the usefulness and structure of the Great Coast Road, fostering travel and trade along its length.

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 5; Charisma 3, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2; Perception 5, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Virtues: Compassion 4, Conviction 2, Temperance 3, Valor 2

Abilities: Athletics 5, Awareness 4, Bureaucracy 3, Craft (Earth) 5, Dodge 2, Integrity 3, Investigation 2, Linguistics (Native: Old Realm; Others: High Realm, Low Realm) 2, Lore 2, Martial Arts 1, Medicine 2, Melee 4 (Staves +2), Presence 3, Resistance 4, Stealth 2, Survival 4

Backgrounds: Backing 5, Influence 3, Resources 3, Sanctum 3
Spirit Charms:

Ancient Waters—The Ancient may pour the water from his bag onto damage to his road, healing it by paying one mote per lethal health level repaired. Likewise, the may grant a traveler on his road a drink, healing her for one lethal health level or two bashing health levels for five motes, but only if the wounds were taken while the traveler was on the Great Coast Road.

Essence Plethora—The Ancient of Stone Journeys has 10 additional motes of Essence.

Hurry Home—The Ancient of Stone Journeys may instantly transport himself anywhere along the length of the Great Stone Road for 10 motes and a Willpower point.

Materialize—It costs the Ancient 55 motes to materialize.

Shapechange—The Ancient sometimes changes his shape to that of a rich merchant or other traveler, in order to lure bandits out into the open.

The Ancient of Stone Journeys has the First Excellency for the following Abilities: Awareness, Craft, Melee and Resistance.

Join Battle: 7

Attacks:

Clinch: Speed 6, Accuracy 4, Damage 3B, Parry DV —, Rate 1

Kick: Speed 5, Accuracy 4, Damage 6B, Parry DV 1, Rate 2

Punch: Speed 5, Accuracy 5, Damage 3B, Parry DV 3, Rate 3

White Jade Grand Goremaul (The Marker of Miles): Speed 4, Accuracy 11, Damage 20L/5, Parry DV 4, Rate 1

Soak: 11L/13B (Resilience of the Eternal Road, 8L/8B)

Health Levels: -0/-1/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap

Dodge DV: 5 **Willpower:** 7

Essence: 4 **Essence Pool:** 85

Cost to Materialize: 55

Other Notes: Those who wear the boots of the Ancient find that they can run along the Great Coast Road at a speed of five miles every hour of running without ever becoming tired. The character must be running, however, and the effect ends as soon as he steps off the Great Coast Road. The Ancient of the Stone Journeys rarely lends out his boots, however, though he has been known to do so to itinerant monks who need to travel somewhere in an emergency.

FIELD GOD

Field gods are the gods of agricultural stretches of land, from rice paddies to wheat fields to orchards and vineyards. Generally, field gods form the majority of the population of a rustic spirit court, though each one rules many acres of a given kind of field. The appearance of a field god changes depending on what is being grown in that field. Rice paddy gods wear short robes of woven rice grains, with big straw hats, and possess perpetually wet feet. Gods of wheat fields are usually gracefully tall and fair in hue, while the goddesses of apple orchards tend to be sweetly rounded, ruddy cheeked and mirthful.

On the Blessed Isle, field gods know better than to demand the sort of harvest sacrifices that they get elsewhere. They also work the hardest of all the field gods in the world, required by the Immaculate Philosophy to do their part to ensure a fine harvest. During winter, when there is no life in their fields, field gods generally wander their domain morosely, dressed as paupers. When pressed, field gods can quickly transform the crops of their field (even during winter) into weapons.

Sanctum: In one place in every field, a small portion of crop is left unharvested. This fruit-heavy tree, bunch of vines or square of field is the entryway into the sanctum of that field god, whose home seems built into the tree or made out of the plant it embodies. Field god homes are comfortable, if a bit rustic.

Motivation: To see that its field, vineyard, orchard or paddy produces a fine crop and is protected from harm.

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4; Charisma 3, Manipulation 2, Appearance 4; Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Virtues: Compassion 3, Conviction 2, Temperance 3, Valor 2

Abilities: Archery 3, Athletics 2, Awareness 3, Bureaucracy 1, Craft (Wood) 3, Dodge 4, Integrity 2, Lore 1, Martial Arts 2, Melee 3, Occult 2, Resistance 2, Stealth 4 (Agricultural Fields +3), Socialize 2

Backgrounds: Backing 2, Influence 1, Sanctum 2

Spirit Charms:

Intrusion Sensing Method—By committing five motes of Essence and spending a point of Willpower, the Storyteller gets a reflexive (Perception + Awareness) roll for the field god, adding a number of automatic successes equal to the field god's Compassion, to detect any time an entity with an Essence of greater than 1 enters its domain.

