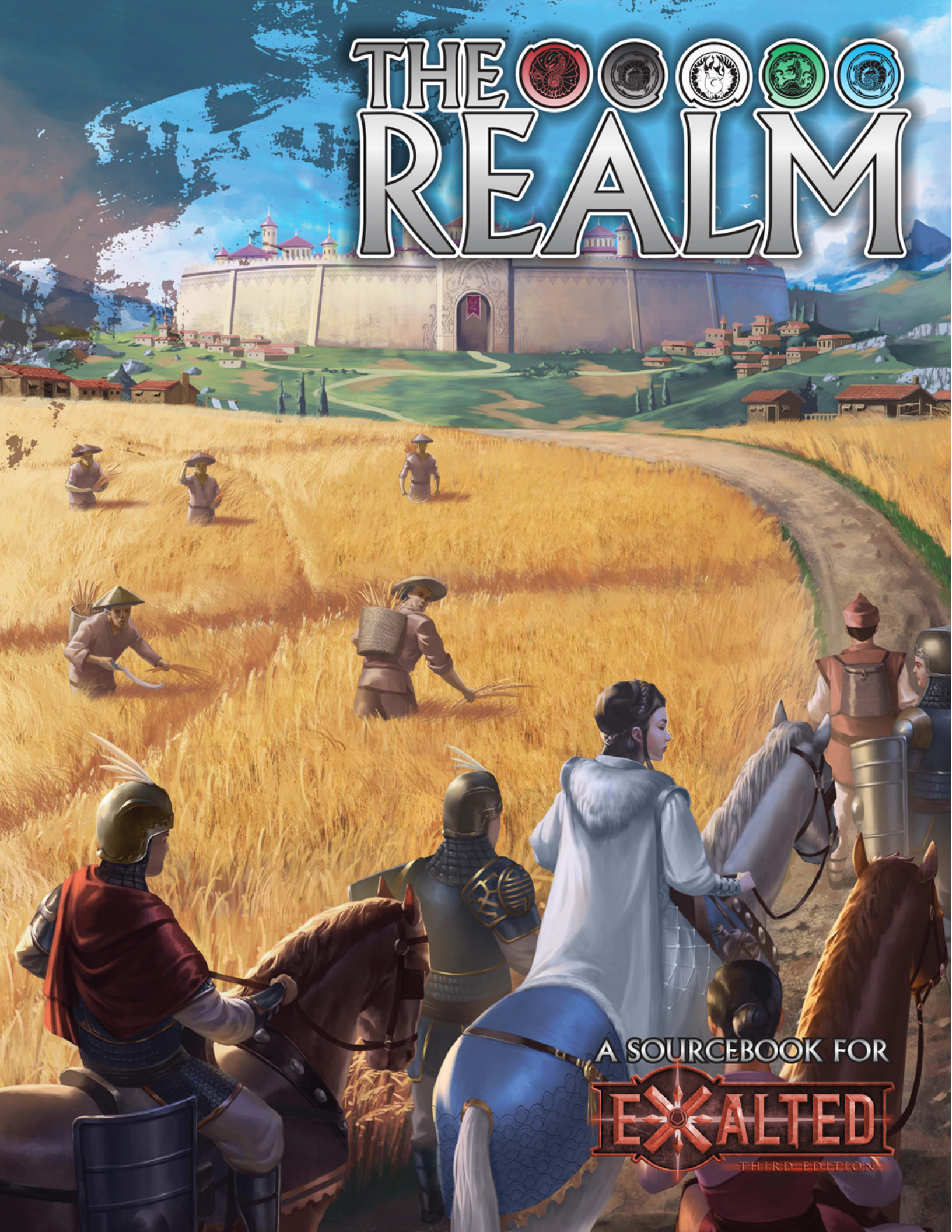

THE REALM
A SOURCEBOOK FOR
EXALTED
THIRD EDITION



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Requires the Use of the Exalted Third Edition Rulebook

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Introduction

"Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if one shouldn't trust the evidence of one's eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest mission civilizatrice."

— Edward Said, *Orientalism*

From Creation's center, the Scarlet Empress ruled the Realm, the world's greatest empire. On the Blessed Isle, Dynasts lead lives of unimaginable privilege, while the lowliest peasant lives better than her fellow woman in any other part of the world. In the Threshold, kingdoms conquered by the Imperial legions join the Realm as satrapies, client-states sworn to the Empress. Through them, Creation's wealth flows into her coffers.

Now, the Empress is gone. The Great Houses of the Scarlet Dynasty feud and scheme against each other. Legions once loyal to the Empress alone are divided among the houses. The Realm's labyrinthine bureaucracy festers with corruption. Satrapies grow bolder in defiance and rebellion. The Empress built the Realm's machinery around herself; in her absence, it cannot hold.

If the Realm falls, it will not go quietly. The Great Houses prepare for a seemingly inevitable civil war, each with its own visions of the Realm's future. The Lunars seek the culmination of their centuries-long vendetta against the Dragon-Blooded. And the Solars' return shakes Creation to its pillars. As the world groans through this turning point, these heroes will forge legends that will be recounted for millennia, or be wiped away by war and apocalypse.

This Book at a Glance

Chapter One: History and Life in the Realm details the Realm's history and the Blessed Isle's society and culture.

Chapter Two: The Machinery of Empire portrays the magistrates, the ministries, the All-Seeing Eye, the Deliberative, and the Realm's economy.

Chapter Three: The Might of the Realm discusses Realm's military, including the legions and Imperial Navy.

Chapter Four: The Immaculate Order covers the Realm's state religion.

Chapter Five: The Blessed Isle details prefectures, cities, and other locales across the Realm's heartland.

Chapter Six: The World We Rule describes the satrapy system and a selection of satrapies.

Chapter Seven: The War for the Caul unveils the weird, distant Caul, battleground between the Realm and the Lunar Anathema.

Lexicon

All-Seeing Eye, the: The *Imperial Service*'s espionage arm, originally reporting directly to the *Scarlet Empress*.

barbarian: A foreigner whose culture doesn't derive from the Realm.

cadet house: A *Dragon-Blooded* family in the Threshold, tied by marriage to the *Scarlet Dynasty*.

citizen: A *peasant*, *patrician*, *outcaste*, or *Dynast* of the Realm. Slaves and the *dispossessed* aren't citizens.

dispossessed: Ex-*citizens* who've been stripped of all rights.

dominion: One of three especially large *prefectures*, carved out of the former Shoguns' personal estates.

Dragon-Blooded: Exalted of the Elemental Dragons.

Dynast: A member of the *Scarlet Dynasty*, the Realm's ruling class.

Great House: An aristocratic family of the *Scarlet Dynasty*.

Immaculate Order, the: The religious institution that enforces and spreads the *Immaculate Philosophy*.

Immaculate Philosophy, the: The Realm's state religion, which teaches that the *Dragon-Blooded* are the rightful rulers of Creation and its mortal peoples.

Imperial legions, the: Realm armies once loyal to the Empress alone, acclaimed as Creation's greatest fighting force. Now divided up among the Great Houses.

Imperial Navy, the: Five great armadas, forming the world's largest fleet.

Imperial Service, the: Collectively, the *Imperial legions*, the *Imperial Navy*, the *Merchant Fleet*, the *magistrates*, the *Thousand Scales*, and the *All-Seeing Eye*.

magistrate: One of the *Scarlet Empress'* investigators plenipotentiary, empowered to battle corruption in the Realm on her behalf.

martial order: A force of militant *oblates* serving the *Immaculate Order*.

Merchant Fleet, the: Ships assigned to escort the Realm's tribute to the Blessed Isle.

oblate: A layperson sworn to the *Immaculate Order*'s service.

outcaste: Any *Dragon-Blood* not belonging to the *Scarlet Dynasty*.

patrician: A member of the Realm's gentry.

peasant: A commoner on the Blessed Isle.

prefecture: An administrative division of the Blessed Isle. Overseen by a prefect.

Realm Before, the: Another term for the First Age.

satrapy: A Threshold province that acknowledges the *Scarlet Empress*' suzerainty and pays tribute to the Realm. Overseen by a satrap who ensures that the local government pays tribute.

Scarlet Dynasty, the: The *Scarlet Empress*' vast extended family, comprising the *Great Houses* and the *cadet houses* of the Threshold.

Scarlet Empress, the: The most powerful *Dragon-Blood* in Creation, who ruled the Realm from its birth until her disappearance five years ago.

secondary school: One of the Realm's rigorous academies of higher learning, attended from ages 15 to 21.

Thousand Scales, the: A colloquial term for the ministries of the *Imperial Service*.

Suggested Resources

Classics

***Dream of the Red Chamber*, by Cao Xueqin:** Depicts the goings-on between the two branches of the sprawling, aristocratic Jia clan, tracing a complex web of relationships among family and servants against a backdrop of the Jias' decline and fall.

Fiction

***Dread Empire*, by Glen Cook:** The Dread Empire of Shinsan, with its sorcerer-generals, invincibly trained legions, and war for the throne between puissant supernatural princes, offers excellent inspiration for the Realm.

Nonfiction

***King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, by Adam Hochschild:** An examination of one of history's most brutal colonial regimes, offering insight into the purposes and consequences of Realm imperialism.

***Pagan Holiday: On the Trail of Ancient Roman Tourists*, by Tony Perrottet:** Interleaving the author's travels around the Mediterranean with Roman travelers' experiences in the same scenic locales two millennia earlier, this book provides a valuable illustration of the Dynasty's relationship with the satrapies.

Movies

***Hero*, directed by Zhang Yimou:** Pure propaganda for one of history's worst tyrants, *Hero* glorifies Qin Shi Huang's brutal reign in much the same way that the Realm lionizes the Scarlet Empress.

The Imperial Mountain was visible from the top of the hill on the road to Juche, but then, it was visible from the bottom as well. This close to the city, the mountain filled much of the horizon, stretching well above the clouds that hung heavy and dark and high in the sky. Sadaal couldn't see it, however. Her face was pointed down, and she prayed to the Dragons for strength. With Mela's grace, she craned her neck upwards.

The last of the traveling guards who didn't surrender was in fine form, slashing sword flashing as he swept it at his attackers. His name was Berat, and she'd known him all her life. One of the bandits who attacked them lay dead on the ground, and Berat fought the others like a man who gave and expected no quarter. The most grievous harm he'd done to the bandits was only to take their mirth. Their leader, a tall woman built of sinew and sadism, stepped in as Berat swept his sword to the side. Her heavy knife whistled in the air, Berat's blood erupted all around her, and Sadaal let out a low moan.

"Hush, child," said some pilgrim in the dirt next to her, whose name she didn't recall. She hadn't learned any of their names, the group that accompanied her — merchants dragging salt from the shores and galangal and lemongrass from An-Teng, hoping to trade for some of the sweet wines of Juche; a few students, scarcely older than she, on their way to the various Thousand Scales schools in the region; and a group of pilgrims and monks escorting an ancient copper statue of the Fire Dragon.

It started to rain. The drops pattered on the statue, making the most patient of the Dragons seem unnaturally hasty. Sadaal prayed, eyes fixed on the statue. She kept praying when a hand, reeking of sour sweat, thrust under her armpit and wrenched her to her feet. A squeak of fear erupted from her when she faced the bandit's leader.

Berat's blood was beading in the leader's hair, Sadaal saw, as the woman leaned down to her height. The raindrops mixed with the blood, breaking and running in tiny red rivers down the woman's forehead and across her leather eyepatch.

"I know that mon," she said, fingernails brushing against Sadaal's robe. "The Rein family. Don't worry, you've nothing to fear from us. Your unspilled blood is worth a talent of jade, love." The leader stood straighter, turned, and walked towards the statue.

"We should have waited," sobbed some minister, her long robes hiked up slightly, hat of office laying muddy and rumpled a few feet from her prostrate form. Her staff was all second and third daughters and sons, scions of lesser import aiding a minister of little import. They looked terrified as the bandits stalked to the noise's source. "I told you, I told you, the Arbiters to the Obsidian Mirror would've taken us, they would have protected us, they…"

"Enough," said the leader, and another bandit took the minister's breath with a swift and brutal kick. Her soundless gasps quelled any loyalty or defensive urges within her staff.

That heavy knife flashed again, and the monks flinched, but no blood hit the ground. The *clang* of steel on copper filled the air, and the silver fangs of Hesiesh's statue made a slight crunching noise as they were torn free. The second fang came more easily than the first, leaving a copper scale in the mud. The leader grinned as she slipped her plunder into a bag at her side.

"Go on, get angry," she said, watching the monks' reddened faces. "It's symbolic, yeah? Dragons don't have teeth. If they did," she grinned wider, "I wouldn't be here."

Sadaal watched the clouds, lightning flashing and racing from one end of the sky to the other, circling the mountain. To her, they looked like dragons.



Chapter One

History and Life in the Realm

As long as mortal memory can recall, the Scarlet Empire has sat at Creation's heart, sprawling outward from the Blessed Isle like the coiled dragons from which it claims descent. A world without the Realm is for most an idle (and pleasant) fantasy, but the tale of its birth is well known.

It's the story of Creation's savior and tyrant, the immortal ruler who directs her Empire like a mason wielding a chisel against history. It's the story of the Scarlet Empress.

Birth of an Empire

Imagine the world's end.

A horde of monsters and devils advances on civilization. Everyone you know is dead by plague. Your village is an echoing shell of empty homes, some still warm with rot. Whole cities are abandoned, familiar trade routes drying up like the rivers blocked by disease-ridden dead. The sky itself seems infected, bruised by falling stars. The few who pass through litter bad news in their wake.

On the day you finish digging your husband's grave, the sky erupts. The horizon dances with lurid signal fires, and for one long moment your ears are battered by the war-trumpet of the gods. Silence follows, and as days become weeks, life releases a long-held breath.

The first wanderers bear news of ogre brigades whipped from the world by a divine scourge. The plague loosens its strangling grip, and hollow houses are cleared of the dead. A legion musters on a nearby hill, clamoring around campfires. Priests speak of a new bodhisattva, one who cleansed Creation of fiend and flux. The sky burns once more, fires thundering out, and you cheer with a voice you'd forgotten you possessed.

And then Her image stands in your village, voice ringing like a gong. You sink to your knees in the dirt. She is a mighty and beautiful tower of scarlet fire, wrought as a woman in robes of blood. She is destruction. She is salvation.

She is, now and forever, your Empress.

The End of Days

In the dying gasp of the Shogunate, the Terrestrial Host sallied forth to defend Creation itself. The creatures that live outside the world had watched with hungry eyes for millennia, and as the Great Contagion ravaged humanity they licked their exquisite lips. Weakened by neglect and war, the powers and efforts that had kept the Wyld at bay finally failed, and the princes of chaos fell upon the world.

The Fair Folk advanced in a mad tide, herding nightmares before them and feasting on countless souls. Refugees were driven inexorably toward Creation's heart, homelands unraveled behind them by the gentry of imaginary worlds. The ragged and disunited Shogunate legions knew that Creation's survival rested on their response. Determined not to let the Fair Folk set foot on the Blessed Isle's shores, they drew their line beyond the Inland Sea. They would stop the raksha there, or spill every drop of Dragon's blood in the effort.

The Woman Who Would Be Empress

The Dragon-Blooded were driven back mile by mile. Some fled across the sea, to make their last stand at home. Others dug in, determined to win an ending worthy of their bloodline. As the thin jade line strained and frayed, one young and charismatic officer made her move. In the old stories, it was ancient weapons and incredible spells that vanquished the Wyld, not mere numbers. Her study of First Age lore convinced her that such power was real, awaiting someone with the wit to claim it.

The young captain used the chaos to abandon her command and return to the Blessed Isle. She guided her Sworn Kinship with antiquated texts to the Palace of the Anathema, an ominous manse sealed away at the heart of an ancient, half-forgotten fortress. As the war for

Creation's last breath waged on, the deserters overcame demons, deciphered passwords, and evaded hideous traps to pierce its dreadful depths. No history records the details of their descent into the innards of a world-rending war machine, but only one survived. With the antediluvian machinery of apocalypse waking beneath her grip, the woman who would become Empress directed her arsenal against Creation's enemies.

Fire and iron poured from the skies, dissolving armies of Fair Folk like rain on chalk. The seas swelled with silhouettes of froth and anger, smashing fingernail boats as a child breaks toys. The Sword of Creation swung but once, and as the aftershocks of Creation's rescue died away, the world fell quiet.

The Seven Tigers

In that silence, only a few souls had the luxury to look ahead. Of those, even fewer were bold enough to act on what they saw. As mighty trees of smoke and ash spread their branches on the horizon, Skri Shanash ordered an immediate march centerward. Senior among the surviving Dragon-Blooded commanders, she saw a world in need of authority and ripe for conquest. By the time word reached the soon-to-be Empress in the depths of her half-tamed Palace, Skri had secured an alliance with six like-minded commanders. These Seven Tigers carved up Creation into private provinces and set about the bloody business of conquering their new lands.

Refugees flooded the Isle's shores, and the Empress could only watch through the Imperial Manse's far-seeing eye as the Seven Tigers confidently rebuffed diplomatic efforts and prepared their invasion fleet. Faced with the prospect of war on the Blessed Isle, a conflict that would sunder the Terrestrial Host beyond repair regardless of its victor, she conjured the wrath of the ancients once more, bringing ruination on those she'd once fought alongside. The threat of invasion was eliminated, her most active rivals swept from the board. And yet the Empress did not move to claim the empty throne.

Destiny Calls

Secluded within the Palace of Anathema, the Empress brooded over the destruction she'd wrought. Having seized the strength she needed to save the world, she couldn't set it down again. Fear and greed would force others to destroy her, to usurp the manse's unfathomable power for themselves. Yet neither could she risk a bid for rulership herself without a strong foundation of supporters.

The Immaculate Order's annals tell that the stalemate was broken by a humble priest in emerald robes, led by astrology to the world's savior. The Empress initially refused entry to this stranger, opening her doors only after he prostrated himself before them for a full day. In private audience he relayed the will of Heaven: that the Realm of old should be reborn, with her as its Empress, to return order to Creation.

The Empress understood that Creation's shattered populace needed a firm hand. Already the Blessed Isle faced crises of hunger, disrepair, and banditry — without a ruler to command its soldiers, tax its merchants, and guide its masons, civilization's lifeblood was stilled. Yet she was reluctant to seize such a role if it came at the cost of oblivion. The Seven Tigers had demonstrated the devastation wrought by civil war, and though her ancient weapons would doubtlessly bring her victory, she had no desire to rule over a desert of glass and bones.

The visitor assuaged her doubts by offering the Immaculate Order's assistance. With the sanction of Creation's preeminent religion, the Empress could win popular support long before any war. The Terrestrial Exalted stood only to benefit from the faith, whose doctrine held that they were enlightened beings worthy of observance, while aligning the Immaculate Philosophy with a single secular authority could stave off the internecine strife that plagued the Shogunate. Of course, the platform provided by a young, expansionist empire would have its own benefits for the Immaculate Order.

Rise of the Scarlet Realm

Their discussion occupied nine days and nights, after which the priest vanishes from history. Some suggest he became one of the first magistrates, or went on to found the Palace Sublime, while less mainstream sources claim he was a god who returned to the Celestial City when his work was done. Whatever the truth, his assurances spurred the Empress to make her title a reality. Harnessing a less destructive aspect of the Realm Defense Grid, she projected her image to population centers across the Blessed Isle as a vast figure of light. Looming over her people, she proclaimed herself defender of Creation, Empress of the Realm, and the one true authority on the Isle.

The initial response was chaos. Priests calmed the terrified faithful who packed Immaculate temples in search of guidance, while itinerants raised scarlet pennants in every safe haven. Daimyos with more pride or ambition than sense took up arms, denouncing this usurper, but those who'd witnessed the end of the Seven Tigers knew that her weaponry was beyond resistance, and many Dragon-Blooded commanders swore fealty at once. These were visited by sorcerous visions of the Empress, who immediately set them against their fellows, subduing the reluctant and eliminating the defiant in a bloody



purge. Within a year, the Empress was the dominant power in the Isle, her crown quenched in victories.

The Imperial City

Absolute power has a curious gravity. The Empress had scarcely completed her announcement before petitioners began knocking on the door of the Palace of the Anathema, now rechristened as her Imperial Manse. Occupied by dismantling her rivals, the Empress was selective in those she admitted to its outer sanctums. A few old comrades from the legions received swift recognition, but otherwise no clear pattern emerged. Those certain that their power and wealth guaranteed them immediate audience were frustrated by the manse's impregnable doors, leaving would-be courtiers to speculate and fume over their ruler's motives for hearing one petition over another.

Left in limbo, these ambassadors settled in for the long haul. They dared not leave — what if they were called upon? As weeks became months, camps became settlements. Petitioners' families joined them in vigil, moving into the pre-Shogunate structures that surrounded the Imperial Manse. Artisans were hired to gentrify their corners of these vast structures, bringing with them families and workers, all of whom needed food, clothes, luxuries, and countless supplies. The merchants who sold such things needed roads, roads required further laborers, and as the population swelled, so did the number of soldiers needed to keep the peace.

The Imperial City today is a labyrinthine tangle of leftover vanities and modern compromises. It was never officially named, but simply grew, a pearl of unequaled value forming around the grit of the Imperial Manse. The spoils of all Creation are shipped daily to this capital, a vast city that exists solely to offer proximity (literal or otherwise) to the majesty of its Empress and the machinery of her empire.

Opening the Doors

The growing crowd on the Empress' doorstep was a cauldron wherein rumor could brew into sedition. An opportunity to establish boundaries came with her first marriage proposal, an indecipherably ornate greeting from the coastal city of Arjuf. Demonstrating a heroic lack of tact, the message assured her that Araka Jeresh stood ready, as a devoted servant and admirer, to share the awful weight of the crown she now wore. It took a shower of emerald fire reducing Jeresh's manse to cinders to teach him humility, but his frantic backtracking so amused the Empress that he was recruited as a messenger, and then a lover.

SECRET HISTORY

In truth, the Empress' mysterious vizier was a founding partner of the Realm. Chejop Kejak, leader of the Bronze Faction amongst the Sidereal Exalted, judged her the best candidate for the strong leadership needed to bring Creation to order. He also expected her to be off-balance, ignorant, and malleable, so the Empress was a nasty surprise.

Nevertheless, Chejop needed a strong Terrestrial polity to implement the Bronze Faction's blueprint for the future and to keep the surviving Lunars and Solars from reclaiming Creation. A central authority would also offer avenues for his Sidereal colleagues to pursue earthly missions disguised as monks, bureaucrats, and nobles. For her part, the Empress couldn't refuse the subtle assistance of Heaven's Exalted agents, nor the spiritual backing of Kejak's Immaculate Philosophy. Neither trusted the other, but each was shackled to their shared cause.

So began the great game of winning the Empress' attention, walking the tightrope between opulence and arrogance, novelty and offense, humble loyalty and invisible timidity. Unique treasures competed with dazzling performances, while others offered practical demonstrations of loyalty and initiative. A simple rumor that the Empress was casting her gaze upon the dwellings around the Imperial Manse would lead to frantic building and rebuilding to catch her eye. Despite Jeresh's misstep, romantic overtures remained a fixture of such strategies, ranging from formal proposals to attempts at seduction. The Empress accepted many of the latter. In some cases, she used these liaisons to soothe a powerful faction, suggest support for a weaker group, or whisper over pillows what couldn't be said in court. Other women and men were simply very, very attractive.

In Her Majesty's Service

Only the Empress' commanders were guaranteed an audience with their aloof and mysterious ruler. Though quick to spot talents capable of serving her more personally, she could hardly strip the legions of their most competent officers. Nevertheless, she was in dire need of agents to work her will.

The All-Seeing Eye

With limited resources to call upon directly, the Empress played petitioners against each other. Having revealed a rival's plot to seek out weapons comparable to the Realm Defense Grid, a minor house's own scheme to obtain a trade monopoly might be stymied by suddenly savvy merchants. Each faction was eager to direct the Empress to the flaws of their rivals, and grateful when she deigned to alert them to mutual threats. Holding herself seemingly aloof from the squabbles she catalyzed, the Empress seized control of those informers who'd proven their usefulness — or overextended themselves until she owned them.

This web of secrets was eventually placed into the hands of Araka Jeresh, who'd proven to be more than a pompous fool. Over the next decade he forged it into a cohesive intelligence organization, keeping the Empress abreast of threats both foreign and domestic. In RY 12, the All-Seeing Eye was given its official Imperial charter, alongside an ever-expanding remit. From satrapies to secondary schools, the All-Seeing Eye worked to live up to its name.

The Ministries

As the Imperial City clustered with litter and traffic, the need for a functioning bureaucracy became obvious. Here the Empress could act openly, giving trusted courtiers authority to tackle problems from tax collection (barely distinguishable from banditry in the early days) to sewage removal. Others were recognized for competence and connections rather than loyalty, potential schemers buried in paperwork as reconstruction drained their treasuries. Mortal gentry leapt at the chance to prove their worth, or at least to meddle in the domains of the Exalted households under the Empress' aegis. She intervened only in true emergencies, as when laborers stumbled upon one of the primeval workings that littered the Blessed Isle.

At first, these task forces acted under the mantle of martial law, tied tightly to the legions, but as unrest gave way to peace, the Empress refined her paperwork junta. By RY 38 the skeleton of the ministerial branch — which would come to be known as the Thousand Scales — was in place, a creeping ivy tendril that would grow to strangle both military governance and the sweeping rights the Shogunate afforded to landowners. Even the Isle's map was carved into prefectures and dominions for easier governance — in this new Realm the Empress was sole landlord, and her laws would be upheld without exception.

The Magistrates

As yet unable to uphold these edicts across her domain, the Empress instead empowered magistrates from

those she trusted. These judges put on ruthless public displays to establish that no one was above Imperial judgment or below Imperial notice, and dragged outdated precedents squirming into modernity's light. The Empress often clashed with antiquated Shogunate tradition, and it was useful to have magistrates supply her with public cause for amendments. She directed magistrates against the abuses of troublesome nobles, making them heroes to the general populace, even as the Empress adorned herself with the powers she stripped away. Gradually, with grand legal reforms and quiet alterations, the Realm's body of law became a cohesive whole designed to serve the Empress' will.

In the modern era, nothing in the Realm draws its authority from any source but the Empress. There's no higher power to appeal to, no greater principle or past regime surpassing her will. The Realm's laws and customs find their origins in a melting pot of Shogunate tradition, Immaculate precept, military conduct, local convenience, and lingering First Age lore, but they're put forth as nothing less than her divine word.

The Legions

The legions required even more care. To tinker too deeply would be seen as prelude to a purge, so the Empress allowed war-ragged legions to prosecute her enemies across the Blessed Isle and slowly laid the groundwork for their revival. Carefully chosen promotions filled the upper ranks with loyalists, while rewards for recruitment and tax remittances for the legions' backers provided the numbers and funds to expand. Lavish parades and new commissions were offered to those who won great achievements in the field, encouraging initiative, ambition, and the same competitive attitude that the Empress found so useful in keeping her subjects at each other's throats instead of her own.

The Imperial Service

Taken together, these four organizations — along with the Imperial Navy and, later, the Merchant Fleet — would eventually be known as the Imperial Service. They became the canvas on which the Empress painted her image of life in the Realm, independent of any one house or local interest. Through them she imposed her presence on her empire's every sphere, creating a culture in which her authority was as natural and unquestioned as the rising of the sun.

Discontented Masses

While the Empress concerned herself with the scheming nobility, lowborn revolts were a constant problem for those who managed her lands. All the Dragon-Blooded's supernatural puissance couldn't bring in a harvest the peasantry refused to sow, nor supply guards to suppress every discontented mob before it burned a manor or lynched a tax collector. Eventually the legions would brutally end such uprisings, but the Empress considered this a poor use of their limited resources. The nascent patricians were more vulnerable — economically and physically — to the violence of their lessers, and often provided the first line of defense, preempting revolt with bribes and beatings.

The Immaculate Order filled the vacuum, using its Imperial patron to reinforce its philosophy's hold on the Realm. Mortals owed the Dragon-Blooded fealty, but only to reflect their spiritual refinement. A Terrestrial who failed to display the expected virtues was undeserving of obedience. This rhetoric allowed the Order to chastise local nobility, and itself provided the rallying cry for countless revolts. These were never threats to the Empress, for the peasantry framed their objections in the language of the Immaculate Philosophy — the only language they'd ever been taught — and so regarded her with religious awe. Instead, they railed against the corrupt bureaucracy or nobility, who were surely obstructing her divine judgment. It cost the Empress little to entertain this worldview once the dust had settled, and she often enacted punishments (token or otherwise) against Dynasts who'd allowed the situation to degenerate.

Rebels who disregarded the Realm's state religion were less tolerable, and often investigated for Anathema. The Unbroken Rushes Movement of RY 465, which erupted across nine prefectures after years of drought, was led by the mysterious monk Seven Rivers. In his writings, copies of which are still smuggled by peasants today, Seven Rivers questioned the favor the Empress held with the Elemental Dragons, an assertion that saw him declared Anathema. His rebellion failed after the Empress drained House Ragara's treasury to replace the lost harvest, but Seven Rivers was never caught.

The Order was an effective tool in winning goodwill from common folk on the Isle and beyond. In turn, the Empress' patronage saw Immaculate monks tutoring noble children in the Diligent Practices and Noble Insights that would shape the Realm's spiritual life. The Empress' version of history was preached to the peasantry and taught in secondary schools, massaging the Realm's turbulent history into an appearance of stability.

Where she couldn't simply erase them, the Empress preferred to rehabilitate peasant rebels, appropriating their virtues as a reflection of her own. During the tumultuous Bloodied Scythe Uprising of RY 707, she offered amnesty to the rebellion's leaders, the Seventy-Two Rebels of Cypress Mountain, each of whom had been a beloved champion to the peasantry before they

LAND OWNERSHIP

Peasants, patricians, Dynasts, and even the Great Houses themselves do not technically own land. The entire Blessed Isle was the Empress' to do with as she pleased, leasing property or allowing folk to dwell without charge as she chose. The power to alter or terminate leases at any time was one of her greatest tools in commanding the houses' fortunes. In her absence, the houses have raised rents dramatically for short-term gain. The weight of this ultimately falls on the peasantry. The most impoverished, unable to pay, join the ranks of the dispossessed (p. XX).

banded together. Through bribes, threats, and persuasion, the Empress secured the outspoken support of the surviving rebel heroes, mortal and Dragon-Blooded alike. With this narrative as a pretext, she issued an edict cutting short the lease on an impressive parcel of rebellious territory, and reassigning it to houses in her favor. If the mortal rebels were later left vulnerable to the very Dynasts they'd defied, at a time when the Empress once more needed the latter's support, her histories do not record it.

The Threshold

The Empress knew that her Realm couldn't thrive in isolation. Without control over its coastal neighbors, the Realm could be cut off from trade and travel, strangled in its ocean crib. Yet she lacked the manpower to occupy and annex the Threshold, or the extensive infrastructure the Shogunate needed to manage such diverse territories. Instead, even before she'd fully tamed the Blessed Isle, the Empress resolved to rule the Threshold indirectly.

Some domains, scarred by the Seven Tigers, swore fealty immediately. She invited loyal sovereigns to take audience with her, conveying special trading rights upon their ships and encouraging goods to flow to the Realm. Imperial legions and fleets were deployed to defend allied territories against rebellious nations who still defied the Empress, crushing hostile regimes to make room for more pliable leaders. Imperial diplomats offered terms to states that remained cautiously neutral, sowing coups where generosity failed to have the desired effect.

These satrapies were kept compliant through carrot and stick. The Immaculate Philosophy spread on the back of Realm imperialism, proselytizing its view of Creation (namely, that the Realm was ruled by divine beings who should be obeyed in all things) and subduing truculent gods. The Realm engaged in construction throughout the Threshold, framing as gifts the mills and mines that reaped a nation's wealth, the roads and harbors that bore it to the Blessed Isle, and the fortifications that secured it against grasping natives. When these measures were insufficient, it was common for independently minded rulers to encounter fatal accidents, or find a legion rallying to their nation's "defense."

Friends and Foes

The Empress had no singular approach. She rewarded the loyal and tempted the strong, punished the defiant and extorted the weak. The feeble border nation of Venom Lake was beggared after just a year of tributes, while Paititi's bejeweled corps of assayer-assassins won its Exigent suzerain such favorable terms that she owed only a fraction of her wealth to the Imperial Treasury. Lines of Dragon-Blooded who'd survived the Great Contagion were offered a place amongst the Blessed Isle's divine nobility, or wedded to the Dynasty as cadet houses. If a powerful territory refused her largesse, the Empress wouldn't bleed her legions confronting it directly. Instead she suborned its neighbors, leaving it isolated in a world still rife with monsters, famine, and disease.

The Anathema were the exception. The few Solars who still roamed free found Creation's divided kingdoms easy prey, forcing the Empress to field her legions against them. The Lunar Anathema proved a more frequent concern. To subjugate a territory claimed by a Lunar was to walk into a hell where every beast could be a spy, where enslaved raksha fought alongside mortal warriors, where a weeping prisoner might reveal herself as a shining devil-beast. The Empress barely survived several assassination attempts from petitioners who shed their mortal weakness like an ill-fitting coat the moment they saw an opening.

Faced with a foe that melted away like the morning mist, the Empress turned to the Immaculate Order. Wyld Hunts ranged far and wide with Imperial sponsorship, battling wayward demigods throughout the Threshold. This long war shaped the edges of the Threshold like a game of cat and vicious, oversized mouse, where climactic battles occurred only at sites too important for the Realm to shun or the Lunars to abandon — most famously, the holy island of the Caul. There, the Empress

REALM YEAR	EVENT
1	The Empress seizes the Imperial Manse, destroying the Fair Folk and Seven Tigers. The Great Contagion ends.
3	The Mountain Folk begin sending tribute to the Empress.
12	The All-Seeing Eye established.
23	Magistrates are first recruited from outside the Empress' personal circle.
38	The first ministries receive formal offices in the Imperial City.
40	The legions and the navy fall completely under Imperial control.
44	Araka Jeresh murdered.
47-53	First invasion of the Scavenger Lands.
53	Tepet's siege of the Imperial City fails; he's taken as Imperial consort.
68	Cevis Ghandarva and his followers leave the Blessed Isle, establishing the Forest Witches.
75-76	Second invasion of the Scavenger Lands.
88-89	Third and final official invasion of the Scavenger Lands.
103	Founding of the Deliberative. First Great Houses established, including Houses Iselsi, Peleps, and Tepet.
114	The Empress marries Rawar.
127	House Jerah awakens the First Age oracle-engine Eyem.
139	Birth of Ragara.
145-148	The Burano and Ophris house legions conquer Prasad.
146	Bagrash Köl uses a primeval relic to forge a Northern dominion surpassing the young Realm. His empire disintegrates in RY 176.
168	Ragara uncovers Eyem's treachery against the Empress. House Jerah disbanded, its properties awarded to the newly elevated House Ragara.
244	Manosque Viridian's coup fails. The Empress exterminates House Manosque.
247	Legion of Silence founded to guard Imperial Palace.
266	The Empress eliminates the Shogunate gentes' remaining privileges. She incentivizes several to establish Northern colonies as cadet houses.
269	Rediscovery of the Caul.
283	Elevation of House Cathak.
365	Nellens taken as consort.
369	Birth of Mnemon.
370	Rawar assassinated.

REALM YEAR	EVENT
399	Nellens dies. Birth of Sesus.
416-418	Trade War between the Realm and the Guild. Calin uses the conflict as pretext to break from the Realm.
422	Elevation of House Mnemon.
440	Elevation of House Sesus.
462	House Ledaal supplants the corrupt, Lunar-suborned House Jurul.
501	House Cynis is elevated, and awarded an Imperial monopoly on the slave trade.
578-585	War against the Anathema Jochim.
590	House Nellens is elevated, amidst much protest.
618	Punitive tariffs on Guild goods lifted.
637	Iselsi-sponsored invasion of the Scavenger Lands fails spectacularly.
643	House Iselsi conspires to assassinate the Empress. She spends the next century publicly dismembering it.
690	Opening of the West to mortal trade via Wu-Jian.
707	Birth of V'neef.
740	House Iselsi stricken from the Imperial ledgers.
750-754	Thorns' failed invasion of the River Province.
754	Elevation of House V'neef.
762	The Bull of the North's nascent empire comes into conflict with the Realm.
763	The Empress vanishes.
764	Council of the Empty Throne. The Mask of Winters sacks Thorns.
765	The Bull of the North destroys the Tepet legions. Imperial legions partitioned among the Great Houses.
768	The present day.

and His Divine Lunar Presence, Sha'a Oka, each had reasons to refuse even an inch of ground, provoking an endless war between dragon and god-beast that stands unique in the Realm's history.

Rivals to the Realm

Time and again, the Threshold spewed forth threats that brought the Realm to the brink. In its second century, the legions stood ready against the mad sorcerer Bagrash Köl's empire, silencing even the most ardent isolationists. The Midnight Tathagata's perverse philosophies provoked a schism in the Immaculate Order before he was revealed as a Lunar Anathema. More recently, an outbreak of the One-Mind Plague infected the satrapies south of Fortitude and threatened to spread to the Blessed Isle until the Empress obliged a cabal of Dynastic sorcerers to contain the epidemic.

The Empire's most galling foe was the army-city of Lookshy. The Shogunate's Seventh Legion refused to join the Tigers, instead claiming the ancient city of Deheleshen in the River Province. By the time the Empress was ready to demand their fealty, they were dug in and defiant. Wary of the backlash the Blessed

Isle suffered with each use of the Realm Defense Grid, and unsure what volatile relics might be buried throughout the Scavenger Lands, she dared not simply wipe Lookshy off the map. Instead, between RY 57 and RY 89 the Empress waged three successive wars to subdue the rebellious legion, the last of which pressed both Lookshy and the Realm hard enough to deploy some of their carefully hoarded First Age weaponry.

Eventually, the two greatest forces of Dragon-Blooded in Creation settled into an uneasy détente. For all Lookshy's might, it was one city before the world-spanning empire of the Realm; yet the Realm could not move to destroy Lookshy without risking grievous injury. In time, the Empress found Lookshy a useful bogeyman, while Lookshy has profited greatly from its role as the Scavenger Lands' shield against the Realm.

The Dynasty

Despite taking an array of lovers, the Empress entertained few thoughts of marriage. She warmed her bed with strong-blooded Exalted, beautiful foreign queens, and exotic mortal handmaidens offered as tribute. She bore children, raised as scions of the Realm, but the first of four Imperial weddings came in RY 114, by which time no partner could be considered her equal. Indeed, the Imperial Husband Rawar first attracted the Empress' attention by his steadfast refusal to be drawn into the vicious political morass she'd created for the Dragon-Blooded surrounding her.

The two remained married until his assassination in RY 370, an event that provoked a season of mourning across the Blessed Isle. Though the Empress cared deeply for Rawar, their relationship had hardly been exclusive. She drew little distinction between their children and the dozen or so she'd borne from other lovers. This frustrated her son Ragara, a genius in finance and today her eldest surviving child. He engaged in a methodical campaign of building his own wealth while quietly killing off siblings to force the issue of succession by eliminating any alternative. His ambitions were finally smothered by the birth of Sesus to the Empress and Nellens, a half-brother and implicit rival whose safety the Empress personally charged him with.

The Thousand Mazy Paths is the name of the philosophy that guarded the Empress against her own success, pitting every facet of the Realm against itself. The woman who'd killed tens of thousands to stave off civil war came to court it like a coy lover. Each schemer always had another rival to defeat before they could aim for the throne. Ministries informed on each other and played murderous games of office point-scoring. Legions were kept separated and competitive, winning grand prizes at each other's expense. These bitter rivalries subverted the Realm's efficiency and reach while ensuring its ruler's authority and security. Even her family was part of this vicious game, Great Houses encouraged to fight over their Imperial Mother's attention and approval. As Ragara's ruthless enterprise proved, the Empress' problem children were more useful to her divided than dead, their rivalries forming the foundation of the Thousand Mazy Paths.

New Great Houses rose when the Empress needed to reset the board, sucking resources and patronage from existing houses into a fresh power bloc. House V'neef was recently founded as a check to House Peleps' maritime power, undercutting the monopoly that gave Peleps room to scheme freely. Nellens became a Great House almost two centuries ago, drawing together a disparate alliance of outcastes and patrician families to plug a gap in the Realm's governance.

Old houses fell when their missteps proved too severe. In RY 244, Manosque Viridian attempted a coup with the puissant Eye of Autochthon. After the Eye failed him, destroying him and his army, the entirety of House Manosque was put to the sword. Other endings were quieter. Houses Burano and Ophris dissolved after centuries of Imperial disfavor, disgraced by their house legions going rogue in Prasad. In total, over a dozen Great Houses have been wiped from the Imperial ledgers in the last seven centuries.

In RY 590, the Empress made the first and only announcement regarding her successor. Come the first millennium of her reign, she would survey her Dynasty and choose the worthiest heir. As the sorcerer-autarch showed few signs of aging, the deadline didn't seem unrealistic, though even the youngest contenders warily noted that she made no mention of actually stepping down once her heir was announced. With the suggestion of an ending at last in their grasp, the houses' efforts to sap each other's strength redoubled.

Then, with over two centuries still ahead of her, the Empress vanished.

An Empty Throne

Such absences weren't unusual. Peasant legends imagined the Empress walking the land in disguise to learn its ills, while Dynasts whispered that she indulged in debaucheries beneath her dignity or engaged in forbidden rites within the Imperial Manse, placating its god-engines with rich and bloody offerings.

After close to two years with no sign or word, however, it was clear that something was wrong. Toward the end of RY 764, the Council of the Empty Throne convened in secret, a viper's nest of mutual enemies: ministers,

Dynasts, Immaculates. The Dynasts' ambitions were tempered by wary disbelief — the Empress' likely response to a hasty claimant made the empty throne seem more like a treacherous mineshaft. The canary they settled on was Tepet Fokuf, a witless regent elected by the Deliberative to hold the reins of empire until the Empress' return. She was in meditative seclusion, they declared, and would return in due time. In private, the Council set a deadline of seven years before the Empress was judged to have truly abdicated.

The Empress had not built the Realm to survive her. Without her, the magistrates had no protection against the corruption they exposed, and the ministries had no leash on their officious bloat. The All-Seeing Eye had no funding or central purpose, and her children were free to scheme and war. The machinery of empire groaned and clogged, and even as the Council dispersed, swearing to safeguard the Realm until its ruler's return, they were already tugging loose its threads to line their own nests.