Materialize—It costs a field god 45 motes to materialize.

Measure the Wind—The field god may spend a mote to under-



stand the spiritual power of those who come to its fields.
Summon Food—By spending five motes, the field god may create wholesome but simple food appropriate to its purview, in quantities sufficient to feed up to five people. By spending 10 motes, this is food of exquisite quality.
 Field gods have the First Excellency for the following Abilities: Awareness, Craft, Dodge and Melee.

Join Battle: 6

Attacks:

Clinch: Speed 6, Accuracy 5, Damage 4B, Parry DV —, Rate 1

Kick: Speed 5, Accuracy 5, Damage 7B, Parry DV 2, Rate 2

Punch: Speed 5, Accuracy 6, Damage 4B, Parry DV 4, Rate 3

Crop-Sword: Speed 4, Accuracy 8, Damage 7L, Parry DV 4, Rate 2

Crop-Bow: Speed 6, Accuracy 6, Damage 6L*, Rate 2, Range 150

* Uses broadhead arrows.

Soak: 9L/9B (Spiritual tunic, 7L/5B)

Health Levels: -0/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap

Dodge DV: 5 **Willpower:** 6

Essence: 3 **Essence Pool:** 60

Cost to Materialize: 45

Other Notes: None

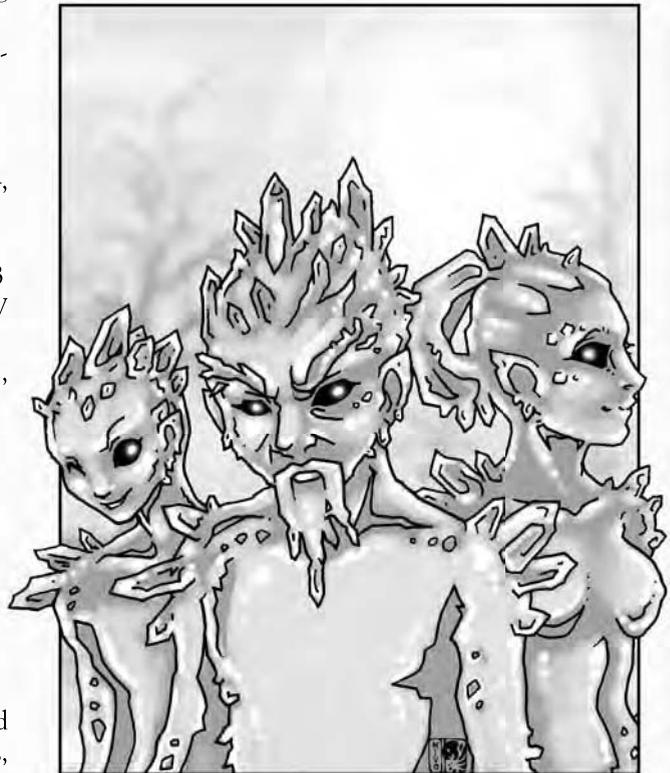
SALT GOD

The salt gods are a very prolific type of little god, found anywhere salt might be extracted from natural environs,

be it along coasts, marshes or in salt mines. The salt gods exist in order to keep salt as part of the natural world, so it is against their purpose under Heaven to permit the harvesting of salt. Unfortunately, because salt is so valuable in the preservation of food and preparation of raw materials, it is the cornerstone of civilization. Therefore, civilizations in Creation have long accepted the need to sacrifice to the salt gods, bribing them to set their duty aside in order to allow civilization to grow.

Even with the coming of the Immaculate Order, the salt gods could not be forced to allow this. In fact, some in the Order maintain that it is wrong to even allow them to be bribed, even though civilization requires salt. Therefore, the Scarlet Empress herself invoked her right as the ruler of Creation to set the terms of sacrifice for salt gods all through her Realm. She would establish a specific sacrificial rate per quintal of salt. In return, not only would the Scarlet Empire permit the sacrifices to continue, it would mandate salt sacrificial rate laws.

Ultimately, this rate led to a tax on salt, set at two percent when it was established in RY 314. As a universal rate of taxation on salt, it eventually became the rate upon which banking and lending institutions were based. The salt rate has fluctuated in the Realm since then, usually varying between two and eight percent, established by the Empress by traveling to the Temple of the Salt Gods in the Imperial City and making a sacrifice in that amount. The salt gods were forced to accept her terms as ruler of Creation. Producers of salt hired Immaculate monks to perform the necessary sacrifices, and the system continued.



In the time since her disappearance, however, things have changed. There is no single standard salt rate any longer, and while some salt gods charge smaller amounts, others (such as those in the Eagle Prefecture) have begun charging outrageous amounts, so much that salt production has ceased in those areas.

Salt gods are small humanoid creatures that appear entirely crusted over with gleaming salt crystals. They stand about two feet high. There are salt gods every few miles of coastline, as well as at salt-gathering sites. (There are approximately 736 salt gods on the Blessed Isle alone.) Salt gods do not hesitate to sabotage and steal from operations that try to take salt without paying the salt rate in sacrifices.

Sanctum: Each salt god maintains a small sanctum that looks like a cavern studded with salt crystals the size of human fists. These sanctums are accessible at liminal places, where one thing becomes another, such as right at the shoreline or at the doorway into a salt mine.

Motivation: To prevent the unblest collection of salt.

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2; Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance 1; Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 2

Virtues: Compassion 1, Conviction 3, Temperance 2, Valor 2

Abilities: Athletics 2, Awareness 2, Bureaucracy 3 (Mercantilism +2), Dodge 2, Integrity 2, Larceny 2, Linguistics (Native: Old Realm; Others: High Realm, Low Realm) 2, Martial Arts 3, Occult 1, Resistance 2, Stealth 3

Backgrounds: Cult 1, Resources 3, Sanctum 1

Spirit Charms:

Erode—Salt gods can cause materials to erode and fray, as though left exposed to the elements and pounding surf for many weeks. In order to use this ability, they must spend three motes, and then an (Intelligence + Conviction) roll is made. Each success inflicts a point of lethal damage to the object. Salt gods may ignore up to five points of lethal soak on an item, unless the item is made of stone. This Charm cannot affect items made from the magical materials at all. Salt gods use this ability to sabotage mining operations that do not pay their salt rate.

Hurry Home—Salt gods can rise from any source of salt in their domain, naturally occurring or mined by spending 10 motes and a point of Willpower.

Materialize—Salt gods must pay 35 motes to manifest.

Salt Body—Salt gods' bodies are made up entirely of salt crystals. As such, they soak lethal damage with their full Stamina, in addition to possessing a measure of armor from the durability of their forms. Salt gods inflict lethal damage with their unarmed attacks, and their sense of pain is dramatically reduced by the spiritually numbing effects of salt, reducing their wound penalties by one. Finally, salt god attacks inflict aggravated damage to hungry ghosts and other creatures adversely affected by salt. These benefits cost salt gods an additional 10 motes when manifesting.

Salt gods have the First Excellency for the following Abilities: Bureaucracy, Martial Arts and Stealth.

Join Battle: 4

Attacks:

Kick: Speed 5 Accuracy 6, Damage 5L, Parry DV 2, Rate 2

Punch: Speed 5, Accuracy 7, Damage 2L, Parry DV 4, Rate 3

Soak: 7L/7B (Salt body, 5L/5B)

Health Levels: -0/-0/-0/-0/-1/-1/-1/-3/Incap

Dodge DV: 4 **Willpower:** 5

Essence: 2 **Essence Pool:** 45

Cost to Materialize: 35

Other Notes: None

RAGOLY AGLDE OF THE WINGS CONJOINED IN LURE

Lord of the Unrivaled Flames

No one truly knows how old Ragoly Aglde is, though he was certainly over a century in age when the Empress appointed him as the master of the Red Tables Court over a century ago. The God-Blooded son of a powerful ifrit lord known as the Wings Conjoined in Lure, Ragoly Aglde wields tremendous power that most God-Blooded never achieve. He has certainly lived longer than most God-Blooded do and shows no signs of slowing down.