The legions were the first to be scavenged. As blunt tools of the Empress, they had few friends at home, and commanders soon found themselves facing empty purses and sharpened knives. Those legions that returned to the Isle were absorbed into private militaries for the Great Houses, their meritocratic officer corps replaced with family favorites. The Threshold is left vulnerable, even as poor harvests force it to pay higher taxes, provoking unrest that threatens countless satrapies. Sightings of Anathema surge beyond credibility, necromancer-kings plunge cities into deathly shadow, raksha and nightmares creep forth from the Wyld, and entropy gnaws at the foot of an empty throne.

Blood is in the water, and as the Realm teeters on the brink of civil war, sharks circle the Inland Sea.

Life on the Blessed Isle

The Blessed Isle is the jewel of Creation. Queens and kings look centerward, envious of its wealth and power. Its satraps and emissaries walk among the mighty like gods among mortals, perfect and infallible. It's the world's center, a land of unmatched splendor and glory.

Millions make their homes on the continent at Creation's heart. Though Imperial cartographers have charted almost all of its soil, it's so vast that many records have been lost — or never made their way to the Imperial archives in the first place. Ancient ruins and hidden valleys still hide secrets undisturbed since the Shogunate, or the First Age.

Hundreds of cities and thousands of towns pepper the Isle's coasts and valleys. Crowds boom, street vendors shout, and thousands mill about, going somewhere and doing something. Amidst this chaos stride the Dragon-Blooded, crowds parting around them. In poorer cities, narrow dirt paths, filthy with waste and garbage, wind among tight-packed buildings; in others, clean and orderly cobblestone streets neatly divide beautiful estates. Few animals move here, frowned upon in places where space is already sparse — this is humanity's domain, borrowed from the Empress.

In the countryside, countless villages dwell in rustic simplicity. Farmers sow and reap. Herders tend cows, sheep, goats, pigs, and fowl. Folk gather for markets and festivals. Patrician households collect rents and see to administrative matters, such as organizing militias against bandits and wild animals. Itinerant monks walk their circuits, tending to people along their routes.

And deep in the hinterlands, amid high hills and dark forests, vagabonds, runaway slaves, and the dispossessed make rude homes, fearing beasts and wild spirits, and the

LIFE IN THE SATRAPIES

The Blessed Isle is the Realm's beating heart, but it's not the whole. The Dynasty presides over a vast array of Threshold states and peoples, each with its own culture, cuisine, styles, laws, and traditions. However, cultural exchange between the center and the periphery is limited.

In the center, Dynastic trendsetters make flamboyant use of foreign styles and foodstuffs. Most such discoveries are fads, for it's difficult to get something new to take hold amid the Dynasty's already jaded tastes. Such fads trickle down among patricians and wealthy peasants, though anything exciting enough to catch Dynastic eyes is generally too expensive for the patriciate. Meanwhile, the ways of the Blessed Isle's peasantry remain largely static, other than in and around the cosmopolitan hubs of great seaports such as Arjuf, Bittern, and the Imperial City.

In the satrapies, some princes and wealthy merchants ape Dynastic clothing and customs — including learning High Realm —in hopes of ingratiating themselves with Dragon-Blooded masters. Many, however, remain aloof from Dynastic practices, whether from native pride or to maintain distance from the Realm in their people's eyes. The Threshold's common folk have neither direct contact with the Dynasty nor interest in their foreign ways, but may emulate such practices when adopted by local gentry.

Empress' justice most of all. Their unfortunate lives have little in common with the rest of the Isle's residents.

Class & Caste

The Common Folk

The lowliest of the Blessed Isle's inhabitants are the **dispossessed**. Dispossessed have no rights and no citizenship — anyone may do anything they wish to them, and all their property is forfeit. Some are vagabonds. Others perform backbreaking, poorly paid manual labor in cities, become camp followers of house legions, or join bands of bandits and rebels. Dispossession is imposed in absentia on escaped rebels, or en masse on peasant villages as punishment for tax nonpayment by the village or widespread lawlessness — a verdict that the Empress, in her infinite mercy, sometimes saw fit to countermand.



Imperial judges hand down sentences of dispossession, and Dynasts' testimony weighs heavily against the accused. Those convicted have an "X" branded on the forehead to mark their status. The Empress could revoke dispossession by decree, as can a magistrate who finds the dispossessed innocent of the crime for which she was punished. Children of the dispossessed are not themselves dispossessed, but considered peasants, though unless adopted early by peasant parents or taken in by Immaculate orphanages, their social options are slim. Most become unskilled laborers or petty criminals, or remain amid the Blessed Isle's wild places with their dispossessed kin.



ENSLAVING THE DISPOSSESSED

Imperial law forbids pressing the dispossessed into slavery, whether formally or informally, on the grounds that this would elevate them beyond their station. Magistrates zealously pursue Dynasts who contrive to have peasants dispossessed and enslave them for personal profit.

Since the Empress' disappearance, the Deliberative has entertained proposals to repeal this law. These have been fervently opposed by House Cynis as transgressing upon their monopoly, and by other senators displeased at such a break from Realm tradition and Immaculate morals.

Slaves in the Realm are usually foreigners — either purchased from slavers overseas, or taken as prisoners of war by the Realm's military. Few are natives of the Blessed Isle; citizens may only be enslaved through the Imperial courts, and only as punishment for severe crimes. Whatever their origins, they're mostly ignored and overlooked.

Slaves have no rights but what their masters grant them; harm to them is deemed property damage by the Imperial courts. Only the Dragon-Blooded may own slaves — it's said that only they possess sufficient enlightenment to handle the spiritual difficulties that owning humans as property entails — though they may delegate slaves to serve their mortal kin. Most slaves are conspicuously branded with their owner's name or initials. The children of slaves were historically born into slavery until the rise of House Cynis, which successfully sponsored legislation in the Deliberative emancipating such children and elevating them to the peasantry in order to secure the house's monopoly on the slave trade. A Dragon-Blood may emancipate her slaves, but no more than one each year, a limitation imposed by the Deliberative to curtail abolitionist sympathies.

Slaves may own property, but can't bear arms without their master's leave. Most slaves receive adequate food and rest for pragmatic reasons. At best, they're treated like valued friends and confidantes. At worst, they live torturous lives, worked past endurance, sleeping on dirt floors in cold rooms with a bare minimum of food. Disobedient slaves suffer beatings, torture, starvation, or drugging meant to render them docile. But even the best-treated slave still suffers abuse, and slavery is

traumatic by itself — a happy slave is a broken slave.

Most Dynasts view slaves as worthless barbarians, their lots improved in servitude — a polite self-deception, even when the slave's material standards are better. Rare abolition-minded Terrestrials may smuggle slaves to safety, let their slaves live as though free, or treat them as servants with wages and guarantees.

The **peasantry** constitutes the bulk of the population, ranging from destitute laborers to wealthy merchants. These common folk live and toil on farms and in cities, paying taxes and homage to the Dynasty. They staff the Realm's legions and crew its mighty navy. The Imperial courts protect them at law, while Imperial might guards them from bandits, outlaws, and foreign foes. The Dragon-Blooded may execute peasants without trial only as punishment for high crimes; doing so too frequently or without adequate cause invites legal censure.

The average peasant toils in her field, but some make their livelihood as merchants, artisans, bankers, esteemed servants of wealthy households, and similarly respectable professions. The richest peasants are significantly wealthier than the poorest patricians, even if they aren't the patricians' social or legal equals, and some leverage this to marry up into the patriciate.

The Patriciate

Patricians form the Realm's administrative class, elevated above the peasantry but set below Dynasts. They're the Realm's workhorses, the cogs that make the greater whole spin. When a Dynastic minister or senator makes a decision, a patrician sees that it's done. When a Great House sets policy for a prefecture, the patriciate arranges the practicalities. When a Dragon-Blooded sea captain sets a course, patrician officers direct her crew. Wherever the Dynasty works, patricians work beneath them.

Tracing their lineages back to Shogunate gentes, Imperial officials, outcastes, Dynastic households stricken from the family ledgers, and entire fallen branches of the Dynasty, patricians enjoy extensive legal rights and protections above those afforded to peasants. They're legally permitted to serve in any capacity a mortal Dynast may, though they find it harder to achieve high positions. They send scions to Dynastic schools, the chaff among the student crop, to receive an education that most in Creation would envy. And most importantly, they may offer allegiance to a Great House and enjoy the benefits of political courtship.

While patrician families seek independence, each Great House wants their services. A patrician family without a patron house can expect to be plied with gifts, invitations, and promises to win its allegiance. In exchange for loyal service, patrician families receive perquisites such as sponsorship for petitions in the Deliberative, the right to raise troops, exclusive trade deals, slaves assigned to serve them, or marriage into the patron house. In the Empress' absence, the houses push for greater control over the patriciate, enticing them to swear outright fealty with lavish bribes or coercing them with economic or military threats.

Roughly half of all patrician families have sworn allegiance or fealty to a Great House, the rest being in some state of negotiation or established independence. The most longstanding independent families have power bases secure enough to prosper without Dynastic favor — such as those established within the Thousand Scales — or pedigrees too poor to attract the covetous attention of Dynastic matchmakers.

Unlike Dynasts, patricians labor in close proximity to the peasantry. However much they try to distance themselves from their lessers, they're ultimately responsible for bringing the Dynasty's orders to the masses. The peasantry brings the patriciate wealth and influence — laboring under patrician landowners, bribing patrician officials, and offering sizable dowries to marry up into patrician families. Patricians' doings are a mainstay of peasant gossip, while wealthier peasants enter patriciate social circles and attend patrician-held functions.

Patrician families treasure few things as greatly as the Dragon's blood. By cultivating a strong lineage, they hope to beget Dragon-Blooded children of their own. In some cases, a Great House adopts a Dragon-Blooded patrician, providing enormous boons and familial connections in exchange. In others, the patrician family pays dearly to see the child fostered by a Great House, keeping the bloodline in the family. Patricians also entreat the Blessed Isle's outcastes to marry into the family.

ABOLITIONISM

Slavery may be the legal and social norm within the Realm, but abolitionist views exist nonetheless. Just as ancient Rome had abolitionists whose efforts necessitated emancipation limits and other laws to protect the institution, so too is the Realm home to peasants, patricians, and even Dynasts who oppose slavery for reasons moral or otherwise. They're a minority, considered naïve at best or dangerous at worst, but abolitionists of high social standing have considerable leeway to advance their agendas.

The Scarlet Dynasty and the Outcastes

Un-Exalted Dynasts lead lives of unimaginable luxury and privilege. Yet they're also failures, after a fashion, when set beside their Exalted siblings. Theirs is a bitter coronet, when their heads were meant for crowns. All Dynasts are born mortal, and it's only when one nears her 20th year without feeling the Dragons' touch that she becomes a failure — until then, her life is dedicated to shaping her into the best Exalted hero she can be. Those who fail to Exalt still serve their houses in the military, ministries, or other branches of the Imperial service, and enjoy the same legal privileges as their Dragon-Blooded kin, yet are never truly their equals in their house's eyes.

Outcaste Dragon-Blooded share many legal and social benefits with Dynasts, but don't truly enter the Dynasty unless they marry into a Great House. They enjoy greater social standing than un-Exalted patricians, but have limited opportunities for advancement within the Realm. Each must choose between coin and razor, serving in either the Immaculate Order or the Imperial Legions.

Cadet House Dynasts descend from the Empress, however distantly, and thus belong to the Dynasty. But they're raised and dwell in foreign backwaters and rarely attend the Blessed Isle's secondary schools, so they lack the polish, connections, and influence of Great House scions.

Dragon-Blooded Dynasts sit atop the Realm's social hierarchy, and all else revolves around them. About half are gainfully employed in some fashion. The rest occupy their time with personal pursuits, self-improvement, adventuring, war tourism, scheming, hobbies, and general meddling.

Marriage and Family

Patrician families arrange marriages for their offspring much as Dynastic families do, usually including betrothal gifts for the groom, and paying groom-price to his parents. Peasant marriages are typically much less formal, often occurring earlier in life and with more leeway for love matches, although wealthier peasant families seeking to marry upward emulate patrician customs. As in the Dynasty, same-sex marriages are a rare but accepted feature among patricians and peasants, carrying no stigma, save in those patrician households with the strongest bloodlines. Patrician families are loath to dilute their pedigree by marrying peasants; it's typically the poorest patricians that marry the richest peasants.

Promiscuity is frowned upon, yet common in practice among both peasantry and patriciate. Married women of means occasionally keep consorts, though this is a drain on all but the wealthiest households.

Rural peasants rear their children firsthand. A child is a boon, providing more labor to bring in the harvest. Patricians and wealthier peasants hire nannies, and sometimes tutors, but are still more affectionate than Dynastic parents.

NAMES IN THE REALM

Family surnames always precede given names in the Realm. Naming conventions vary by social class.

Most peasants have no family names. The dominant naming scheme is one-word (or occasionally two-word) given names drawn from nature — Petal, Light, Thistle, Stone, Dutiful Sparrow, Spring Rain, and so on. Names whose Old Realm cadences emulate the upper classes (see below) also appear. The Blessed Isle's populace is a mélange of numerous local and immigrant cultures; peasants in many regions have their own distinctive naming conventions.

Some patrician family names, especially families with peasant origins, likewise evoke natural imagery — Cirrus, Wave, Thunderhead, Rose, and so forth. Others, especially those that trace their lineage back to Shogunate gentes, share the Old Realm cadences of the Dynastic ruling class — Bal, Amon, Tereya, and similar. Given names generally emulate Dynastic naming practices.

A Dynast's family name is that of her house. If a Dynast belongs to a major bloodline of her house, the name of the line's founder follows her house name. Most Dynastic names follow the phonetic forms of Old Realm, which alternates between consonants and vowels.

Outcastes come from any number of cultures, and their names are equally diverse. Outcastes of humble origins may rename themselves, taking on impressive titles or adopting epithets that commemorate heroic accomplishments. They're considered to have no family name by Imperial law, and so take the name of the patrician family or Great House into which they marry. The exception is that if an outcaste marries a peasant, she passes on her name to her children as a new patrician surname.

Every satrapy has its own unique culture and naming practices. The Realm rarely meddles with these, with some exceptions — a particular name might be forbidden if it belonged to the leader of a popular uprising against the Realm.

DRAGON-BLOODED ARMOR

Armor for Dragon-Blooded frequently incorporates iconic designs, which Immaculate doctrine forbids the un-Exalted from wearing. Pious Dynasts find such designs risqué, deeming it unseemly to parade iconic imagery before mortals. Styles currently in vogue include White Rose style, with rounded contours and an animal-themed central boss; brash, sharp-edged Thundercloud style, adorned with dragons or mythical beasts; and conservative Dragonscale style, engraved with elemental imagery and excerpts from the Immaculate texts.

Slaves and the dispossessed cannot enter into legal marriages, but nonetheless celebrate informal weddings.

Clothing

Tunics with skirts or loose pantaloons are common work clothes for the Blessed Isle's peasantry. When not involved in manual labor, peasants wear sarongs; zhiduos, loose robes with side slits; and ruquns, outfits consisting of a blouse, skirt, and a waist skirt. The zhiduo and the tunic-and-pantaloons combination are common among wealthier peasants. Jeonboks — long, sleeveless vests — and kimono are also popular. Those wealthy enough to forgo manual labor and imitate patrician fashions wear togas or saris. Peasant garments are usually cotton, ramie, or wool, with wealthier families owning linen garments for festive occasions. The usual footwear is sandals, clogs, or foot wrappings; sashes and scarves are popular, especially in the winter months. Common headwear includes the wide-brimmed, conical farmer's hat and the kufi cloth cap, while topi caps, toques, and linen headbands are rarer. Jewelry is made of non-precious metals adorned with ceramic beads and polished stones.

The patriciate favors togas and saris of linen and silk. Tunics, tight-fitting kimono, and shenyi are common undergarments. Skirts and pantaloons (preferably silken) are loose and flowing for women; men's cuts are tight and slinky to draw Dynastic suitors' eyes. Jewelry is gold and silver, preferably set with diamonds, beryls such as aquamarine and morganite, or other pale gemstones. Headgear is at its most ostentatious at this level of society with the zhuzi jin and zhangokfutou, or winged hat, being common choices. Sandals and slippers are the predominant footwear. A sash or belt — often holding a weapon — around the waist is common. Cloaks are wool-lined silk or delicately embroidered linen with fine fur on the inside.

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

The Realm observes numerous state holidays created by Imperial decree, religious festivals ordained by the Immaculate Order's prayer calendar, and traditional celebrations. The Day of Her Ascent celebrates the Empress' formal coronation, marked by lavish feasts and recitals of patriotic poetry and song. The Celebration of Seven Shattered Helms honors the Imperial legions, whose most distinguished troops once paraded before the Empress on that day to receive her commendation. The five days of Calibration at year's end are marked with drunken revelry and alchemical fireworks; Dynasts engage in absurd role reversals — satraps beg on street corners for coins, household heads kowtow to servants, and lucky peasants are made five-day queens.

Other holidays are local and idiosyncratic. Pangu Prefecture commemorates the anniversary of the founder Cynis' Exaltation in a decadent festival funded by House Cynis. The peasants of Six Vines observe a holiday honoring the Hearth that slew a pack of hellboars threatening the town over a century ago. The Feast of Fallen Crusaders, a Shogunate-era holiday, is still celebrated in Lord's Crossing Dominion.

Togas and saris see little use among Dynasts, who favor various forms of robes and tunics. Long skirts, pantaloons, or short skirts with pantaloons are common legwear. Every type of cut and style is seen among the Dynasty, as Dynasts prefer to stand out. Daopaos and kimono are in favor among the humble and those unconcerned with fashion. Belts hold scabbards for dagger and sword, and sturdy boots and gloves are fashionable among mortals. Hats tend to be simpler than among patricians, headbands elaborately embroidered with poetry being a favored option.

Art & Architecture

The Immaculate Philosophy bans imagery representing material things other than the Elemental Dragons and the Immaculate Dragons; monks destroy such heretical icons and punish their creators and possessors. However, the Dragon-Blooded aren't subject to such restrictions, and exceptions exist for vocational purposes such as bestiaries, herbals, and anatomical guidebooks. Pictorial depictions of the Empress are heretical but common. Art tends to be stylized, if not entirely abstract. Calligraphy mixed with illumination, stencil prints, and filigree makes up much of surface artwork.

Sculptures and reliefs of dragons, mixed with abstract patterns, ornament buildings and temples, often carved from marble and sometimes painted in vivid colors. Architecture favors columns, spires, and pagodas, with fluted rooftops and domes of various styles.

Typical peasants inhabit one-room houses in the countryside, or else small urban apartments. Well-to-do peasants and patricians live in wood or stone houses centering around a large open space called the atrium — open to the sky in warmer climates, or enclosed farther north — and a smaller meditative garden. Dynasts prefer ornate, walled-off building complexes linked by enclosed walkways, replete with spires, gardens, pergolas, pagodas, and pavilions.

Quality and ornamentation of furnishings indicate a family's prosperity and status. Higher-quality furniture involves fine hardwoods, lacquerwork, and elaborate carvings and fretwork. Other common adornments include hanging scrolls, indoor plants, and arabesques.

Geomancy plays an important role in Realm architecture. While only the Dragon-Blooded and a few rare thaumaturgists have the prowess to construct manses, well-versed mortal geomancers — who often learn from assisting manse architects — earn high salaries for planning Dynastic and patrician households in auspicious patterns that harmonize with local dragon lines, or to arrange peasant towns and villages in such patterns. Charlatans are common in the profession, though few would dare defraud a Dynast in such a manner.

Cuisine

Rice is a staple crop; most peasants owe it their lives. It transcends class in a way little else does — the Empress ate rice, as does the lowliest slave. Other grains, such as wheat and millet, are grown across the northern Isle and in mountainous regions less suitable for growing rice; there, noodles, dumplings, pancakes, and steamed bread are common.

Simple peasant meals often involve potage of staple grains, supplemented with lentils, onions, greens, and other vegetables. Peasants raise chicken and ducks for eggs, and occasionally enhance meals with elderly fowl or offal. Fish is a major part of coastal peasants' diets; inland folk maintain carp ponds. Citrons, peaches, berries, and apricots from orchards or wild groves are common in some rural areas and an occasional delicacy elsewhere. Poorer peasants supplement their diet with pest animals such as frog, lizard, and rat, or occasional poaching. Wealthier peasants can afford pork, mutton, and fowl in stews, pies, and pastries. Rice wines and beers are peasants' drink of choice; most villages have a local brewer. Well-to-do peasants can afford tea and wine as status symbols.

PETS & GUARD ANIMALS

Dogs, cats, and snakes make popular pets and verminers in the Realm; Lord's Crossing Dominion is known for its colorful, silken-haired lapdogs and oversized black guard dogs. Other pets include songbirds, monkeys, and beetles. Dogs, alongside swans, llamas, and giant wolf spiders, often see use as guard animals. Austrech, falcons, mospids, and hounds are common hunting companions — austrech handler is a profession with a high injury rate. Dragon-Blooded may share their households with dangerous or exotic animals — falcons, lions, bears, gazelles, panthers, or hippopotamuses.

Patricians eat heartier fare, with more meats and fruits and a greater variety of vegetables. Deepwater fish, beef, and game fowl are staples. Strong spices, herbs, and seasonings such as fish sauce and chili paste are easily affordable, along with tea and wine. Poorer patrician families reserve these better meals for when they have guests, eating common fare in private. Rice and other grains still make up much of most meals, even for the wealthiest families.

Dynastic cuisine — deftly and artistically prepared by trained chefs — is heavily seasoned, both to satisfy jaded palates and as a show of wealth. Breads and rice balls accompany thick sauces or curries. Dynasts enjoy a wide range of meats, ranging from simple but expensive lamb, veal, and horse to more exotic delicacies such as bear, dormouse, dove, peacock, snail, squid, shark, or even river dragon. After a hunt, it's traditional to serve the quarry at the evening meal. Tea, wine, and distilled spirits are always at hand.

Common utensils are chopsticks, spoons, and knives.

Dining

Peasants and patricians gather the whole household for meals — sociable occasions full of chatter and laughter — and use them to raise important family business.

Dynastic households only eat together on special occasions, such as holidays, announcements, entertaining guests, or honoring exceptional servants. Otherwise, Dynasts prefer to dine in small groups in lounges throughout an estate, or alone in their quarters. Parents eat with young children and their nannies every so often to inspect the child's progress, and for the same reason dine with Exalted offspring visiting from school.

In these situations, the children are expected to eat quietly and only speak when spoken to.

The Dynastic dining hall has two tables. The household's Dragon-Blooded sit at the larger table along with guests, especially accomplished mortal family members, and un-Exalted spouses, and have first pick of the dishes. The other table seats the rest of the household.

Travelers dine at a common table in roadside inns. Such places lack menus, serving whatever the host has in the pot, though they'll lay out their best for patrician and Dynastic travelers. Urban folk procure simple meals and snacks, ranging from buns, soups, and dumplings to roasted silkworm pupae, from food carts and street kitchens; many poorer citizens lack their own cooking facilities. Some teahouses also serve food, and proper restaurants can be found in several cities, the finest of which have spread their reputations across the Blessed Isle.

Temples & Shrines

Every city on the Blessed Isle has one or more temples dedicated to the Immaculate Dragons. The Imperial City has hundreds, encompassing every facet of each Dragon. Most cities also maintain temples to lesser deities — Flashing Peak, goddess of the Imperial Mountain; Gri-Fel, god of the Imperial City; and various prominent local divinities — to offer proper homage, directed by monks according to the Immaculate prayer calendar.

Villages often house an Immaculate shrine — sometimes several for larger towns — decorated with a dragon statue. Many are roughly carved, though particularly devout Dragon-Blooded or patrician lieges (or other wealthy residents) sometimes fund beautifully carved and lacquered shrines filled with depictions of the Immaculate Dragons. Only shrines housing Immaculate monks hold valuable goods and adornments. Both minor and major shrines allow common folk to offer up prayers on sanctioned days.

Every Dynastic household has at least one shrine to the Dragons, and in all but the smallest households, the main shrine takes up a full room or pagoda. Patricians often keep a house shrine to the Dragons in the atrium.

Folklore & Superstition

In a world where true magic is wielded by reclusive spirits and inaccessible god-kings, it's unsurprising that superstition and folklore abound. Some tales are repeated across the Blessed Isle and the Threshold; others are local to a single village or clan.

Such folklore often revolves around folk interpretation of the Immaculate Philosophy. Peasants attribute landscape features and improbable events to the Five Elemental Dragons and their mortal avatars, the Immaculate Dragons; this sometimes leads to heretical cult worship. A mortal monk's blessing is ascribed supernatural power. Tokens from pilgrimage sites, such as water from the fountains of the Pagoda of Pasiap's Footstep in Juche, likewise serve as talismans.

Numerology is a common belief. Five is an auspicious number, as the count of the Dragons, as is ten, for the Elemental Dragons and the Immaculate Dragons together. Seven is also auspicious as the number of greater celestial bodies. Four — being one short of the Dragons' perfection — is inauspicious, symbolizing incompleteness, death, or temporal power untempered by piety. Six, representing wealth or excess, is auspicious or inauspicious depending on circumstances.

Ghosts are rarely encountered on the Blessed Isle; few shadowlands exist to allow such congress, and ghosts that do appear are punished by Immaculate monks. This leaves all the more room for folkloric inventions concerning mysterious hauntings, phantom lovers, and vengeance from beyond the grave. Shooting stars are said to be spirits of Dragon-Blooded heroes battling dark forces, while in the Daoshin Peninsula's marshes, peasants claim that will-o'-wisps are Cathak's ghost leading victims to safety. Some say ghosts of dead Dynasts gather in the Imperial City each Calibration to attend a Deliberative of the Dead. Perhaps, some whisper, they have judged the Empress and found her wanting.

Misfortunes are also attributed to other supernatural entities. Residents of Arjuf, Juche, and Lord's Crossing believe troubled children are changelings left by the subterranean Mountain Folk. Rural folk of the western Isle attribute sickness to the familiars of witch-queens and incubus-princes living in invisible palaces in the wilds, supping on stolen mortal blood. Epilepsy is widely regarded as the curse of truculent gods by peasants across the Isle.

Folk Magic

To the Immaculates, magic is both gift and curse in un-Exalted hands. Mortal thaumaturgists or sorcerers should, by rights, either receive proper training at the Heptagram — if they can afford it — or enter the Immaculate Order to master that power and put it to noble use. However, while Order and throne both frown upon lay use of magic by the un-Exalted, benign enchantments — divinations, blessings, curatives, talismans, and the like — aren't prohibited, and in fact are employed by houses and legions, though practitioners are watched for signs of abuse.



Peasants rightfully fear practitioners of wicked magic. Some witches lay soul-twisting sorcerous curses or invoke forbidden thaumaturgies; others bargain with ghosts and devils to blight enemies with ill fortune, disease, nightmares, possession, and madness. Such execrations are forbidden, their practice a high crime under Imperial law.

Charlatans abound in cities and hinterlands alike, falsely claiming all manner of magical powers. Some market divinations or amulets for steep prices; others offer to curse a hated foe, claiming to have wicked Dynastic ghosts — Manosques, Jerahs, Juruls, and the like — sworn to their service. Such frauds must stay well ahead of the Black-Helms lest they lose a hand or their tongue.

Not all folk magic practices require a thaumaturgist's or sorcerer's gifts, and these occult disciplines are in common use. On the Nuwa Plains, a newborn's forehead is anointed with salt to ward off devils. Peasant farmers believe an iron nail twisted into a helix or spiral — an "iron dragon" — wards off bad luck and mental illness. And throughout the Realm, folk call on Pasiap for protection against witchcraft, dark spirits, or Anathema. The Immaculate Order doesn't police these folk practices as they do thaumaturgy and sorcery.

Law & Order

The Guardians of the Realm (known colloquially as "Black-Helms" for their distinctive headgear) are an Imperial peacekeeping force overseen by the Honorable and Humble Caretakers of the Common Folk (p. XX). They gather and assess rumors and reports of crimes on the Blessed Isle, find and arrest the culprits, and sometimes — if the detainee is of the lower classes — punish them. As the Dynasty rarely deigns to meddle in the affairs of its lessers, the Black-Helms are the Empress' hand in most mortals' everyday lives, terrifying peasants and annoying patricians.

While the Guardians' black, conical, open-faced helmets are their most visible and iconic feature, their actual symbol of office is a distinctive scarlet belt worn around the waist, adorned with the Guardians' insignia — a brass buckle engraved with a pentagram — and holding a scabbarded short sword. Guardians in wealthy locales are assigned uniforms and additional armaments, such as buff jackets and crossbows; others accouter themselves individually out of pocket.

In large cities and densely populated regions, Guardians receive formal training; in small towns and large villages,

SHUN THE PERFIDIOUS LAWYER

While professional legal advocates have occasionally plied their trade throughout the Realm's history, they're traditionally despised as middlemen who interfere in matters of justice for personal gain, and are officially prohibited from all legal matters. Instead, judges directly question defendants in criminal matters, while the parties in civil matters are expected to plead their cases personally to the court.

EXILE

Exile is a rare punishment, typically deployed as a show of leniency for Dynasts who voluntarily turn themselves in for capital crimes. Exiles are stripped of land and Imperial heirlooms, and can never return to the Blessed Isle unless pardoned by the Empress. Otherwise, however, they retain their wealth and Dynastic status. An exile's children do not inherit her status; their house welcomes them home to claim their birthright.

visiting Caretakers brevet two locals, based on reputation and how muscular they look — two is considered the minimum to be effective, as one can detain prisoners while another delivers a message. Rural Guardians are scattered about in pairs so that ideally no peasant lives more than a day's march from the nearest constabulary. Service is mandatory, but Guardians receive a modest salary as compensation. Many Guardians maintain other work and enforce law on the side. Officers — only seen in cities, drawn exclusively from patricians and the occasional stray un-Exalted Dynast — enjoy sizeable salaries and wear full uniforms. Their sashes have a brass buckle inlaid with a silver pentagram.

While Guardians have wide power over peasants, only officers may issue punishments to patricians or mortal Dynasts. For crimes beyond the Guardians' authority or desire to punish, they may bring offenders before the Imperial courts (p. XX). Guardians are required to obey a magistrate's orders, and often provide muscle or local expertise to assist their investigations.

The Imperial Force wears polished silver buckles inlaid with a red jade pentagram. Only they have authority to arrest Exalted and bring them before the Imperial courts, for which they're furtively dubbed "Dragon-Handlers." Each member of this elite force — which maintains detachments in major cities across the Blessed Isle — is chosen by the Deliberative's Greater Chamber; candidates are almost invariably skillful, honorable, and devoted to the Dynasty. Imperial Force membership is possibly the highest honor the Realm can bestow upon a mortal — though some are Dragon-Blooded, as mortals alone have little chance to detain an unwilling Prince of the Earth. The Imperial Force doesn't answer to the Honorable and Humble Caretakers of the Common Folk, but to the Deliberative directly.

While the Dragon-Blooded aren't above the law — the Empress saw to that — it only touches them lightly. Ordinary Guardians don't intervene in most crimes committed by Dragon-Blooded, but rather observe and report misdeeds to the Imperial Force or the nearest magistrate. Only in exceptional circumstances will they attempt to bring her to justice: wholesale slaughter of patricians or peasants, large-scale destruction of property, and the like. Even so, the Terrestrial must be treated with groveling respect and extravagant apologies, and may only be detained for three days — sufficient time for the Imperial Force to arrive.

Crime on the Isle

Petty thievery, such as pickpocketing and mugging, has major outbreaks when excessive taxation brutalizes the populace, but is otherwise uncommon outside of organized criminal activity, which includes street gangs, pickpocket rings, trained beggars, drug cartels, and the like. Despite the popularity of tales in which heroic magistrates uncover Realm-spanning criminal syndicates, most are small, local organizations operating within a single city or town.

Smuggling is frequent, whether by conventional merchants sneaking contraband past customs inspectors in hidden compartments, or small vessels slipping into hidden coves by night, though the Earth Fleet usually halts such efforts. Earth Fleet captains are much more amenable to bribery than heretofore, due to the increased expenses suffered by the navy since losing the Merchant Fleet.

Scavenging relics of the Realm Before is a profitable venture, but often one of dubious legality. Unlike Dynasts, who may freely excavate and traffic in artifacts and First Age antiquities, patricians must apply to the Thousand Scales for a license to do so, and are subject to strict regulations and taxes. Peasants may not even own such relics. Scavengers who circumvent these laws can reap vast profits, but risk commensurate punishments — patricians face imprisonment, staggering fees, and revocation of scavenging licenses, while peasants face execution.

Crime has become more common since the Empress' disappearance, and is punished less frequently. With the Imperial legions withdrawn from many former postings and the Great Houses raising taxes to fill their coffers, peasants find banditry a profitable recourse, preying on traveling merchants or nearby villages. Crime syndicates within the Blessed Isle's cities face less scrutiny from the magistracy, and officials grow easier to bribe by the day. Within the Scarlet Dynasty, conspiracy flourishes, and duels between hot-blooded Dynasts erupt, heedless of the prohibition on dueling to the death.

Criminal Organizations of Note

The **Jade Hand** is Scarlet Prefecture's most notorious gang of thieves, cat burglars, and second-story women. When a patrician household is emptied of valuables while its members are away at a Dynastic gala or a satrapial noble is pickpocketed en route to petition the Deliberative, locals attribute it to the Jade Hand, who seem suspiciously well informed. Much of the time, their intelligence comes from Houses Cynis and Sesus, but most Great Houses occasionally have use for their services.

Originally based on the island of Shansin west of Radimel's Seat, the **Shansin Six** run an opium-smuggling operation. Small, fast ships carry raw opium across the Inland Sea to Arjuf's Old Dock district, where it's made into heroin. The Six are in House Sesus' pocket; in exchange for a cut, Sesus agents interfere with Earth Fleet, Ledaal, and All-Seeing Eye anti-smuggling efforts, as well as Cynis' attempts at maintaining their monopoly on the illegal drug trade. The Six aren't averse to side deals, and may sneak clandestine travelers onto or away from the Blessed Isle for the right price.

The **Gallows Dogs** are a rare society of professional killers. They operate in secrecy — no Gallows Dog knows her superior's true identity, and hiring them requires leaving an elaborately coded letter in a designated dead drop, along with their fee. Prices vary with the victim's social class; the rate for murdering a Dynast is so high that only another Dynast could typically afford it. That cost is tenfold for hits placed on Dragon-Blooded, which are carried out by the syndicate's elite members: Gnarled Oak, a renegade Immaculate; Three Dagger Prince, an Iselsi scion masquerading as outcaste; Akaya Moda, Exigent of a hot-springs god; and similarly puissant killers.

Entertainment

Every social class on the Blessed Isle engages in — or watches others engage in — sports and games. These include wrestling, boxing, quoits, tuho, kite fighting, footraces, and boat races. Archery, fencing, and chariot racing are popular among patricians and Dynasts. A number of ball games have fallen in and out of vogue over the centuries, using either fist- or head-sized balls; these may be thrown, kicked, or knocked with sticks, depending on the game. Cuju is particularly popular in the legions, while harpastum is common in major cities among peasants and patricians alike.

Dice games such as cho-han, chingona, hazard, and throwing-heaven-and-nine are popular among urban peasants and in the Imperial Navy. Dominoes, once in vogue, retain a passionate following in Arjuf Dominion and along the Jade Coast. Legionnaires have a fondness for card games, which have recently become fashionable among the Dynasty and patricians. Most citizens use cards that display only numbers and abstract symbols, but elaborately painted cards with iconic imagery are popular at Dragon-Blooded parties, with those commissioned by Cynis hosts often being especially lascivious.

Board games are popular among the aristocracy — the Dynasty loves Gateway and its variants, while games like chaturanga and nardshir come into and out of fashion — but their appeal has filtered down to the peasantry. Games such as dama, hunt-the-Anathema, go, and pachisi are as accessible to farmers and apprentices as to patricians and Dynasts. Students at the House of Bells practice a range of complex war games, which many play throughout adulthood for entertainment and intellectual stimulation.

Cockfights are a peasant tradition, while beetles and other insects are pitted against each other by folk of every class. For human bloodsport, dueling is a longstanding tradition among Dynasts and patricians, though not to the death. A few major cities, most notably Myion, Pangu, and the Imperial City, maintain gladiatorial arenas, though these are licensed and subject to stringent oversight.

Gambling inevitably accompanies games and sporting events, whether to liven up interminable military postings or assuage upper-class ennui. High-stakes betting and professional gambling are both frowned upon by the Immaculate Order, as they indicate a desire to live beyond one's station, but gambling within one's means for entertainment is acceptable.

Woodblock printing has led to a flowering of reading for pleasure. In major cities, one can purchase a tawdry novel, travel guide, art book, or Immaculate text for the price of a good meal. Many in the upper classes prefer handwritten works, seeing fine calligraphy as an art in itself.

PLAYING CARDS

Modern decks of cards have five suits: Banners, Jewels, Lamps, Ewers, and Flowers. Each suit has 10 ordinal cards, with six through 10 being face cards depicting a Minister, Magistrate, General, Matriarch, and Dragon. Certain elaborate Dynastic games and divinatory methods incorporate a sixth suit, the Mysteries, whose 25 cards include such subjects as the Monk, the Sea Captain, the Prisoner, the Anathema, the Imperial Mountain, the Wheel of Reincarnation, Exaltation, and Creation.

Almost every village has its storyteller, while traveling players perform bawdy tales and morality plays at inns and teahouses for food, lodging, and a smattering of yen. At the other end of the scale, classically trained actors perform a variety of traditional dramatic forms — from mannered tragedies to uproarious farce — at urban theaters and aristocratic galas.

Music in the Realm ranges from bawdy songs sung in peasant taverns to lengthy compositions performed at Dynastic galas. Common instruments include the sanxian, erhu, guzheng, dizi, guban, and zhu; instrumental music is often accompanied by singing. Most pieces are composed in pentatonic scales. Current popular styles of music include the Elegant River genre, with its slow, soothing tempos; the operatic Jade Cockerel genre, known for high-pitched vocals; and the improvisational Eight Winds genre.

Dynasts and wealthy patricians who've amassed art collections often display them in galleries. Similarly, some open museums to house historical relics, preserved animal specimens, and exotic mementos of the satrapies. Immaculate temples likewise assemble religious artwork and relics for viewing by the devout. Galleries and museums are typically private, although on certain festivals their patrons may open them to the public. Others allow wealthy peasants and patricians admission for a fee. A centerpiece of many Dynastic salons is the cabinet of curiosities, a room filled with collected esoterica — mounted heads of exotic animals and Wyld beasts, shrines and holy icons looted from satrapies, Shogunate-era antiquities, recreational artifacts, and the like.

Travel

The Blessed Isle is vast, and even in the best of times, remote stretches of road saw banditry. Legions, garrisons, and militia patrol the roads — though less than they used to — but distances are so great that it's difficult to do more than dissuade bandits from staying in one location. Without protection, poorer travelers travel in groups, while wealthier travelers hire armed guards to protect caravans and other valuable cargo.

Roads leading between important locations, such as from the Great Coast Road to Lord's Crossing or Juche, are finely laid with stone blocks, which ensure the footing is smooth and even. Lesser roads, branching off into dirt paths and perilous mountain trails, see few to no patrols unless locals handle the job themselves. When riders or runners on the Empress's business pass, other travelers yield. Peasants and patricians likewise clear the road so Dynasts may pass.

Poor travelers walk or ride wagons pulled by oxen or other beasts of burden. Patricians prefer sedan chairs, horse-drawn wagons, and chariots for personal use, and yeddim-mounted howdahs when traveling with family. A Dynast may travel however and wherever she sees fit, often on horseback, in a palanquin, or in a small, lacquered carriage. The legions march and Immaculates walk.

The Great Coast Road

The Great Coast Road runs along the Blessed Isle's entire coastline, turning inland only along parts of the Caracal and Imperial Rivers. A First Age wonder, its featureless black surface provides excellent traction. Supernaturally tough, it slowly heals itself — though records from the Realm's founding indicate repairs were once far swifter than now. Most importantly, enchantments on the road contract the distance it covers, hastening travel by as much as a fifth.

The road runs past cities, towns, and villages, traversing marshes as a causeway and crossing rivers on First Age suspension bridges. On rural stretches, inns and teahouses stand a day's travel apart, with separate lodgings for lower- and upper-class travelers. Many are centuries old; villages and towns have grown up around them. They often stand beside small fortalices whose watchtowers stand vigil against highwaymen, and whose heliographs pass warnings to the legions and the throne. Some fortalices — particularly those used as waypoints by the Imperial Post — remain garrisoned by prefectural or gubernatorial troops. Others are in the hands of house garrisons, local militia, or even bandits.

Amid today's unrest, new checkpoints appear along the Great Coast Road, while inns of formerly sterling reputation have been seized by highwaymen who feign hospitality, then rob guests blind by night. "Bandits" clad as ragtag raiders, but fighting with legionary discipline, use the road to execute lightning raids, then vanish into

neighboring prefectures. House strategists lay plans to seize or blockade sections of the road, to protect vital holdings or redeploy house assets once the Isle breaks into open war.

Waterways

The Blessed Isle is replete with rivers, canals, and lakes. Small boats make their way up and down, while sleek galleys patrol major waterways. Dhows and junks carry goods; fishing rafts bob in the current. Pleasure yachts stand out on the rivers, especially brilliantly decorated and colored Dynastic craft.

Coastal traffic is similar, though triremes of the Imperial Navy and Merchant Fleet occasionally move past at speeds few other vessels can achieve, and rafts and riverboats give way to large fishing rowboats and light coastal cogs and caravels. Other bluewater craft stay farther from the coast, avoiding treacherous shallows.

Travel Permits

To cross prefectural borders, peasants and foreigners require travel permits issued by the Fastidious Keepers of the Imperial Peace (p. XX). Obtaining a permit requires a fee and a valid cause — usually taking the form of a letter of endorsement from a high authority — or a sizable bribe. Permits indicate issuance date, duration, origin and destination prefectures, and whether it's a one-way or two-way trip. They grant the holder permission to leave her prefecture (and any prefectures en route), and carry a red ink stamp to prove authenticity. These stamps rotate on a regular basis to impede forgery; there's a thriving black market in copied or stolen stamps.