Ragoly Aglde is something of a megalomaniac, seeing the fire elementals of the Blessed Isle as his sole dominion. He honors his subjects, seeing in them truly numinous spiritual entities, though he does not worship them. After all, he works closely with the Immaculate Order—although it might be fairer to say that the Immaculate Order watches him closely, to make sure he does not become an object or promulgator of heresy. Ragoly Aglde despises the Court of the Orderly Flame and will not hesitate to order the destruction of fire elementals that he learns are associated with it.

Ragoly Aglde's personal power and influence has swelled tremendously, as he alone can grant easy access to sorcerers wishing to summon fire elementals easily. Those who wish to summon fire elementals who will not fight their bindings from the Blessed Isle may journey to the Red Tables and apply for the Imperial Seal of the Unrivaled Flames, a red jade token that may be used during the summoning of a fire elemental. Not everyone gains such a token, however. Only those who can pay the tremendous bureaucratic fees, render the appropriate gifts and prove that their ability to summon fire elementals is of benefit to the Realm are even considered.

Ragoly Aglde is usually clad in crimson, gold and black robes. He has brilliant red hair that he keeps decorated in the height of imperial fashion, with beads of jade and gold woven into it. His nails are long and lacquered crimson, brushed in black ink with the words of fire elemental summoning spells. He is armed with his father's red jade daiklave, the Revered Scion of Heshesh, and he wears a red jade chain shirt beneath his robes.

Motivation: To honor the memory of his father's power by one day wielding as much power as he did.

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 5, Stamina 3; Charisma 3, Manipulation 5, Appearance 4; Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 4

Virtues: Compassion 2, Conviction 3, Temperance 1, Valor 4



Abilities: Athletics 4, Awareness 3, Bureaucracy 4, Dodge 5, Integrity 3, Linguistics (Native: Flametongue; Others: High Realm, Low Realm, Old Realm) 3, Lore 4 (Elementals +2), Martial Arts 4, Melee 4 (Daiklaves +1), Occult 5 (Summoning +2), Performance 2, Presence 4, Ride 2, Socialize 2, War 3 (Elementals +2)

Backgrounds: Artifact 4, Backing 4, Influence 3, Inheritance 4, Manse 3, Resources 5

Powers: Ragoly's elemental heritage grants him a variety of useful abilities, including:

Elemental Powers—Ragoly can use the Dragon's Suspire, Elemental Expression and Elemental Rejuvenation powers.

Ifrif's Gift—Ragoly Aglde is immune to damage from fire.

Terrestrial Circle Sorcery—Ragoly Aglde can use the following Terrestrial Circle Sorcery spells: Emerald Circle Banishment, Emerald Countermagic, Summon Elemental.

Join Battle: 7

Attacks:

Clinch: Speed 6, Accuracy 9, Damage 4B, Parry DV —, Rate 1

Kick: Speed 5, Accuracy 9, Damage 7B, Parry DV 4, Rate 2

Punch: Speed 5, Accuracy 10, Damage 4B, Parry DV 6, Rate 3

Red Jade Daiklave (Revered Scion of Hesiesh)*: Speed 4, Accuracy 13, Damage 11L, Parry DV 6, Rate 3

* By spending a single mote when he attacks, Ragoly may use Revered Scion to strike dematerialized spirits.

Soak: 7L/6B (Red jade chain shirt, 5L/3B, Hardness: 2L/2B)

Health Levels: -0/-1/-1/-2/-2/-4/Incap

Dodge DV: 7 **Willpower:** 7

Essence: 3 **Essence Pool:** 39

Other Notes: None

CREATURES OF THE BLESSED ISLE

Crag Cat

The mountains in the Dragon's Nest Range are known for their populations of crag cats, leopard-sized wild hunting cats that have developed claws and musculature adapted for climbing nearly sheer rock faces (+2 bonus to all climbing-based Athletics rolls). Crag cats normally prey on sheep or goats that wander too far from their herds, but they are known to prey on travelers when hungry, leaping down from cliff-faces where an attack is unlikely to



come from. Crag cats launching an attack from such a vantage impose a -2 external penalty to their target's (Wits + Awareness) rolls to notice the unexpected attack.

Dog, Blackstar Mastiff

Large hounds used for war or hunting, the blackstar mastiff is an expensive purebred dog sold by the Starlight clan of Lord's Crossing Dominion. Blackstar mastiffs are purest black, with the occasional sprinkling of white, making them look like a field of stars in the night sky. Those who wish to purchase a blackstar mastiff must journey to the Starlight compound in Traiter to stay for two weeks, being trained at the facility to handle the hounds, as well as being introduced to their animal. Those who have had the training before need spend only the week getting to know their beast. A character must have at least three dots of Resources to be able to afford a blackstar mastiff.