For the common woman, such travel is rare — the fee is steep, and most peasants can expect to be permitted a single pilgrimage in their lives, unless exceptionally devout and recommended by local monks. Wealthy peasants can afford occasional business or personal travel. Caravan guards and laborers pay significantly discounted fees — customarily absorbed by the hiring merchant, who usually relies on a Dragon-Blooded patron to keep costs down.

Black-Helms, archons, and magistrates' servants receive long-term travel papers covering the entire Blessed Isle. The Dragon-Blooded can easily acquire such papers for favored errand runners as well. Legion officers of scalelord rank and higher have ongoing travel papers for themselves and their soldiers while on duty, and a soldier bearing a letter of endorsement from an officer need pay no fee to receive travel papers to go on



SCHOLARSHIP IN THE REALM

While the rural peasantry is expected to adhere to traditional ways, the Dynasty understands the value of erudition and artisanship. Every manner of savant is prized. Architects, chirurgeons, surveyors, metallurgists, engineers, and sorcerers all have cause to study the works of the past, from a smattering of surviving First Age texts to seven centuries of Imperial and foreign scholarship. Then they scribe and share new treatises for their peers' edification.

Cultivation and exploitation of scholarship and invention has placed the Realm near the forefront of technical advancement and understanding. Copies of cheap novels and the Immaculate Texts are churned out via woodblock printing; glasswork allows for spectacles, telescopes, and theodolites; windmills and watermills pump water and grind grain; cities enjoy aqueducts, fountains, and running water; Varangian clockworks are replicated in the workshops of Juche and the Imperial City.

leave. Anyone traveling with a Prince of the Earth needs no papers. Because of the vagaries of wind and current, coastal traffic — unlike land and brownwater travel — requires no permits, a perquisite peasants in oceanside regions enjoy over their landlocked peers.

Communication

The Realm boasts the largest, fastest, most effective communication system in Creation, overseen by the Imperial Post (p. XX). Whether a personal letter from an Imperial City clerk to her parents in Juche or a coded plea for help smuggled out of Calin at great personal risk, the Conveyors transport the post quickly and reliably.

The Imperial Post delivers priority messages for whoever can afford it. This generally means Dynasts, patricians, and wealthy peasants and foreigners, though in practice, many couriers are perfectly willing to take on post for the peasantry for a few yen if the parcel is light and the destination is on the way. While correspondents' identities are easy to discover, few couriers peruse — or worse, tamper with — the messages they carry; such acts carry severe penalties. Nonetheless, corrupt couriers often do brisk business, and can become wealthy with some luck. The Great Houses employ their own couriers when confidentiality is paramount.

The Imperial Post's most common and recognizable messengers are mounted couriers. Traversing a network of relay points, they brave road hazards and difficult terrain to bring parcels of letters from city to city. Some employ stealth or disguise when traversing bandit territory, hoping to avoid notice. Even apprentice couriers are trained in self-defense, and stories depict seasoned couriers holding off entire bandit parties to deliver a package safely.

In the Blessed Isle's cities, the Imperial Post employs message runners to deliver important letters and parcels. Its postal fleet of catamarans plies the Realm's waterways carrying messages and cargo, and traverses the Inland Sea to bring the post to and from Threshold satrapies.

The Imperial Post's most sophisticated responsibilities are the heliograph towers, technological marvels that transmit messages by reflecting sunlight off mirrors. Heliograph stations rise from garrison posts and fortalices along the Great Coast Road and a handful of major inland travel routes. Only the most urgent messages merit a heliograph's precious time, so military and major law enforcement concerns take precedence, with Great House, ministerial, and Deliberative matters coming after them, and Dynasts' personal messages a distant third.

Unlike the easily intercepted heliographs, sorcerers are able to send messages by spell with the utmost secrecy, and charge steep prices for this service when Dynasts need to relay sensitive information. The Imperial Post employs sorcerers for emergency communications.

Quality of Life & Health Care

The Blessed Isle's peasants are blessed with relatively clean, healthy lives. Urban areas maintain sewers; apartment buildings contain lavatories. Public baths of various standards cleanse slaves and patricians alike. The neighborhood midwife offers medical care regarding childbirth and various ailments for a reasonable price; while her knowledge of medicine may be limited, her obstetric skill minimizes death in childbirth. Herbalists offer remedies for everyday troubles, including menstrual problems, while dentists clean teeth, fill cavities, and insert bridges.

Most villages have a bathhouse. This may be small and simple, but provides the same standard of cleanliness as their urban peers. In remote regions without lake or stream access, peasants bathe in tubs filled from wells or cisterns. Villages typically lack herbalists and dentists, relying on the local midwife to pull teeth and suggest herbal remedies.

Trained physicians treat patricians and wealthy peasants personally or direct them to specialist treatment, including dream analysts, dietitians, masseurs, acupuncturists, chiropractors, fire cuppers, bonesetters,

DISCRIMINATION IN THE REALM

The Realm's culture perpetuates prejudices and long-held stereotypes, like sexism, institutionalized slavery, and discrimination against "barbarian" cultures — that is, any culture not rooted in Realm traditions — and beastfolk. These issues exist in Creation to starkly and vividly illustrate life in the Realm, and to give players injustices to fight against.

However, as Storyteller, be mindful that these *are* injustices, ones your players may deal with daily. Talk to your group. Make sure everyone's comfortable with the idea that, for instance, people of every gender in the Realm face discrimination of one kind or another. Men are stereotyped as reckless and impulsive, subtly diverted from positions of real power. In group conversations they may find themselves interrupted or ignored more than women, who've internalized the assumption that a man's ideas are colored by his hotheaded nature. Meanwhile, women are stereotyped as wise and even-keeled, imposing unreasonable behavioral expectations that often set them up for failure; a parent punishes a daughter more severely for instigating fights than a son, and blames her regardless of circumstances. Showing anger publicly is considered uncouth for a woman, while for a man it's considered normal.

These are just a few examples — and they're inspired by reality, which means there's every possibility some or all of your players have encountered such unfair treatment in their lives. Don't use these setting elements if players don't want to encounter them in a game they play for fun. If you do use them, do so respectfully; let players engage with them as much or as little as they like. A player may not mind the issues' presence, but won't want to make them a central conflict for their character — that's fine, you can portray them on the periphery for that person. And if a player *does* want to use her character's Exalted might to fight against the system for herself or others, make an epic tale out of it instead of saying no.

ophthalmologists, and chirurgeons. Spas and resorts offer rest cures. Access to elite midwives makes death in childbirth very rare. For a peasant, becoming a physician is among the best ways to gain access to wealth and high society.

Health care in the Dynasty relies on the Dragon-Blooded. Exalted physicians handle most ailments even for the lowliest mortal Dynast, as poor health is thought to lower descendants' chances of Exaltation. While most Exalted die in battle or misadventure, Dragon-Blooded in their final years suffer health problems like everyone else, such as aching joints, migraines, and back pains. Almost every Dynast has access to a slave-physician who advises how to alleviate and reverse pains, aches, and persistent annoyances. While mortals often share physicians, most Dragon-Blooded maintain personal doctors, especially as they age. Some Dragon-Blooded quietly employ gods of medicine and healing, or pay sorcerers to summon demon chirurgeons.

Barring misadventure, rural peasants can expect to live to 65 or 70, and patricians often reach 80. Mortal Dynasts typically live for a century, or even longer with anagathic medicines.

Dominions and Prefectures

The Realm is composed of hundreds of prefectures that pay tribute and taxes. Prefectures range from tiny backwaters to bustling centers of wealth and education dominated by the Great Houses. Most prefectures encompass one or two cities, up to a dozen towns, and any number of villages, grouped together by proximity or geographical region.

Three especially large prefectures — Arjuf, Lord's Crossing, and Numinous Rolling Wave — were carved from the Shogun's personal lands in the post-Contagion era; they're called dominions. They stand today as centers of commerce and bureaucracy.

Prefects

Each prefecture is overseen by a prefect, an Imperial bureaucrat answering to the Honorable and Humble Caretakers of the Common Folk. Prefects are typically un-Exalted Dynasts; less significant prefectures fall to patricians and outcastes, while Dragon-Blooded Dynasts hold plum postings. Prefectures' income supports the Realm; their crops feed the populace, metals from their mines become arms and armor for the legions, their timber builds Imperial Navy vessels, and much coin that enters a region goes right back into the Imperial coffers — though today, a sizable share is appropriated by a Dynastic prefect's Great House.

The Deliberative appoints prefects, a duty its members still consider a key prerogative. Now that there's no Empress to veto such appointments, the Deliberative's power has increased considerably.

Governors

Each city and town has a governor who reports to the prefect. Most governors are patricians, though some are outcastes or un-Exalted Dynasts. Prefects select governors for open seats in their prefecture, for a term lasting until the governor chooses to retire. These lifetime appointments mean an incoming prefect may preside over a body of governors from houses previously in power.

Governors enjoy limited authority to direct local Guardians of the Realm, and can petition ministries on a town's behalf. They also collect taxes from their towns and villages, which the prefect in turn collects from the governors. Where villages and farms are too scattered to feasibly appoint a governor, rural tax collectors in the prefect's service roam the land exacting payment and tribute. Once, these roving tax collectors were, if not respected by the townsfolk and farmers, at least obeyed; since the Empress' disappearance many have gone missing entirely.

The Honorable and Humble Caretakers are tasked with official determination of when a village grows large enough to become a town. Once this decision is made, the local prefect is notified so she can appoint a governor. A house seeking more direct control over the rural populace might undertake efforts to encourage growth of villages within its prefectures with economic incentives such as farming subsidies, and once those villages have grown into towns, arrange the appointment of governors indebted to the house. In the Empress' absence, less savory methods have emerged — forcibly relocating peasants to new villages, or influencing the appropriate minister to register villages as towns on paper.

Taxes

The Realm employs a twofold taxation system, collecting both prefectural and Imperial taxes. Governors collect prefectural taxes from cities and towns to send to the prefect. The prefect uses the proceeds to pay for infrastructure, administrative costs, militia, and other expenses; she gives most of the remainder to her house, and the rest to the Home Office (p. XX) to remit to the Imperial Treasury. Imperial taxes are collected directly from villages, towns, cities, and businesses by the Humble and Honest Assessors of the Imperial Tax (p. XX) and deposited into the Imperial Treasury. Every official at every step of this process pockets as much tax as she dares skim.

It's vital that each tax assessor understand her jurisdiction's economy and populace, lest dishonest inhabitants deceive her. At the same time, discretion is required. Collecting too much tax, even if honestly calculated, can thrust a prefecture into famine or lead to villages being dispossessed. Tax collectors typically assume that some property is being hidden, and write off the loss rather than face the economic consequences of collecting the full tax.

With the Empress gone, all involved parties seek to profit. Citizens of every class grow bolder in concealing assets. Prefects raise taxes and cut the Home Office out entirely. The Honest and Humble Assessors give less and less to the Imperial Treasury, blaming dishonest prefects for overtaxing villages.

Prefects and Politics

A prefect's performance is evaluated every seven years. If the prefecture doesn't yield sufficient profit, or peasant revolts affect tax revenues, she may lose her contract. This evaluation isn't only based on the prefecture's growth or decline: A prefect whose house had fallen from the Empress' favor often found herself paying for a distant relative's sins with her position. If a prefect's evaluated before her seven years are up, she's either greatly exceeded expectations or performed disastrously.

The Empress approved the Deliberative's appointments for prefects tactically, preferring prefects from outside whichever Great Houses held significant influence in that prefecture. Ideally, a prefect's loyalties lay with the Empress, unswayed by house ambitions — whether designs on the territory or opportunities to interfere with rivals. However, the Empress unhesitatingly arranged appointments to reward or punish houses, or to affect a prefecture's political dynamics. The Empress employed outcaste or patrician prefects to maintain the balance of power between houses in a region.

Since the Empress' disappearance, many prefects' contracts have turned over. The rest are up for review within the next two years. If a Great House controls a significant portion of a prefecture, chances are that its senators in the Deliberative have struck deals to appoint the next prefect from its ranks, consolidating its power.

Few prefectures are dominated by a single house. The Empress looked suspiciously upon a house amassing too much local authority, and actively moved to thwart such ventures. If other houses didn't independently discover new political or commercial interests in the offending house's area, she'd point out opportunities through advisors, or breed competition by awarding another house a commercial enterprise requiring resources from that prefecture. Typically, however, prefectures and dominions are large enough that several Dynastic households



could have stakes in them without the Empress needing to step in.

Most of the Great Houses' home prefectures — their ancestral seats of power, where their interests are strongest — are currently overseen by prefects from those houses. Dejis Prefecture boasts a Mnemon prefect; Tepet, though weakened by recent reverses, still rules Lord's Crossing; Arjuf is dominated by Ledaal. The Empress generously permitted such dominance, only occasionally "suggesting" a prefect from a rival house every few decades. Currently, only Cynis and Sesus have prefects from other houses in their home prefectures, though that's likely to be remedied within the next two years.

Some prefectures have no strong Dynastic presence whatsoever. The Realm considers them backwaters. They're usually poorer culturally, socially, and economically.

The Great Houses aren't a prefecture's only notable political powers. Patricians whose families have lived in a particular area for centuries also hold significant clout, serving as governors or staffing the offices of prefects, governors, and local ministries. They have the pulse of townspeople and farmers, and may see discontent stirring among the peasantry well before the prefect does. They also bear the brunt of peasant resentment. Depending on how the prefect has attended to the patrician's concerns — has the prefect put coin in the patrician's coffers? Did the prefect leave it to the patrician to clean up a wandering Hearth's mess? — she may help quell potential uprisings, or scapegoat the prefect to the peasantry.

The Immaculate Order plays a large part in a prefecture's day-to-day affairs. Peasants trust local monks' guidance and wisdom. Like patricians, Immaculate monks may help to start or quash a rebellion, based on the prefect's performance and what's best for the people. When social unrest stirs, an Immaculate abbot carefully observes whether the prefect is handling things effectively or making things worse.

Each prefecture provides different benefits to the Realm, from agricultural to bureaucratic, commercial to spiritual. Their geographical locations and access to Imperial roads and waterways — or lack thereof — makes them economically and culturally diverse. Even within a region, prefectures' characters vary widely.

Many prefectures also provide opportunities for wealthy Dynasts to relax and indulge in local delicacies

MONEY CRISES

In this time of tumult, the Great Houses can't have enough money. Soldiers must be recruited, trained, paid, equipped, housed, and fed. Raising peasant levies strips farmers from the countryside and journeymen from cities. Laborers must be paid to manufacture weapons, ships, and fortifications. Potential allies are wooed with lavish gifts, and rivals bribed. Mercenaries demand payment; enemies hold officers captive for ransom. The houses overreach in every respect, spending beyond their means in preparation for civil war.

Few houses can operate on a war footing for long. Raising taxes can only extract so much before peasants revolt. This is exacerbated by price increases as armies soak up supplies. Worse, war on the Blessed Isle will burn fields and cities, resulting in famine. House leaders may turn their heads from the human cost, but not the economic cost as production dwindles. They'll have no choice but to go deeper into debt to fund war efforts — and any strong-seeming house will always find creditors willing to extend one more loan.

Apart from Houses Ragara, Nellens, and Sesus, each house is over its head in debt to merchants, bankers, House Ragara, and the throne. With creditors breathing down their necks, and needing liquid assets to fund war preparations, they scramble to squeeze as much as possible from every source. Taxes and tariffs are raised, new ones imposed, and the throne's share shortchanged. Mercantile interests grow predatory, sacrificing longstanding business relationships for short-term gain. Legions and fleets loot foreign cities and seize merchant vessels. New loans are taken out, compounding interest owed beyond any reasonable ability to repay. Yet the rewards trickle through the houses' fingers as their plunder cascades into their creditors' coffers.

and delights. In the northwest, pleasure barges sail the waters around the Sideshores. Those who wish to retire, or to get away from the demands of life in the Imperial City, might travel to the Wandering River's shores in southern Paeon Prefecture, or visit Halcyon Prefecture's seaside resort towns and baths.

In many prefectures, holy sites, First Age wonders, and Immaculate temples bring in a significant portion of the region's revenue. Pilgrims flock to a city to behold religious relics or visit a house founder's grave; savants come to study ruins of the Realm Before. This creates a thriving economy: Not only do temples receive donations from the faithful, but teahouses open nearby to house and feed travelers. Guides offer their services for adventurers and tourists, and stables turn a tidy profit caring for mounts and pack animals.

For more information, see Chapter Five (pp. XX-XX).

The Great Houses

The Great Houses of the Scarlet Dynasty comprise ten thousand Dragon-Blooded champions and thousands of mortal kin. The Empress inaugurated the first Great Houses in RY 103, establishing a handful of her children — some biological, others adopted — as matriarchs of sprawling Dragon-Blooded clans drawn from outcastes and Shogunate gentes. She toppled old houses when it suited her and elevated new ones in their place. After centuries of intermarriage, virtually all Dynasts trace their lineage back to the Empress.

Each of today's ten Great Houses commands enormous wealth and power. Prefects and satraps funnel tax revenues into their houses' coffers. Satrapial garrisons are drawn from house paramilitaries, and even in the Empress' time, some houses were permitted to raise their own legions. Dynastic households lease vast estates from the throne, administered by loyal patrician families. In their home prefectures, the houses have clustered their estates, imposed their mores, and influenced culture through policy and behavior.

Since the Empress' disappearance, the Realm's fate has fallen to the Great Houses. Once carefully manipulated and counterpoised by the Empress, now they struggle to balance forging useful alliances against undercutting rivals for the throne.

The Great Houses consolidate political power: raising taxes, dominating once-neutral prefectures, subverting ministries. The legions that once served the Empress have been divided among the houses, their officer corps replaced by partisans who place house interests above other concerns. Every day, the prospect of civil war looms nearer; if it comes to pass, the Realm's common people will suffer as the houses clash.

House Cathak

House Cathak approaches every situation from a strategist's perspective, whether importing food into famine-stricken prefectures, undermining business rivals, or suppressing satrapial unrest. It can be subtle when necessary, but prefers the direct, aggressive approach. Shipments of grain are delivered by legion detachments,

inspiring gratitude to House Cathak and awe for its legions. Mercantile rivals meet with threats and buyouts orchestrated with tactical precision. Satrapial rebels are crucified en masse to teach their countrymen the folly of defiance. It tightly secures its most profitable satrapies' loyalties and resources, while withdrawing forces from less important satrapies lest it spread them too thin.

House Cathak's foremost strategic goal is maintaining the income that supports its legions. Unpaid salaries result in poor morale, desertion, and mutiny. This in turn means that prefectures and satrapies under Cathak control have historically borne some of the highest taxes within the Realm. Peasants view the house more favorably than might be expected from its taxation, as it's done much to equate its military might with the Realm's safety. It's also gained popularity from strengthening ties with the Immaculate Order, as its leader, Cathak Cainan, grows more pious with age. It enjoys no such admiration from satrapial subjects, but so long as they obey, House Cathak doesn't demand their love.

The house's passion for physical and mental challenges is emulated by patricians and brought home to peasant villages by retirees from the house legions. Athletic contests, sports, and games of all sorts enjoy prominence in its holdings.

The house legions form the predominant economic and cultural influence on Cathak holdings. While the poorest bear the brunt of steep taxation and food shortages, merchants and patricians negotiate lucrative contracts for supplies with legion provisioners, or lure soldiers into teahouses, markets, and brothels. House Cathak's move toward Immaculate piety has spread through its legions as well. They lend manpower and supplies to the Order, and crack down on peasant heresies in Cathak prefectures.

House Cathak has always relied on Ragara loans for its legions' upkeep, and its debts are considerable. Despite this, its financial stability now surpasses that of many houses. Since Cainan offered to back a viable contender for the throne, House Cathak has been showered with bribes and gifts from other houses seeking to curry favor. Combined with strategic retention of lucrative satrapies and mercenary deployment of legions, this covers interest payments on the house's loans.

House Cynis

Dynasts know House Cynis as hedonists and sinners whose decadent salons and indulgent parties are the finest entertainment the Realm has to offer, and as masterful physicians capable of soothing the most dreadful hurts and ailments. To patricians, the house's irresistible allure almost overshadows its scandal — who could resist an invitation to one of their infamous debauches, or the tantalizing possibility of a tryst with a Cynis paramour?

The Blessed Isle's lower classes and the Threshold's populace know House Cynis as the hand that cracks the overseer's whip as slave work crews maintain roads, gather crops, and raise public works. When Dragon-Blooded indulge themselves on sumptuous feasts and exotic narcotics at Cynis galas, the house's slaves cater to their every need. When taking their leisure in Pangu's magnificent bathhouses, slaves massage them and anoint them with oils and perfumes.

Cynis scions crave art, leisure, and beauty, and shape their holdings to satisfy these desires. Breathtaking frescoes grace the walls of Cynis households and satrapial palaces; galleries depict deeds of the house's famous scions; colorful mosaics and flower gardens elevate villages and public squares to aesthetic perfection. Religious dissidence and heresy take root in Cynis holdings more easily than other houses'; while House Cynis isn't atheistic, it offers the Order little assistance in curtailing such behaviors among the peasantry.

In addition to its Imperial monopoly on the slave trade and its grain exports from fertile Pangu Prefecture, House Cynis has a major presence in the Realm's criminal underworld. This provides additional markets for the house's drugs and poisons, and a deniable vector for disseminating information harmful to the house's rivals. The Empress turned a blind eye while such activities remained modest; Sesus is perhaps the second-largest player in the Realm's criminal underworld, and Cynis' activities drove a wedge between the two houses.

With tribute drying up and piracy cutting into trade, Cynis' ability to host its astoundingly lavish galas diminishes, as does its supply of exotic slaves and rare drugs. This shakes its hold on the Dynasty's appetite for extravagance. The house raises prices on luxury goods to compensate, and focuses on maintaining key drug-rich Eastern satrapies. More quietly, it offers the Guild greater inroads into trade with the Blessed Isle in exchange for steeply discounted contracts on Threshold mercenaries.

House Ledaal

House Ledaal's Shadow Crusade against Anathema and monsters that threaten the Realm is a two-edged sword when it comes to its reputation with the patriciate, the peasantry, and its satrapial subjects. Ledaal scions are respected for zealous commitment to slaying demons and rooting out witchcraft; romanticized retellings of

their deeds are spread throughout the Realm by storytellers, minstrels, and playwrights. Residents of Ledaal's prefectures and satrapies enjoy unparalleled safety from infernalist cults and wicked cabals, the Fair Folk and the hungry dead, and Lunar and Solar Anathema.

The price of this safety, however, is the ruthlessness with which the house prosecutes the Shadow Crusade. Even in the most gently administered Ledaal prefectures and satrapies, the first sign of devilry spurs an unrelenting search for its source. Ledaal scions will do whatever's necessary to protect the Realm, and if that means torturing conspirators for information, burning fields that shelter unhale spirits, or carrying out mass executions to ensure the guilty are dealt with, they judge it a necessary sacrifice.

While all Dynasts hold themselves above the common folk, House Ledaal makes an especial point of it. Patricians rarely receive invitations to Ledaal social occasions, and even then face constant reminders of their lesser station. Acts of lèse-majesté are punished in strict adherence to Imperial law where other houses might respond with mercy or nonchalance. When Ledaals do condescend to interact with social inferiors, it's often in pursuit of knowledge. Though they hold satrapial populaces in low regard, they're voracious students of their satrapies' scholarship, culture, and craftsmanship. A Ledaal prefecture on the Blessed Isle might be home to libraries of Rukasian philosophy, exotic musicians from far-off Breach, and mausoleums built after the Zephyrite style.

As House Ledaal consolidates power in this time of uncertainty and looming civil war, many households squeeze their holdings even more aggressively than the other Great Houses. Iselsi agents stir up rebellion in Ledaal's Incas holdings; incensed merchants avoid Arjuf Dominion's ports. Ledaal's "Hellboar" legion quashed the Tetagana uprising in northern Arjuf last year; further revolts are expected.

House Mnemon

House Mnemon enjoys a strong reputation across the Blessed Isle, cultivated through close ties to the Immaculate Order and involvement in public works throughout the Realm. Patricians and Dynasts respect House Mnemon's piety and rely on its architecture — roads, aqueducts, levees, wells — to do business. Though Mnemon herself receives little love from the peasantry, her house enjoys acclaim as architects that raise villages and towns out of squalor, renowned artists and poets, and monks who teach children and subdue unruly gods.

Among its satrapies, House Mnemon's reputation is more complicated. Its espousal of the Immaculate Philosophy leads to brutally efficient suppression of local religious faiths, but House Mnemon devotes more resources than any other house to improving its satrapial holdings with public works. This garners local favor, especially from those who profit off it, but most inhabitants soon come to realize whose benefit the roads and walls are built for.

The Immaculate Order flourishes in Mnemon holdings, whose populaces are thoroughly inculcated with Immaculate morality and doctrine. Peasant villages and patrician families emulate their Dynastic lords' piety, shunning blasphemers. Meanwhile, the Order teaches the common folk what's owed by the ruler to the ruled, and prefects or governors who abuse their power don't last long. Mnemon holdings also share the house's artistic predilections; aniconic artwork is prominently displayed in large cities in hopes of catching a Dynastic patron's eyes, while even the humblest peasant family's home holds an icon of the Dragons.

With no Empress and a deadlocked Deliberative, House Mnemon has lost its primary revenue stream of construction projects for the Throne. Other houses have likewise cut back on construction to conserve funds against future need, and find excuses to delay payment. With most of the house's military gathered in Dejis Prefecture and Jiara, it's unable to protect other prosperous satrapies, losing which would financially cripple the house.

House Mnemon's longstanding ties to the Immaculate Order may be its salvation. While the Order won't intervene overtly, it commissions expensive new works from Mnemon — grand temples in Ajakai and the Imperial City; monasteries at the Imperial Mountain's foot; hospices throughout the Isle — and pays up front, effectively funding Mnemon through the crisis. In the meantime, the house focuses on finishing projects that pay on completion, while postponing work on artifacts and manses.

House Nellens

House Nellens may be the black sheep of the Scarlet Dynasty, but its standing is much stronger among the Realm's lower classes than its better-pedigreed peers. It's invested in a wide array of businesses owned by patricians and peasant merchants, and its prominent position in the Thousand Scales affords scions opportunities to trade political favors.

Nellens scions treat their patricians as closer to equals than other Dynasts, allowing them social liberties unacceptable to other houses, who see such patricians as haughty and presumptuous. Peasants residing in

Nellens holdings generally regard the house approvingly, thanks to favorable tax policies and investment in businesses catering to wealthy peasants as well as patricians. Peasants in other houses' holdings are of two minds about House Nellens, welcoming their willingness to deal with the common folk, but nonetheless absorbing the other houses' stigma against the weak-blooded Nellens.

Nellens holds fewer satrapies than other houses, preferring to invest in businesses on the Blessed Isle and in the Threshold rather than satrapial leases and garrisons. And its overseas interests aren't limited to its own satrapies. Nellens ministers in the Foreign Office monitor the tributes collected by other houses; when a satrapy is asked to pay a debilitating sum, a charismatic Nellens scion might appear offering financial assistance, cultivating the house's overseas influence.

While House Nellens' financial position is currently stable, should civil war wrack the Isle, its small businesses will suffer more than larger concerns. Other houses assign sizable garrisons to individual high-profit operations. Nellens' enterprises are too small and, other than in Juche, too thinly spread to guard them all. However, the house's close involvement with patrician and peasant business partners means that an attack on its finances might turn the Blessed Isle's populace against the house responsible.

Nellens is cashing in favors for favorable loan terms from un-Exalted bankers and merchants, and divesting minor assets at a loss. These funds are reinvested in a few profitable, better-defended ventures: garrisoned mines, Guild caravans, independent maritime consortiums, River Province enterprises. The house also contracts with House Mnemon to fortify its cities. But these overt expenditures alert rivals to Nellens' economic strength.

House Peleps

Throughout the Realm, Peleps scions are respected as paragons of Dynastic virtue, known for honorable dealings and romantic adventure. Patricians and peasants admire them, but also fear them, for their justice is untempered by mercy. While their meritocratic governance elevates them above the corruption many see as endemic to the Dynasty, their rejection of nepotism and cronyism is an obstacle in the political arena.

The Imperial Navy shapes the culture and economy of House Peleps' prefectural holdings. Many patrician families purchase naval commissions in every generation, and coastal prefectures abound with Navy veterans. Ships bring back culture and commodities from the satrapies — exotic Western spices season wealthy patrician families' meals, island priesthoods' ritual dances are performed for public entertainment, and even peasants adorn themselves with colorful feathers from the Wavecrest Archipelago.

The house still reels from losing the Merchant Fleet to V'neef, forcing it to take out Ragara loans and issue Imperial Navy bonds to stay afloat. It's cut back on galas and tuition, delayed naval maintenance, scrapped decrepit vessels rather than investing in repairs, and divested unprofitable assets. Captured pirate vessels are auctioned off while their contraband cargo is dispersed into black markets through covert dealings with Houses Cynis and Sesus.

House Peleps has begun collecting unsustainably massive tributes from many satrapies, stripping them bare in the short term in anticipation of conquering new holdings once civil war begins in earnest. Peleps is also blatantly cheating the Imperial Treasury — a necessary move to maintain and expand the fleet, but politically unsound.

House Ragara

House Ragara's moneylending ventures permeate every level of the Realm. While its loans to Great Houses are especially profitable, it also finances patrician households, peasant merchants, outcastes, and foreign industries. While its predatory lending practices have made many enemies — albeit heavily indebted enemies — it maintains positive relationships with numerous peasant, patrician, and foreign business owners.

Some in the Realm look down on the Ragaras as bankers rather than heroes. To others they're champions, safeguarding prosperity and fending off the Guild's nefarious influence. House Ragara oversees its holdings with a light hand — as long as taxes are paid and subjects are loyal, it leaves well enough alone.

Ragara scions live lives of opulence bordering on decadence. Chefs from far-off lands prepare 10-course meals whose cost exceeds a peasant household's annual food budget. Musicians, hired to follow Dynasts in their leisure, provide constant instrumental accompaniment. Gateway boards boast pieces of gold and platinum, inlaid with diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and sapphires. Small armies of bodyguards march resplendent in matching uniforms dyed in brilliant colors, their plumed helms and bejeweled breastplates polished to a mirror sheen.

Patricians and satrapial nobility in Ragara holdings often emulate such lavish lifestyles, a feat most manage by taking loans from Ragara nobles. Some peasants emulate their masters with ostentatious affectations; others embrace the virtues of austerity in protest. The

Immaculate Order's antagonistic relationship with House Ragara gives it great prominence among Ragara prefectures' peasantry; while the enlightened woman pays her debts, predatory lending is an abuse of one's place in the Perfected Hierarchy. The Order has historically supported more peasant uprisings against Ragara than any other house.

War is profitable for House Ragara. As other houses sell assets for emergency cash, Ragara buys them on the cheap, even gaining de facto control of a few Tepet satrapies in exchange for waiving debts. It also profits from arms sales, and stockpiles foodstuffs and medicines against wartime famine and pestilence. But while strife is profitable, the Ragaras wish to keep it short and at arm's length. Businesses pay no dividends, nor debtors interest, after their properties are razed and their people slaughtered.

The Ragaras' greatest fear is a debt jubilee. If a new Empress cancels debts owed them, much of their wealth vanishes. Anticipating this, many merchants, mercenaries, and senators in Ragara's pay refuse credit, accepting only coin or scrip. To compensate, the house calls in its own debts in hard currency — or threatens such as leverage for other demands. But the more the house exerts its power, the more it antagonizes the other houses. After all, debts owed Ragara end if the house is destroyed — and Corin Prefecture's currency reserves are a juicy target.

House Sesus

No Great House matches House Sesus' reputation for blasphemy, cruelty, duplicity, and depravity. Yet few can afford to distance themselves from Sesus on principle, as it's immensely wealthy, with significant military and political power, and one of the Dynasty's strongest bloodlines. And those who benefit from association with a Sesus, or who only have social contact with charismatic members of the family — whether as cronies, business partners, or lovers — view the house more positively, often waving off its reputation as undeserved.

House Sesus invests in numerous profitable ventures in its own satrapies and those of other houses, providing both substantial revenue and a staging ground to sabotage Dynastic rivals. Its scions are unethical and ruthless in business and financial affairs, using spying, extortion, and sabotage to gain advantage. Few dare speak openly against such practices; even those who don't suffer similar fates may find themselves cut out of dealings with Sesus' extensive mercantile enterprises.

Sesus-dominated prefectures and satrapies offer their administrators little resistance. The house's many spies are expert in finding and eliminating opposition; infiltrating insurrectionist movements, they quickly suborn, arrest, or assassinate rebel leaders. Sesus spies also have their fingers in organized criminal groups. These are left alone — and, in some cases, protected from the All-Seeing Eye — so long as they don't touch the house and its cronies, and assist the house upon request.

Only House Sesus' powerful Threshold commercial interests sustain a military as large as House Cathak's and a spy network rivaling the Iselsis — and it's expanding both as war looms. In the North, they've coopted satrapies formerly owned by House Tepet, claiming all but a pittance of their tributes in payment for the protection they "generously" offer their fallen cousin.

Though Sesus-dominated businesses trade with the Guild, the house is also the Realm's keenest weapon against Guild expansion. It undercuts Guild activity in satrapies where it has a strong presence, incidentally allowing independent businesses to thrive to an extent rare in the Threshold. But in this troubled time, Guild-aligned businesses move aggressively against Sesus mercantile interests. Aside from financially injuring the house and driving a wedge between it and Guild-allied Cynis, a trade war will disrupt local economies throughout the Threshold.

House Tepet

The peasantry has long admired the Tepets' military heroics and romantic Shogunate traditions, though satrapial subjects conquered by Tepet legions rarely share this admiration. While the house legions' fall has devastated Tepet's standing with the Dynasty, the patriciate and peasantry haven't been so quick to turn on them. Evenhanded governance of Tepet holdings keeps discontent and civic unrest to a minimum, though many Tepet prefects and satraps have begun implementing harsher policies and steeper taxes to maintain the house's solvency.

House Tepet is unique among the surviving Great Houses in its descent from a Shogunate-era gens, a distinction reflected in its holdings' cultures. Antiquated customs, fashions, and philosophies remain in vogue in Tepet satrapies: Poets compose verses in the demanding Autumn Willow form, patrician and Dynastic socialites dress in many-layered junihitoe, and blacksmiths forge weapons in the Six Jewels style. House Tepet's martial culture also influences its holdings. Patricians, peasants, and satrapial subjects alike emulate the house's emphasis on honor, and heretical worship of Mela is far more common in its holdings than any other house's.

House Tepet's economy fell to shambles with its legions' downfall, leaving it unable to maintain even the

semblance of Dynastic power and luxury. Remaining satrapies scarcely pay tribute, and interest payments on Ragara loans bleed the Tepets white.

They aim to rebuild by military means. Tepet forces, though vastly diminished, could still plunder the opulent holdings of treacherous rivals. Wealthy patricians and merchants in Lord's Crossing and former Tepet territories provide "loans" that resemble gifts, preferring the risk that the house may never repay them to their assets being seized by other houses.

House V'neef

A fledgling by Dynastic standards, House V'neef was elevated to Great House status only 14 years ago. V'neef herself, just over six decades old, has but a bare handful of blood descendants. The vast majority of V'neef scions are outcaste and patrician adoptees, disdained by bluebloods of the Dynasty's ancient houses; many are still adapting to their change in fortunes. Given the house's small size, it holds a disproportionate number of prefectures and satrapies, though fewer than most other houses.

As many V'neef Dragon-Blooded are outcastes, foreign to each other and to their matriarch, the house has little cultural cohesion, except perhaps for mores inculcated by Pasiap's Stair and the legions. V'neef herself tries to remedy this by throwing endless galas and other social events to bring her adoptive brood together and instill familial ties, but ultimately the house still lacks the underlying cultural heritage found elsewhere in the Dynasty. As such, beyond policies encouraged by the matriarch — fairness, generosity, rectitude — one cannot point to a specific V'neef way of doing things, nor of traditions common to the house's holdings.

House V'neef profits greatly from its share of Merchant Fleet tribute, and sees substantial income from trade in wines, thoroughbred horses, alcohol, tobacco, and qat. But expanding the Merchant Fleet and extending its Western holdings strains even its impressive resources, while the Fleet's income dwindles as tribute falls off amid chaos and secession in the Threshold. And as the house diverts its efforts away from protecting maritime commerce, mortal merchants suffer — and rightly blame V'neef for their suffering.

The house needs money to fund its Western campaign. Pirate-hunting yields plundered cargoes and captured ships, but raises tension between V'neef and Peleps. Wherever the Imperial Navy and the Merchant Fleet collide, tempers run high. Expanding further west into Peleps territory could trigger all-out war. And V'neef expansion vexes other houses, though a Peleps empire seems more threatening while that house commands the Imperial Navy.

V'neef's subjects still remember what things were like before the house's advent. It's cultivated a good reputation in its prefectures and satrapies, taking care not to abuse the peasantry and patricians in its care. But now that House V'neef raises taxes everywhere to prepare for incipient strife with rival houses, many recall former governors and prefects from other houses with fondness, making these provinces fertile ground for demagogues, rebels, and subversives.

House Iselsi

The common peasant knows little of House Iselsi. Perhaps she's met a monk who bears the antiquated name, or heard stories in her mother's lap of the Great House's fall from glory. To maintain the charade that they've been truly brought low, a few live openly as patricians in the shadow of manses and estates that once were theirs, places now overseen by other houses. Enough time has passed that inhabitants of formerly Iselsi-controlled prefectures and satrapies remember little of the house's governance.

Without holdings, House Iselsi is hard-pressed to maintain its spy network. Informants and other agents require payment, affluent cover identities must dispense largesse, and bribery demands sizable slush funds. Of the house's limited income, funding to maintain temples in Incas Prefecture may be cut off at any time by Deliberative political maneuverings, small commercial ventures are imperiled by piracy and war, and scions' moneymaking activities in the Threshold are cut short by recall to new duties on the Isle.

Iselsis in positions of wealth and power borrow money and disappear, burning lifelong cover identities. Others extract funds and assets through criminal acts, leaving trails pointing to various houses to further inflame their enemies — blackmailing ministers for depravities performed at Cynis parties, extorting money from crime bosses while in the guise of Sesus agents, or robbing Mnemon-owned caravans in Corin Prefecture.

Wind of Justice was a small city, and had not long ago been a successful city. It had grown through river trade with wealthier neighbors until it dominated rugged Turu Prefecture. But in recent months, the city's businesses had ground to a halt. Bankers, hostelers, and traders fought for space with rustic refugees, and food was scarce. Turu had a bandit infestation, and tonight, in a lantern-lit shack on the Wind of Justice docks, three outsiders were trying to solve it.

Shaora was the youngest of the three archons, washed out of monkhood a year prior. He had been out tracking witnesses all day, and stank of sweat. "The last few bandit raids were here, here, and here," he said, making charcoal marks on a map of the prefecture, laid out on the table. "Each sizable, all within one week. I'm guessing at least four different gangs, now."

Smoke Pearl had had the hardest life of the three, and she showed her teeth without smiling. "Old thieves in Wind of Justice keep their heads down. These bandits? Different breed. I hear they've got a lot of foreigners. Maybe mercenaries?"

Lusalu had been an archon for thirty years, recruited in her prime. She set her rice aside and tapped the map, where the governor's mansion could be found, just outside the city. "Let's not jump to conclusions. I finally got my hands on the governor's ledgers — her security was terrible — and I think this all comes down to taxes."

"It always seems to, these days," muttered Shaora.

Lusalu continued, "Governor Ledaal Janoka's been providing false records to the Honest Assessors, and we know how peasants get when taxes are high. We just need to make our report. Magistrate Thorn will do the rest."

Smoke Pearl grunted. "My hackles are up. There's more to this, I'm sure of it."

Lusalu frowned, thoughtful. "The governor did receive a strange visitor yesterday. Someone not on her schedule —"

"Someone's outside!" hissed Shaora, sliding out of his chair to enter a low, rolling crouch. The more experienced archons didn't hear anything but didn't hesitate. Smoke Pearl drew her cutlass, Lusalu her bow. Lusalu aimed at the shack's locked door and waited through several long moments of silence.

When the door burst inward, Lusalu loosed her arrow. It took the first intruder in the throat, but he was quickly pushed aside by the force of the others behind him. Shaora grabbed one intruder by the sword hand and pulled her into a choke hold as Smoke Pearl drove another back across the threshold with aggressive slashes.

Lusalu took in the intruders' appearance: boots and cloaks too nice for soldiers, bucklers and armor too fine for bandits. These were hired bravos, and there were surely more of them. She knelt, and found a latch in the wooden floor. She opened the trap door she'd installed, revealing the dark river below. "Time to go!" she called, and punctuated the order by loosing an arrow into Shaora's grappling partner. The young archon grimaced, shoved the dying woman aside, and dove into the river.

"I paid a full season's rent for this dump!" shouted Smoke Pearl. "I'll catch up when —"

A longsword cut her short. As she fell, her attacker pulled his blade free, then raised his shield against an arrow Lusalu didn't remember loosing. Lusalu nocked another arrow, but the assassin bowled over Smoke Pearl and slashed the back of Lusalu's hand.

The older archon recoiled backward, and there was no floor. She reached for Smoke Pearl, hit her head on the trap door's edge, and tumbled, bleeding, into the river.



Chapter Two

The Machinery of Empire

The Scarlet Realm's vast governmental bureaucracy is the engine driving its expansion and conquest. This massive web of officials, functionaries, councils, and advisory committees is divided into four parts: the magistracy, empowered by the Empress to speak with her voice in dispensing justice; the Thousand Scales, innumerable ministries of the Realm's government; the All-Seeing Eye, the Empress's secret police; and the Deliberative, the Realm's legislative body. Taken together, they carry out functions vital to perpetuating the Realm's existence while carefully concealing those functions from its citizenry.

Before the Empress vanished, she maintained a deliberately fragile balance between the elements of the Realm's bureaucracy. Without her hand to guide it, the machinery of government strains under its own weight. The Thousand Scales grow rife with indolence and unchecked corruption while the Deliberative accrues power it was never meant to have. Magistrates scatter like hares without the Empress to protect them, and the All-Seeing Eye no longer reports to the throne.

The Magistracy

While famous generals and shikari are well known throughout the Realm, magistrates are the real heroes of the common people. They roam the land, meting out justice in the Empress' name and protecting citizens from predation and corruption. Peasants recount the heroics of magistrates current and historical, elevating their deeds unto legend. A magistrate's appointment or death is gossip of the highest order, for they're champions of the people and defenders of the Realm, awesome figures that leap straight out of epic tales to slay monsters and punish wrongdoers — the Empress' will made flesh.

The first magistrates were the Empress' colleagues from her days as a Shogunate officer. Before the Realm was stable, she needed mouthpieces to carry her decrees far and wide, and she chose only those few she truly trusted. In time, she refined these unofficial proxies into the magistracy: a body of plenipotentiary Dragon-Blooded problem solvers with sound judgment and singular talents, tasked with traveling the Realm to act in the Empress' stead in virtually any situation.

To make her magistracy as incorruptible as possible, the Empress decreed that magistrates cannot acquire wealth, making them technically poorer than most peasants. However, Realm citizens are required to make available anything a magistrate needs, from food and lodging to artillery and courtesans, and even artifacts if the situation is dire enough. As a result, bribes are generally meaningless to a magistrate, who can command anything she desires but take nothing with her when she leaves.

The Empress appointed the magistracy primarily to root out corruption among the backbiting ministries. The magistracy held authority over the Thousand Scales, and ostensibly the ministers ultimately answer to it. Naturally, tension arose between the two bodies, as magistrates traveled the Realm disciplining government officials for taking bribes or plotting to gain power beyond their ambit. Without the Empress, this tension has exploded into a shadow war, and the ministries are winning.

The Way Things Were

Where the All-Seeing Eye (p. XX) was the Empress' invisible left hand, the magistrates were her highly visible right, answerable only to her. Even now, no law can touch them unless they commit outright treason. They travel independently and solve problems as they find them, whether investigating murder among Dragon-Blooded, slaying demons, or stripping corrupt satraps of worldly possessions. They may pass any judgment on anyone short of Great House matriarchs, requisition any resource, and demand cooperation from anyone. They have carte blanche to represent the Empress wherever they go; all citizens understand that when a magistrate opens his mouth, the voice that emerges is hers. Or at least, it was.

Appointment

Individuals with so much independent power must be chosen with extreme care. Only the Empress could appoint new magistrates, and she did so personally. Whether the Regent or Deliberative might do so in her absence hasn't been put to the test; neither shows any interest in strengthening the failing magistracy.

Every magistrate is Dragon-Blooded. The Empress often chose influential rebels and heretics, relatively harmless criminals, and other social or political outcasts as magistrates — competent but disgraced Exalted who'd fallen victim to Dynastic machinations, or become scapegoats for grievous failures or personal transgressions against families and rivals. Primarily, the Empress required her magistrates to be savvy, tenacious, talented, concerned with justice, and dependent entirely on her favor for redemption. She offered the choice between the fates their misguided lives demanded — often death or exile — or serving her directly in the Realm's defense. Few turned her down.

Choosing magistrates from the ranks of dishonored heroes and troublemakers also ensured that the magistracy wasn't pulling too many marriage prospects out of circulation. While magistrates still marry, it's harder for them to sustain the high-society presence necessary to remain competitive candidates for advantageous marriages. While marrying a magistrate is a great honor for any family, they're not in high demand.

Regardless of strategy, those so chosen venerated and loved the Empress more than most. The greatest Dragon-Blood alive not only noticed them, but called them to be her personal agents — a calculated way of winning hearts. Their unparalleled loyalty to her even now makes them seem like legends. In the eyes of commoners who suffer the fallout of the Dynasty's constant jockeying, the magistrates are above it all, worlds closer to the Immaculate ideal of Princes of the Earth than the Dynastic prefect and her tax-collecting lackeys.

Rookie magistrates have no official training regimen, but experienced magistrates typically take newcomers under their wings to show them the ropes, warn them about common pitfalls, and gauge their mettle and judgment. This informal master-apprentice relationship tends to make magistrates loyal not only to the Empress but to each other, making them feel like part of something larger even when alone in the field.

Companions

Each magistrate travels with a scribe who records her judgments and exploits for later reporting. A magistrate must return to the Imperial City every five years, to account for everything she's done since her last visit and receive rewards or punishment at the Empress's discretion. A magistrate whose actions were deemed ill-judged could be assigned to an undesirable task or route until her discretion improved — or even removed from duty, never to be seen again. This is extraordinarily rare, requiring error on the scope of conspiring against the Realm or becoming an Anathema's catspaw.

Magistrates also employ skilled servants called archons. Archons are to magistrates what magistrates were to the Empress: troubled misfits saved from lives of crime and punishment to serve the Realm, given authority to act on their magistrate's behalf. Many are mortals who aspired to heights the Immaculate Philosophy or their worldly status denied them, and suffered for their hubris. Others never achieved their considerable potential and became mired in dishonorable pursuits or swept up in Dynastic schemes full of empty promises. One famous historical archon was a peasant who leapt into the path of an arrow meant for a magistrate's back, pulled from the brink of death by the magistrate's chirurgical prowess and rewarded for her selfless bravery. A magistrate may make any consenting mortal an archon as long as he doesn't already serve another Dragon-Blood or a Great House.

An archon performs any task his master requires, from delivering messages and chasing leads to supporting her in combat and evacuating endangered citizens. Many magistrates choose archons to complement their own abilities; one who excels at interrogation and negotiation but is only a middling combatant may seek a peerless swordsman as an archon. Most archons are proficient trackers and investigators, learn the ins and outs of ministerial law and process, and gain some martial expertise.

Archons spend the rest of their lives in their magistrates' service. When a magistrate dies, her archons die with her, by decree; this encourages them to protect their master to the death, and discourages treachery. In practice, though, an archon who learns of his master's death will quietly find somewhere remote to start over; the Realm doesn't bother hunting former archons down unless they become nuisances.

Most archons are as loyal to their magistrates as magistrates were to the Empress, for much the same reason. Popular folklore on the Blessed Isle paints mortal archons as nobly reformed, turning their backs on infamy to serve Dragon-Blooded champions. Notable archons can win almost as much repute as their masters, accessible figures in tales of untouchable paragons.

Romances between magistrates and archons aren't uncommon. After all, adventuring together for years is a

ARCHONS

While archons are notable and singular heroes, keeping track of a magistrate's full complement of archons can be daunting. The following Quick Character traits provide a template for archons, which Storytellers can customize and improve to reflect an individual archon's talents.

Essence: 1; Willpower: 6; Join Battle: 7 dice

Health Levels: –0/–1x2/–2x2/–4/Incap

Actions: Investigate: 7 dice; Larceny: 5 dice; Legal Knowledge: 5 dice; Read Intentions: 7 dice; Senses: 7 dice; Social Influence: 6 dice; Stealth: 5 dice; Tracking: 8 dice

Appearance 3, Resolve 4, Guile 3

COMBAT

Attack (Straight sword): 8 dice (Damage 12L/2)

Attack (Long bow): 7 dice at short range (Damage 12L)

Combat Movement: 6 dice

Evasion 4, Parry 4

Soak/Hardness: 6/0

recipe for emotional and physical entanglement. Some feel such relationships are beneath the Exalted; others complain this dilutes the blood of the Dragons. Tempestuous relationships and forbidden children between magistrates and archons — real and fictional — have been a rich vein for storytellers and songwriters for centuries.

Archons don't always accompany their magistrates. Veteran magistrates sometimes gather a dozen or more trusted servants, and roaming in such numbers paints an easy target for foes to prey upon. Instead, when a magistrate collects more than four or five archons, she usually sends them out in pairs or small groups on extended missions, reporting back according to prearranged schedules.

Life and Times

Magistrates rarely settle in one place or traverse set routes, although exceptions happen, especially as they advance in age. The Empress dictated some hotspots where magistrates are expected to check up on things every few months or so — posts that can be filled by anyone in the area at the time. For instance, all major Peleps port cities are considered magistrate posts, to intercept potential security breaches by sea resulting from the Admiralty Board's cutthroat competition. House Peleps resents the implication (and the surveillance), and the ministries now woo pliable Peleps scions in their surreptitious campaign to tie the magistracy's hands.

Formerly, it wasn't uncommon for magistrates to cross paths, especially in major cities, and it was traditional to dine together and discuss recent events and the state of the Realm. Today, they avoid gathering publicly lest an enemy seek to eliminate many in one swoop. Their archons typically meet in their stead.

When two magistrates meet while investigating the same crime, they may join forces, continue working independently, or turn the problem over to one while the other moves on, at their discretion.

Most of a magistrate's day-to-day work is less legendary than tales suggest. Days on end go by with only the road to worry about, and most towns hold no dire injustices to right. Magistrates rely heavily on the rumor mill and a network of contacts gained through previous heroism to find problems to address. Most magistrates travel from one city to another, passing through as many towns and villages along the way as possible; *something* illicit is always happening in a city.

Whenever a magistrate does find trouble — much more often now than before — she resolves it however she deems best. Sometimes that means working with established authorities like the Black-Helms, Immaculate Order, or satrapial garrisons. Sometimes this means going undercover and whispering a message into the right ear at the right time. Sometimes it means kicking down a prefect's door and demanding answers, or facilitating talks between warring parties. Often, it means combat. Corrupt officials and mystical menaces don't like being revealed for what they are, and fight the fierce arm of justice with whatever they can. Every magistrate has a different set of talents, approaches, and archons in her toolbox, so no two magistrates work in the same way.

The Way Things Are

Before the Empress vanished, the magistrates were indomitable forces of righteousness. In her absence, the ministries came alive with schemes like ravenous hyenas. Formidable Dragon-Blooded champions who now answer to no one scare the Thousand Scales witless. Now, every day holds the potential for a hidden knife on a lonely road or a law stamped with the Regent's approval to strip power from the dozens of remaining magistrates, who are only too aware that their numbers can't be replenished.

Most magistrates now pull their archons close, finding safety in numbers, and call upon extensive networks of contacts to bunk in safehouses and avoid main roads. Some take to the satrapies for now, hoping the ministries won't expend resources to hunt them beyond the Isle. Others work to unseat ministers who conspire against them before the conspiracy removes them first. They rarely meet, fearing that multiple magistrates in one place make a brighter target. As deadlines for reports to the Imperial City come due one by one, they wrestle with the decision between returning to a hostile city or postponing it indefinitely and risking being charged with dereliction of duty. The ministries understand that annihilating the magistracy would erase one of the last checks on the Great Houses' reach, but eliminating archons and those magistrates closest to home, and limiting the jurisdiction of the rest, works to their advantage.

But the magistrates won't go down easily. Besides their resourcefulness, personal prowess, and entourages of skillful archons, magistrates are heroes of the people. Peasants and satrapial locals see them not as grandiose Imperial overlords or distant symbols of Immaculate perfection, but divine defenders that arrive to banish their worst nightmares and improve their lives. Even patricians and Dynasts often appreciate one of the few remaining symbols of the Realm's heroic ideals. Now that magistrates are underdogs, the common people love them even more, and any minister or Great House flunky who openly persecutes a magistrate could have a revolt on her hands.

Magistrates of Note

A skilled and respected officer in the Cathak house legions, the proud, flamboyant **Cathak Teneri Fenar** was even more feared on the dueling ground than on the battlefield. But when she inadvertently killed the Tepet matriarch's son in a duel, only the Empress' mercy saved her life and averted further bloodshed between the two houses. Since the Tepet legions' rout, Fenar has devoted herself as a form of personal penance to investigating rumors that they were sabotaged or betrayed by agents within the Imperial Service and the Great Houses.

Once a rising star in the Treasury, the patrician Dragon-Blood **Tereya Varu** found that his personal blasphemies weren't as secret as he'd hoped. Embezzling several talents' worth of jade to pay off a persistent blackmailer, he was undone when his theft was uncovered by Treasury head Bal Kesif. His experience in the Thousand Scales is invaluable in ferreting out corrupt ministers; he's currently investigating a conspiracy of crooked tax collectors within the Humble and Honest Caretakers.

Despite her best efforts, the outcaste Winglord **Coalbright**'s forces were smashed by the Army of No Queen at the Battle of Five Bridges. Her dragonlord pinned all blame for the



wing's failure on her, accusing her of dereliction. The Empress found it expedient to elevate her to the magistracy. Coalbright took satisfaction in uncovering the misdeeds of the houses that betrayed her, but in the Empress' absence she's fled to the Threshold to avoid their wrath, and has made contact with the rogue legion of Saloy Hin (**Dragon-Blooded**, p. 126).

Despite a century of pious service to the Immaculate Order, abbot **Ledaal Oraya** became a figure of shame when he was caught in an affair with a married Dynast. Cast out of the Order, he accepted the second chance offered him by the Empress. To his mind, the impecunious life of a magistrate differs little from monastic discipline.

The Ministries

The ministries of the Thousand Scales provide the structure and guidance that keep the Realm from descending into chaos. The ministers filling its ranks understand that the most direct path to the top is a straight line, and sometimes that line is through someone's back. Whether they come from the Dynasty or well-connected patrician families, or are even talented peasants seeking better lives, successful ministers who've ascended to lofty heights of power and influence will do whatever it takes to stay there. As the Great Houses slice up the empire and squabble over the pieces, the ministers are ruthless in holding their departments together so the Realm continues to function.

Structure and Organization

Hundreds of ministries govern the Realm. Each has a specific, closely defined function. Some are small, consisting of only a single minister and a handful of clerks. Others are vast, sprawling networks of bureaucrats spread over numerous offices throughout the Realm.

The Thousand Scales' primary hub is the Imperial City; most administration buildings stand in the Imperial Palace's shadow. Large ministries claim entire buildings as their own, while other structures contain the offices of several smaller ministries. Although still reflecting the grandeur of the Empress's domain, many of these edifices have a certain utilitarian sameness to them, as though designed to be interchangeable.

Many major ministries maintain branch offices elsewhere in the Realm, especially in prefectures populous or remote enough that it's impractical to funnel their administration through the Imperial City. Some branch offices are in purpose-built urban structures; others occupy rural estates donated by local families or reassigned by Imperial edict.

The Empress built in checks and balances to limit the power held by any single ministry. The Humble and Honest Assessors of the Imperial Tax collect huge sums of wealth, but can't spend one obol without approval from the Treasury. The Imperial Treasury is responsible for the Realm's vast fortune, but relies on the Honest Assessors to fill the coffers in the first place.

These overlapping responsibilities also serve as failsafes if a ministry is compromised. Should a corrupt minister and her staff be removed, their responsibilities will go neglected. But as other ministries perform similar functions, the bureaucracy can carry on until suitable replacements are found. The Empress sometimes merged lesser ministries or divided ministries that had grown large and unwieldy into lesser bureaus, making their exact number difficult to pin down.

Power of the Patricians

The ministries employ vast numbers of bureaucrats. While many belong to the Dynasty and a handful are gifted peasants, most are patricians. Their families' names aren't as well-known throughout the Realm as the Dynasts', but many have been involved with the Thousand Scales for centuries — some trace their family lines back to the Realm's birth, or earlier. All have spent generations entrenching themselves into the Realm's power structure, and they scheme like Dynasts to gain and maintain power.

Some ministries are dominated by one patrician family, while other ancient lines have spread their scions throughout the Thousand Scales, developing wide networks of contacts and influence. While patrician ministers lack Dynasts' social status, many are well-connected politically. Such patricians make it easy for their families to advance through the ministries, and painfully difficult for others.

Far too often, an un-Exalted Dynast enters the ministries expecting to use her name and influence to climb the ladder. These Dynasts learn the hard way that it's patricians who hold power here. In many cases, patrician control of a ministry is so thorough as to make advancement extremely onerous. Even a well-bred Ragara would find it impossible to advance in the finance ministries without support from a well-placed Bal, Rein, or Tereya. To secure their own advancement, many Dynasts bow to patrician families' wishes or allow themselves to be co-opted by better-placed ministers. While most find this distasteful or beneath them, they realize that it's a necessary evil — and the patricians enjoy this reversal of fortunes.

With the Empress' disappearance, the Dynasty seeks a tighter hold on the ministries. While longstanding wisdom has mortal ministers bow and step aside for

the occasional Dragon-Blooded Dynast, these ministers now find themselves fighting for the survival of the powerbase they've spent centuries building. They won't let it be torn out from under them without a fight.

Entering the Thousand Scales

To ensure that all had the opportunity to seek a career in the ministries, the Empress created the Nine Rigorous Examinations. These are held twice annually: once in the Imperial City and once in another city on the Blessed Isle, varying from year to year.

Many obstacles confront the would-be minister. A candidate must arrange transport and, if a peasant, travel papers for the year's location. The examinations are exceedingly difficult, and anyone hoping to do well should hire a tutor and purchase the requisite study materials. Even if a peasant takes the test and scores well, she'll still need to find someone to recommend her for a position — and to provide financial support. Securing a post requires a supply of inks and brushes, not to mention fine clothing befitting a minister of the Realm. These expenses prevent many peasants and poorer patricians from entering the Thousand Scales, despite the Nine Rigorous Examinations' egalitarian pretense.

For well-to-do patricians and Dynasts, these costs are small inconveniences; for children of rural farmers, they seem insurmountable. Fortunately, there's no shortage of people looking to offer a hand up. Whether it's making introductions or offering loans, these individuals labor to ensure that promising candidates find their ways into the ministries. Having a minister who owes you a favor is often more valuable than whatever you had to spend to get her there.

Advancement

Those without powerful connections enter the ministries in the most junior positions. Their performance is closely monitored for the first year (three years in the case of the finance ministries) and they can be recommended for promotion after their probationary period ends.

Each ministry holds annual competency examinations. Anyone wishing to be considered for promotion can sit for an exam, and all ministers must take at least one exam every five years. When a position opens up unexpectedly (as with the termination, resignation, retirement, or death of a minister), normal protocol is set aside, and a replacement can be appointed by a supervisor. Promotion to the very highest ranks in the ministries requires the Deliberative's approval. Once a rubber stamp on the Empress' choices, the matter has turned intensely political, and a few high-ranking posts have been open for years due to legislative deadlock.

There are always more ambitious ministers ready to climb the ranks than available openings. Assassination is a time-honored — albeit illegal — tradition among the Thousand Scales. This requires careful planning and execution: If someone in middle management comes down with a case of dagger-to-the-back, their underlings are the first suspects. The safest method is to make the death look accidental, though some will always suspect foul play. Safer still to hire someone else do the deed while you establish a public alibi.

Most assassins plot their promotions many steps in advance. A Treasury clerk who wants to move up one pay grade could theoretically just murder her supervisor — but a better method is to murder her *supervisor's* supervisor. If successful, her supervisor is promoted to fill the vacancy, and she can take his place. Even better, if her supervisor is implicated, suddenly there'll be two open postings to choose from.

Blackmail is a gentler alternative. Threats to reveal particularly dire indiscretions can compel a minister to resign or retire. More broadly, bribes, blackmail, extortion, and favors — often with support from a high-ranking minister, powerful patrician family, or Great House — are invaluable tools for climbing the ladder. It's dreadfully embarrassing to go to the effort of murdering a superior, only for a string-pulling rival to claim the dead woman's seat.

Since the Empress' disappearance, this strategy has become riskier — not in terms of getting caught, but in terms of success. Emergency vacancies may be addressed by a motion in the Deliberative. In the past, it was exceedingly rare for the Deliberative to waste its time examining such promotions, but with the ministries ripe for subversion, things have changed.

Even if the Great Houses don't snap up a vacancy for one of their own, the approvals to replace a dead minister can be stalled as paperwork grows ever more obstructed. A bureaucrat may kill her supervisor only for his desk to sit vacant for months before those responsible approve a replacement. Meanwhile, as the dead supervisor's personal assistant picks up the slack, his superiors might find it simpler to give him the job. This leaves the assassin the option to try again, or wait and study hard for her next competency exam.

The Ministries of the Thousand Scales

The following list of ministries is by no means comprehensive; think of them as a glimpse into the machinery that keeps the Realm running.

The Imperial Treasury

All tax and tribute collected from the Realm is remanded to the Imperial Treasury. Imperial Treasurers authorize spending in the Imperial Service, and since they control the purse strings of other ministries, few openly go against them.

The Realm's wealth is kept in several treasure-manses. Mostly in and around the Imperial Palace, they're protected by unwaveringly loyal troops, bound spirits, and other traps and defenses. Some manses are so secure — accessible only to the Empress, or requiring passwords only known to now-dead Treasury officials — that the Treasury itself can't access them. This doesn't prevent the Realm from leveraging that wealth; Treasury ministers move numbers around on a ledger without removing jade and silver from the inaccessible vault.

The Realm's stockpiled wealth doesn't just sit around. Under the Bank of the Scarlet Throne's auspices, Treasury ministers granted loans to Dynasts and patricians needing capital to start or expand business ventures. With the Empress' disappearance, several finance ministers have gone into business for themselves, finding legal loopholes and tax shelters that keep for themselves the interest they receive.

The Empress' Exchequer, Bal Keraz, exerts nigh-total control over the Treasury. A 180-year-old Dragon-Blood, he inherited the office — and his subordinates' loyalties — from his mother Kesif. Keraz has been rooting out the worst of this corruption with aid from the All-Seeing Eye, many of whose handlers have turned to him for funding without the Empress' financial support. Most finance ministers were brought into line; several had to lose their heads. A few ministers sought protection from Great Houses in exchange for ignoring longstanding loans or selling them the loans of rival houses. These ministers now provide creative bookkeeping to the Great Houses and are a constant thorn in Keraz's side.

Corruption has hobbled the Treasury. It receives scarcely a tenth of its former income in tax and tribute. The rest flows into the pockets of individual officials and the Great Houses. The Treasury's reserves, though vast, are largely committed to backing jade scrip; withdrawing too much might create a currency crisis. Bal Keraz anticipates the need for even more severe budget cuts within three years unless matters improve.

The Humble and Honest Assessors of the Imperial Tax

The Honest Assessors calculate and collect taxes from villages, towns, cities, businesses, and estates throughout the Realm. This is no easy feat. Neither peasants nor Dynasts want to turn over their property; they frequently conceal caches and crops, or lie about what their property is worth. Assessors are expected to be familiar with their territories so they can root out hidden stockpiles and calculate property values fairly. They often go in disguise when performing audits. Martial prowess is invaluable — the Assessors aren't well liked, and the roads they travel are long and lonely.

Where businesses and wealthy households pay taxes individually, each rural village pays taxes as a whole, villagers each chipping in to a communal pool. Should a village fail to pay, the entire population is dispossessed.

The All-Seeing Eye, which once ruthlessly culled corruption in the Assessors, is growing blind. Now individual Assessors keep larger shares of the take for themselves, or work hand in glove with the Great Houses — often due to intimidation or blackmail — to give tax money to the local prefect.

The Honest Assessors' current head is Cathak Curuk, who works closely with Bal Keraz to keep the Realm's income from drying up completely. He's proficient at his job, loyal to the Realm, and unwilling to accept bribes. This has earned him many enemies amongst the Dynasty, and most of the houses are conspiring to remove him from office. He's lasted this long due to his working relationship with Bal Keraz and his formidable martial training.

The Wise and Knowledgeable Advisors of Foreign Tributaries

The Knowledgeable Advisors, commonly known as the Foreign Office, constitute one of the largest ministries. Every satrap and her staff belong to it — even though most never set foot in the ministry's offices in the Imperial City.

In the central offices, a small army of ministers review reports from each satrap and her advisors. This data is collected and analyzed by committees that consult with current and retired military advisors to determine how best to maintain the Realm's hold without destabilizing the region. The Knowledgeable Advisors send back recommendations, or dispatch teams to advise and investigate onsite (see pp. XX-XX).

The Foreign Office's head, Ledaal Arnis, succeeded her mother in the position. Arnis remains loyal to Realm over house, but she's becoming increasingly frustrated

by the state of foreign affairs. In the past, Arnis reported mismanagement to the Empress so satrapies could be reassigned to different houses before too much damage was done. With the Empress gone, Arnis finds satraps completely ignoring her department's advice. Bringing these complaints to a satrap's house matriarch is pointless; most are complicit in any wrongdoing, while the Deliberative lacks legal power to reassign satrapial leases. With no recourse, all Arnis can do is watch her department wither and die.

The Curators of the Imperial Registry

The Imperial Registry is a book delineating the powers, responsibilities, and jurisdiction of every ministry in the Thousand Scales. Its Curators revise it as new edicts and judgments alter the boundaries of the ministries' authority, making careful corrections to ensure the document remains internally consistent.

Stored at the Imperial Palace, the original Registry has over 3,000 painstakingly calligraphed pages. Bound in brass plates inlaid with silver, gold, and gems, it's secured with an ornate lock for which the Respected and Impartial Keeper of the Registry has the only key.

The Registry is the final say in responsibility and jurisdiction within the ministries. Disputes between ministries are settled by legal savants from among the Curators known as interpreters. Once an interpreter arrives, she hears both sides of the issue before deliberating for three to 10 days, during which time she calls on witnesses and consults the Registry.

Each judgment is final and binding, and is recorded in the Registry as precedent for future judgments. This is why interpreters take so long to deliberate: A decision made in a remote town can have implications years later for agricultural ministers in the Imperial City. Traditionally, the interpreter leaves the day after announcing her decision, to ensure that the prevailing party can't reward her for ruling in their favor — and making it more difficult for the loser to take retaliatory action. An interpreter cannot arbitrate another disagreement involving the same city or the same ministries for one year to minimize bribery and bias.

Corruption isn't tolerated among the Curators. Any interpreter found accepting bribes has her hands and tongue cut off and is forced to wander the Realm with a plaque detailing her crimes. Ministers caught bribing interpreters almost always lose their office. Some lose their heads.

Wave Akaru, the hidebound Keeper of the Registry, has run the ministry for half a century, and is said to be able



MORE OF THE THOUSAND SCALES

The Empress' Private Purse: Where the Treasury deals in jade and in the Realm's overall finances, the Empress' Private Purse (or Imperial Purse) controls the manufacture and flow of cash (**Exalted,** pp. 77-78). While less significant to the affairs of the mighty — one cannot forge a daiklave out of paper money! — the Purse is undeniably important to the Realm's economy. It's also important to the war effort; legionnaires are paid in cash rather than jade. Efforts by the Great Houses to subvert the Purse are underway. The Imperial Purse is headed by Cirrus Jezan; her resentment of the Scarlet Dynasty is the ministry's greatest defense.

The Bursars of Barbarian Tribute: Talents of silver taken in tribute from the satrapies are tallied by the Bursars and stored in their vaults. The Treasury draws upon these funds to pay foreign merchants and governments in silver — often by means of ledger entries and financial instruments, without ever taking actual silver from the vaults. Several factions within the Realm are working to suborn the Bursars, intending to deploy their vast silver reserves to hire Threshold mercenaries and subvert entire satrapies. The ministry's head, the jovial Tereya Motas, is quietly negotiating with Guild factors to provide her family with a mercenary army in the event of civil war.

The Illustrious Compilers of the Perfected Curriculum: In addition to its namesake duty of promulgating the Empress-sanctioned curriculum taught in the Realm's primary schools, this ministry oversees Imperial funding of secondary schools — the House of Bells, the Spiral Academy, Pasiap's Stair, and countless lesser institutions. (The Cloister of Wisdom is funded by the Immaculate Order, while the Heptagram is funded independently.) Ravine Dal heads this ministry, a doddering, near-senile savant who lets her subordinates deal with all the work.

The Devoted Wardens of the Empressí Wilderness: The Empress owns all land in the Realm. While much is leased out to the Great Houses and patrician families, this ministry oversees unleased tracts of wilderness, stocking forests with game animals, taking preventative measures against wildfires and other natural disasters, licensing hunting of certain animals, and punishing poachers. It's overseen by the secretive Iselsi Shenesh, Minister of the Imperial Gardens, perhaps the only Iselsi to retain significant official authority in the Realm — and suspected by his peers of membership in the All-Seeing Eye.

to recite the entire Registry by heart. She works closely with the Master of Palace Scribes to ensure that copies of the Registry are distributed to ministries throughout the Realm. This is a never-ending task because the Registry always changes, and while every effort is made to distribute updates, most copies of the Registry contain outdated sections.

The Righteous and Implacable Courts of Imperial Justice

Almost every prefecture hosts an Imperial court in its capital that hears criminal cases, contract disputes, and other petitions. Charging crimes is entirely at the discretion of the Guardians of the Realm (p. XX). Application of bribery or social pressure — whether a Dynast's word in the right ear or a mob incensed by obvious injustice — can decide whether or not charges are pressed, and which ones. This is especially true in rural areas, wherein the only law enforcement may be a couple of local peasants who've been breveted to Black-Helm status and are easily swayed.

An Imperial judge presides over the court. In criminal cases, she's both judge and prosecutor, questioning witnesses, directing deputies to gather evidence, and pronouncing sentence. Her authority isn't unlimited; verdicts are circumscribed by Imperial law. Criminal sentences range from fines and beatings to branding, enslavement, dispossession, exile, or execution. Sedition or nonpayment of taxes by peasants is punished by dispossessing entire communities. Magistrates are empowered to overturn an Imperial court's verdict based on their own investigations, and their decisions are not subject to review by the courts. Likewise, the Empress could overturn judgments by edict.

Dynastic, outcaste, and patrician defendants convicted of capital charges may appeal to the Empress' Own Court in the Imperial City. There, cases are brought before a triumvirate drawn from the Realm's eldest and most respected judges. House Peleps traditionally plays a prominent role in the judiciary; it's all but unheard of for the triumvirate to lack a Peleps scion.

Judges are drawn from Spiral Academy and Outer Coil graduates — some prodigies fresh from school, others veterans of the ministries — versed in the ever-shifting landscape of Imperial laws, as well as forensics, interrogation, and the reading of body language and other cues. Judges are appointed by the Deliberative, a great honor.

DYNASTIC WEDDINGS

Dynastic weddings are legal affairs rather than religious ones, presided over by an Imperial judge. The couple recites vows promising to support one another as well as the Realm, placing particular focus on producing Dragon-Blooded children. The bulk of the ceremony is a speech made by the judge about the benefits and responsibilities of marriage. After this, the union is blessed by a monk and celebrated with a lavish feast and celebration that lasts for hours to days, depending on the influence and resources of the couple's families.

Judges are scheduled well in advance and paid in jade; judges renowned for public speaking are particularly sought after. For judges who tire of court, this can be a lucrative semi-retirement.

This has traditionally been routine and perfunctory, but since the Empress' disappearance the Great Houses have begun exerting their own control on the judiciary.

The Honorable and Humble Caretakers of the Common Folk

Just as the Foreign Office monitors the satrapies and addresses their needs, the Caretakers — sometimes called the Home Office — monitor the prefectures to ensure the citizenry is fed and cared for. The Blessed Isle is the Realm's breadbasket, and several committees within this ministry are dedicated to monitoring crop yields and ensuring that foodstuffs are distributed throughout the Realm. They also ensure that prefects aren't letting their own citizens starve to make their numbers look better.

The Home Office also oversees maintenance of the Realm's public works — especially those relating to the Realm Defense Grid — watching for negligence or corruption, such as a corrupt prefect skimming funds for herself or one of the houses. The Caretakers also oversee the operation and funding of the Guardians of the Realm (p. XX), collecting reports of crime from the prefectures and allocating resources to those most in need of the Guardians.

The Caretakers audit the taxes prefects collect for these purposes, and take a share of those taxes for the Treasury. This tax structure runs parallel to that overseen by the Humble Assessors, a jurisdictional conflict crafted and fostered by the Empress. In her absence, the prefects have become hard to control, raising taxes while sending ever less to the Treasury.

The position of Just and Magnanimous Custodian was held by Sesus Sereda until her assassination four years ago, and every effort to replace her has been blocked on the Deliberative floor. With no one to supervise the overworked Caretakers, reports of decaying infrastructure are delayed for months before reaching the Stewards of Imperial Assets. Guardians of the Realm in crime-ridden prefectures might work on partial salaries or nothing at all, while those in the next prefecture over have funds to spare on lavish ceremonial regalia.

Other ministries are frustrated by how disorganized the Caretakers have become, and the Stewards are concerned that necessary repairs are being neglected that may place the entire Realm at risk. Bal Keraz and Cathak Kuruk have moved into the power vacuum, giving direction to the ministry's senior officials, and exerting their influence to oppose efforts by the Great Houses to further undermine the Home Office's authority.

The Stewards of Imperial Assets

This ministry, responsible for maintaining public works within the Realm, works closely with the Caretakers of the Common Folk. The Stewards are responsible for everything from sanitation and highway systems to maintenance of public structures. This ranges from manses integral to the Realm Defense Grid to the Imperial Post's heliograph towers.

While they employ skilled builders and engineers, the Stewards usually contract out the work to private businesses. The competition for such bids is fierce — once one contract's been successfully completed, the Stewards are more likely to offer another. In areas needing extensive repairs, competition for contracts has been known to turn violent as workers sabotage the competition.

The Home Office's disarray is dragging the Stewards down with it. Maintenance reports and repair requisition forms that should be forwarded to the Stewards sit in dusty inboxes deep in the bowels of administration. By the time the Stewards are notified of necessary repairs, they've become far more extensive and costly. As the Great Houses skim more tax revenue for themselves, the Stewards' budget shrinks, forcing them to rely on cheaper labor. The Stewards focus on repairs necessary to the Realm Defense Grid, often ignoring other issues entirely.

The current head is Rose Adal, an elderly mortal patrician who took the job after her predecessor and former superior was poisoned at a banquet. Long years of service with the Stewards have made her one of the Realm's most knowledgeable savants of geomancy, and the Great Houses ply her with sizable bribes. The Realm Defense Grid could well determine the war for the

EVEN MORE OF THE THOUSAND SCALES

The Diligent Monitors of the Diffusion of Divine Essence: This ministry tracks the ancestry of all Dynasts, patricians, and outcastes in the Realm, including births, marriages, and deaths, and is responsible for licensing mons for Dynastic and patrician families. It's headquartered in the Imperial City, but offices across the Blessed Isle maintain regional archives, complicating efforts to alter or forge records. Any Realm citizen may request copies of their official documents or a family tree for a significant administrative fee. Monitors are sometimes called upon to mediate with Dynasts looking to arrange marriages, or patricians seeking fosterage or adoption of Exalted children into a Great House. While House Nellens has long sought to control the ministry, it's still overseen by the gossipmongering Yanaz Ujara, who's being blackmailed by House Sesus to shut out Nellens scions.

The Fastidious Keepers of the Imperial Peace: This ministry regulates travel throughout the Realm, issuing travel permits (p. XX) and inspecting ships for contraband. While a career in the Fastidious Keepers offers little political power, the nature of its duties makes it lucrative for those interested in accepting bribes. The ministry's head is the doleful Kunon Fen, who secretly keeps a heretical shrine to Asquin-Zal, the God of Territorial Borders, in her office.

The Infallible Conveyors of Official Messages and Heartfelt Expressions: Also called the Imperial Post, this ministry oversees communications in the Realm (p. XX). Because this ministry is indispensable for the Realm's functioning, it's suffered little from budget cuts throughout the Thousand Scales. The current Master of the Imperial Post is Nellens Junaj, a Dragon-Blood who worked his way up through the ranks to his current position. Unfortunately for House Nellens, Junaj is unfailingly loyal to his ministry and has thus far refused to abuse his position.

The Ministry of Prehistoric Recollection and Antiquities: This shabby, understaffed department oversees the collection of potentially volatile relics and caches them away in heavily secured museums open only to the Scarlet Dynasty — though some officials profit from tipping off Ragara and Ledaal contacts about such finds. The ministry also plays a vital role in censorship, suppressing the dissemination of information to the peasantry that would undermine the Realm's official history. Its obsessively studious head, Mnemon Korame, hasn't been seen in months; her subordinates assume she's holed up in a ministry museum researching one of her many projects.

throne, and no one's certain just how much Adal knows about its inner mysteries.

The Sagacious and Scrupulous Registrars of Sorcerous Puissance

This ministry maintains the White Registry, a record of every sorcerer in the Realm. Imperial decree prohibits sorcerers from holding leadership positions within the ministry, although it employs several as advisors regarding the capabilities of the sorcerers it tracks. The Registrars have close ties to the Heptagram and collect information about its current and former students.

While the Registry isn't public, it's not difficult for any Great House with even modest espionage resources to learn its contents, so when it comes to conflict with rival houses, any sorcerer on the White Registry is considered a known quantity. Meanwhile, unregistered sorcerers are wild cards that rival houses can rarely prepare countermeasures for, making them extremely valuable to their houses, and virtually guaranteeing that their services will be called upon. Sorcerers who wish to avoid becoming entangled in house politics make sure to register so that they can't be used for espionage work.

Each registered sorcerer owes a single formal Obligation that the Empress or the Deliberative may call in at any time. This requires the sorcerer to provide a required service with no compensation and under strict secrecy. In the past, the Empress tailored Obligations to each sorcerer — to encourage some to reach heights they might not normally attain, or to force overly arrogant or ambitious sorcerers to humble themselves before her. She preferred to leave Obligations uncollected for decades, waiting until a sorcerer's power matured before calling upon his services. In her absence, the Deliberative has begun exercising its authority to cash them in.

The current Warden of the White Registry, Rein Melana, is a noted socialite, granted an exotic air by her

SORCEROUS SOCIETIES

Dragon-Blooded sorcerers, stigmatized by Dynastic society, commonly gather into small societies to network, make friendships, and throw parties they can attend without feeling unwanted. These may be as small as one Hearth or as large as thirty members. Some go to great lengths to conceal their membership, communicating only through intermediaries and Infallible Messengers. Others proclaim membership by displaying intricately inked mystic tattoos, decorative sashes, or the society's preferred colors.

The Sorcerers of the Scarlet Throne: This society is open to any registered sorcerer residing in Scarlet Prefecture, and thus is full of connivers with political leanings who seek to live as close to the Realm's governance as possible. They made grand shows of serving the Empress at her request, a folly she always enjoyed. She spoke of the importance of the tasks she entrusted to them and their vital importance to the Realm, while assigning them unimportant duties and makework. Since her disappearance, the society has descended into pointless squabbling, although a small group has approached the prefect of Scarlet Prefecture and the Imperial City's governor, quietly offering support should civil war break out.

The Cabal of Righteous Midwives: Summoning neomah to create children is a disreputable practice within the Realm, with the exception of the Precedent of Rawar (**Dragon-Blooded**, p. 98). This isn't purely irrational prejudice — a novice summoner who ill understands the nature of the demon she summons may issue instructions it cannot properly comprehend or adequately fulfill, and even the makers of flesh can suffer the occasional mishap. However, for sterile Dynasts or those in same-sex marriages, the demons' service is among the only ways to have children of their own bloodline. The Cabal of Righteous Midwives offers such Dynasts their distinctive services. Specialists in binding neomah, they study the demons' alien psychologies to avoid common pitfalls and consult Immaculate monks for scriptural guidance. The price for their services is steep, even for a Dynast, yet they rarely want for paying clients.

The Watchers: The Empress commissioned the Watchers to police their brethren for reckless demon summoning, infernalism, or spiritual corruption. While Imperial law and Immaculate orthodoxy permits Dragon-Blooded to summon demons, the Empress had no tolerance for sorcerers whose folly led to demons wreaking havoc, nor for traitors who'd serve the demon princes. The Watchers gathered evidence on suspect sorcerers and turned it over to the Empress to dispense punishment. Now, no one knows who the Watchers are or what they're doing. They've become bogeymen for Dynastic sorcerers, who whisper that mysterious deaths among their ranks are a sign that the Watchers have taken punishment into their own hands.

proximity to sorcery. Since the Empress' disappearance, she spends much of her time being fêted and plied with gifts — both by senators seeking information on the capabilities of sorcerers with outstanding Obligations, and by those same sorcerers wishing her to downplay their capabilities.

The Righteous and Accountable Ministry of Weights and Measures

The Ministry of Weights and Measures is responsible for standardized measures of weight and distance in commerce and public works. Its local offices perform spot inspections on merchants' scales and weights to prevent chicanery, survey properties for purposes of taxation and land disputes, ensure that uniform measures are used in construction, and so forth.

The ministry oversees measurement in several other ministries. Most notably, it validates territorial boundaries for purposes of taxation and legal jurisdiction, ensures that the Treasury mints coins of the proper weight, tests the purity of silver taxed from the satrapies by the Bursars of Barbarian Tribute, and verifies the quality of the paper on which the Imperial Purse prints paper notes.

Corruption has been a perennial problem within this ministry. Its activities are highly decentralized, and enabling fraud can be profitable for officials at every level. Magistrates and their archons once regularly investigated local offices, but they currently have bigger problems.

The Keeper of Perfected Measures is White Sage, a patrician-born Exalt fostered with House Peleps. Her own efforts to stamp out corruption led to an assassination attempt involving paralytic nerve toxin, which left her with a nervous tic and growing paranoia. In the past year, she's dismissed several experienced officials, insisting that they were in league with the Great Houses.

It's difficult to say whether this is delusion on her part or if the houses really are growing bolder in their efforts to defraud the Realm.

The Splendid and Just Arbiters of Purpose

The Splendid and Just Arbiters of Purpose are tasked with finding, gathering (or, in the case of slaves, purchasing), and looking after lost eggs from the moment they draw their Second Breath until they find their place in the Realm. The dragon's share of their work concerns outcastes from the Realm's peasant, slave, and dispossessed populations, who are declared wards of the Realm and brought to study at the Arbiters' headquarters, the Obsidian Mirror. (Exalted patricians technically fall within the ministry's ambit, but their education is typically handled by agreements between patrician families and Great Houses.)

These outcastes receive basic education they lack due to their upbringing, such as etiquette and customs. However, this education is mostly about *un*learning what they were taught about their place in the world. These are no longer commoners, but Princes of the Earth. Arbiters meet with outcastes individually to monitor their progress and prepare them to make their choice between the coin and the razor (**Dragon-Blooded**, p. 101).

The current Master of Orphans is Agama Orir, a Wood Aspect outcaste who took the coin and returned to the Mirror after his military career. He has a mortal wife and two children, but is involved in a longstanding love affair with Tepet Kyvul, his former commanding officer, and has steered several outcastes toward the tattered Tepet legions. Wary of this sentimentality, rival houses want him replaced. Some seek to eliminate the Arbiters completely, placing control of the lost eggs into the Great Houses' hands. So far, such ambitions have been checked by House Mnemon, which has little interest in adopting thin-blooded outcastes and would rather keep lost eggs out of rival houses' hands.