Blackstar mastiffs come with special leashes with which they are trained, and they remain quite docile while wearing the leashes. A servant or lieutenant can easily lead the beast around while it remains leashed. Off the leash, the dog will never attack anyone without orders, but it will not tolerate being grabbed. (Fortunately, it ignores incidental touching, simply growling at the contact.)

can eat eggs, fish and insects, giant pandas feed primarily on bamboo and are quite common in the massive bamboo forests of the western Blessed Isle. Pandas prefer to avoid humans, but they are capable of attack—though they do so invariably out of irritation, rather than any predatory instinct. Hunters and trappers often kill pandas for their pelts.

Hearth-Cat

First created during the First Age, a hearth-cat is a small house-cat, with a smooth pelt of deep crimson, gray and white swirls, often looking like patterns of fire. The cat's eyes are a cheery amber and tend to reflect back firelight with gold flashes. Hearth-cats have a magical ability to emit heat sufficient to keep a person warm during cold winter nights. This heat is emitted in a fairly tight area, so the cat normally snuggles up to a sleeping person or sits on someone's lap, emitting heat for as long as it purrs.

These cats are relatively common in the Blessed Isle now, thanks to their popularity, but they are quite expensive in the Threshold. Their bloodlines must be kept pure in order to retain their magical abilities—crossbreeding them with any other animal loses the ability. A character must have at least two dots of Resources to be able to afford a hearth-cat in the Blessed Isle. In the Threshold (particularly the North), the Resources minimum rises by one dot.

Horse, Firemane

Firemanes, known for their black or dark red coats and deep red tails and manes are bred in the city of Cloaka in Eagle Prefecture. These horses are strong runners,

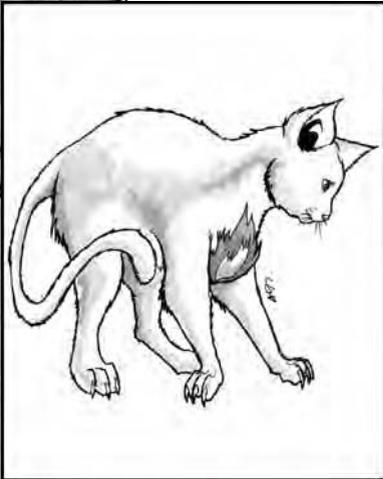
favored for their endurance and speed. They are never used for pulling carriages or hauling packs. Many Dynastic families are known to use these horses, particularly House Cathak, which gives a firemane to each Cathak child before she goes into the military.

Scarlet Crane

Long-legged water birds of a deep crimson hue, scarlet cranes are known for their crown-like head crests of feathers. Supposedly turned their crimson hue by the Scarlet Empress's blessings, scarlet cranes are found only along the length of the Imperial River. Thaumaturges who use one of the scarlet feathers of these cranes in creating items of good fortune gain an additional die in doing so during the creation process.

Tongma Monkey

Tongma monkeys are curious creatures, with long curling tails, big ears and eyes that make their little faces look quite comical. They are known to imitate the sounds of laughter and can copy the laughs of people they are around with uncanny accuracy. Tongma monkeys are often trained by sailors from the island of Tongma and love scrambling over the rigging. The monkeys eat primarily fruit and insects.



Once the abode of the gods and home to the Old Realm's Lawgivers and their Lunar consorts, the Blessed Isle is now the center of the Creation-spanning Scarlet Empire, ruled by the Empress and her Terrestrial Exalted children. Spared the worst of the Contagion, the Fair Folk invasion that followed and the centuries of conflict and want that reduced the rest of the world to barbarism and savagery, the Isle remains the jewel of Creation.

But now, the architect of the Blessed Isle's long peace, the Scarlet Empress, has vanished. With no clear heir, the Great Houses gird themselves for civil war. On top of that, the long-forgotten Lawgivers have returned to reclaim dominion over Creation. Will the Blessed Isle's tranquility be shattered at last, or is there still some way to shield Creation's heart from the Time of Tumult?

The first of five Celestial Direction books devoted to fleshing out the bare bones of Creation's supernatural locales presented in the Exalted core book, this book includes:

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