The All-Seeing Eye

Everyone's heard of the All-Seeing Eye. Dynasts watch warily over their shoulder for its agents, while adventure novels using the Eye as a colorful backdrop are popular amongst impressionable youngsters. The Eye's agents and handlers encourage this awareness and low-level paranoia. They're an open secret by design, which gave the Empress the ability to control what information about the organization entered the public consciousness.

The All-Seeing Eye is nearly as old as the Realm. Even after the Empress assumed control over the Imperial Manse, others challenged her authority. As she consolidated power, she sought eyes and ears to observe where she could not. It was insufficient for her enemies to fear the possibility of her retribution; they needed to understand that reprisal was inevitable should they challenge her supremacy. The Eye and its reputation were key to maintaining this status quo. Over the years, the Eye — part intelligence network, part secret police — grew into an empire-spanning shadow. Today, its reach extends not only across the Blessed Isle and its satrapies, but throughout the civilized world.

Organization

Officially, the All-Seeing Eye doesn't exist, being little more than a fantastic figment of public imagination to keep the Empress' enemies perpetually wondering about their own security. In truth, its charter dates back to the Realm's earliest years, and for seven centuries its leadership reported directly to the Empress.

The Eye's organizational structure has always been deliberately loose and informal. No official headquarters building houses the Empress' spies; no bureaucracy directs its operations. Rarely could any given agent easily identify others in the Empress' personal employ.

Agents of the All-Seeing Eye are responsible for "the continued prosperity of the Realm and its Princes of the Earth," a mission sufficiently broad that it's interpreted in numerous ways. The Eye follows the letter of the law if it must, and the spirit so long as that doesn't interfere with its greater directive. The Empress's secret police are rarely the sort of people the public would expect to be in her employ. An agent of the Eye could be a village elder, trusted military officer, Immaculate monk, favored concubine, or flower girl who always has a particular patrician's favorite perennial.

THE EYE GUIDES THE HUNT

The All-Seeing Eye's mission includes coordinating logistics for Wyld Hunts, deploying its skills and connections to eradicate Anathema. It employs a small but widespread network of mortal astrologers — and other informants with more mundane skills — throughout the Threshold, whose sole objective is to watch for signs of Anathema activity. Since the Empress's disappearance, reconnaissance missions and surgical strikes have become more common than pitched battles, as the Great Houses withdraw support from the Hunt to prepare for other conflicts.

Structure of the Eye

The All-Seeing Eye operates in small cells, each led by a handler. Handlers — a cross between supervisors and middlemen — are almost invariably mortal sorcerers or Dragon-Blooded. It's a handler's responsibility to distribute tasks among her agents, make command decisions in the field, evaluate information her agents gather, and report relevant data back to her own supervisor, one of the Eye's intelligencers. Due to the sensitive nature of their work, it's rare that a handler oversees more than half a dozen agents.

Intelligencers once reported directly to the Empress through ciphered messages, trusted couriers, sorcery, and more esoteric channels. Although each intelligencer directs several handlers, she works independently of the others, so that a compromised intelligencer only jeopardizes her own handlers' cells.

Most agents have regular lives completely separate from fieldwork. They aren't merely encouraged but expected to live out those identities normally, as though they'd never heard of the All-Seeing Eye. While some agents make a career of spycraft, many go years at a time without ever hearing from their handlers — but are expected to report for duty when required.

A handful of agents are Dragon-Blooded career field operatives tasked with eliminating threats to the Realm too subtle or time-sensitive for a large-scale response, or where such a response might cause widespread public panic. They're highly specialized in their chosen talents, martially proficient, well-funded, and well-outfitted. Each agent is entirely capable of working alone; it's often a requirement of their missions.

Each agent maintains a personal network of assets. Like agents, assets can be anyone at all, but they aren't officially part of the All-Seeing Eye. They see no telltale mark left on a table for their benefit; they're given



no secret handshake or code, and often never realize the import of the information they pass along. A wise agent cultivates her web of assets; they're her lifeblood, and they sometimes have access to information she doesn't. Household servants, for example, see a great deal because their presence is so often invisible to their betters. When an agent locates a person in a position to discover things she might want to know, and who could be potentially bribed, blackmailed, or appealed to in some fashion, she regards him as a potential asset.

The Empress maintained an Eye presence in the River Province, conducting misinformation campaigns and acts of espionage against Lookshy. The General Staff isn't without resources of its own; its rangers are the Eye's foremost rivals in the Scavenger Lands. Over the years, this centuries-old grudge has been fought in the shadows of Nexus and Great Forks, among Sijan's tombs, and throughout the petty city-states of the Hundred Kingdoms.

Recruitment

The Empress always handpicked the All-Seeing Eye's intelligencers, who promoted handlers from the ranks of their cells' agents. In her absence, some intelligencers have begun training handlers to take on the intelligencer role, while other handlers — most notably those whose intelligencers have suffered misadventure — assume the post of their own initiative.

Each cell recruits its own agents. The traditional process is simple: Once a handler decides that someone is sufficiently qualified and loyal to the Realm to bring into her cell, she leaves him a token in the form of the agency's symbol — a single lidless eye. The recipient is then watched carefully. If he keeps quiet about the token, he's judged sufficiently taciturn to be trusted with the Eye's secrets, and is inducted into the cell. If he fails to keep his cool and informs others of his discovery, she has him killed.

As a result, the Eye's symbol has been misinterpreted in the public consciousness as a token of assassination. The Eye does nothing to discourage this, and indeed occasionally leaves the sign when eliminating a target to ensure that everyone knows that the victim had fallen foul of the Eye. Unaffiliated murderers and assassins who misuse the sign to transfer blame for their actions to the Eye suffer swift, fatal retribution.

The Eye in Tumult

Five years after the Empress's disappearance, the All-Seeing Eye fares better than the severely embattled magistrates, though it too is now in a state of disarray. The Empress was the Eye's true spymaster; without her, the intelligencers that supervise the Eye's assets are uncertain to whom they should report and what they should be reporting, while some handlers and field agents consider directing their skills toward other ends.

One of the Eye's strengths is the limited independence granted by its very nature. Individual cells can recruit new operatives when the need arises — something the magistrates cannot do — although this wasn't nearly as common five years ago as it is in the present day. Due to the cell's self-contained structure, agents who enter the fold in this fashion are rarely able to do significant damage to the Eye as a whole should the worst happen — usually, the direst consequence possible is that the informant's cell is compromised by his actions. It's more difficult in the current day to thoroughly investigate a given agent's background, especially when they're recruited in the field, and the risk of recruiting a double agent is real. However, many cells take the risk, confident they can deal with traitors in due time should the need arise.

Without the ever-present specter of the Empress and the funds she once supplied, the Eye lacks much of the impetus to continue its duties. This has disrupted the flow of information, as many cells have gone dark or outright rogue. Currently, the majority of the Eye's intelligencers and handlers have turned to Bal Keraz, head of the Imperial Treasury and a known loyalist of the Empress, for funding and direction. But other cells have gone their own way.

Some handlers and agents use their accumulated secrets and power to set themselves up as princes of their own petty holdings, be it a small city-state or an underworld network. Others, seeing the Realm in steadily increasing disarray as civil war approaches, cut their losses and associate themselves with powerful, wealthy patrons. Still other agents, discovering the identities of their fellows, reach out to offer collaboration — or at least a convenient alliance. The operation of an intelligence service of any kind, let alone one as extensive as the Eye, is quite costly, but while Keraz's support is a viable solution, that support comes with conditions that some agents are unwilling to accept.

The Deliberative

The Deliberative is the Realm's legislative body, created by Imperial decree in RY 103. Faced with growing criticism after the failure of her final full-scale invasion of the Scavenger Lands, the Empress felt the need to appease malcontents at home and abroad, if only because boiling them all in hot oil would have been impractical. Drawing on the traditions of the First Age, she created a pair of grand forums: one for the Dynasty, another for

BEHIND THE EYE

Few are aware that several of the Eye's handlers belong to the disgraced House Iselsi. These spies funnel information to their house elders, and without the Empress to leash them, they aim to suborn the rest of the Eye to the family's service.

Fewer still have any inkling of the role the Bronze Faction of the Sidereal Exalted has played in the Eye since its inception. A few Sidereals in deep cover serve as intelligencers, deploying the Eye for their own mysterious ends.

patricians and allied dignitaries. Together, they used ritualized debate to discern solutions for the problems plaguing the Realm and its Empress.

The Deliberative wasn't intended to have any meaningful role in crafting the Realm's policy — the Empress' word was law, and she had no intention of surrendering absolute authority. Instead, she crafted the Deliberative to stem unrest and dissension amid the Realm's nobility, permitting them to propose laws for her consideration. She appointed her loudest, most venomous critics to the Deliberative, letting them debate policy and spout oratory to their hearts' content, turning their vitriol against each other rather than toward her. A handful of her own supporters seeded amongst them spoke up to derail efforts towards consensus or compromise, ensuring that laws proposed to her would have enough detractors that she could safely ignore them without political consequences. The power wielded by the Deliberative was largely an illusion, but one that the Empress handled with every sign of respect. What other tool would allow her to corral renegades with their proud consent?

Now the Empress is gone, and Regent Fokuf entertains the Deliberative's proposals lest he make an enemy of any of the Great Houses. In the chaos of the Time of Tumult, the Deliberative may be the single greatest source of political power within the Realm.

The Deliberative consists of two chambers, the Greater and the Lesser. Senators of the Greater Chamber and delegates of the Lesser Chamber meet in the Palace of the Deliberative Senate of Exceedingly Judicious Nobles, a monumental structure that once stood outside the Imperial City, but has since been absorbed by the growing metropolis. Before the palace spread streets and plazas full of businesses catering to the needs of Deliberative members and their numerous staff. Behind it, ringed by high brick walls, unfold the famously serene Gardens of Peace and Law. They're generously strewn with pathways, little bridges, gazebos, and other features offering Deliberative members a quiet, private place for contemplation and plotting.

The Palace's eastern wing houses the Deliberative's legions of servants and staff, the barracks of the Guardians of the Deliberative, storehouses, kitchens, and the like. The western wing holds the grand entry hall, and also contains residential quarters and various parlors, libraries, galleries, shrines, and recreational areas where Deliberative members can relax or debate. The southern wing houses the Great Hall of Most Inspired and Noble Lawmaking, where the Greater Chamber performs its labors. The northern wing houses the Hall of Contemplative and Prudent Debate, where the Lesser Chamber is seated.

In addition to proposing laws for the Empress' consideration, the Deliberative has numerous other privileges and duties — appointing prefects, satrapial garrison commanders, Imperial judges, chief ministers, members of the Imperial Force, and other high positions; proclaiming state holidays; sponsoring graduates of Pasiap's Stair as legionary officers; and so forth. These powers were contingent on the Empress' veto. Some things are beyond the Deliberative's power — by law, they cannot renegotiate satrapial leases, elevate new Great Houses or strike existing houses from the Imperial ledgers, or exercise other vital powers the Empress reserved for herself. Even with a compliant Regent, the Deliberative has no authority over such matters.

The Deliberative notionally sits in session year-round, but few members wish to commit their entire lives to politicking. By gentlewoman's agreement, the legislative season lasts from the start of Ascending Air to the end of Descending Wood. The Empress called sessions out of season to respond to crises or for political expediency, and any Deliberative member who didn't hasten to her call risked expensive or humiliating punishments. It's inauspicious to hold session during Calibration. The Deliberative's size has varied over its centuries-long history; at present, there are roughly 150 senators of the Greater Chamber and 450 delegates of the Lesser Chamber.

During sessions, some Deliberative members reside in the Palace of the Deliberative itself. Others reside elsewhere in the Imperial City, either with family — every Great House has at least one family in permanent residence — or in private apartments, to avoid being spied on or to conceal scandalous proclivities.

THE GUARDIANS OF THE DELIBERATIVE

One thousand elite guards keep the peace in the Palace of the Deliberative. Ostensibly on hand to defend against assassins and insurrectionists, their primary function is to protect rowdy Deliberative members from one another and enforce decrees of the Greater Chamber's Guardian of Enlightened Discourse and the Lesser Chamber's Protector of the Debate. Outfitted in brass-chased lamellar and purple half-capes, they bear ceremonial naginatas and more practical short swords. Their insignia is a dragon with a scroll clutched in its jaws.

The Greater Chamber

The beating heart of Imperial politics, the Greater Chamber of the Deliberative is where the Realm's foremost orators and dignitaries meet to pontificate and debate, to render wise counsel unto the Scarlet Throne, and to determine Creation's fate — the ideal to which this august body aspires, but rarely attains. Here, Creation's greatest schemers clash with hated cousins in bitter warfare, only somewhat tempered by feigned civility.

The Empress handpicked senators from the Great Houses; they're almost always Dragon-Blooded. Appointment to the senate is an honor that cannot be refused. Many of the Dynasty's most troublesome members found themselves "rewarded" with senatorial appointments, drawn into the Imperial City under the Empress' eye. Since her disappearance, appointments to the Greater Chamber are theoretically made by the Regent, although in practice he's a rubber stamp on recommendations voted on by the Greater Chamber. The post can only be resigned upon summary dismissal by the Empress, exile, or death.

The Master of the Deliberative, chief officer of the Greater Chamber, oversees debate and has final say in procedural matters. Almost always a woman, she's elected for a yearly term by a two-thirds vote of the Greater Chamber. The senators likewise elect an Incorruptible Secretary to tally all votes taken, and a Guardian of the Enlightened Discourse to command the Guardians of the Deliberative protecting the Greater Chamber. The holders of any of these positions may be dismissed from office by a no-confidence vote, which can be called at any time. The current Master of the Deliberative — Ragara Julinei, a vastly corrupt politician — fears the prospect of a no-confidence vote more with each passing day.

The Greater Chamber is rife with factions and cliques of senators. A house's senators often vote together, but with no house holding more than a small fraction of the Chamber's seats, the formation (and frequent turnover) of broader coalitions is inevitable. Currently, the most prominent factions are the staunchly conservative Old Dragons, the zealous Yellow Banner reformists, and Ragara Julinei's loyalists, derisively nicknamed the Jade Eaters.

As candidates for the throne have stepped forward, new factions have arisen to support them, while existing ones face unprecedented shakeups in the face of divided loyalties. The Old Dragons are torn between maintaining the status quo in anticipation of the Empress's return and throwing their support behind Mnemon; the Yellow Banners argue incessantly over whom to back, though V'neef seems most likely; the Jade Eaters are more concerned with preventing Julinei's ouster. Some senators have broken from factional agendas, like the coalition of Old Dragons and Jade Eaters gathering support for dark horse Sesus Raenyah.

Proposed legislation enters the Greater Chamber as a Declaration of Harmonious Intent, composed by the sponsoring senator and a pair of seconds. Declarations must be hand delivered by their sponsors to the Master of the Deliberative at the beginning of the day's session. Being first in line is a great honor; latecomers face jeers and abuse questioning the importance of legislation whose sponsors couldn't bother to present it in a timely fashion. The session cannot commence until every Declaration is received, and may stretch on into the night. Flooding the Master of the Deliberative with frivolous Declarations to stall the opening of debate while winning over supporters isn't unusual.

The Master of the Deliberative reads each Declaration to the Greater Chamber in the order in which it was received. She cannot officially refuse to present a Declaration, but may find faults — substantive, procedural, or entirely pretextual — rendering one "unsuitable" for presentation, accomplishing the same end. After reading a Declaration, she calls a formal vote to determine whether the Chamber will debate it. If a simple majority agrees, the Declaration is burned in a ceremonial brazier, and the Incorruptible Secretary adds it to the list of motions to be debated. If not, it's returned to the sponsor as a badge of shame.

After this voting concludes, debate formally opens, with the Master of the Deliberative choosing the order in which legislation is discussed and voted on. A Declaration's sponsor introduces it. Once she concludes her speech, the rest of the Greater Chamber may join in, with the speaking order chosen by the Master. No time

limits are imposed, and filibustering sessions can last for days. If debate stalls, the motion can be tabled until an agreed-upon date later in the legislative session. Otherwise, once debate concludes, the senators vote on the motion. If it passes by a simple majority, it descends to the Lower Chamber, to dare their disapproval.

A senator can freely skip a day's session with little consequence, but while month-long absences aren't unheard of, the Empress frowned upon such dereliction, and kept tabs on any senator who took too much leave. Even after her disappearance, lengthy absence from the Greater Chamber subjects the delinquent senator to steep political and social costs.

The Lesser Chamber

Delegates to the Lesser Chamber of the Deliberative are selected by the Greater Chamber from patrician families, wealthy peasant merchants, and satrapial nobility. Dragon-Blooded patricians, outcastes, and cadet branch members are influential but rare. The ideal delegate, in the Greater Chamber's eyes, is pliable, wealthy, and useful to her betters; much horse-trading occurs between senators when a vacancy opens in the Lesser Chamber, each seeking to reward favorites with positions of power, or keep potential enemies under her watch. While the Greater Chamber elects delegates, only the Empress has the power to dismiss them.

Delegates elect a Master of the Lesser Chamber to oversee debate, a Scrupulous Monitor of the Will of the People to tally votes, and a Protector of the Debate to oversee the Guardians of the Deliberative protecting the Lesser Chamber. The current Master of the Lesser Chamber is Tide Lojan, daughter of a distinguished patrician family that's enjoyed House Peleps' patronage for decades. Her mother, the indefatigable negotiator Tide Miren, once held the same post; Lojan trades aggressively on her mother's accumulated favors — and her knowledge of where the bodies are buried.

The Lesser Chamber can't introduce motions, voting only on legislation passed down from the Greater Chamber. The Master of the Lesser Chamber solemnly reads each motion, then opens debate. In theory, the Master controls the order of speakers; in practice, debate in the Lesser Chamber rapidly devolves into a shouting match. Any delegate may call for a vote on the motion at any point, although the Master and two-thirds of the delegates must approve the request. Once a vote is called, the motion passes and is sent on to the Empress — now the Regent — for consideration unless two-thirds of the Lesser Chamber votes against it. If the motion is defeated, it's returned to the Greater Chamber in the form of a scroll bound with twined black and red ribbons.

Given the Greater Chamber's control of appointments and the difficulty of voting down a motion, the Lesser Chamber might be expected to serve as a rubber stamp on the Greater Chamber. But the Lesser Chamber's delegates have little love for the Greater Chamber — and though the Greater Chamber fills their ranks, it has no power to dismiss them. Debates over legislation can be lengthy and contentious even if the proposed law isn't particularly controversial, as delegates seize the opportunity to demonstrate skill at oratory and statesmanship. Matters of overwhelming importance to the Realm might pass unobstructed, and bribes from senators or interested houses can grease the wheels, but beyond that, the Lesser Chamber doesn't shrink from voting down the Greater Chamber's proposals.

Passage into Law

Once the Lesser Chamber approves a motion, it traditionally requires the Empress' approval to become law. She wielded her power of veto freely and fearlessly. Only a nigh-unanimous vote of the entire Deliberative could overturn her veto — one dissenting vote was allowed in each Chamber.

Regent Fokuf notionally holds the same power, but while he may be a man and a fool, even he is well aware of how tenuous his position is, and how easy it would be for any of the Great Houses to have him assassinated were he to frustrate legislation aligned with their interests. Besides, lawmaking holds no interest for him — it's easier to let the Deliberative attend to that, and enjoy his sinecure.

DELIBERATIVE ATTIRE

Senators wear extravagant white silk robes, trimmed with scarlet signifying their devotion to the Empress; many also wear colored sashes to indicate their factional affiliation. Delegates wear gray and scarlet robes. Each of the Deliberative's officers wears a ceremonial cape, its pattern and colors unique to her position. Failure to wear one's official garb bars Deliberative members from attendance; wearing shabby robes is a grave insult to both Deliberative and Empress. The expense of maintaining one's wardrobe is yet another distraction the Empress imposed on potential enemies.



Money and the Realm

The Empress was the wealthiest person in Creation. The Imperial Treasury, which drew in half the world's riches, was hers to spend as she saw fit. She fueled markets by demanding taxes and tribute in jade and scrip, ensuring that selling goods and services to her soldiers and civil servants was more profitable than other ventures. Her tools for manipulating those markets included altering pay scales among those in her service, adjusting tax rates, tweaking Great House stipends to induce houses to raise or lower prefectural taxes, grain doles to alleviate famine, and positioning legions or fleets to expand local economies. While the Realm always demanded jade, the Empress sometimes stipulated a prefecture or satrapy also provide specific other goods — silver, timber, cloth, tin, spices — to manipulate that province's resources or fill a need on the Blessed Isle.



The Empress was also the Realm's premier creditor. The Bank of the Scarlet Throne lent money to — or invested in, or even outright subsidized — governments and commercial enterprises to stimulate manufacture and trade, and to bend local economies to her purposes. With such funding, an iron foundry in chilly Astragal fends off a new Guild-backed operation undercutting its prices. A wholesaler in the Lap markets V'neef wines, strengthening the nascent house's finances. A pious banking family in Gentian imposes higher interest

THE EMPRESS' FUNERAL

One proposal that keeps coming before the Deliberative concerns a funeral for the Empress. This is a complex matter. If she still lives, those who approved her funeral will surely earn her disfavor. If she's dead, her unpropitiated spirit might do great harm, and failing to acknowledge her passing disrespects longstanding Dynastic tradition.

More practically, formal recognition of her death further undercuts the status quo, whether to strengthen the Deliberative's role or to open the way for claimants to the throne. And the Empress' extravagant funeral, planned for centuries but never really expected to occur, will cost enough to bankrupt nations — enough to cripple even the Thousand Scales' budget.

REGENT TEPET FOKUF

The Council of the Empty Throne appointed the mortal Tepet Fokuf as Regent of the Scarlet Throne, a compromise choice acceptable to every Great House except his own. While his kin pride themselves on honor and military acumen, Fokuf is an embarrassment of a man, lacking ambition and talent. He wasn't always so, but it's said that his failure to Exalt broke his will and pride.

Neither Fokuf nor anyone else in the Realm indulges the idea that he's anything but a figurehead, holding a post that exists solely to leverage authority traditionally vested in the Empress alone. He speaks with senators and prominent Dynasts a few minutes each day, and issues whatever decrees they support. He spends most of his time in his bedchamber in the Imperial Palace, masturbating to passages of the Immaculate Texts that concern lovemaking and eroticism. While the Mouth of Peace has endorsed the act as a sincere, if peculiar, show of devotion, she privately despises the Regent — a mere mortal given authority over the enlightened Dragon-Blooded, in violation of the Perfected Hierarchy — and longs for the day he dies. The peasantry express their contempt more openly, muzzled only by the laws against lèse-majesté; should widespread peasant revolts arise, deposing the Regent will doubtlessly be a central rallying cry.

Only once has Fokuf dared sit on the Scarlet Throne. Whether the intertwined jade dragons that form the throne actually came to life and rejected him, or whether the pressures of rule simply proved too much for him, none can say for sure.

CREDIT AND COIN

Commerce involves less hard currency than one might think. Credit — based on respectability and trust between equals — is the basis of exchange within the Dynasty's tight-knit social networks, patrician houses, urban mercantile classes, and peasant villages. Where trust ends, coin appears. It's used to pay taxes and rents, and to deal with traveling merchants, foreigners, and other persons of no account. Even when dealing with foreigners, the wealthy prefer letters of credit, promissory notes, and other financial instruments to coffers bulging with inconveniently heavy and conspicuous coin or scrip.

rates on adherents of the Intou heresy, encouraging River Province businesswomen toward Immaculate orthodoxy.

For centuries, Realm military policies created a fertile environment for commerce. Scouring piracy from the Inland Sea to protect tribute convoys and Realm merchants made travel safe enough for Threshold vessels to travel without escort, lowering barriers to entry on maritime trade. Extirpating banditry in prosperous, populous satrapies likewise encouraged overland trade, as did laying roads down for the legions and tribute-laden baggage trains.

Imperial fiscal policy wasn't always gentle. Loan covenants proscribed trading with the Guild or competing with Realm industries, or demanded borrowers contract with Realm merchants or purchase Imperial bonds. By raising interest rates to unsustainable levels, then offering to refinance, the Empress extracted political and economic concessions. And sometimes she deliberately crippled satrapies with impossible debt by demanding damages from conquered or rebellious tributaries to pay military expenses, or compelling rulers to accept loans at exorbitant rates they couldn't repay. The results — crumbling public works, unsustainable taxation, debasement of currency, banditry, famine, civil disorder, openness to invasion — demonstrated that the Realm didn't need to dispatch legions to destroy its enemies.

Eliminating debt was also useful. Canceling debts on the wealthy freed them to make investments or indulge in luxuries, rather than hoarding against the day their debts were called in. Loan amnesties among peasants and satrapial commoners ended uprisings at a stroke. House Ragara always hated this power, and fears its use in another's hands.

Though the Empress' methods could be cruel or destructive, and impoverished the Threshold to enrich the Blessed Isle, commerce suffers throughout Creation without her hand on the tiller. With the Imperial Treasury shying away from risky loans, ambitious or desperate merchants turn to Ragara or Guild moneylenders demanding outrageous interest. And with Peleps and V'neef warring for dominance in the West, pirates raise a thousand sails: Northern merchants go a-reaving along the White Sea coast to supplement their business income, Azurite and River Province warships capture merchant vessels, and impoverished fisherfolk and indebted merchant captains alike form pirate enclaves amid islets off the Blessed Isle's shores.

The Salt Rate

Salt is precious to the Realm. It's a dietary necessity, a staple preservative, and bars passage to hungry ghosts. But the Blessed Isle's salt gods — hundreds of whom dwell along coasts and marshes, and in salt mines — are truculent, demanding sizable sacrifices from any who'd gather significant quantities of salt. Centuries ago, the Empress compelled the salt gods to accept a single rate of sacrifice: the salt rate, then equivalent to two percent of the salt's value.

The Empress pinned the loan rates of all banks in the Realm to the salt rate by decree. She often changed the rate, either as a result of negotiations with salt gods or to manage the economy. It was four percent when she disappeared. Over the last five years, about half of the salt gods have diverged from the salt rate. Some have increased their demands, and regional banks and ministerial branches have felt it best to follow suit. In other instances where banks have raised rates, greedy salt gods have eagerly followed. In both cases, it's peasants and debtors who suffer.

Finance in the Time of Tumult

With the Empress gone, more and more satrapies stop paying tribute. As the Realm swallows up less of the Threshold's treasure, the economies of the richest lands beyond the Inland Sea blossom as they haven't in centuries. Some enrich themselves by exploiting native resources; others through trade; and some by conquering neighbors no longer under Imperial protection, battening off others' resources as the Realm has for centuries.

INTEREST AND THE IMMACULATE ORDER

The Immaculate Order doesn't object to interest-bearing loans in and of themselves, but predatory loans are another matter. The Order opposes lending that crosses class boundaries. Poor peasants, unable to understand the intricacies of patrician and Dynastic financial instruments, cannot help but be taken advantage of. Like the Inconsiderate Horseman, the creditor acts without care for the harm she causes the debtor.

Immaculate disapproval goes both ways, however. A debtor knowingly accepting a loan beyond her current means to repay indicates that, like the Ostentatious Peasant, she expects her fortunes to change for the better. Yet all members of the Perfected Hierarchy should accept the lot offered them by the Dragons. In such circumstances, the victim receives as much blame as the perpetrator.

Still, none are certain the Realm's power won't rise again under a new Empress, or that civil war won't cut a fiery swath through the Threshold. All remain wary of Dynastic military might; with no Empress in control, who knows when that power might be turned against them?

Creditors are calling in debts now, before debtors die, go bankrupt, or obtain leverage to refuse payment. While patrician families accept quasi-feudal obligations to protect them from their creditors, peasants find themselves dispossessed, becoming laborers, bandits, pirates, or rebels.

With civility between the Great Houses breaking down, faith in the stability of the Empress' Private Purse dwindling, and growing fears that war will invalidate the Realm's credit systems, many officials, merchants, and crime bosses demand taxes and prices be paid exclusively in jade and silver specie. To meet the need, satrapies are sucked dry of resources, while countless slaves are forced into mines to die in the dark. Realm currency disappears from less-valuable satrapies as Imperial troops are withdrawn. The houses venture farther afield for precious metals, most notably Peleps and V'neef campaigning in the West.

The chaos of economic unrest is a godsend for ambitious Dragon-Blooded and Anathema alike. A Dynast buys up businesses and merchandise on the cheap in an endangered city-state, then recoups their value by rescuing the city. Starting with a single vessel, a pirate-hunter captures enough ships to form an armada. A caravan master's sword arm, stealth, or silver tongue safely brings priceless cargoes across trade routes too ravaged by war or banditry for lesser merchants to pass unscathed.

Clouds hung low on the mountains' slopes, obscuring the peaks. Nellens Tregane had been watching them since the sun rose, when they'd turned the pale pink of a lover's fleeting blush. The sun climbed higher, and they were nothing but gray again. At least now they matched her mood.

Tregane and her unit had been marching along this steeply winding path, following Juche Prefecture's border since well before dawn. They'd searched for three days to no avail, though her peasant scouts swore the bandits who'd been troubling the area were close by. They showed her scraps of fabric snagged on thorns, the damp remains of snuffed-out campfires, and wood shavings that suggested her quarry were carving new spears.

To kill more of us, she thought, and glanced back at the scale of Nellens soldiers from the Juche garrison, all following her, waiting for her next command. She managed not to grimace. People thought of Juche as safe, but that was in the river valleys, where crops grew and cities and towns thrived. Out here, they were nearly in the wild. She couldn't help but wonder whether her scouts were reliable. They were hunters and trappers with little need for her coin or her promises to inform the prefect of their helpfulness.

If only she knew what the Ledaal troops in Arjuf and Turu had found! Rarely did she permit herself to wish she'd Exalted like her sister, but in this moment, she would have given much to attach a message to an arrow and shoot it over the mountains to reach the Ledaal unit. Or to whisper a word into the wind and have it reach the Ledaal commander's ears.

Then the trees rustled, and formerly solid-looking patches of ground shuddered and rose, revealing nearly three dozen men and women dressed in the greens and browns of the surrounding forest. The air whistled, and Tregane heard the awful, final, sound of a spear hitting home. Her soldier hit the ground before Tregane could spin to see who it was.

Who *they* were. Because it wasn't one spear that had hit so loudly, but three burying themselves simultaneously in their targets. Her other soldiers stood, weapons drawn, grim-faced and determined. *They're awaiting my orders.* She should have seen this coming and, like mighty Daana'd, switched course. But she hadn't. They'd taken an officer of the Nellens legions by surprise, and three of her soldiers were dead.

"Talonlord?" asked one of the survivors, softly.

She'd trained for this. A scenario just like this had been one of her drills. She groped for the appropriate strategy, but her mind only coughed up that last *thunk,* and a prayer for the dead.

"We'll take your weapons, for a start," said one of the bandits. "And your armor. Whoever we decide can live can march back to Juche naked to deliver our regards, so get your best bribes ready."

"*Talonlord Tregane.* Your *orders.*" She knew that grizzled voice. One of her scalelords. A woman who'd marched in many campaigns, and was about to die on this no-name road, killed by bandits. Avara, that was her name. But Tregane still couldn't answer.

"Right," said Avara. Then, louder, "Soldiers, *to me.*" The unit responded immediately, obeying Avara's commands. Tregane followed them herself, drawing her sword at last and swinging it wherever Avara told her to. On Avara's word, a handful of soldiers surrounded Tregane, carving their way past the bandits and out of their trap.

It wasn't until they were a mile down the road that the sound of those left behind to fight faded away. "I'm sorry," Tregane said, "I don't know what happened."

"You froze," said Avara. "It won't happen again."

That was an order, too. One Tregane intended to obey.



Chapter Three

The Might of the Realm

The Imperial Legions

For centuries, the Scarlet Realm's legions were the Empress' boot on the throat of the world. No other fighting force matches their numbers, resources, or discipline. Subjugating the Threshold, they defended the satrapies from hostile neighbors, while suppressing internal threats — banditry, peasant uprisings, rebellious lords, and heretical movements. Led by thousands of Princes of the Earth, the Imperial legions were all but invincible. But since the Empress vanished, the legions have been carved up among the Great Houses, their battle-hardened leaders replaced by political appointees. Though still deadly, the legions are now brittle blades that may be turned against one another in the Realm's escalating internal strife.

History of the Legions

After conquering the Blessed Isle with a patchwork of remnant Shogunate forces, local auxiliaries, conscripts, and militias, the Empress rebuilt her military from the ground up. Based loosely on Shogunate military hierarchies, units were of fixed size and structure, funded by the Imperial Treasury, and served the throne rather than individual generals, families, or local governments. The new legions were staffed with the most talented officers available. Initially these were survivors of the Blessed Isle's ancient, reputable Shogunate gentes. Later, as the Realm's political fabric changed, some came from the Great Houses, but most were outcastes with no place in Realm politics. Handpicked by the Empress and her staff, they were loyal to her alone.

The number of legions varied with the political and economic climate. Legions were decommissioned in peacetime; new legions were raised or old ones reconstituted amid expansion or rebellion. The Realm saw as many as 81 legions under the Imperial banner, though that number fell to 40 by the time the Empress disappeared.

Once it became clear that the Empress was truly gone and the throne open to whomever could claim it, various factions in the Realm's government — the Great Houses, ministries, and All-Seeing Eye — deemed it essential to break the Imperial legions' power before an outcaste general seized the throne in a military coup. To decentralize military power so that no one conspirator might wield the army against the others, not to mention ridding the ministries of a long-resented expense, they divided the legions among the houses. Each argued for a share, backing those arguments with political leverage — favors, blackmail, bribes, and extortion.

The plan went into effect in RY 763 at the Celebration of the Seven Shattered Helms, a traditional festival wherein the legions' elite troops paraded before the Empress at the Imperial Palace's gates to receive her approbation. This time, they were met by the chief of the Imperial Treasury, who informed the assembled generals that the throne could no longer afford the expense of an Imperial military — and indeed, hadn't the legions outlived their usefulness? Surely the Threshold's barbarians now knew better than to trouble the Realm; surely fear of Imperial retribution had settled into their bones, bowing them down for millennia to come. Troops loyal to the Great Houses, backed by numerous sorcerers, encircled the plaza lest the generals thought to dispute matters.

Once the houses apportioned the legions between them, they purged their new forces of disloyal elements. Hardline Imperial supporters, partisans of rival houses, and prominent outcastes were removed from the upper ranks. Some were simply dismissed, others framed for criminal acts, and a few murdered outright. These were replaced by loyal scions of the sponsoring houses. The Empress' personal military staff suffered similarly. Of her nine Crown Marshals — responsible for refining the Empress' war plans — two were executed on trumped-up charges, and a third imprisoned at the Imperial gaol Ice-Above-the-Water. The rest have gone into hiding.

HOUSE FORCES

Cathak: 8 legions.

Cynis: 3 legions.

Ledaal: 3 legions.

Mnemon: 5 legions.

Nellens: 2 legions.

Peleps: 4 legions, the Imperial Navy.

Ragara: 3 legions.

Sesus: 7 legions.

Tepet: 1 legion.

V'neef: 2 legions, the Merchant Fleet.

Iselsi: No military.

Each house also has paramilitary forces.

All this has hurt morale. The legionnaires recognize that they now fight in service of one house or another's fortunes, rather than for the good of the Realm. Desertion rates are higher than at any point since the Unbroken Rushes Rebellion, and insubordination a mounting problem for inexperienced leaders unable to maintain order. The richest houses ameliorate these troubles by spending more on salary and supplies, but the benefits of such practices are both marginal and unsustainable.

Dissolution and Desertion

Seven full legions were disbanded after the purge. Soldiers from liquidated units were reassigned to other legions that were below full strength, while officers were either transferred or dismissed from service. A few officers, seeing the writing on the wall, withdrew with their most loyal soldiers to the Blessed Isle's hinterlands or to the Scavenger Lands and other volatile Threshold regions, there to carve out roles as brigands, mercenaries, or princes.

One of the purportedly disbanded legions, the 17th "Sirocco" Legion led by the outcaste Saloy Hin, deserted intact in its entirety, having been in the far South at the time of the recall and refusing to heed the summons. Meanwhile, a full dragon of the 19th "Maelstrom" Legion, under the command of the outcaste Hanto Galina, rejected the summons to return to the Blessed Isle. After overthrowing the satrap of Fray deep in the Northeastern forests, they installed Galina as their Empress.

Roughly 10,000 more soldiers deserted the remaining units during the changeover. Many have been caught, though some prefects quietly free them or offer them posts in house legions in exchange for pardon, rather than turn them over to another house's military justice or the Imperial courts. Thousands more remain at large. Some turn to banditry, making travel in the Blessed Isle more dangerous than it's been for centuries. Others, including numerous outcastes, remain unaccounted for. The Realm's movers and shakers wonder if an Imperialist force — loyal not to any house, but to the Empress, or simply to itself and its generals — has reconstituted itself in secret.

House Militaries and Paramilitaries

Of the current Great Houses, only Cathak, Sesus, and Tepet held an Imperial remit to raise their own house legions before the restructuring. These forces were trained in a manner similar to the Imperial legions, though never to quite the same quality — the throne had access to the very best trainers and equipment in the Realm, and Imperial legions were perpetually battle-tested to a degree that house legions were not. The latter were employed largely in safer postings and only intermittently sent into major battles against foreign militaries and Lunar hordes, minimizing risk to house troops and scions. Cathak and Sesus merged their old personal militaries with newly acquired Imperial legions, promoting house officers over career legionnaires to ensure loyal leadership.

In addition, each house has its own paramilitary forces outside of the legion structure. These forces — which serve primarily to garrison satrapies against rebels, bandits, and Lunar hordes — are provided by the satrap's house, but the Empress traditionally assigned a garrison commander from a different house as a check on the satrap's power. As the garrison leader's authority is limited by lower-ranking garrison officers' loyalty to the satrap's house, it behooves her to recruit and train local auxiliaries so she has troops she can rely on — but this risks strengthening the satrapy's ability to revolt.

Aside from garrison forces, each house maintains a handful of small specialist units, ranging from Sesus counterinsurgents specialized in espionage and counterespionage, to Mnemon siege engineers, to Peleps and V'neef marines skilled in ship-to-ship combat and amphibious assault. These forces vary greatly in quality, from the deadly grace of the now-defunct Iselsi ghostcutter corps to the mediocre training and morale of Ragara's richly accoutered hireswords. Many such units were folded into the house legions; others remain independent of the legion structure.

HOUSE TEPET IN TUMULT

Three years ago, House Tepet's military was crushed by the Anathema called the Bull of the North. What should have been a glorious victory under house matriarch Tepet Usala was sabotaged by political machinations at home, set into motion by the Empress before her disappearance, to undercut a house at the pinnacle of its power. The Empress' military staff provided false intelligence on enemy numbers and disposition, while promising supplies and reinforcements that never came.

Even so, the legions — first under Usala, with leadership passing after her death in the field to her second-in-command, the seasoned general Tepet Arada — pressed deeper into the icy North than anyone expected, forcing the Bull to commit his entire force to the final battle. The Tepet legions came within a hair's breadth of victory — maiming the Bull and his witch, slaying two others of his Circle, and mauling his forces so badly that they've yet to recover. But the Anathema won the so-called Battle of Futile Blood in the end, butchering the legions and slaughtering the cream of Tepet's Exalted champions.

While no satrapial auxiliaries equaled the Tepet legions, many of Creation's most skilled and terrifying warriors hailed from Tepet satrapies or received training from its generals: Ithen's ghost-faced warriors, the ruthless battle-falconers of Zelion, and especially the brutal Medoan heavy cavalry. Medo's janissary troops, trained from birth for physical might, horsemanship, and skill at arms, are all but fearless, knowing that bravery in battle earns them an honored place among their clan's ancestors. While they despise the Realm, they admire the Tepets as illustrious warriors, seeing the house's ideals as akin to their own. House Tepet lost its legions, but may not be without allies in the coming civil war.

War Tourism

House militaries and paramilitaries are often tied up in small Threshold wars. Given the unpredictable profit margin of controlling a satrapy — a house might lose more than it gains due to famine, pestilence, rebellion, exhaustion of natural resources, or other troubles — alternative income streams were invaluable. It was common for a house to compensate for shortfalls by attacking Threshold peoples outside the Realm's sphere and gathering spoils of war — captured treasuries, urban plunder, and prisoners to sell to House Cynis and Guild slavers.

The Empress encouraged such behavior because it kept the Great Houses aimed toward the Threshold instead of the throne. Even so, she maintained limits on these little wars. She doled out newly captured satrapies as she chose rather than leaving them to their captors, restricted conflict between existing satrapies, and exacted terrible penalties when a house's military adventures harmed the Realm as a whole.

While the legions needed no pretext for conquest, the Empress preferred a legitimate casus belli, as unprovoked invasions meant stiffer resistance, stronger enemy alliances, and more rebellious subjugated populations. Offering the throne an honorable way to bring its legions into the field earned the Empress' favor. But if a house's military adventurism weakened the Realm's position, her displeasure was certain. Calling upon the throne for aid might mean losing face, being stripped of the satrapy used as a staging area, or even executions of officials involved in the debacle. But if she had to march the legions in without being asked, the consequences were far greater.

Legion Structure

Infantry forms the legion's core. Its main line of battle consists of 5,000 soldiers divided into 10 dragons, each commanded by a dragonlord reporting to the legion's general. Each dragon is divided into two 250-strong wings led by winglords; each wing is comprised of two talons directed by talonlords. A talon's troops are subdivided into five scales, each 25 soldiers strong and led by a scalelord. The scale is composed of five fangs commanded by noncommissioned fanglords.

Each senior officer — those ranked talonlord or higher — has a second-in-command. These serve as deputies, ready to assume the officer's role if she dies, and to stand in for her when she's on leave or detached duty. Senior officers are also accompanied by coteries of adjutants, including both insightful junior officers promoted to serve as advisors, and fresh cadets who need seasoning. Cadets traditionally served a stint on staff before they're deemed ready to accept a commission.

Most legions employ six dragons of medium infantry and four of heavy infantry. Each legion is accompanied by four to six dragons' worth of skirmishers — archers, javelineers, slingers — to scout, harry enemy formations, and tie up opposing skirmishers and cavalry. Skirmishers receive roughly half legionnaires' pay, have lower status, and are largely deemed expendable. Legions fielded in the Threshold are also reinforced by auxiliaries (p. XX).

Generals typically assemble the dragons under their command into ad-hoc formations called flights. Each

flight is commanded by its most senior dragonlord.

These numbers are largely theoretical. In peacetime, as much as 20 percent of a legion's strength may be unavailable due to troops on leave or detached duty. Numbers can drop even more precipitously in wartime, when there aren't always enough competent skirmishers or recruits available to replace casualties.

Unit Designations and Traditions

Each unit has a numerical designation, such as: "12th Legion, Eighth Dragon, Second Wing, First Talon, Second Scale, Fourth Fang." Full designations are mostly for ceremony and paperwork. "Second Scale, advance!" suffices on the field of battle.

However, all but the greenest units, down to the talon, possess nicknames bestowed for colorful achievements in their history. For instance, the Wolf-Pelt Dragon distinguished itself against the wise beasts of the Uskwood; a scrap of century-old fur still dangles from its standard. Gallevo Faren led the remnants of what is now Faren's Wing out of a Delzahn ambush. The Bloody Crown Talon slew the last outcaste queen of Psalter.

Nicknames are only supplanted by truly astonishing achievements, or stricken for mutiny, treachery, or other dire circumstances — such as when several units nicknamed after Manosque heroes became nameless after that house's fall.

The Rank and File

Not every legionnaire was born on the Blessed Isle. Legions recruit locally to fill gaps in the ranks, whether on the Isle, among the satrapies, or beyond the bounds of empire. No matter who the recruit was before taking her oath, she's a legionnaire now, and citizenship in the Realm's peasant class awaits her after her term of service. Most start as skirmishers, advancing into the legions proper to replace retirees and the fallen.

Legions conscript unwilling soldiers only in extremis, as loyalty to one's sisters-in-arms is paramount. Enlistees must meet basic standards of height, weight, strength, and stamina. Major physical or mental disabilities disqualify recruits, and neither outlaws, the dispossessed, nor slaves may take the oath. Officers are loath to waive these rules for all but the largest bribes; their lives and reputations depend on their soldiers' skill and loyalty.

Officers are responsible for recruiting among local peasants even while off-duty, selecting noteworthy physical specimens, or individuals reputed for skill or valor. These typically enter the officer's own unit or personal guard. Similarly, governors, prefects, and other officials select local peasants for recruitment, offering letters of recommendation to officers in their social circle. Individuals thus recommended bypass a stint among the skirmishers and move directly into the ranks.

THE STANDARD

Every unit of talon size or larger carries a standard. This unique, elaborately worked draconic shape — sometimes of gilded wood or chryselephantine, but usually bronze, silver, copper, or brass — is mounted atop a pole and carried by a standard-bearer. To the legionnaires, it's a symbol of their courage, honor, luck, and pride. The standard serves as a rallying point in the thick of battle. Losing the standard is deeply shameful for the entire unit, especially for the standard-bearer; her ignominy will pursue her for the rest of her career, unless she retrieves the standard herself.

A patrician or mortal Dynast enrolling as a foot soldier is a rare folly. The Blessed Isle's Dragon-Blooded never enter the ranks at all. Should a Prince of the Earth enlist as a dramatic gesture, it's not taken seriously; the oath doesn't bind her, and she may depart as she pleases.

On rare occasions when a Threshold outcaste seeks to join the Realm via the legions, she must first lead auxiliary troops for a time — perhaps years — while Imperial officers gauge her mettle. If found suitable, she enters the legions as a foot soldier to aid in acculturation and teach humility in the face of Dynastic superiors. However, such outcastes are quickly promoted out of the ranks.

Training and Equipment

Legionnaires follow a grueling training regimen throughout the year. This includes marching for hours in close formation, sprinting, jumping, climbing, carrying heavy loads, and swimming when a body of water is available.

Each legionnaire must know the proper use of her weapons — spear, sword, shield, and dagger. She must care for arms and armor in the field — removing rust and notches, repairing dents, replacing broken buckles, etc. (This isn't a concern in barracks and billets, where weapons are stored in armories for safekeeping, minimizing theft, deaths in off-duty brawls, and mutiny.) Other equipment, such as clothing, shovels, cooking gear, and cold-weather clothing, must also be carried and maintained.



A FOOTSOLDIER WAKES

Tiding Light stirs just before dawn to the sound of gongs, the regimental musicians' reveille cutting right through the leather tent. His joints and scars twinge as he rolls off his cot, reminding him of a dozen years of marching and battle in the 19th "Maelstrom" Legion. The five other men in his tent rise with him, bolting down mouthfuls of hardtack softened in vinegary wine, and fumbling for undergarments and tunics ripe with days of sweat; Light hopes they camp by a river tomorrow, so he can bathe and clean his garments. He quickly dons the rest of his gear — scarlet buff coat, boots, belt, helmet, and Peleps badge. Sheathing his sword and gathering up spear and shield, he follows his fanglord out into the gray light to fall in on the parade ground for the day's orders, to be followed by hours of camp duties, combat drills, and surprise inspections. But he smiles, knowing he has a liaison lined up between dinner and his round on night watch.

While weapons training is important, it takes second place to fighting in formation. Legionnaires must move and act as one under officers' direction, neither crowding one another nor spreading themselves so thinly that enemies can push through their ranks. On parade grounds and in the field, they practice marching in orderly rows or columns, wheeling, falling back, and establishing or changing formations such as the wedge or defensive circle.

Life in the Ranks

Though terrifying and bloody, combat is the smallest part of the legionnaire's life. Most of her days are hard labor. When not training, she's making and breaking camp, cooking for her fang, scrubbing pots, washing or mending clothes filthy from the trail, digging latrines, hauling stones and lumber to build roads and bridges, and heading out to scout or forage — taking care not to forget the day's password. Entertainment is largely limited to sports, gambling, gossip, storytelling, and horseplay.

The legionnaire's diet is mostly hardtack or porridge, supplemented by beans and lentils, hard cheeses, and preserved meat or fruit. Livestock in the train supply

THE LEGIONNAIRE'S OATH

"In the name of the Immaculate Dragons, I pledge my body, heart, and soul to the Empress, whom I shall hold dearer than my own flesh and blood. I swear to uphold the honor of the Upright Soldier; to purge myself of the serpents of treachery, the wolves of cowardice, and the raitons of dereliction; and to revile as Anathema any sword-sister who harbors such a beast in her soul. If I am faithless, I submit to such sanction as my Empress commands — to be beaten, to be bound, to be burned, to be slain by the sword. If I am faithless, may my kin be consumed by poverty, plague, famine, and fire. If I am faithless, let my soul be reborn as a weed, as a worm, as a shadow beneath the stone."

fresh meat in emergencies, while foraging provides greens, nuts, berries, wild game, and enemy livestock. Individual soldiers or fangs procure such condiments as fish sauce or chili paste in allied settlements. Pillaging, of course, is a feast.

Life is somewhat more comfortable when barracked or billeted in friendly territories, where locals or legionary slaves handle cooking and cleaning, and the legionnaire can spend her salary on fresh food, good wine, catamites, and courtesans — unless she's lost it all gambling with her shield-sisters.

Fraternization in the ranks isn't forbidden, but neither is it encouraged; the legion has no use for pregnant soldiers. Low-quality maiden tea is available to all legionnaires, and both female and male soldiers who don't avail themselves of it before liaisons are disciplined severely.

As few things encourage mutiny more effectively than not paying one's troops, the Empress was always prompt in supplying cash to the legions. The Great Houses can't afford to be as assiduous. Many legionnaires grumble at delays. Some take what they will from locals through threats or force, and urban military actions in the Threshold devolve more easily than before into looting and plunder. Less-affluent houses worry what their legions will do if funds run dry.

Still, the legions' strict discipline largely holds matters in check. Lesser crimes, such as insubordination and petty theft, are punished by scutwork, reduced rations, denial of leave, fines, or whipping. Deserters are beaten to death by their own fangmates. A mutineer's entire fang is executed by the rest of the talon, though this punishment is waived for fangmates witnessed risking their lives against the mutiny.

Advancement and Retirement

Legionnaires are respected for service to the Realm. They also have more opportunity for advancement than civilians. All fanglords and many scalelords rose from the ranks, earning responsibility, higher pay, and immunity from much day-to-day drudgework.

The legions also reward soldiers commended for gallantry. These benefits include monetary bonuses, shares of plunder, decorations such as medallions or dragon-shaped diadems, promotions, and praise to the senior officers' connections and superiors in the Dynasty — often the most valuable prize of all.

Over half of all legionnaires see the end of their 20-year terms. The foreign-born retire as peasant citizens of the Realm; they're pointed toward lands held by their officers' families and supplied with a letter of endorsement to obtain travel papers for the journey, although many choose to retire in cosmopolitan cities with communities from their native lands. There are no further benefits beyond one's military skills and the respect of one's peers, though the wise have sent enough pay to their families over the years to fund a comfortable retirement, while generous officers provide loyal troops with dismissal bonuses.

Soldiers are rarely discharged before retirement, although injury or chronic illness can cut a military career short, as can disbanding a legion during peacetime. These soldiers receive no benefits, but if they successfully reenlist, prior years of service count toward the length of their new term.

The Officer Corps

The legion's chain of command is sacrosanct, passing the general's instructions on down to the troops through 1,000 fanglords and every officer in between. Commands are to be obeyed instantly and without question, though many new political appointees lack proper discipline; experienced superiors must treat them gently, lest house leaders disapprove of a favored scion going under the lash.

While most fanglords and scalelords rose from the ranks, mortal senior officers are largely patricians and Dynasts who've purchased commissions — formerly from a branch of the Imperial Treasury, or more recently from the legion's Great House. Some start as junior officers; others begin on a senior officer's personal staff, then are promoted directly to talonlord. No mortal has ever become a general, and only the most brilliant and accomplished become dragonlords.

LEGION ENCAMPMENTS

The legions follow strict regulations regarding encampment. At the end of any march, earthworks and palisades go up immediately, while tents are raised in neatly organized grids. Watchtowers and pickets guard against enemy troops and scouts. Riverside and coastal camps contain docks for riverboats or Imperial Navy vessels.

Over time, palisades give way to stone walls capped with artillery and pierced by fortified gatehouses, within whose precincts rise barracks, bathhouses, storehouses, and workshops. Many a Realm town or city began as such an encampment.

Dragon-Blooded dominate the highest officer ranks through strength, skill, and seniority. A legion typically has 40 to 60 Dragon-Blooded, including the general, most or all senior officers, and many of their seconds-in-command. Once, most were outcastes sponsored by the Empress, seeking to raise their social standing in a milieu dominated by the Dynasty. Many outcastes have been dismissed in recent years to accommodate political appointees from the Great Houses, but the Deliberative still sponsors a trickle of candidates from Pasiap's Stair to fill gaps in the officer corps.

Promotion was traditionally based on seniority, with especial success through gallantry or brilliance enabling a swifter rise. But with the legions passing into house control, family and school connections have gained enormous weight. Now, wet-behind-the-ears officers are placed above ancient outcastes with centuries of experience, who can do little but smolder at the indignity.

Upon retirement, officers receive a rank-based pension. Especially high rank or meritorious performance earns other benefits at the Empress' (now the Deliberative's) discretion, such as elevation to the patriciate; wardenship over estates, manses, or Imperial heirlooms; or ministerial office.

An Officer's Life

In the field, junior officers share most of the rank and file's hardships. A fanglord sleeps in her soldiers' tent and stands at their side in battle. But while senior officers lead from the front — with concomitant casualties — they have higher pay, better quarters and billets, superior cuisine, and their own personal staff, ranging from a talonlord's valet to a general's gaggle of aides-de-camp.

When not on campaign, junior officers keep their troops in line, preventing or quelling brawls, drunken scenes, and other troublesome behavior. Meanwhile, senior officers represent the throne and participate in the local social scene, mingling with aristocrats, monks, and wealthy magnates at salons, banquets, festivals, and musical or theatrical performances. All are expected to remain neutral in matters of local politics while presenting a cultured face — and obtaining supplies, billets, or recruits for the legion.

Rising or senior officers are quite marriageable, and must fend off persistent invitations from households pressing suit on a favored scion's behalf. Dragon-Blooded and mortal Dynasts are especially tantalizing targets for marriage and assignations, and must take care not to be drawn into inappropriate liaisons that might dilute their bloodlines. Peasant-born officers are much quicker to accept such offers, should they arise.

Foot soldiers have only limited ability to go on leave:

LEGIONS AS BATTLE GROUPS

In theory, nothing stops the Storyteller from throwing an entire legion at the PCs using the battle group system (**Exalted**, p. 205) as multiple Size 5 battle groups led by dozens of individual Dragon-Blooded. In practice, this would be a headache for the Storyteller and drag on forever. Instead, it's best to handle such a large-scale military campaign as a succession of multiple battles. A legion can be broken down into its dragons (Size 4 battle groups led by four to six Dragon-Blooded), wings (Size 3-4 battle groups led by two or three Dragon-Blooded), talons (Size 3 battle groups led by a Dragon-Blood or mortal), scales (Size 2 battle groups led by a mortal), and fangs (Size 1 battle groups led by a mortal), which the Storyteller can mix and match to create interesting battles along each step of the war. Legionnaire battle groups usually have traits of battle-ready troops (**Exalted**, p. 496) with average or elite Drill, the best using elite troop traits (**Exalted**, p. 497) with elite Drill. They never have Might unless enhanced by magic.

A legionnaire battle group may be accompanied by a battle group of skirmishers, usually one dot of Size lower. Most skirmishers have militia traits (**Exalted**, p. 496) and poor or average drill, while the best have medium cavalry traits (**Exalted**, p. 497) and average or elite Drill. Local auxiliaries might also be fielded alongside legion battle groups. Their traits and Drill vary widely based on origin.

AN OFFICER WAKES

Well before dawn, Dragonlord Peleps Munadi rises from the silken pillows of her pavilion's divan. Her slave valet brings her an ewer and washbasin, then pins the tent flaps open so the crisp Northern breeze can sweep in past the guards. The valet trims Munadi's hair and dresses her in an azure chemise, charcoal trousers with silver piping, black leather boots and baldric, a silver-inlaid breastplate, and a polished silver helmet in the shape of an eagle's head. Taking up and sheathing her daiklave, the dragonlord moves to her desk, where her valet sets out cheese and cold beef while an aide-de-camp enters to lay out the latest dispatches from units on detached duty and from the general's staff. She nods grimly; as expected, the rebels are on the move. Orders will doubtless come to break camp today. Munadi sends a runner to instruct her staff to attend her; she needs the dragon's logistical issues shaken down by daybreak.

two days per month in the satrapies, or one month per year on the Blessed Isle. Dynastic officers take longer furloughs to fulfill family responsibilities. Their seconds-in-command are breveted to their rank in their absence — an excellent opportunity for junior officers to distinguish themselves.

Support Staff

Legionnaires handle many support duties themselves. In the field, each fang cooks, cleans, does laundry, and maintains its own gear. But other responsibilities require specialists.

Every senior officer employs a servant or slave. The general has a larger entourage — including aides-de-camp, valets, and a personal scale of elite bodyguards — and directs other experts such as chirurgeons, diviners, spies, and experts in local geography and culture.

Talons and larger units use musicians and flagbearers to handle military signaling. Drums, gongs, and semaphore convey orders to advance, retreat, change formation, or engage in other maneuvers. Officers dispatch more complex messages to one another with swift-heeled runners; high-endurance couriers or portable heliographs transmit sealed or coded orders to other legions or garrisons.



The legion also maintains from six to 30 talons of military engineers. Exempt from combat, engineers draft legionnaires as laborers for a range of construction jobs — camps, roads, bridges, fortifications, siege engines, etc. In peacetime, legions are assigned such duties as building town walls, digging canals, and dredging harbors.

Most legions have one or more sorcerers attached, usually outcastes whose gifts were fostered at Pasiap's Stair. While their repertoires include flashy, destructive battlefield spells, they're equally valued for logistical and strategic capabilities, such as sending instantaneous messages to allied forces, spying on enemy generals, or commanding the weather. Each sorcerer is assigned a scale of bodyguards for protection, supplemented by demons, elementals, or other unnatural defenders.

A handful of Immaculates accompanies each legion, offering spiritual guidance and leading religious rites. They also advise in dealings with local spirits, supervise burial rites, and watch for heresy among the troops. Cults of war gods, Mela, or the Empress are regrettably common.

Every legion has a supply and baggage train to herd livestock and to haul rations, water, armor, weapons, ammunition, clothing, and other gear, not to mention the legion's payroll and plunder. Smiths, bowyers, fletchers, and other artisans accompany the train. Supply wagons are driven by slaves, who are treated well — better than skirmishers — lest they steal, abscond, or turn against their masters. The train is guarded by a wing of soldiers commanded by the quartermaster, who ranks second only to the general, a recognition of the crucial role logistics have always played in the legions' success. The baggage train may number as much as a quarter of the legion's strength. Arming them is a last-ditch measure, reflecting poorly on the general's abilities.

Imperial doctrine discourages the camp followers — spouses, catamites, liquor-sellers, drug dealers, victualers, gamblers — that flock to the Threshold's less-disciplined military forces. Nonetheless, reputable merchants visiting the train can make enormous profits, minus bribes to the quartermaster to allow such commerce.

Auxiliaries

In Threshold campaigns, the legions supplement their numbers with companies of auxiliaries. These are "borrowed" from a local ruler or satrap, though generals occasionally conscript local irregulars. While wars with major Threshold powers and Lunar hordes pull in every auxiliary unit available, in most situations they're called on to fill specific battlefield roles, such as cavalry to counteract the legions' own lack of mounted forces.

TREASURES OF THE LEGIONS

Dragon-Blooded legionnaires frequently bear artifacts loaned by their houses, and are almost always allowed to retain them indefinitely. Outcastes are sometimes loaned artifacts by superior officers, or — for those demonstrating exceptional prowess — the Empress herself. Artifacts can also be looted from enemies, commissioned from Dragon-Blooded artificers, or forged personally.

First Age relics, such as lightning ballistas and warstriders, are dramatically rarer. While some Great Houses possess siege artifacts, none claim possession of a warstrider (at least, not openly). The Realm's scarce handful belonged to the Empress; they're kept in Imperial arsenal-manses when not fielded. Many such manses were accessible only by the Empress; the houses devote considerable efforts to prying them open.

Some satrapies' auxiliaries are notorious throughout the Threshold, such as Medoan heavy cavalry, Marukani horse-archers, Delzahn lancers, and Jiaran sword-dancers. Others are less renowned but equally useful, especially in the right terrain — Tu'uri desert warriors, Linowan foresters, Varangian engineers, and Baihu marines. But satrapies such as prostrate An-Teng, decadent Luqai, or now-fallen Thorns have a reputation for mediocre troops that no general is eager to employ.

Auxiliary forces are attached to flights at the general's discretion, where they have the lowest seniority. They're typically thrust into the worst fighting, as Realm commanders would rather lose foreigners than their own troops. Much like mercenaries, most are of questionable morale, and more likely than legionnaires to rout or be distracted by plunder.

Janissaries

Many auxiliaries, especially irregulars, can only remain in the field for a few months at a time, as they're needed at home for agricultural and pastoral duties. But units belonging to standing armies can remain attached to the legions for years, and are often employed thousands of miles from their homelands so they have no loyalties to any local faction.

The Realm typically arranges such deployments by demanding tribute from a satrapy in the form of auxiliary soldiers. These janissaries serve in the legions for the

duration of their indenture, typically a 10- or 20-year term, after which they're returned to their homelands. Satrapies with strong military traditions often grow more cosmopolitan over time as returning janissaries bring back new tastes and new ideas.

Martial Orders

When the satrapies' common folk face imminent peril, Immaculate monks stand ready to offer what protection they can. When that's insufficient — when disorder leaves no civil government ready to muster arms — an abbot or archimandrite may take matters into her own hands, organizing and training militias against bandits, armies, or even the Anathema.

Faced by persistent threats, such militias may be formalized as martial orders, with soldiers dedicating themselves to the Order as militant oblates. Where the Empress deemed them useful, she officially acknowledged them as arms of the Realm — especially in the Caul, where the orders have supported holy war against the Lunars for centuries. Others function without official sanction.

Some martial orders disperse after the threat precipitating their foundation fades. Others persist. Such orders have been known to move to more troubled regions; turn their efforts toward charitable or missionary functions; or even detach themselves from the Order entirely, becoming mercenaries or despots. These last may well find themselves condemned by the Mouth of Peace and opposed by a new martial order.

Colcothar Wardens: This order was founded to guard pilgrims traveling the Colcothar Road through the Eastern Threshold to the Immaculate shrine at Firstfall, fending off bandits and wild beasts. Though the Colcothar Road has since become a much safer route, the Wardens remain active. They've developed from a small group of bodyguards into a well-drilled force, employing guerilla tactics and their familiarity with the Eastern jungles to undermine and exhaust enemy militaries.

Dragonguard of the Sacred Waters of Sextes Jylis: Once a force of local soldiers and mercenaries founded to protect Immaculate monks and pilgrims in the near North, the Dragonguard of the Sacred Waters was decimated two centuries ago in the war against the Anathema Jochim. With their Immaculate masters' temples destroyed at Jochim's hands, the remnant Dragonguard chose service to a Sworn Kinship dedicated to spreading the Immaculate Philosophy across the North at sword's point. That Hearth has since dissolved, but the Dragonguard remains as a sovereign power, many of its settlements founded upon land it cleared from the wilderness.

Sword-Saints of the Divine Tempest: One of the Caul's longest-standing orders, the sword-saints strive to attain perfection in all martial endeavors, spending countless hours in weapon drills and memorizing the *Thousand Correct Actions*. Their leaders, all Dynasts, pride themselves on noble blood, a source of contention with humbler Caul-based orders such as the Penitent Raitons and the Keepers of the Amber Tabernacle. Since a disastrous defeat against an Anathema warlord felled their leader, the order's officers have begun dueling amongst each other, to injury or to death, over who'll take up the mantle of leadership.

Mercenaries

Hiring mercenaries is a last-ditch tactic for the world's dominant military power. But sometimes a Dynast has more money than political pull, and hired spears are better than none. House Ragara in particular relies heavily on mercenary troops. Most are less dependable than even the weakest house legions, and more prone to looting and treachery than peasant levies. However, the Threshold's most skilled and reputable mercenary bands are a cut above their peers, and are more than worth their exorbitant fees.

The Empress forbade bringing companies of hired soldiers to the Blessed Isle, lest they destabilize her control of the heart of the world. With the Empress gone and the magistrates harried, the Great Houses now find it feasible to flout that restriction — as do patrician families, mercantile consortiums, and criminal syndicates. Even so, employers find ways to disguise their mercenaries' provenance, whether as bodyguards or groundskeepers, as a fig leaf against magistrates' attention.

Strategies and Tactics

The Realm military tends toward traditionalism. Failure using orthodox strategies can be blamed on external factors, while failure with a novel strategy falls entirely on you. But don't mistake conservatism for ignorance! The Realm's most brilliant Exalted military scholars have spent centuries codifying tactics and logistical methods for future officers' benefit. Nor should one mistake it for passivity. The legions are renowned for speed and maneuverability; generals rely on lightning-fast assaults to blindside foes, hitting them when they're unready or from unexpected directions.

At the heart of Imperial doctrine is *The Thousand*

Correct Actions of the Upright Soldier. This red-bound book compiling the Shogunate's military genius is studied by every legion officer, alongside annotations and other texts put forth by Shogunate and Realm generals and military historians. The *Thousand Correct Actions* covers the full range of battlefield activities, from protocol for disciplining subordinates to methods of ambush in various terrains. Constant drill ensures that soldiers are ready to engage in any of the book's classic formations and maneuvers at a moment's notice, while training in the House of Bells and other military schools teaches officers how to put those tools to best use.

Some generals risk innovative tactics. Win or lose, these lead to longstanding discussions among savants and challenging tests for cadets, and when such idiosyncratic methods yield victory, they're added to the deuterocanon of Realm military science. Sadly, many political appointees now dominating the legions' higher ranks haven't trained with the *Thousand Correct Actions*. Thrown into the chaos of battle without the Realm's centuries of collective experience at their beck and call, they're reduced to following their own untrained tactical instincts, and the legions suffer for it.

Each house has a reputation for specific strategies and tactics, as do many individuals, households, and legions. Sesus doctrine emphasizes assassinating enemy leaders, suborning enemy espionage assets, and poisoning supplies, while Mnemon generals favor fortified defenses and strategic deployment of sorcery. Ragara Himada, like his mother before him, prefers frontal assaults, relying on the direlance Sunpiercer to fill his troops with righteous fury and unshakable morale. The 7th "Earthshaker" Legion, now led by House Cathak, specializes in siege warfare to conquer the high, desert-girdled fortresses of the smoldering South.

The Vermilion Legion

Black sheep of the Imperial military, the 40th "Vermilion" Legion — or the Red-Piss Legion — is home to the best of the worst. Its recruiters concern themselves solely with physical and intellectual fitness, not character, so its ranks are filled with petty criminals, gamblers, drunkards, and heretics.

No reputable Dynast would dream of purchasing an officer's commission among such rabble. The higher ranks are filled with refugees from political infighting, disgraced officers dismissed from other postings, and young troublemakers — whether lazy, disobedient, or debauched — whose Dynastic parents have despaired of putting them to better use.

Commissions are cheap compared to reputable legions, based on the Vermilion's current needs — whether jade, provisions, winter quarters, intelligence, or the downfall of one of the legion's foes. The Vermilion never places untried or inept cadets in charge of anything larger than a fang. Higher ranks are earned only through merit, not wealth or prestige.

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

Legions dispatch scouts and employ local spies to report on enemy troop strength and disposition, identify resistance leaders, and the like. Before the Empress' disappearance, generals and admirals could also rely on information from the All-Seeing Eye. With the recent withdrawal of consistent support from the Eye, the Great Houses now scramble to place their own limited intelligence-gathering capabilities at their officers' disposal. House Sesus' extensive intelligence apparatus gives its legions a significant advantage in this regard.

While incompetent officers get the cold shoulder from their peers, those with genuine experience and ability are warmly welcomed. The Red-Piss Legion has always been a meat grinder for Dynasty and Realm to throw their refuse against the Threshold's worst dangers, and its soldiers treasure reliable, effective sword-sisters. After the Imperial legions' dispersal among the Great Houses, the Vermilion may be the only remaining legion to elevate merit over politics.

Tactically, the Vermilion is the most innovative legion. Officers disgraced for failure using novel methods often end up here. And given that Red-Piss officers have no further to fall, they lose neither status nor face by abandoning tried-and-true approaches. Likewise, the Vermilion has a history of underhanded, disreputable stratagems, employing ambush, poison, treachery, and psychological warfare to enervate foes before open battle.

Socially, enrollment in the Red-Piss Legion is a two-faced coin. The leaders of such a mongrel force, unable to hold a more reputable commission, are openly sneered at by fellow officers in the Realm's salons — to which they rarely receive invitations, lest their miasma of failure sully the household. But those who complete their terms of service are regarded with admiration. After all, if an officer can endure the worst the Vermilion throws at her, what else might she be capable of?

When the legions were divided among the Houses, the Vermilion was foisted upon House Tepet as an insult. Its prodigious young general, Tepet Ejava, will see the

other houses regret that indignity.

The Legion of Silence

One army remains wholly independent of the Great Houses. The Legion of Silence consists of 5,000 preternatural soldiers trained from birth to serve the Scarlet Empress. Purchased from parents or Cynis slave markets as children, their tongues cut out, raised on a diet of drugs and sorcery, they're hulking warriors of superhuman strength and stamina.

In addition to guarding the Empress, detachments of the Legion of Silence protect various important structures in the Imperial City and across the Blessed Isle. They also escort Dynastic dignitaries on important and dangerous missions at the Empress' instruction.

The Legion's training program, centered upon the Imperial Palace, is handled by Immaculate monks and a handful of the Empress' handpicked ministers and sorcerers. Together they raise the children, inculcate a fanatical ideology of service to the Empress, tend to the mysterious sorceries and artifacts that shape their growth, and train them in combat.

At present, the Legion of Silence continues to guard the Imperial Palace and other structures and personages to which they've been assigned. With no Empress to give them orders, they remain quiescent as a body. No one is certain how they'll react when another Dynast attempts to seat herself on their mistress' throne.

Over seven feet tall and thick with muscle, the emotionless-seeming legionnaires cannot be mistaken for lesser soldiers. They have their own military hierarchy akin to other legions, and convey instructions through hand signs not taught to outsiders; some find the degree to which they're able to communicate with a few gestures unnervingly uncanny. The Legion's dragonlords form a council that received instructions from the Empress a few times a year and propagated them through the chain of command. Now only they know what and whose orders they pass on.

The Imperial Navy

The seafaring counterpart of the legions, the Imperial Navy is the unparalleled maritime power of the Time of Tumult. But where the legions are divided among the Great Houses, the preponderance of Realm sea power remains under one banner.

House Peleps administers the Navy by Imperial remit. Final authority is vested in the Rightly Guided Admiralty Board on the Isle of Wrack, who pass directives to the five elementally named directional fleets' grand admirals. The Earth Fleet guards the Blessed Isle's coasts and roots out pirates and smugglers on its shores. The other four fleets convoy legions to and from the Threshold, cow lesser navies, and crush whatever seaborne forces threaten the satrapies — pirate fleets, Lunar navies, rogue spirits, or monsters from the deep.

The Earth Fleet, the eastward Wood Fleet, and the southward Fire Fleet comprise primarily triremes, biremes, and smaller craft, their design ideal for rivers, coastal waters, and the placid Inland Sea. Only the westward Water Fleet and, to a lesser extent, the northward Air Fleet invest in larger vessels. Built to weather stormy Western waters and the icy White Sea, their deep bellies store cargo and contain fresh water and rations for crossing the ocean to Fajad, Wu-Jian, the Caul, and other distant lands.

Lesser admirals direct flotillas and squadrons assembled for various purposes. Admirals are always Dragon-Blooded; most belong to House Peleps, but a few hail from other families, promoted for undeniable competence or through spousal influence. Other Princes of the Earth command individual vessels, though most

REALM MILITIAS

Though the Blessed Isle hasn't been invaded for seven centuries, its authorities still face banditry, piracy, and rebellion. While legions and house paramilitaries are called in for major uprisings, cities and prefectures maintain militias to deal with lesser troubles. Reporting to governors and prefects, these consist of local peasants paid a small stipend to serve one season each year. They're often retired legionnaires, or young women and men considering a legionary career. Training is minimal, and equipment is stored in city armories while off duty.

Militia spend much of their time guarding government buildings and city gates, often collecting tolls at the latter. Their responsibilities also encompass fighting fires, distributing famine doles, apprehending criminals, escorting officials, and staffing fortalices along the Great Coast Road. Off-duty militia are mobilized to fend off pirate landing parties and bandit gangs, increasing the active militia's numbers fivefold. Civil war, should it come, will see them mobilized as well, leading masses of even less experienced peasant conscripts to invade neighboring prefectures or defend their homes.

SILENT LEGIONNAIRES

Even the Dynasty doesn't fully understand what the Empress' private guard might be capable of. The Storyteller should feel free to scale up the Legion of Silence with secret powers granted by sorcery, alchemically fueled battle transformations, or other mysteries.

Essence: 1; **Willpower:** 8; **Join Battle:** 11 dice

Health Levels: –0x2/–1x2/–2x2/–4/Incap

Actions: Disguise: 4 dice; Feats of Strength: 14 dice (may attempt Strength 5 feats); Read Intentions: 7 dice; Resist Disease/Poison: 10 dice; Senses: 8 dice; Social Influence: 4 dice; Threaten: 8 dice; Tracking: 5 dice

Appearance 3 (Hideous), Resolve 5, Guile 4

Combat

Attack (Poleaxe): 11 dice (Damage 16L)

Attack (Shield): 10 dice (Damage 14B)

Attack (Unarmed): 11 dice (Damage 11B)

Combat Movement: 8 dice

Evasion 3, Parry 6

Soak/Hardness: 12/0 (Articulated plate)

Merits

Giant: –3 penalty to disguise rolls to pass as someone of lesser stature.

Imperial Devotion (Innate Merit •••; Prerequisites: Raised in the Legion of Silence): +2 Resolve against fear-based influence; treat influence that would cause them to harm the Scarlet Empress as unacceptable. Battle groups of Silent Legionnaires double 9s on Willpower rolls against rout.

Powerful Grasp (Innate Merit ••; Prerequisites: Giant): May wield two-handed weapons one-handed. Don't receive Clash bonus unless wielding them two-handed or paired.

Unspeaking (Innate Merit •; Prerequisites: Mute): Despite being mute (**Exalted**, p. 169), Silent Legionnaires suffer no impediment on nonverbal threaten rolls or rolls to communicate with each other.

of the Navy's thousands of ships have mortal captains. These are all patricians and un-Exalted Dynasts, many of whom purchased commissions from House Peleps. On the rare occasions a peasant rises through the ranks to captaincy, typically because her fellow officers perished, she's elevated to patrician status.

Likewise, other shipboard officers, such as the first officer, pilot, purser, and surgeon, usually come from the patriciate; aristocratic officers respect peasant-born peers' skill and dedication, but never recognize them as social equals. Each officer has an assistant to fill her role when off duty or incapacitated. Common sailors and rowers are peasants. Marines — Peleps paramilitary and auxiliaries, abetted by rowers and sailors — follow similar patterns.

Sorcerers often find service attached to fleets and flotillas, twisting the weather to speed travel and to ward off storms and doldrums, and deploying battle magics and conjured spirits in naval engagements. Such postings are lonely, however, as sailors view them with especial superstitious dread.

Immaculate monks occasionally accompany fleets to deal with aquatic spirits. In their absence, the Navy tends toward irreverence; the sea is wild and deadly, and sailors deem themselves wise to propitiate its native powers. Cult worship of Daana'd is common, as is veneration of major thalassic gods and elementals.

Legionnaires distrust the Navy. The legions are helpless at sea; storms can sink their convoys without recourse. Sailors, for their part, rarely witness land battles; they see only legionnaires' seasickness and ignorance of sailing. Furthermore, while the legions extend the Realm's reach, only the Navy ensures that no enemy can touch the Blessed Isle's shores. So the Navy, from the most dandyish officer to the sweatiest, most salt-crusted rower, regards the legions with disdain, seeing them as mere adjuncts to the Imperial fleets.

Since the Empress' disappearance, the navy has become a tool of House Peleps' ambitions. Shipbuilding focuses on deep-drafted vessels to reinforce the Water Fleet, which has grown significantly to support the Peleps campaign to carve out an empire in the West.

The Merchant Fleet

Formerly the Imperial Navy's sixth fleet, the Merchant Fleet now stands alone. Where the Navy is responsible for military actions, the Merchant Fleet escorts tribute ships that satrapies send to the Blessed Isle. In exchange for guarding tribute from pirates and privateers, V'neef receives a share for itself — an enormous financial boon.



It also seizes contraband and claims captured pirate ships as prizes, along with the contents of their holds.

The Merchant Fleet was attached to House Peleps to fund the Navy's enormous maintenance costs. When the Empress elevated House V'neef, she transferred the Fleet to the nascent house to keep Peleps ambitions in check. The Fleet's Peleps scions and their most vocal supporters were dismissed during the transfer. But many older sailors and minor officers remain quietly devoted to their erstwhile masters, and would gladly see the Fleet returned to Peleps control.

Numbering close to a thousand ships of various sizes and designs, the Merchant Fleet is smaller than any directional fleet except the Earth Fleet. Its captains are canny experts in anti-piracy techniques, often disguising ships as merchant vessels so convoys appear defenseless. The Fleet's anti-piracy campaign has grown more aggressive, hunting buccaneers independently of tribute-guarding duties.

NAVAL BATTLE GROUPS

An Imperial trireme carries a Size 2 battle group of marines, using the traits of battle-ready troops or elite troops (**Exalted**, pp. 496-497) with average or elite Drill. They're led by the ship's arms master (use grizzled mercenary traits — **Exalted**, p. 497) or, more rarely, a Dragon-Blood captain. If a trireme is boarded, its crew and oarsmen join the fray as a Size 3 battle group with conscript traits (**Exalted**, p. 496) and poor Drill. They can also crew the trireme's siege weapons (**Arms of the Chosen**, p. 127) — a pair of ballistae or fire projectors.

The blue-water vessels of the Water Fleet, as well as heavier ships in the other fleets, boast larger complements of marines and crew. Most carry a Size 3 battle group of marines; the largest carry a Size 4 marine battle group. Sailing ships have smaller crews than triremes — only a Size 2 battle group — but because they're composed entirely of trained sailors, rather than rowers, they have average Drill. They're typically equipped with a catapult or fire cannon (or two), and multiple ballistae or fire projectors.

TREASURES OF THE FLEETS

Imperial Navy and Merchant Fleet officers often possess artifacts, loaned from their houses or obtained through purchase or plunder. The Navy also commands a bare handful of damaged, oft-repaired First Age warships that serve as flagships and dreadnoughts, along with several artifact siege weapons. Technically the Empress' property, she's no longer in a position to protest their repatriation by House Peleps.

Like House Peleps, V'neef has turned its maritime forces toward empire building in the West. Many tribute convoys go underprotected as a result. Still, House V'neef vehemently opposes allowing any other house to usurp its role. The Fleet will be a powerful tool if civil war comes, able to leave rival houses' tributes defenseless, or even seize them in a preemptive strike.

House Fleets

Each Great House has its own ships in the hands of individual households or the house as a whole. These include pleasure ships, packet boats, merchant fleets for commercial ventures, and military vessels to protect cargoes from piracy and convoy paramilitary forces. Cynis, Nellens, Ragara, and Sesus maintain the most sizable fleets. Tepet sold off most of its fleet after losing its legions.

The Imperial legions always relied on the Navy for transport across the Inland Sea. Should civil war arise, this practice will end along with Peleps' neutrality. The wealthier houses are arming merchant ships and building new military vessels. Others seek alliance with houses possessing sea power, and draw up troop dispositions knowing that the Inland Sea may, at any time, become uncrossable.

Against the Anathema

For centuries, the legions' most reliably dangerous foes were the Lunar Anathema. Tribes and states serving the Moon's Chosen fight with religious fervor, while Lunars themselves engage in devastating acts of espionage — poisoning supplies, sowing discord in the ranks, spying on military councils, changing sealed orders, and assassinating leaders to take their places.

The Lunars and their servants have many advantages — shapeshifting, unholy puissance, sorcery and other Anathema magic, numbers, knowledge of terrain, high morale — and few Threshold peoples can contest their advance. But the legions have honed their tactics to deal with the threat. Elaborate watchwords and webs of sentinels make enemy infiltration more difficult. Entrenchments and shield walls fend off powerful but less-disciplined warriors. Sorcerers and Immaculates counter spirits and other strange powers allied with the Anathema, while Sworn Kinships engage the Anathema directly. Setting fire to field or forest can both break enemy armies and leave them unable to sustain themselves.

Dragon-Blooded officers remain the Realm's most powerful weapon against Lunars and their armies. When the Realm masses enough Exalted in the field, little can stand against them besides truly enormous hordes, the Anathema themselves, or especially powerful monsters and magics dredged up from ancient ruins, the Wyld, or stranger places. Such opposition is rare, however, both because the Lunars rarely gather sufficient force in one place, and because such opposition warrants use of the Realm's dwindling handful of irreplaceable First Age war magic.

The legions usually defeat such forces in the end, but at great cost in blood and treasure. Anathema live long and see far, and their leaders are content to lose battle after battle to bleed the Realm of jade and Dragon-Blooded scions. Enough such pyrrhic Realm victories will see Lunars win the war. Before the Empress' disappearance and the Solars' return, the Silver Pact's victory seemed inevitable to its elders. Now Creation is thrust into chaos, and nothing is certain.

The Bull of the North's rout of the Tepet legions was among the first signs of this. Despite House Tepet's decimation, the other houses view the campaign as victory for the Realm overall, believing the Bull's forces defeated for good. Rumors of a resurgence of Solar Anathema have spread throughout the Realm, but few Dynasts who haven't seen this for themselves give such rumors credence. Some dismiss the stories as travelers' tales or Ledaal fearmongering; others believe the coming civil war at home takes precedence over Anathema in the hinterlands.

Empty Garrisons

Once, the Empress' legions enforced Imperial peace throughout the Threshold. Few dared war against her satrapies, and any bandit infestation, urban revolt, peasant uprising, heretical cult, or widespread lawlessness that threatened tribute collection was swiftly crushed. If a Realm garrison proved insufficient, the Imperial Navy deployed legions to the nearest port to destroy the

ANATHEMA IN THE TIME OF TUMULT

The Dynasty's general apathy towards reports of the Anathema is important when Storytelling games with Dragon-Blooded, Solar, and Lunar player characters. With the Realm focused on internal power struggles, Dragon-Blooded player characters have the opportunity to take positions of prominence in hunting down Anathema and potentially changing the status quo. Rather than being "just another shikari," they can be key players in the Realm's defense against the Anathema.

For Solar and Lunar player characters, this offers considerable breathing room. The Realm's Wyld Hunts are at their lowest ebb in its history; the threat they pose, while real, isn't omnipresent. However, Solar or Lunar player characters might be the ones who reveal the Anathema's true threat to the Realm at large, unifying the Dynasty against them.

threat.

With the Empress gone, the power vacuum has pulled most of the legions and much of the garrisons back to the Blessed Isle to protect the Great Houses' holdings there. While strategically important satrapies remain well-defended, the Realm maintains a skeletal presence elsewhere in the Threshold. Some satrapies are garrisoned with a handful of house paramilitary soldiers. Others go completely unprotected.

In mountainous Jiara, valued as a treasure trove of First Age relics, an entire Circle of Solar Anathema raised an insurrection against the Realm. Unwilling to countenance this heresy, Mnemon personally led three legions to quash the rebellion. Though Mnemon's troops aren't hobbled by the logistical problems the Tepet legions faced, and she herself is a legendary sorceress, her legions lack the Tepets' experience and brilliance. Though she was victorious in the initial battles and broke the rebels' hold on the capital, the conflict's ultimate outcome remains in doubt.

Emerging from the Southern desert at the head of a thousand nomadic warriors, the beguiling Lunar priestess Ketzepah Narrow-Ways and her Dragon King lieutenants have seized the Zephyrite city of Hyacinth. Casting down images of the Immaculate Dragons, she's replaced them with a Sun altar upon which she sacrifices the hearts of her enemies — rebels, religious martyrs, and soldiers captured in raids on other Zephyrite cities of the Elidad River basin. The satraps of Zephyr's city-states and the wealthy Cynosure Coast hold their garrisons close while begging their houses for legions to repel Ketzepah.

Civil war wracks the northern city-state of Mantle. While Queen Elet is her mother's legitimate heir, she's a target for her people's hatred of the Realm. Spurred by famine and oppressive taxes, the countryside has risen against her, backing a pretender said to be her illegitimate half-sister. Once, the Realm would have backed one contender with a legion, and that would be that. Now a peasant army marches on Mantle, opposed only by unreliable militia and a talon of garrison troops dispatched from the satrapial seat at Shale Strand.

Outlying Medoan tribes have begun raiding ill-defended neighboring satrapies. Riders sweep down on towns and caravans, slaughtering any who raise arms against them, stealing foodstuffs, livestock, and trade goods. Medoan princes say they're unable to identify the perpetrators and rein them in. In truth, not only do they back the raiders, they're preparing to ride against neighboring cities to carve out an empire as their Touman Prince did centuries ago. They hope their Tepet patrons will fight at their side.

Three peasants came to Nine Herb Mountain Monastery. They had journeyed to Arjuf Dominion from hardy Turu, lovely Aru-Thistle, and steadfast Bucolic Hymn, to speak with one voice on behalf of their people, to one who might listen. They were bid to wait, which they accepted. They were offered work in the fields below the monastery, which they embraced. Yet they never forgot their homes.

After a month with neither complaint nor complacency, Abbot Mnemon Amalu judged them sufficiently dedicated. She called them to her sand garden, where they could look out upon the city of Iron Scripture below, and drink tea, and ask their question.

The three peasant delegates knelt with the abbot, as monks raked the sands around them, forming infinitely new patterns. They spoke in the vernacular, and Amalu condescended to speak as they did. They were nervous, yet determined, which was appropriate.

The delegate from Turu began, gathering her courage: "Honored abbot, we come to you because our governors no longer care for us."

Amalu raised her eyebrows slightly. Perhaps she was surprised.

The delegate from Aru-Thistle rushed to mitigate Turu's harsh words: "We cannot speak for what lies in the hearts of the Exalted, of course, but our people bend — no, break under the weight of our taxes."

Amalu lowered her eyebrows slightly. Perhaps she was concerned.

The delegate from Bucolic Hymn steeled herself, and spoke as plainly as she dared: "Honored abbot, it doesn't seem right for the Exalted to take all our food and our work, and leave us with nothing. Must the Great Houses live so well that we starve? Are we not due some comfort for our obedience?"

Amalu closed her eyes. "You wish for our blessing in defying your governors." There was an uncomfortable silence, which she deepened by saying, "Or, perhaps, you wish for our direct intervention."

Said Turu, "You are right, honored abbot. We beg your intervention."

Amalu's eyes flashed with Essence, and the peasants grew afraid. "You are bold, to ask this. The Immaculate Order keeps society whole, and the Realm faces threats from every direction. Hard times do not qualify as true dereliction."

Said Aru-Thistle, "Honored abbot, perhaps you're right, but we also face threats from above and within! The more we starve, the more incensed we become. We three don't want a rebellion, but if we return home without hope, what choice will remain?"

Amalu pointed at the delegates. "Now I think we approach the truth of the matter. For word of banditry in your prefectures has reached our humble monastery long before you. Surely you agree that such crimes can only redouble any injustices brought about by imprudent governance?"

Feeling accused, Bucolic Hymn leaned forward. "Of course you are right, honored abbot. But we are only peasants, not warriors. We cannot solve one of our problems, let alone two!"

"Where is your faith?" demanded Amalu, and the peasants looked down in shame. "You boast of your obedience while undermining your rightful rulers, and you fail to ask for help with an obvious injustice." The abbot's expression remained stern for a few moments more, then relaxed. "Remember always: the Dragons provide for those who serve the Perfected Hierarchy."

The peasants looked to each other, and to the abbot, uncertain.

Amalu continued: "Who knows more of banditry than peasants, and what injustice can survive full understanding? Perhaps you can sift through rumors for a truth that will allow us to cure this bandit plague. Then, perhaps, your petition will find favor with the Elemental Dragons after all."

The three peasants heard this, and were enlightened.



Chapter Four

The Immaculate Order

As the soul sustains the body, the Immaculate Order sustains the Scarlet Dynasty. The Realm's official religion provides the Dragon-Blooded with a divine mandate to rule Creation in the Elemental Dragons' name, under the Empress' enlightened guidance. Immaculate monks work tirelessly to maintain proper social and spiritual order, sharing their wisdom through patient instruction and terrifying martial arts. The Immaculate Dragons (**Exalted**, pp. 71-73) serve as examples of upright and holy behavior to the Dragon-Blooded.

Now, with the Empress missing, her children turn from righteous rule to jockey for her throne, and Anathema brew ever-greater heresies in the Threshold. The Order faces chaos and unrest sufficient to make the faithful question whether the invincible Realm still holds the Dragons' favor.

The Immaculate Philosophy

Consider the humble farmer and the fertile hen.

It's the way of the farmer to tend to her fields, her animals, and her family; her just reward is the fruit of her labor and the honor of her family. It's the way of the hen to provide from her body, in the form of egg, flesh, and chicks; her just reward is the shelter and feed of the farm. The farmer, secure in her place, respects and nurtures the lesser creatures in her care. The hen, secure in her place, honors and obeys the farmer that cares for her. So it is from earth to Heaven: The lesser creature shelters beneath the greater, and gives honor and obedience in return. At Creation's heights, the Princes of the Earth. In its depths, the plants and creatures of the soil. When all see to their duties, all prosper, and Creation prospers with them.

Consider, then, the unmindful fox. It's the way of the fox to hunt vermin, to keep the wilds from being overrun, and to fill his belly. Yet if the fox shuns perfection and steals from the henhouse, then all is in disorder. The fox will become lazy and neglect his duties, and the vermin of the wild will run rampant. The hen will be gone before her time, and produce no more for the farmer that nurtured her. The farmer will lose her hens, or else must turn from her fields, animals, and family to set traps for the fox. The fox will be caught in time, and the stolen hen will weigh down his soul as he journeys to his next incarnation. It's better, then, for the perfect farmer to gird her yard, so the fox cannot reach her hens. In this way, the farmer follows a perfected life, and guides lesser creatures toward their own enlightenment.

This parable demonstrates the Immaculate Philosophy's central tenet. There's a structure to the universe, a celestial blueprint for all things laid down in the Immaculate Texts and disseminated by the Order's monks. This divine hierarchy calls upon all beings to honor, serve, and sacrifice for their superiors, and to provide protection, respect, and guidance to their inferiors. In striving to perfect the station given by the Elemental Dragons, every individual refines her own enlightenment, and will reincarnate into a new life where her station's fortune and influence reflect the improved quality of her soul. In denying or falling short of her station, she sows discord, tragedy, and confusion, and will reap these fruits in future incarnations.

The Perfected Hierarchy

In the Immaculate Philosophy, this is the way of Creation: The Five Elemental Dragons birthed Creation from their own Essence; all Essence seeks to refine itself into the perfection of the Dragons to return to that source; all life thus seeks its own perfection and reunification; souls reincarnate according to their enlightenment. Life thus consists of a cyclical struggle against the ego across multiple incarnations. If there's an end to this cycle, it's to ascend beyond incarnation — to transubstantiate and become one with the Dragons. To live is to struggle, even for the most enlightened.

In the upper echelons of this hierarchy walk the Dragon-Blooded. As the Immaculate Order teaches, each Prince of the Earth spent unnumbered lives

DIVINE PROSELYTES

By and large, spirits have as little to do with the Order as possible, resenting both its interference in their dealings and the drubbings administered by its monks. But a few, such as the city father Gri-Fel (p. XX), actively engage with the Order, attending religious celebrations and services at Immaculate temples on their prayer days, or advising Dynasts in matters of theology. For some, this is a simple matter of ingratiating themselves with a conquering force, and perhaps earning a better place in the prayer calendar. Others, cowed by the monks' power or enthralled by scripture, find themselves genuinely believing in the moral benefits of the Immaculate way.

refining her enlightenment before ascending to the ranks of the holy. In this the Elemental Dragons show their wisdom, for they place upon each person a weight of duty proportional to her ability to bear it responsibly. The Exalted carry all of Creation upon their backs, and for this burden they're due praise, wealth, and service. While heretics and the uninitiated view the Immaculate Philosophy as a tool to prop up the Dragon-Blooded, faithful millions view the Dragon-Blooded as sainted pillars of the Immaculate Philosophy. Mortals should gladly surrender the weighty concerns of rulership, and the Exalted should accept their responsibilities with gravity.

In this perfect order, the monk stands apart, yet integral to the whole. The Dragons call women and men from all levels of society to surrender secular pleasures in service to the Immaculate Order. In this, monks don't forsake their station, but fully embrace the duty that all beings carry: to act as custodians to the Perfected Hierarchy. As the Dragons took on flesh to overthrow the Anathema and enlighten Creation, so do Immaculate monks sacrifice their own prosperity to spread the Philosophy to every corner of Creation.

The Prayer Calendar

The Immaculate Order strictly regulates prayer. It isn't meet for spirits to extort prayer from mortals with promises or threats. The lay populace may only worship the Dragons and the gods at the direction of Immaculate monks. The Immaculate Order promulgates prayer calendars prescribing festivals and days of worship throughout the Scarlet Realm. Monks direct mortal worshippers' collective prayers according to calendars, and every god receives worship in proportion to her station. The Dragon-Blooded are exempt from such strictures, deemed sufficiently powerful and spiritually elevated to worship and treat with gods as they see fit.

Most of the prayer calendar's contents vary between regions, as Immaculates allot worship to local gods that submit to their orthodoxy; only the most important deities have their prayer days standardized throughout the Realm. Prayer calendar revisions serve as both carrot and stick for spirits — a god who seeks worship beyond her allotted due will have her prayer day struck from the calendar as punishment, while monks might offer a deity an additional festival in exchange for her assistance in an important matter.

Heresy

Immaculate monks teach that all life begins in ignorance of the Perfected Hierarchy. All things must grow in wisdom through guidance from the wise. Where wisdom cannot be found, heresy takes root, whether in Creation's furthest reaches or the Blessed Isle's heart. Where heresy exists, monks must root it out and destroy it through education, violence, or both. Any belief that contradicts the Immaculate Texts is heretical, but the gravest heresies relate to worship and the Anathema.

Heretical Worship

The outer Threshold teems with cults that defy every Immaculate tenet of right worship, and secret cults spring up even on the Blessed Isle. Immaculates refer to these cults collectively as the Hundred Gods Heresy, and hold a sacred duty to anticipate, uncover, and destroy such heretical worship. This is difficult, particularly in satrapies with rich religious histories and divine mythologies. Many cults go underground, while others syncretize Immaculate concepts. The Immaculate Order has centuries of experience stamping out illicit worship. Monks in the Realm ban and destroy iconography that could lead mortals to false worship, use public duels to settle questions of doctrine, and stage raids on heretical assemblies with expert coordination and intelligence.

The Order must also contend with Immaculate heterodoxies, various sects whose beliefs undermine the Immaculate Philosophy's orthodoxy. These include the Pure Way of Prasad (p. XX), the ghost-veneration of the Intou heretics of the northern River Province, and the Sisterhood of Pearls' Five Insightful Criticisms (**Dragon-Blooded**, p. 128), as well as heretical worship of the Immaculate Dragons in the Realm.

Mortals are forbidden to worship the Dragons directly. While Dragon-Blooded are encouraged to revere the Immaculate Dragons and permitted occasional prayers



or offerings to them, the Order roots out organized cults worshiping the Immaculate Dragons, imposing punishments appropriate to cultists' beliefs, actions, and degree of repentance.

The most common such cults are dedicated to Sextes Jylis. Peasants pray to him for children in barren marriages or for succor in times of famine, while tantric cults devoted to him come and go within the Dynasty. Mela follows close behind, worshipped as a legendary warrior and wise sage, especially in the legions. Daana'd receives veneration from sailors and coastal communities as a sea goddess; she's also occasionally claimed as a patron by transgender, nonbinary, and genderfluid worshippers, as she's a transgender woman herself. Pasiap is revered as a spiritual teacher, patron of architects, and guardian against Anathema. Mortals rarely worship Hesiesh, other than children believing his mastery of Essence can grant them Exaltation, but Dragon-Blooded may tread into heresy as they pray to him for self-discipline and restraint.

One of the smallest, yet most persistent Immaculate heresies is the Heresy of the Antitheses, which crops

DRAGON-BLOODED AND CULTS

A Dragon-Blood who reaps a mortal cult's prayers has led her inferiors into heresy, even if unintentionally. Her worshippers will suffer for their faith if discovered, and the Exalt suffers censure from her peers unless she punishes this heresy personally. Elder Dynasts advise cultivating obedience in the mortal masses, not love. Love warms the heart, they say, but obedience tempers iron.

The greatest, least-recognized exception was the Scarlet Empress. Beloved as the holiest of the holy Dragon-Blooded, with praises and supplications to her peppered throughout the Blessed Isle's vernaculars, the Empress had a vast heretical cult throughout her reign. Many believe that she was enlightened enough to achieve transubstantiation, but remained in Creation to shepherd her children. Spiritually minded Dynasts scoff at the idea that anyone *really* worships the Empress, even as peasants earnestly pray for her blessing, wherever she may be.

up among this or that prefecture's peasantry every few decades. It teaches that the Immaculate Dragons will return to Creation, reinvested in flesh as their Antitheses — the Unworthy Babbler, the Illiberal Churl, the Sickly Whore, the Inconsiderate Horseman, and the Ostentatious Peasant. Whether the returned Dragons come to punish the wicked or to herald the world's end varies between iterations of the heresy. Adherents worship the Dragons' negative aspects as holy devils, hoping their prayers will turn aside the Antitheses' punishments or earn a reprieve from doomsday.

The Anathema

If the Hundred Gods Heresy is a pandemic, then each Anathema is a unique threat promising a monstrous outbreak of diseased thinking. "Anathema" is a clerical term applied to threats fundamentally inimical to the Immaculate Philosophy, which can only be answered with a Wyld Hunt. Solars and Lunars are always Anathema, but other beings — such as Exigents, Liminals, or the like — earn the title only when their power and aggression merit a decisive response.

Each Wyld Hunt is a unique force — some are organized and orchestrated by the Immaculate Order, while others are called by a few individual Dragon-Blooded. Participation in a Wyld Hunt earns great honor, and every subject of the Realm bears a sacred duty to offer whatever assistance the Hunt may require. Dragon-Blooded travel for hundreds or thousands of miles to answer its call, to descend upon the Anathema with overwhelming speed and ferocity, and to exult in the Dragon-Blooded Host's invincible might.

With the Empress gone and her children withdrawing forces from the Threshold, a Wyld Hunt may be slower to assemble, but no less deadly when it strikes. Each Wyld Hunt aims to overwhelm its target, knowing it must cut her down while she's still inexperienced lest she become another Bull of the North or Ma-Ha-Suchi. The Hunt kills many Anathema, but captures some that cannot be killed or that possess strange powers which promise some benefit to the Realm. The Immaculate Order seals these profane marvels away in lightless corners of Creation, to be studied or exploited as the rest of the Realm forgets their existence. A few Anathema were taken to the Imperial Manse at the Empress' decree.

Immaculate monks understand the nature of the Solar and Lunar Anathema. The Order knows that it hunts and murders Exalted, but believes that the unyielding perfection of Solar Essence and mutable chaos of Lunar Essence lead inevitably to insanity. As spiritually naïve mortals transformed into tragic monsters, these Anathema cannot help but disrupt and pervert the Perfected Hierarchy wherever they go. Better that they die quickly, before the corruptive taint of their undeserved power spreads too far. Few monks see the need to explain these fine details to mortals and disinterested lay Dragon-Blooded, who would only become confused. Only hearts of iron can provide the mercy that Anathema need most.

OTHER WORLDS

The Immaculate Philosophy is largely unconcerned with otherworldly lands beyond Creation — such knowledge is unimportant and irrelevant to most adherents. While Dragon-Blooded have access to education and texts that provide extensive knowledge on these, most mortals in the Realm only know the following.

Heaven: Yu-Shan is the abode of the most powerful spirits. It isn't an afterlife for mortals to aspire to.

Hell: Not an afterlife, but the strange land from which demons hail. Few know the name Malfeas.

The Underworld: The inauspicious realm of ghosts who refuse to submit to their rightful reincarnation, and the hungry dead. Shadowlands are perilous places to be avoided.

The Wyld: A dangerous, chaotic land haunted by mutants and Anathema.

The Immaculate Texts

No written work claims more influence in the Second Age than the Immaculate Texts, from which spring all wisdom and enlightenment in the Immaculate Order's eyes. These volumes — each written by an Immaculate Dragon or a witness to their endeavors — set forth the order of the universe, the Immaculate Dragons' deeds, and the perfected way of every social station. Through study of the Immaculate Texts, one may learn to live a prosperous lifestyle, and to champion the Perfected Hierarchy wherever it's fallen to chaos. The modern Realm's ascetic social policy for the peasantry and its aggressive expansion into the Threshold closely align with the demands that the Immaculate Texts laid down centuries ago.

Though the Immaculate Texts aren't subject to official revision, they remain a complex, living creation. Compiled and altered by Dragon-Blooded scholars and Sidereals — and in rare cases, fabricated outright by the Bronze Faction — with the aim of designing a self-sustaining society, the Texts have always been a mélange

of topics ranging from herding to hygiene to erotica. Dragon-Blooded quest through First Age ruins for texts worthy of inclusion in Immaculate canon, following appropriate revisions. Linguistic drift and Creation-wide distribution have resulted in varied translations that further complicate the Order's sprawling doctrine.

Immaculate monks are authorized to define proper interpretation of doctrine, and to enforce right behavior as they see fit. The Immaculate Texts teach that the faithful can lead others to enlightenment through an open scroll or closed fist, so monks spend years perfecting their minds and bodies to provide either method of instruction. When monks fundamentally disagree on a point of doctrine, they may escalate their debate into a duel to determine who better understands the Dragons' will. Such duels can be brutal, but are rarely fatal. Even a poor debater holds the Dragons' favor as long as she continues to win.

When disagreements over doctrine become sufficiently widespread and entrenched, minority followers break away into an Immaculate sect. The Order historically suppressed these sects whenever possible, as they rejected its control, and thus Sidereal influence. In the Time of Tumult, the Order's unity of vision trembles before the upheaval of the Realm's long-held social order. Some among the faithful argue that the Empress vanished because the Realm has lost the Dragons' blessing, while others believe that she's transubstantiated to open the throne to her children, or that she's gone to the Caul to claim that holy land with the aid of the true faithful. Still other monks, seeing the Dynasty neglecting its duties toward the Threshold, believe that the Order must properly guide the Realm's heroes. The Immaculate Order faces an unprecedented risk of sectarian fracture, and its grandmasters struggle to find a solution that won't betray its principles.

History and the Order

The Immaculate Order functions as the largest source of historical and academic inquiry in the Realm, perhaps in all Creation. Monks collect, study, and transcribe the world's history in a vast collection spanning hundreds of monastic and temple libraries. Many tales of Creation's lost days hide in monasteries rarely seen by laity, their contents dispensed at the Order's discretion.

Popular myth states that the Immaculate Order was born when the Elemental Dragons incarnated to lead the Dragon-Blooded in glorious rebellion against the demonic Anathema, raising the Dragon-Blooded to their rightful place as Princes of the Earth. This view of history suffices for most lay mortals, and even for incurious Dragon-Blooded, whose station doesn't demand the full truth. Once a monk has received sufficient spiritual preparation, she learns a more nuanced history: that the Immaculate Order was founded during the Dragon-Blooded Shogunate, that the Immaculate Dragons' great deeds are allegories condensed from dozens of historical Dragon-Blooded across various time periods, and that the Solar and Lunar Anathema are Exalted themselves, though doomed to insanity.

Though it's a constructed religion, the Immaculate Order is *well*-constructed and requires minimal historical revision to function. The Sidereals planned for the Immaculate Texts to face millennia of scrutiny by a dynasty of highly educated demigods, and risked only lies that couldn't be directly tested. Perhaps some being in Heaven or Hell witnessed Sidereals pen certain Immaculate Texts, or knows the true purpose of reincarnation, or saw Creation formed by a hand other than the Elemental Dragons', but if so, they've never proven their claims. Where knowledge is sparse, faith suffices.

THE ORDER AND THE INCARNAE

The Immaculate Order acknowledges the existence of the Unconquered Sun, Luna, and the Five Maidens as the highest of gods, second only to the Elemental Dragons in import. However, the Order largely doesn't worship the Incarnae, viewing them as too removed from the affairs of Creation and humanity to merit or desire veneration. The lay populace is almost entirely ignorant of the Incarnae. If the Most High are displeased by this, they haven't left their Jade Pleasure Dome to make their discontent known.

Organization

For many of Creation's people, the Immaculate Order seems ageless and omnipresent. The Immaculate Philosophy serves as the Realm's official religion, and as an extension of Realm influence in lands beyond Dragon-Blooded control. Missionary monks seek out rumored settlements in Creation's furthest reaches and smuggle Immaculate teachings into hostile territories. Some villages know the Order only by the monk who visits every year, bearing wisdom and punishing troublemakers, but these monks act as the eyes, ears, and fingers of a massive enterprise, well-coordinated and driven by shared purpose.

Temples, Monasteries, and Open Roads

In populous regions, **temples** serve as the Immaculate Order's face. Each houses a staff of monks that serve their community, shelter visiting monks, and send reports back to the Order through the temple's abbot. Peasants visit for scheduled services, which include monk-led worship of local spirits, but they're usually free to visit at any hour of day or night. In temples, the faithful seek wisdom from monks, contemplate their lives, make donations, and approach enlightenment in accordance with the Immaculate Texts. Temples often offer basic education: Monks teach peasant children reading and arithmetic from ages four to nine. Many children in city slums and hinterland towns learn to read from excerpts of the Immaculate Texts and grow up with a healthy respect for the monks that taught them. Children who cannot learn respect for the monkhood may learn fear instead; that too is educational.

Most temples answer to a local mission: a central temple with administrative authority over a geographic region, headed by an influential monk called an archimandrite. Missions collect intelligence and excess donations from satellite temples, and coordinate temple staffing, resources, itinerant routes, and communication in their region. Missions answer to higher Directional missions, which in turn answer directly to the Palace Sublime on the Blessed Isle, home of the Mouth of Peace and center of the Immaculate Order. Through dutiful adherence to this system, the Order manages a constant flow of information with greater efficiency than the bloated Guild, and with more public sanction than any secret police force.

While the Immaculate temple forms the beating heart of a community, **monasteries** function apart from society, away from well-trod paths. In these secluded structures, monks learn, study, and contemplate the Philosophy's mysteries, housed in two-person quarters called cells. Monasteries are highly structured, spiritual places staffed exclusively by monks and oblates (laypersons sworn to serve the monastery). Generally only influential Dragon-Blooded can secure an invitation for full access to a monastic library without entering the monkhood. Such invitations provoke envy among academics. Many of Creation's foremost scholars of history and nature are monks who spend years or decades in a single monastery, studying, transcribing, and illuminating rare texts, or writing new treatises of their own.

Aside from academic study, monks seek out monastic seclusion and structure for many reasons — to recover from crises of faith, evade powerful enemies, or train in rare martial techniques. Each monastery has its own rules, character, and reputation. A few monasteries house members of only one gender or focus on one field of study, while other monasteries dedicate themselves to the study and worship of one of the Elemental Dragons. These last monasteries are particularly valuable to Dragon-Blooded monks who feel their Essence straining against old limits, and who wish to retire from the world to cultivate their elemental might. A monk seeking admission to a monastery petitions the monastery's abbot, a monk of great power and experience. This petition is often a formality, but most abbots expect petitioners to stay and contribute to the monastery for at least a full season.

Beyond sight of any temple or monastery, the **itinerant monk** carries the Immaculate Order on her back. She may travel a specific annual circuit, tenaciously fighting vagaries of weather and terrain to maintain her schedule, ensuring that every town, village, and crossroad on her route receives the blessings and structure of the Dragons. She may travel as her spirit demands, seeking crises and heresy, bestowing order wherever she feels it's needed. Or she may travel according to secret instructions,

THE MOUTH OF PEACE

She personifies the people's faith, provides an inspirational public face, and carries the words of the pious into the halls of power. The Order teaches that each Mouth of Peace is a reincarnation of the last, a cyclical counterpart to the ageless Empress. In the years after the Mouth of Peace dies, monks scour the Realm for young girls who fit certain spiritual criteria and pass specially designed tests. With Sidereal guidance, the Order often finds an ideal candidate, likely to Exalt, before she's 15 years old. When she Exalts, she surrenders her name. In the few cases a Mouth has failed to Exalt, she's been deemed a mistaken selection, and the Order has hastened to find the young Dragon-Blood who is the former Mouth's "true" reincarnation.

As a beloved representative of the Immaculate Order, the Mouth of Peace is important, but she's not always politically powerful. The current Mouth of Peace once struggled to assert her vision for the Order over Chejop Kejak's control, but now she approaches the end of her natural life. Fearing that her death and the subsequent ill-omened interregnum between Mouths will signal civil war, and that a leaderless Order may lack the mettle to intervene, she seeks historical and canonical precedent to bypass the normal selection process and choose her own successor.

provided for her at prearranged temples and drop points — these "celestially guided" itinerants are precision tools for their superiors in the Immaculate Order. Skilled assassins, spies, and investigators, they solve thorny problems with ruthless efficiency, then return to the anonymity of monk's robe and tonsure. Regardless of personal goals and styles, the Order expects all itinerant monks to make scrupulous reports on the state of communities they visit, including their needs, risks of heresy or social instability, and whether a population has grown large enough to require its own temple.

Rarely, a monk switches from one role — temple, monastic, itinerant — to another, with permission from her superiors and appropriate training.

The Breaths of the Immaculate Dragons

The Immaculate Order's administrative wing organizes itself according to the Order's practical needs. While missions provide staffing based on geographic location, each of the five administrative divisions — called Breaths — addresses a specific array of problems using a floating staff, rapidly deployed throughout the Realm. These monks provide logistical support and planning for Immaculate projects, plus additional staff when necessary. Each Breath claims tens of thousands of staff on the Blessed Isle alone, and they're well-prepared to concentrate their forces in cases of emergency. In times of peace and prosperity they're more scattered but still busy, for the Order requires unceasing work.

Each Breath is headquartered at a major temple on the Blessed Isle. Many administrators visit their headquarters rarely, for their work is wide-ranging and continuous.

The Breath of Sextes Jylis (Human Resources and Public Works) focuses on development of sustainable resources, both human and natural. This Breath's staff handles recruitment, sorting, and assignment for would-be monks, and in truth they maintain a constant (even intrusive) presence throughout the life of any monk, sometimes arranging painful lessons to provide some expected spiritual benefit. This Breath's staff also orchestrates large-scale environmental planning initiatives, such as creating dams, food-bearing forests, and stable agricultural communities. With more staff than any other Breath, the Breath of Sextes Jylis often seems omnipresent in Immaculate-influenced areas. In the wake of a natural disaster, the Breath provides significant support and infrastructure to restore the community's needs, and coordinates with the Breath of Daana'd for optimal disaster relief.

The Breath of Pasiap (Architecture and Geomancy) oversees and contracts out the construction and maintenance of structures belonging to the Immaculate Order, and manages and budgets the Order's wealth. This Breath's staff includes groundskeepers, architects, geomancers, actuaries, and various specialists providing necessary insight into the Order's diverse holdings and resources. They leave public works to the Breath of Sextes Jylis, but occasionally hire out their construction services to keep work crews productive and skilled. While manse maintenance is highly prestigious work, and construction is fairly public, this Breath downplays its own importance in managing the Order's funds. As an organization devoted to ideals — and one with no desire to be seen as a rival by the Great Houses — the Order prefers not to flaunt its prodigious wealth.

The Breath of Mela (Combat Training and Military Planning) defends the Immaculate Order and provides training so the Order's monks can defend themselves. Organization and maintenance of Wyld Hunts and martial orders falls to this Breath, as does placement of military force — for the Immaculate Order, this mostly means guarding particular locations or individuals. Though the Breath of Sextes Jylis prepares acolytes for life as a monk, the Breath of Mela provides much of their actual training, for the monk's way combines spiritual, mental, and physical perfection. Despite their importance to the legendary martial prowess of Immaculate monks, the Breath of Mela has the smallest staff of any Breath — most monks see themselves primarily as spiritual and social guides, not warriors.

The Breath of Hesiesh (Special Projects) provides for emergent needs that lack established procedures, reinforces the other Breaths with additional manpower, trains mortal thaumaturges and sorcerers in pious usage of their gifts, and handles assets of inauspicious origin such as Exigents and dangerous First Age artifacts. The Breath of Hesiesh takes an unusually egalitarian and practical approach to staffing and problem-solving, resulting in a population consisting heavily of the old, infirm, and eccentric. Monks who have trouble fitting in with the order find their talents put to good use by the Breath of Hesiesh, and even those with no particular talents may find a place in the Breath's ranks. As a side effect of its makeup, the Breath of Hesiesh varies in size. When a population boom of monks grows older, or when pestilence renders large swaths of the monkhood infirm, the Breath of Hesiesh's ranks can swell to exceed all but the Breath of Sextes Jylis'.

The Breath of Daana'd (Human Community Development) sees to the needs of communities that the Immaculate Order seeks to guide. Where the Breath of Sextes Jylis focuses on environmental concerns, the Breath of Daana'd provides social services such as healthcare, housing, and education in various contexts. Monks provide care for their communities at every stage of life,

CELESTIAL GUIDANCE

Though it's slowed in execution, the Wyld Hunt still finds many Anathema shortly after their Exaltation. The Order credits its swiftness to a stable of Immaculate thaumaturgists trained in divinatory arts. Though these diviner-monks are skilled and sometimes successful, their greater purpose is to provide a cover for Sidereal foresight. With Sidereal direction, the Wyld Hunt, itinerant monks, and the Breaths of the Dragons can mobilize and investigate threats that are still in infancy.

guided by the Breath of Daana'd's standards and priorities. In times of crisis, this Breath provides humanitarian aid. Many monks find this Breath's work rewarding yet spiritually challenging, for they're ideally placed to notice early signs of heresy and social unrest. Duty dictates that a monk cut away such threats by any means necessary, even from a community that she's come to love.

The Bronze Faction

In the Immaculate Order's heart there's a second, secret order. Posing as Dragon-Blooded monks of unusual power and wisdom, the Sidereal Exalted subtly guide the Order with ancient knowledge, insight into fate, and destiny-weaving powers. Only the wisest monks and most perceptive lay Dragon-Blooded know of these secret allies, who can manipulate whole societies and direct the Wyld Hunt toward threats that will soon rise.

Once, this hidden society comprised much of the Sidereal Host, united under the leadership of Chejop Kejak (p. XX). With his inner circle of ancient Sidereal peers, Kejak directed younger Sidereals in maintaining the Realm, and in continued suppression of the Lunar and Solar Exalted. He spends much of his time guiding the Order while posing as an assistant to the Mouth of Peace.

Now, centuries of stability threaten to break apart. With the Solars' return, the Gold Faction of Sidereals that once backed the Lawgivers as Creation's true princes has reemerged, defying Kejak's plans for a world of compromise, stability, and survival. Kejak retains a majority of the Sidereal Host in his own Bronze Faction, but his inner circle has dwindled since the First Age, and he will die of old age soon. He has no intention of surrendering over a millennium of hard-fought peace to the mad god-kings of his memory, and his followers know from history that the Solars can be beaten with sufficient planning and manpower.

While directing ten thousand Princes of the Earth is difficult even at the best of times, the Empress' disappearance complicated the Bronze Faction's work immensely. They work feverishly to avert or mitigate civil war in the Realm, and to maintain the Wyld Hunt's effectiveness so that no Lunars or Solars grow too powerful while the Dynasty looks toward the center. Kejak and his inner circle assign younger Sidereals to gather intelligence and head off unacceptable destinies, while preparing for decisive action with the Order's immense resources.

The Order and Society

Where the Immaculate Order holds influence, monks preside over every stage of life and every community milestone. In much of Creation, until an Immaculate monk pronounces a child's name, that child is simply "girl" or "boy." Monks provide geomantic oversight for harmonious building projects, advise mortals on auspicious times for marriage and conception, and banish unwelcome spirits and hungry ghosts. They also perform ceremonial funerals that employ local traditions to ensure a restful passing. This influence applies at every level of society. Peasants rely on monks to interpret and intercede with gods, while Great House matriarchs honor the elemental insight and purity of the Order's grandmasters. In lands where the Order has held sway for generations, most can't imagine life without it, or why anyone would seek such a life. Under ideal conditions, the Perfected Hierarchy provides stability rarely experienced in Creation.

Conditions are rarely ideal, and when they are, people become complacent. Complacency leads spirits to greed, mortals to unrest, and Dragon-Blooded to hubris. The Immaculate Order serves society, then, by policing it with constant vigilance. In denying themselves life's more alluring pleasures, monks become more difficult to sway or corrupt. In applying precisely calibrated violence, monks serve the greater peace. They safeguard the social order by standing apart.

Politics

The Immaculate Order is a deeply political entity, though few of its supporters think of it that way. It doesn't compete for power, prestige, or wealth as the Great Houses do. Most of the Order's resources come from donations and bequests, and few monks would accept a position of temporal power except as a temporary measure in times of crisis. Because Immaculate monks forswear sex, they rarely form power blocs based on blood ties. In thoroughly indoctrinated regions like the Blessed Isle, the Order more closely resembles a force



of nature than an organization. Politicians may align themselves with the Order or move without its blessing, but few view it as a rival. The Mouth of Peace may speak for the Immaculate Order, and move millions of hearts with a single statement, but she doesn't claim to *control* the Order any more than an astrologer claims to control the heavens.

Yet the Order does act politically, if unobtrusively. Where the Immaculate Philosophy holds sway, monks advise courts and powerful individuals, publish tracts addressing contentious topics, and hold demonstrations to instruct witnesses in the Dragons' will. Powerful figures who act in alignment with the Order publicly reap blessings, while those who act against the Dragons' will find many doors closed to them. If a person or group consistently flouts propriety, the Order turns its face from the offenders and remains silent in their presence. This censure is immensely damaging. Few can weather the public scorn, servant revolts, and blatant sabotage that follow the monks' silence. Most subjects of the Order's censure ultimately earn forgiveness through lavish donations and public displays of humility, or else flee society in disgrace. Even a casually blasphemous Sesus scion thinks twice about her words while in the Order's eye.

Where the Immaculate Philosophy is weak and heresy reigns, the Order must be proactive, even ruthless. Its political aims are so broad that it effectively opposes entire power structures, from princes to priests. The Order undermines its rivals' authority, reveals damaging secrets, and even assassinates particularly stubborn champions of heretical cultures. From the perspective of the faithful, these efforts remain apolitical: Rather than seeking worldly power, the Immaculate Order seeks to impose civilization where it doesn't exist. To the Realm, nations that haven't embraced the Perfected Hierarchy are barbaric and backward, and true government cannot proceed in those locales until a civilized foundation is in place.

Social Control

The Immaculate Order has one goal: force Creation's civilizations into its philosophy's idealized order. To accomplish this goal, the Order must shape and perfect every level of society, using social engineering techniques set forth in the Immaculate Texts. They trace every ill and unrest to spiritual failures undermining the Perfected Hierarchy and root out the disharmony they deem responsible. To this end, the Order collects and controls information, as accumulation of wisdom makes the Order suitable to guide those who have none.

WHAT CONSTITUTES ICONOGRAPHY?

The Immaculate Order is an aniconic religion: Representative artwork tempts mortals into false worship, and must be controlled. Artwork and decorations in Immaculate-influenced lands tend toward the abstract and geometric. Rules regarding icons evolve over time, and are situational rather than absolute — certain professions require accurate representation for practical purposes, and monks judge when illustrations encourage idolatry. The Order currently allows mortals to display respectful depictions of the Elemental Dragons and Immaculate Dragons at shrines or in their homes, though wearing such imagery as ornamentation crosses the line. Dragon-Blooded can own, display, and worship representative artwork as they choose, though conservative Dynasts prefer not to expose mortals to controversial art.

The Immaculate Order is the single greatest source of basic education in Creation. Millions credit Immaculate monks for their knowledge of the world and its history. Monks transcribe thousands of books every year, many of which travel to temple libraries accessible to the public. While the Order freely provides knowledge, it also controls what information is publicly available. The Order unhesitatingly bans heretical or controversial media — books, songs, iconography — from public consumption. Monks who uncover banned materials have them destroyed publicly, often by the very people who made or kept them. The relative truth that banned materials contain is immaterial compared to their potential for social unrest, and the Order expects its monks to realize this. Monks sometimes retain copies of banned works to better understand the threat they pose, while Dragon-Blooded are considered spiritually elevated enough to keep and use banned materials as they see fit.

Fiction in the Realm often uses the monk as a plot device for revealing the truth. In the monk's presence, other characters find their best-kept secrets coming to light by the Dragons' will. This archetype is a benign reflection of the Immaculate Order's voracious collection of intelligence. Every monk learns to provide detailed reports on her activities and interactions, and particularly vigilant or insightful monks are prized. Many monks excel at collecting valuable confessions; others investigate criminal behavior or send the faithful to spy on hidden cults. Rare investigators earn the title of inquisitor, and wield special authority to investigate apostasy, corruption, and scandal in the Order's heart.

The Immaculate Order doesn't simply collect information, nor does it share everything it learns with temporal governments. The Order uses or doles out secrets in exchange for allies and influence, or acts decisively in cases of heresy and immediate danger to the social order. Often this means coordinated violence, or even a call for a Wyld Hunt. Kinder monks prefer to educate mortals who've been led into heresy and show them the errors in their dogma. Others execute heretics without pause, confident the dead will face the Dragons' judgment and receive a fitting reincarnation. Satrapial governors and police learn either to support the Order's activities or to stay out of the way, for the Order carries the trust and backing of the Dragon-Blooded.

Unrest, Protest, and Uprisings

Sometimes order breaks down. Confusion can arise at any level of the Perfected Hierarchy. Social obligations become muddled. Corruption in the Immaculate Order's ranks can lead to abuse, heresy, and feuds between monks. Peasants suffering droughts or disasters may seek to take by force the prosperity the Order promises its faithful. Dragon-Blooded often fail to rule with the virtue, wisdom, and skill expected of their elevated spiritual position. Most often, each of these factors influences and exacerbates the others.

The Immaculate relationship with civil unrest is complex. Monks have suppressed or mitigated countless uprisings, but they've also allowed or led dozens of revolts across the Realm's history. The Order demands that the weak obey the powerful, but also expects rulers to provide a basic level of care for the peasantry. When obedience brings only suffering and starvation, civilization cannot function, and the Order must set things right.

If governors, generals, and princes close their hearts to the Immaculate Order's words, the Order doesn't deny their authority, but rather silently censures the corrupt. When censure brings redoubled impropriety rather than responsibility, the Order turns to nonviolent protest. Tracts, posters, and sermons remind society of the proper order of things. Monks lead strikes or march in ominous silence through the streets. Mortal monks faced with unacceptable orders from Dragon-Blooded respectfully refuse. When nonviolent methods receive violent responses, Immaculate monks defend themselves, lending their legendary martial skills to righteous causes and teaching the meaning of propriety by force.

The Great Houses — like the Empress before them — generally allow a revolt to burn a few noble homes and the occasional local ministry (and with them, tax records) before sending troops to quell the chaos. Rebel leaders face execution, their followers return to work,

SLAVERY AND THE ORDER

The Immaculate Philosophy recognizes slavery as simply another misfortune a mortal may face in an incarnation, no different than poverty, debility, or birth among barbarian peoples. Slaves who serve dutifully and docilely will fare better in their next life. But the Philosophy still demands that a slave's masters provide for her needs and refrain from needless cruelty. Monks are as quick to aid slave rebellions as peasant revolts.

and corrupt or foolish governors receive replacements. For instance, Trae Leng's Revolt in RY 299 resulted in the looting of Lord's Crossing and the revelation of disgraceful behavior by prominent local ministers. Other notable peasant rebellions include the Vengeful Harvest of RY 326, the Bloodied Scythe Uprising of RY 707, and the Ragara's Widows Uprising of RY 591, so named because House Ragara's tenant farmers faced starvation due to the house's brutal taxation. In each case, the Immaculate Order disciplined its rebel monks — typically a matter of show, the monks having already received their abbots' tacit approval.

In RY 465, the Realm faced a uniquely disturbing revolt. Claiming a monk named Seven Rivers as their leader, the Unbroken Rushes Rebellion surged into the public eye just before harvest in nine prefectures. The rebellion's adherents claimed the Empress had lost the Dragons' favor, as evidenced by three consecutive years of drought. They refused to work, no matter the punishment, demanding the Empress prove her divine mandate by conjuring food and drink from the air. She instead called on House Ragara to import massive amounts of foodstuffs, and paid traveling performers to discredit Seven Rivers as an Anathema seeking to mislead the Realm's subjects.

Seven Rivers evaded all attempts at capture, anticipating the approach of the Empress's agents with uncanny accuracy that enhanced his reputation as Anathema. Though his tracts were widely distributed during the rebellion, few ever met Seven Rivers, and his true identity was never established. Centuries later, hinterlanders still claim sightings of Seven Rivers and share tall tales of his deeds, which always favor the poor and humble.

Dragon-Blooded Society

The Immaculate Order boldly pushes the position that the Dragon-Blooded alone are Creation's rightful rulers. Every child in the Realm dreams of Exaltation, great deeds, and mortals who can no longer gainsay her. Dynastic children dream of the day when their Exalted relatives will look them in the eye.

In the Immaculate Philosophy, Dragon-Blooded aren't only superior, but holy. They've earned wisdom and power over countless lifetimes of virtuous obedience to the Perfected Hierarchy, and have the undeniable right to reap the fruits of their power as they please. Their every action inspires Creation to heap rewards upon them; their every word guides mortals to enlightenment. As children work in their limited way to bring honor and greatness to their parents' house, so should mortals take joy in laboring for the Dragon-Blooded.

This environment divides Dragon-Blooded and mortals into effectively different orders of being. Immaculate society confirms an Exalt's natural solipsism and teaches mortals that they would have Exalted if their dreams were meant to come true. Young Dragon-Blooded enjoy praise, education, and self-expression with total freedom, effortlessly outstripping childhood rivals and obstacles, while mortals refuse to oppose or even directly contradict them. The world seems so eager to bow before the Dragon-Blooded that mortal things soon seem childish and unsatisfying. Wanting for nothing, Dragon-Blooded seek challenges and glories only their peers can provide, or seek structure and simplicity in monkhood.

Perceptive outcastes understand this social engine's self-serving nature and find it enticing or distasteful, but the system is often invisible to Exalted Dynasts. They view the excess and ambition of Realm high society as their birthright. They learn to avoid personal engagement with mortals, for sympathy and attachment distract from command. When they leave their gilded homes, most Dynasts see a Creation full of uneducated barbarians and wasted resources, waiting to be tamed for the greater glory of the Scarlet Dynasty. They seek to dominate and direct mortals as a spiritual duty, for in practicing obedience to Exalted wisdom, mortals improve their souls. Few entertain doubts about their rightful place in the universe; doubt is a mortal thing for which Princes of the Earth quickly lose tolerance.

Life in the Order

Monkhood is at once profession, commitment, and lifestyle. Immaculate monks dedicate themselves to a monumental, never-ending task, and receive few earthly pleasures in return. Those who embrace the hardship and solitude of spiritual life find purpose and efficacy they never imagined. Those who break under

the monkhood's pressures learn a hard lesson about accepting their station in life, and in this they still serve the Perfected Hierarchy.

Entering the Monkhood

Spiritually minded youths come from rare Immaculate-run primary schools, bearing sponsorships and deep preparation for monastic life. Farmers and tradesfolk put their humble skills to work in temples and monasteries. Repentant criminals and mercenaries seek inner peace and honest work. Exiles, orphans, and refugees find anonymity and protection, ensconced in temple walls. Even the mighty Dragon-Blooded may put aside worldly pleasures and temptations for greater communion with their Essence.

Mortals and outcastes generally begin their new lives by presenting themselves as postulants at a nearby mission. Each postulant dons coarse gray robes and endures the monks' commands and chastisements as they await an audience with the archimandrite. Postulants may wait days or weeks for this audience, though the archimandrite speeds the process for postulants with influential sponsors or great potential. Dynasts undergo a similar process, though their sponsorships often merit consideration in the heart of all missions, the Palace Sublime (p. XX). If the postulant is accepted, regardless of stature, she's declared an acolyte of the first rank, and her training begins immediately.

Acolytes spend a year or more at the mission in care of the Puissant and Humble Instructors, who test and drill acolytes in fundamentals of martial arts and Immaculate Philosophy every day. This training is grueling, and at the turn of every season acolytes undergo testing to ascend in rank. Those who pass five such examinations graduate to true monkhood. Acolytes that the Instructors believe will never achieve the bare minimum of mental or physical fitness necessary for monkhood are dismissed. Many former acolytes return home stronger, more disciplined, and more aware of their limitations. Others swear themselves to the service of the Order with whatever lay skills they possess, and are called oblates.

Once an acolyte ascends to monkhood, her training intensifies. Monks known as Diligent and Skilled Teachers drill the newly ordained monk morning and night, testing her for advancement at their discretion over a period that may last years. Each monk dedicates her training to one Dragon and its associated martial art, beginning with unarmed techniques and progressing to



weaponry. Students with prior training or special potential receive extra training while their peers sleep.

A monk in training may have to stand perfectly still for hours while enduring shouted insults and pulled blows, or she may be challenged to rapidly change stances while answering complex theological questions. As mortal monks are capable only of learning the fundamentals of Immaculate styles, they aren't tested for the highest ranks of martial skill. Dragon-Blooded may be asked to weather sharp darts without shedding blood, perform katas requiring superhuman agility, or meditate for hours in freezing cold or driving storms. Monks who fail such tests receive no chastisement, only bruises and continued training.

When the Diligent and Skilled Teachers determine that a student has progressed as far as training can take her, she's considered a monk of the First Coil. She consults with administrators from the Breath of Sextes Jylis to determine her appropriate placement, based on where she feels led to serve and where the Order needs her most. Monks of particular potential, background, or skill receive important, challenging placements where they can excel and, perhaps, rise through the Coils of the Immaculate Order quickly. Martial skill, wisdom, and accomplishment contribute to advancement.

Monks of the First Coil serve positions of low authority. With the Second Coil comes increased responsibility in a temple, monastery, or administrative branch, or training in some specialist field. Mortals generally plateau at the Third Coil, where they nonetheless can serve as administrators, temple abbots, and specialists. Fourth Coil monks assume major roles such as archimandrites, high-ranking administrators in the Breaths, and elite specialists. The Order's grandmasters occupy the Fifth Coil.

Monastic Names

Each new acolyte surrenders her name as a token of her surrender of her old life, and receives a new name from the archimandrite. Acolyte names are typically plain and unpretentious, such as Arrow, Beetle, Grass, or Hawk.

Upon attaining the First Coil, the monk may reclaim her old name if she wishes; this is most common for Dynasts. Alternatively, she may choose to retain her acolyte name, preferring its simplicity and humility; or she may petition the archimandrite for a new name reflecting her inner nature. Recipients of elaborate monastic names take on diminutives; for instance, Righteous River Overflows Its Banks is usually called River.

Lifestyle

Immaculate monks surrender many pleasures and comforts of secular life in pursuit of spiritual service. These sacrifices set the Immaculate apart and render her recognizable throughout much of Creation. Even her enemies may respect her, for Immaculate monks' discipline and fortitude are legendary.

Humility

As servants of the Perfected Hierarchy, monks strive to remain humble and shun trappings of vanity. Monks may not bear makeup, piercings, decorative scars, or tattoos, and must conceal deliberate body modifications that predate monkhood. The Order expects monks to shave their heads every five days and to dress in the Order's belted robes and sandals. These gestures of humility and conformity communicate a monk's allegiance to all who see her.

Monks follow extensive rules concerning appearance. They may sport full beards or none at all — no trimming or shaving to achieve a particular style. Wide-brimmed hats are appropriate for traveling, and many monks make these from straw or grass. Monks wear belts of material appropriate to their Coil. Postulants wear simple rope belts, while grandmasters wear fine silk. Most monks possess ceremonial robes for special occasions. These display decorations appropriate to the monk's rank and taste, such as geometric designs, verses from the Immaculate Texts, and stylized dragons. Immaculate superstition states that monks who give in to vanity will suffer bad luck until they seek humbling punishment, such as public shaving by another monk, or wearing a postulant's robe for a month.

Celibacy

Monks swear to celibacy as postulants and are expected to avoid sexual contact and remain unmarried for life. Even esoteric forms of intercourse, such as employing a neomah's services, are proscribed. As such, they're also forbidden from having children, which can be a significant source of tension (or relief) for young Dynasts expected to carry on their family line. Conversely, some families push children into the monkhood to simplify matters of inheritance, or remove unsuitable children from the bloodline.

According to Immaculate doctrine, sexual contact distracts monks from spiritual matters. Sexual frustration does much the same, so monks are permitted to masturbate. Any monk found violating her vow of celibacy is expelled from the monkhood. Monks found to be pregnant are sent to monasteries to complete the pregnancy, then expelled once the child is born. Children

HERMITS

Some monks find the close quarters of monasteries too oppressive, yet still feel led to seek enlightenment in solitude. These monks escape all society, often contradicting their duties. Despite their rarity and disinterest, or because of it, these hermits are popular subjects of fiction and myth. Hermits are often credited with secret wisdom and unknown powers, and every year hundreds of pilgrims journey into the wilderness, or to the Imperial Mountain's slopes, in hopes of finding one famous hermit or another. The Immaculate Order insists that hermit monks simply serve the Order's plans and hold no secret techniques, which only makes their legends grow.

whose veins run strong with the blood of the Dragons are swiftly adopted by Dynastic or patrician families that have donated generously; others go to Immaculate-run orphanages. Some of the most well-known monks in the Order's history were themselves monk-orphans, a topic that inspires debate and contemplation among Immaculate philosophers.

Poverty

Monks vow to forgo material wealth, as excess leads to dissipation. They may carry and own objects for personal use, but the Order views unnecessary attachment to material goods as unseemly. Most objects a monk carries belong to the Order, and she's expected to donate any wealth she earns. She almost never needs to work to earn food; the faithful will ensure that she's fed.

The Order uses its wealth as it deems appropriate. Often, temples are well-appointed and sturdily built, for an impressive temple reflects well on both the Order and the community's donations. Temples serve as shelters and makeshift fortresses in cases of emergency. The Order can also afford to hire significant manpower for various purposes, and to throw lavish dinners to charm political figures.

Diet

As monks ascend the Coils of the Immaculate Order, their diet becomes more restricted. The Order teaches that a pure spirit requires a pure diet, but views as arrogance any attempt to restrict one's diet beyond one's station. Dietary restrictions are simple: for postulants, no gluttony; in the First Coil, no intoxicants, narcotics, or red meat; in the Second Coil, no fowl; in the Third Coil, no sweets, sorbets, or coarse grains; in the Fourth Coil, no meat or dairy at all, and no drinks save tea and water; and in the Fifth Coil, nothing save rice, bread, vegetables, tea and water. Monks who fail to uphold their diet may regain their purity over days of fasting, consuming only water.

Work Ethic

Many who dream of monastic life imagine lives spent contemplating the Immaculate Philosophy's mysteries. In truth, life as an Immaculate monk leaves precious little time for contemplation, for the monk is always working. If she's not actively serving the public, she's training to perfect her martial skill, or transcribing texts in a monastery. Even itinerant monks stop to minister to every village, crossroad, and farmstead they run across. Wise monks make time to meditate and unclutter their mind, which little resembles the intellectual relaxation that some layfolk imagine.

When the stresses of monastic life demand release, monks may request time for spiritual seclusion — usually up to a few days per season for low-ranking monks. Most take this time to read, meditate, and generally spend time alone, whether in the wilderness or temple cells put aside for this purpose. Monks may also request transfers to other temples or monasteries, or even sabbaticals for extended personal business that must be addressed.

Outside Connections

Every monk leaves behind a life full of opportunities and responsibilities when she dons the postulant's robe, but the Immaculate Order doesn't erase the person a monk used to be, nor stop her from building relationships outside the Order. Dragon-Blooded monks, especially, have connections that the Order would prefer to use. As such, the Order encourages monks to stay in contact with family, provide a pious example to their cousins, and keep the Order informed of their families' activities. The Immaculate Philosophy encourages family loyalty as long as the monk's greatest loyalty lies with the Order.

Perhaps the most important relationship any Dragon-Blooded monk can build is the Sworn Kinship. The Order supports these second families as a sacred tradition among Princes of the Earth. Fully monastic Kinships serve as resourceful problem-solvers for the Order, but monks also form Kinships with lay Dragon-Blooded. Monks represent the Order's interests in a secular Kinship, and serve as spiritual guides to their sworn siblings. The Order regularly apprises the monastic members of these Kinships of opportunities that may benefit Kinship and Order alike.

Leaving the Order

Monks swear to serve the Immaculate Order for life, but not all succeed. Some leave the Order in disgrace after grave transgressions; others depart of their own volition. Once a monk submits her request for dismissal, her superiors generally give her a month to see that her duties are taken care of, and to change her mind. If she remains certain of her decision, she's cast out from the Order, never to return. The Order doesn't reveal the circumstances of her dismissal to outsiders — the honor or dishonor she earned as a monk doesn't follow her through the temple doors.

Returning to secular life often means returning to family, which may or may not be welcoming. A conspicuous silence follows the monk who returns to her worldly station; her friends and family rarely mention her time "away" except in whispers. The Order publicly treats her as if she'd never been a monk, while quietly watching to ensure that she doesn't turn her Immaculate knowledge and skills to heretical ends.

A monk who won't accept her own dismissal or the terms thereof is a heretic. She'll face duel after bloody duel until her doctrine is disproven, or until no monk lives who'll challenge her. Some such monks form short-lived Immaculate sects, or retire into hermitage and obscurity.

Other Exalted

Creation abounds with more strange prodigies than any sage could name. The Immaculate Order knows of other Exalted beyond Solar and Lunar Anathema, but the Perfected Hierarchy serves only the Dragon-Blooded. All other Exalted must bow to the Princes of the Earth or become enemies of the Order.

The Sidereal Exalted

Most Dragon-Blooded do not know the Sidereal Exalted exist. Those that do are typically monks of high position within the Order entrusted with that knowledge by members of the Bronze Faction, although a handful learn of the Maidens' Chosen while studying under them at the Heptagram. A few passages in especially obscure Immaculate Texts, never read by any but the most devoted, explain that the Sidereal Exalted are the agents of Heaven, divinely empowered to safeguard the Perfected Hierarchy by guiding the Princes of the Earth. This is, of course, true — the Bronze Faction was much wiser than to think they could deceive the Terrestrial Host indefinitely. However, with the Gold Faction's resurgence in support of the returned Solars, Bronze Faction members within the Order have promulgated new interpretations of the Immaculate Texts stating that Sidereals who serve Anathema are Anathema themselves.

The Exigents

The Immaculate Order believes that only Dragon-Blooded have earned the power and rewards that come with Exaltation. Though Exigents vary wildly, the vast majority accepted power from a god that — according to Immaculate teachings — they had no right to interact with. Even the most benign Exigent is therefore guilty of subverting Creation's Perfected Hierarchy, a stain likely to haunt them across many reincarnations. Yet Exigents often possess strange and useful powers, and the regard of influential deities. Well-behaved Exigents may mitigate the crime of their existence by serving the Order. Not all Exigents are pressed into service, but those who fail to heed Dragon-Blooded supremacy and Immaculate orthodoxy are named Anathema.

Essential Silence earned the title of Anathema not with doubt, but with faith. Chosen by Silken Vesper, a god of mysteries unveiled, Essential Silence served the Order as an inquisitor, forcing the unspeaking lips of heretics to surrender their secrets and rooting out blasphemous cabals within the Order's ranks. It's said his power outstripped his wisdom, though he'd say he grew beyond the Immaculates' deceptions. Seeing only conspiracy and secrecy in the monkhood, the Exigent became a heretical reformist. Essential Silence travels the Threshold's coasts outfitted like an itinerant monk, seeking corruption to expose in every temple he passes. Those who see him passing by do not — cannot — speak of him. Those who hunt him forget the nature of their quarry. Those who face him in battle find he anticipates their every move.

Kerlei the Chain is the Chosen of Zhieka, Who Binds the Heart in Steel, a god of righteous imprisonment. Her sealing arts have fettered raksha princes in chains of living iron and immured heretics in dungeons conjured from their own nightmares; her baleful mien has driven even the hardest hearts to repent. For decades, Kerlei has been warden of the prison beneath the Nail of Truth, in holy Pneuma (p. XX). Here, Sidereals imprison Exigents of inauspicious origins, those Chosen by forbidden or criminal gods. Here, these illicit Exigents are forcefully purified under Kerlei's supervision, either reconditioned to loyally serve the Immaculate Order or sent to atone for their sins in their next life. Kerlei's Exaltation has not prolonged her lifespan, and in her old age she seeks an apprentice to take on her duties.

GOD-BLOODED AND THE ORDER

God-Blooded are disfavored as the results of improper congress between mortals and spirits. They're ill-regarded — especially Ghost-Blooded and Demon-Blooded — but aren't Anathema. They're watched for signs of blasphemous dealings with their parents, and especially powerful God-Blooded are pressured to join the Order to channel their divine powers towards righteous ends. Spirits seeking to accrue power by amassing God-Blooded offspring face censure from Immaculate monks; their liberated children are often adopted by the Order.

Tall Cypress, the Wraith-of-the-Woods serves as the foremost example of proper Exigent behavior in the Realm. Over 400 years old, Tall Cypress is the Chosen of Yagumo, a widely revered forest god of the Blessed Isle. The Wraith-of-the-Woods can tap into Creation's past through communion with trees, or shroud his mortal aspect with the might of primeval forests as he takes on a plantlike form. He's put his gifts to use defending peasants from woodland bandits and savage beasts, guiding Wyld Hunts, and aiding in negotiations with forest spirits. He's a frequent object of veneration by heterodox fertility cults of Sextes Jylis; he subdues such heresies with gentleness and humility, lest the Immaculate Order be forced to do so with a closed fist.

Ma'anjin Hekobo is the Exigent of the central war god, Wanjung, Heaven's General and Trumpeter of the Chosen. Immaculate monks presided over Hekobo's Exaltation and ceremonially granted her the Dragons' blessings over three centuries ago — a special dispensation for a god who'd demonstrated unusual compliance and dedication to the Order and the Immaculate Philosophy.

Though she's retired from service in the legions, Dynasts still share legends of Hekobo's deeds. She fights with the divine might expected of a war god's champion and radiates martial perfection in all endeavors. Humble farmers have left their fields to take up arms upon hearing her sing; weapons smithed upon her forge cannot be broken. She graces several well-known historical illustrations, her face concealed in a demon-masked kabuto, her armor blazoned with stylized dragons that seem to constrain her inauspicious power.

Hekobo serves, protects, and speaks for Wanjung directly. The central war god has enjoyed worship for many centuries, but now relies on Hekobo to navigate conflicting demands from the Great Houses for his support. Several houses seek alliances with Ma'anjin Hekobo, and she's repelled an assassination attempt from Iselsi agents seeking to deprive the Dynasty of a divine ally.

The Liminal Exalted

The Order knows little of the Liminal Exalted. Their graveborn nature marks them as unclean, yet they're known to hunt the undead that boil forth from the shadowlands. House Ledaal has a particular interest in them, viewing them as potential allies of the Shadow Crusade.

The Getimian Exalted

The Bronze Faction has kept the renegade Sidereal Rakan Thulio's presence a secret from the Immaculate Order, but since he unsealed the Getimian Exalted, they've had no choice but to teach trusted monks in the Order's inner circle of the appearance of these new Anathema, who corrupt the weave of fate with their chaotic Essence and seek to sow terror in Heaven. These monks receive training in unique meditative techniques and sorcerous practices with which to sense discrepancies in causality that reveal the presence of Getimians.

The Abyssal Exalted

The Order understands little about the deathknights, though more than most of Creation. However, they know enough to proclaim them Anathema — it's hardly subtle, when they bear the marks of the Solar Anathema on their brow and shine with the bleak majesty of dead suns. Some monks speculate that, as the Solar and Lunar Anathema wrested away the power of the sun and moon, the Abyssals usurped the power of death itself; others believe they stole their power from devils dwelling in the darkness beyond the stars.

The Infernal Exalted

Over the last five years, the Order's Sidereal patrons have pursued rumors and reports of the appearance of these new Exalted with dread. It is said that they are Hell's Chosen, wreathed in the light of its mad green sun. Though the Bronze Faction has yet to share its knowledge with the Order, the Infernal Exalted's hellish power and rumored resemblance to the Solars ensures that they'll be considered Anathema.


The Blessed Isle
500 Miles
The Sideshores
Storm Coast
Howling Heart
Fields of Rue
Nuwa Plains
Skyhevn Mountains
Eagle's Launch
Bright Obelisk
Tongma Archipelago
Eye of Creation
Lord's Crossing
Lord's Crossing
Silk-and-Pearl Peninsula
Serpentine River
Bittern
Ashara
Tarpan Wastes
Justiciar
Gulf of Daana'd
Plains of Rusted Iron
Kissed-with-Jade
Daoshin Peninsula
Pendant Isles
Myion
Arjuf and The House of Bells
Jora
Porcelain Coast
Great Western Ocean
Cartography by Ed Bourelle


Pneuma
White Coast
The Heptagram
Shadowed Coast
Chanos
Sanqu
Dragon's Blanket
Fallen Wing
Xianyu Coast
Mnemon-Darjilis
Imperial River
Blue Flag
Pangu
Numinous Rolling Wave Dominion
Tierce
The Imperial City
Imperial River Basin
Raiton's Perch
Star-of-Prose
Juche and-The Obsidian Mirror
Iron Scripture
Sdoia
Gloam
Waiting Pagoda
Whaltin Mountains
Pasiap's Stair
Caracal River
Dyprash Mountains
Luo-Han Plains
Sion and The Palace Sublime
Jade Coast
Noble
Dragonsvrath Desert
Empress Mercy
Riven Quay
Jiara
Tassel
Radimel's Seat
Kirighast
The Inland Sea

The country villa was whipped by a chill wind, rolling in waves across the azure grass of the plains. The villa dated back to the Shogunate, and the wooden pillars that held up a slate-stone roof bore the scars of war, of Contagion, of generations of empire. It sat on the plains of Arjuf, overlooking an elaborate stone bridge spanning some tributary of the Caracal. Doubtless the bridge was just as storied as the villa, but Ledaal Marek had never bothered to learn its history. He slid off a silk glove and placed his bare hand on a pillar, feeling the Wood Essence locked deep within. *You came from some ancient's grove on the other side of this Isle. If only you spoke to any but myself,* he thought, *such things you would say.*

A heavy tread sounded behind him, shaking him out of his reverie. Ragara Kajak Dafa stomped in, clutching his black-patterned cloak tight. "Always was drafty in here."

"Don't listen to him. I'm fond of it," said Sesus Hodaal, following in behind Dafa. She walked a half inch above the floor, Marek noted. Her hair followed the wind, even when the drafts didn't touch her. Her Essence had been growing.

Marek looked over at the bridge. A storm was coming, he noted, rolling off the Imperial Mountain stretching high in the distance. "Let's begin," he said.

Whatever awkwardness was icing over their interactions after years apart melted in the warmth of their reunited Hearth. Within the hour, Marek had retrieved a bottle of Juche's sweet wine to fuel the embers of kinship between the three.

Dafa spoke first. The mercenaries — imported from half a dozen bands up and down the Scavenger Lands — took his jade to unify and consolidate the disparate bandits who'd sprung up between Juche and Arjuf within the past five years. He had scouts better than the peasants Nellens used, light infantry comfortable with the irregular garb of the Blessed Isle's homegrown raiders, and heavy infantry for when House Nellens decided to deploy a Prince of the Earth to the problem. Everything but cavalry, for there was no way to disguise its provenance.

Hodaal had whispered the routes of a dozen travelers to Juche, of the best places to lie in wait and strike the verdant green valleys where the jade rolled like water. It was her orders, written in three tongues and a half-dozen hands, that set the Nellens scouts against one another.

But it was Marek that stopped his house from picking up the slack. It was he who paid off ministers, governors, and numerous lesser functionaries to keep what they were doing hidden. Marek had run the calculations before his Hearthmates had arrived. He produced the book, pointed to the elegant calligraphy that described their profits now that Nellens' business prospects in Juche were in chaos. Then he cracked open the wine.

"Upstarts," Hodaal said. "Without our pedigree."

"Impetuous," Dafa said. "Without respect."

"Ambitious," Marek said. "Without prospect. To House Nellens and their future. May they prove as fruitful for us in the next five years."

The glasses clinked, and they turned to the elegant tapestry of Creation that had hung in the villa since the days of House Jurul. Marek traced a finger along to the Threshold.

"To the South, then?" he asked. The future was bright.



Chapter Five

The Blessed Isle

As the Scarlet Realm is civilization's heart, so the Blessed Isle is the heart of the world. All things come here: Eastern mahogany, Western pearls, Northern amber, Southern firedust.

The Blessed Isle is also Creation's spiritual heart. The gods once lived atop the gargantuan Imperial Mountain, and traces of their habitation lie hidden throughout the land. When the Exalted founded the Realm Before, they erected mighty manses, crafted marvelous artifacts, and spun webs of sorcery to further bless the Isle's water, soil, winds, and hearths. Nowhere else in Creation is so broad a region so agriculturally lush and productive.

Mortals have dwelt here for millennia. Since the Contagion, the folk known as the Wàn have predominated. But they've long since intermarried with the Isle's many other autochthonous ethnicities — enclaves of which persist in the interior — while coastal prefectures are rife with Threshold-descended citizens whose ancestors came to the Isle as refugees, merchants, or slaves. All are now one people, joined in superiority to the barbarians beyond the Inland Sea.

Endless Prefecture

No prefecture contains the Imperial Mountain's heights, but some rise along its base. The Endless is both the highest and least populous of these, inhabited only by Immaculates and visited only by pilgrims and the occasional Dynastic scholar or adventurer.

Numerous bright-bannered Immaculate temples and monasteries — each set a day's climb apart — wind their way up the path called the Spine of the Amaranthine Dragon, along the Imperial Mountain's eastern face, where travelers can be warmed by the morning sun. Monks and oblates sweep courtyards, tend terraced farms and gardens, and greet travelers with keen-eyed hospitality. The uppermost temple, the Pagoda of Heaven's End — situated but a fraction of the way up the impossible mountainside — is dazzlingly bedecked with centuries of offerings left by patrician and Dynastic visitors. Its abbot, the ever-vigilant Immaculate grandmaster **Cathak Vitara**, commands a small army of monks sworn to guard the threshold between humanity and the Mountain's primeval powers, keeping visitors from leaving the path while preventing the Mountain's inhuman denizens from entering mortal lands.

Above and to either side of the Spine of the Amaranthine Dragon lie countless miles of rocky wilderness, rising from wooded slopes through thickets and meadows to high, icy places perilous to mortals. Scattered among these places are remnants of the Realm Before — cities buried by avalanches, spirit-ravaged ruins, and manses that have lain fallow since the Contagion. Several sites near the pilgrim route are known to Realm savants and have been investigated by Dynastic expeditions — except the sprawling, slate-roofed House of Gray Wings, which vanishes like fog whenever a large party approaches,

MIRACLES OF THE BLESSED ISLE

The Blessed Isle is dotted with wondrous remnants of the Realm Before — artifacts, manses, and sorcerous workings that greatly improve quality of life for peasant and Dynast alike. Such marvels include the traveler-hastening Great Coast Road, water-refining sunstills, weather-manipulating sky mantis towers, and manses that direct the flow of rivers or renew fallow fields. Most of these are singular wonders, beyond the prowess of the Dragon-Blooded to reproduce; those prefectures and villages that benefit from them are uniquely blessed.

But old magic has curdled and spoiled, poisoned by the Solars' betrayal at Dragon-Blooded hands over a thousand years ago. The Realm's history is pocked with horrors spawned from tainted manses and crumbling sorceries. And as the Anathema return, magics thought stable all these centuries are likewise turning sour. In Red Sky Prefecture, Immaculate rites cannot lay the dead to rest. A deadly dream taints the blessings on the city of Bright Obelisk. Bizen Prefecture's immortal orchards darken and wither. Abominations crawl unborn from the ruins crowning the Imperial Mountain.

THE IMPERIAL MOUNTAIN

Broader at its base than many nations, miles high and taller than any other point in Creation, the Imperial Mountain is a landmark visible from every point on the Blessed Isle, albeit as no more than a dim blue shape on the horizon to coastal folk. It's the center of Creation. Countless dragon lines flow from it, flooding the world with Earth Essence. Some say the Earth Dragon dwells at the mountain's heart, others that it's home to weird Mountain Folk cities, or cradles sorcerous engines driving the Realm Defense Grid. None know the truth. The Empress, with the Immaculates' approval, forbade her people from mining the sacred mountain — a stricture that jade-hungry houses may soon flout.

Legend speaks of a great city — perhaps first of all cities — at the mountain's crown. Called Meru, it was home to gods and Exalted before the Anathema arose, and was a place of marvels, ringed by similarly wondrous cities along the highest slopes. No living Dynast claims to have visited Meru. The higher one climbs, the colder and thinner the air, the more chaotic the power that grounds itself in demesnes and broken manses, and the more dangerous the creatures that stalk the slopes — wrathful elementals, bound demons, mad gods, and unnatural beasts spawned by unraveling sorceries of the Anathema.

and from which wild, chimerical beasts emerge to battle Immaculates and devour unwary travelers.

House Mnemon holds the prefecture, and its scions oversee temple maintenance and determine who may visit the mountain's prehistoric sites. The current prefect, **Mnemon Rin**, is a pensive widower more concerned with piety than politics. When bribed by savants or scavengers to allow access to the ruins, she donates all the money to the Order.

Pasiap's Shadow

The Imperial Mountain is thick with wild animals and spirits. The land here has its own gods, while elementals of wind and stone have long dwelt in these crags. Ghosts fleeing shadowlands to escape undead tyrants or prehuman spiritual terrors find shelter from both Immaculate monks and scourging sunlight in the Mountain's darkest depths. The greatest of their dwellings is the labyrinth of caverns called Pasiap's Shadow. Here gather thousands of ghost-exiles from across the centuries, their whispers echoing in confusion through dark, vertiginous spaces — sprawling, seemingly endless chambers; phantasmagoric vertical shafts; and tangled webs of twisting, indistinguishable corridors.

These shades can rarely fulfill their passions, whether vengeance on an aristocratic rival, fulfilling an oath to a Dynastic master, or giving a descendant a better life. This frustration makes them a strange lot, given to introspection and philosophical musing. Mortals seeking communion with ancestors typically go unsatisfied, unable to find their own kin among the dead, but scholars and sorcerers occasionally visit in search of knowledge — or to bind ghosts into their service.

Dejis Prefecture

Dejis Prefecture comprises a swath of mountains and foothills extending northeast of the Imperial Mountain. Ancestral seat of House Mnemon, Dejis is best known for magnificent architecture. Breathtaking Immaculate temples, monasteries, and shrines seemingly rise in every valley and on every peak, drawing pilgrims from across the Blessed Isle. Moreover, centuries of careful geomantic engineering have strengthened the area's formerly weak dragon lines; now powerful manses blaze with Essence along Dejis' hills and cliffs.

This is rugged country inhabited by rugged folk. Many peasants labor in Dejis' mines and quarries, unearthing marble, iron, jade, and gemstones. Others serve pilgrims as guides, or eke out a living from terraced farms and flocks of sheep or goats. Wood manses enrich several valleys, but the region's agricultural yield remains lower than most of the Isle; Dejis' cities rely largely on imported foodstuffs. Caravans of ore and grain require more guards than heretofore, with banditry on the rise since the Empress' disappearance.

While mining and pilgrimage support the prefecture's economy, Dejis depends most of all upon House Mnemon's Imperial remit for construction. Every city, village, and town contributes worker corvées to the Mnemon labor force. This is dangerous work, but safer and more pleasant than mining.

Most construction takes place in other prefectures. While Mnemon households recruit local labor, they rely on experienced Dejisian workers and overseers to manage such projects. As such, Dejis peasants are more well-traveled and cosmopolitan than peasants in most of the Blessed Isle. When work is slow, House Mnemon occupies its architects and construction crews with projects in Dejis itself. Roads wind across the length and breadth of the prefecture, while bridges and aqueducts span gorges and ravines. Ornate ministerial offices, temples, and tenements dominate the cities.

The Immaculate Order is especially influential here. House Mnemon constructs and maintains temples and monasteries for little to no recompense, and raises more such structures in Dejis than anywhere else. The Order is a constant presence, aiding and disciplining the people, while keeping the mountains' gods and spirits within bounds. And now these holy places overflow. With many of her house's legions overseas, Mnemon has invited the Order's monks to gather in Dejis for its ceremonies and festivals to discourage unprovoked attack from other Great Houses, and they've answered her call.

Mnemon-Darjilis

Rebuilt from a First Age city's ruins, Darjilis is a wonder of Dragon-Blooded construction. Generations of city planning and painstaking efforts have restored the ruins to glory, full of temples, manses, and majestic government buildings. The founder Mnemon's household enclave occupies the House of Marmoreal Glory, an alabaster pyramid at the city's geomantic center. Several Mnemon sorcerers maintain occult laboratories in the upper reaches of the Azure Morning Pinnacle, collaborating on difficult projects or gossiping among the manse's courtyards.

Mnemon-Darjilis is a construction industry hub. Much of the populace finds employment in the city's drafting houses, specialist guilds, and surveying corps. Patricians enroll in prestigious architectural academies, receiving training as contractors, architects, engineers, and masons under the tutelage of experienced assistants to Mnemon scions. Graduates are preferred by wealthy patrons, fetching correspondingly high fees for their services.

The Immaculate Order is a major presence in Mnemon-Darjilis, which contains hundreds of temples and shrines. Cottage industries of professional celebrants, mourners, and religious artisans have sprung up in surrounding neighborhoods, assisting with the city's nigh-constant funerals, devotions, and celebrations. The austere temple headquartering the Breath of Pasiap (p. XX) is the site of frequent contract negotiations between the Order and House Mnemon.

Despite its peaceful appearance, the prefecture is a hotbed of internecine political maneuvering. Mnemon's many enemies covet her lands, influence, power, and wealth, and aren't above attempting to undermine her authority within her own lands. Since the Empress' disappearance, some have begun moving against Mnemon, seeking to cause some disaster or embarrassment that will damage her close ties to the Immaculate Order.



PLACES TO COME FROM

Hawk Prefecture: This small farming district, proud of its history of producing austere, serious professionals for the ministries, long ago won an Imperial remit to establish a primary school focused on civil service. Kestrel Academy, its neat grid of schoolrooms reflecting its curriculum's rigid orthodoxy, is famous for turning out stolid, proficient functionaries. But a new teacher — a young survivor of House Tepet's fall — proved not to be the straitlaced soldier the academy expected. He teaches students to follow passion rather than tradition, and live life to the fullest. Parents and faculty alike are horrified and outraged. Ignoring the headmaster's revocation of his status, he demonstrated mastery of unarmed combat by placing several staffers in the infirmary when they tried removing him by force. The headmaster now seeks other means to expel the young Exalt before he further corrupts the school's youth.

Mavinyos: All cities have their share of crime, whether purse-cutting, burglaries, muggings, or street brawls. But in the small, rough-and-tumble port Mavinyos — its wealth drawn from looting ships wrecked on the nearby rocks, ill-gotten gains of Xianyu Coast bandits, and under-the-table bargains with the local salt god that contravene the salt rate — governor Sesus Gilend bends those crimes to her will. Pickpockets, beggars, and second-story women double as her spies, passing knowledge and stolen goods to the blind fence Blithe, who gives Gilend first pick. Thieves unwilling to join the network or toe the line are purged. But a new thief outside that structure has proven elusive. Nicknamed "the Magpie," the thief strikes solely at the governor's household, making off with precious jewelry and objets d'art. Gilend has accused the city's other Dynastic household, a Cathak family whose affront threatens to become vendetta.

Winter Blossom Prefecture: Residents of this cool, dry upland district, with its farms, pottery workshops, and ancient cave shrines that have escaped Immaculate attention, inhabit river valleys between ocher loess cliffs. Much of the prefecture was once a shadowland, sealed through centuries of labor by Immaculate monks and a Hearth of sorcerers through prayer, sorcerous wards, salting old battlefields, and planting blessed rock-jasmine. But ancient blood has soaked deep into earth and stone. Violent death easily opens paths to the Underworld, and the slightest error in funerary custom rouses a hungry ghost. Such events are once-in-a-generation disasters; Winter Blossom parents discipline children harshly to instill self-control and a loathing of risen dead, and send them to the Monastery of the Evergreen Scale to study last rites. The sorcerer Ragara Gasu, last of her Hearth, lingers in the Broken Ivory Pagoda; she's moved on to more esoteric researches since the shadowland's closure, and the old alliance between her and the Immaculates grows strained. Meanwhile, the prefecture commands a strategic pass between Lord's Crossing and Mnemon-Darjilis. Should war come to Winter Blossom, battles to seize the passes will doubtless reopen paths to the land of the dead.

Chanos Prefecture

Swept by chill north winds, Chanos Prefecture's rocky hills and mountains are known for mild summers and for winters lasting longer than almost anywhere else on the Blessed Isle. Perhaps it's fitting, then, that a house of Hesiesh's scions would claim it for their own, banking their own fires high through the winter.

House Sesus' power here is second to none. In the dark, cloudy winter months, their riders brave wind, sleet, and snow to carry messages for the house's spy service. Miners labor year-round, sheltered from the cold by ancient stone that yields its bounty to picks and smelters. Mining is Chanos' primary economic engine, with the soil too poor and rocky for intensive agriculture. The coast is a broken, jagged line of boulders washed by wild waves even in the best weather, and out to sea lies the fearful mist-cloaked archipelago housing the Heptagram. Peasants know well to leave anything that washes ashore alone; who knows what dark magic it bears?

Chanos Prefecture is hilly and difficult to traverse, most of its waterways too tortuous for anything but rude barges carrying ore to Chanos city for reshipment elsewhere — more fragile vessels rarely survive the rocks and rapids. In winter, travel becomes more difficult still, with highland villages sometimes snowed in for weeks at a time. Chanos residents enjoy indoor diversions, especially Miner's Gambit — a newly popular local game of strategy and steady hands, centered around stacking small cylinders on a stone plinth scored with regular furrows. Most such disks are slag, their irregularity part of the game, though young Dynasts or patricians commission silver or ivory sets, bucking their elders' dismissal of the game as peasant entertainment.

Chanos

Chanos city lies in a curving bay, partially sheltered from the north wind. Tens of thousands live here full-time, most employed by House Sesus, openly or otherwise. Called the Gateway to the North, it's home to the Air Fleet's carracks and galleys, whose docks occupy much of the shoreline. West of that is hilly Smokehearth district, home to refineries and smithies that refine native ore into precious metals, and generally downwind. Housing and trade districts spread along the crescent-shaped coast to the east, slowly rising in affluence and prestige, until one arrives at Emberswathe, House Sesus' ancestral stronghold. At the district's heart sits the Palace of Burning Wind, an ancient fortress-manse. Legend says it can rain fire from the sky, but such a weapon hasn't been used in living memory.

Immaculate pilgrims visit temples — some dating to the Shogunate — that dot the landscape. Most are well-tended, with walls of polished marble. One, the Lapis Pillar Temple, is a tall tower lined with lapis lazuli, built with a Sesus endowment a century ago to showcase and celebrate Chanos' economic might.

The Hall of Excellence Untested, among the Realm's best-regarded military primary schools, sits in the hills just east of Chanos. It's renowned for its strenuous curriculum, including mock battles, dawn-to-dusk training regimens, wilderness survival training, and drilling alongside the Sesus legions — these drills held publicly on the city's parade grounds, a popular attraction for the peasantry.

The city itself is often gray and rainy. Its cobbled streets' deep, narrow gutters prevent flooding by channeling rainwater through expansive sewers into the bay. This works in all but the poorest districts, such as Redrock and Ashen, which occupy a depression west of Smokehearth. Buildings are mostly stone, thick walls keeping heat in and cold out. Frequent inclement weather makes cloaks common, so it's easy to venture out unrecognized beneath a hood.

Visibility is often poor in the mornings, the sun taking until midday to burn off thick fog that swallows whispers into silence. Now, it hides something even less wholesome, something that House Sesus' elders desperately try to conceal — a preternatural thief who vaults from building to building, bypassing guards to snatch valuables before vanishing into the fog in a heartbeat. The city's common folk call her the Chanos Flicker, not knowing whether she's a rogue god or Anathema.

For all House Sesus' power in its home prefecture, it must contend with a prefect from another house, **Ragara Nova** — one of the few men in the Realm commanding such a lofty position. The Sesus elders see him as a well-connected man promoted above his natural ability, and thus, as an opportunity to be exploited. Efforts to extract information from his good-natured ramblings have spawned a cottage industry of informers in the prefect's palace. Governor **Sesus Majali** plies him on her house's behalf — they dine together regularly, and discuss politics over Miner's Gambit. Unbeknownst to House Sesus, Nova is more intelligent than he lets on. He plays to stereotype, feeding misinformation to House Sesus, while informing House Ragara of operations that House Sesus thinks secure via codes in official correspondence. He plays a dangerous game — should House Sesus make the connection, his days may be numbered, for Majali isn't known for controlling her temper.

The Isle of Voices

Home to the Heptagram — the Realm's premier school for sorcery — the Isle of Voices nestles amid a foggy, storm-raked archipelago off the Blessed Isle's northern shores. Its exact location is secret. Any ship visiting the Heptagram — bringing students to and fro, or supplying the place with food, hard goods, scholarly and sorcerous texts, and bizarre reagents its curriculum demands — requires a faculty member to bypass the school's protections. Without such aid, the island can't be found; compasses spin wildly, navigators grow disoriented, and maps blur and refuse to be read. The guide must also calm the winds that drive ships away from the island and onto the rocks, and mollify guardian demons and chimerical beasts nesting on the cliffs and swimming beneath the waters.

One road winds from a cliffside jetty to the Heptagram proper, whose seven stony towers stand arrayed with geomantic precision among precipitous crags. Visitors encounter all manner of discomfiting phenomena along that path. Carvings on weathered stone pylons make one's skin crawl; statues seem a violation of Immaculate aniconic precepts, until they start to move; an electric feeling crackles in the air, manifesting in blue and violet coronas of spirit-fire; and darting shapes resemble jellyfish made of shadows. Teachers and older students evince neither wonder nor discomfort, treating such things as mundane and unworthy of note. Some manifestations are phantasms to intimidate visitors and scare off intruders. Others pose genuine dangers to body, mind, or soul.

But the Isle of Voices has few visitors in any case. The Heptagram would have an unwholesome reputation even if it were sunny, bright, and free of mystery, for the Realm's folk fear sorcery and its wielders. Misusing sorcerous power unleashes horrors upon the world, and

some say that trucking with demons tarnishes the soul. Dynasts value kinfolk who master such powers, but wish little social contact with them.

The Heptagram's enrollment is smaller than other secondary schools, with only a few dozen students, and one faculty member — usually a sorcerer or savant — for every two students. All labor under headmaster **Ragara Bhagwei**, one of the Realm's greatest sorcerers and medical savants. Brilliant and profoundly eccentric, for centuries he's confined his ambitions to the transcendent sphere of erudition. Even his intimates cannot be certain whether that will change with the Empress' disappearance.

Beyond the path to the Heptagram, the island is a patchwork of perils. Older students perform occult experiments among picturesque hills, groves, declivities, and promontories; in the Caves of Qana, bound elementals slay all who cannot answer their riddles; and those who sleep beneath the Black Elder Tree dream of their own deaths. The ruins of the Versino, precursor to the Heptagram, remain haunted by the demons that destroyed it centuries ago.

DRAGON'S BLANKET

Encompassing a great swath of the northeastern Blessed Isle, the downlands of the Dragon's Blanket consist of grassy ridges like the sinuous bodies of dragons curled beneath a blanket of endless green. Rustic herding and mining villages pepper the landscape, their populace wary of strangers.

The hills are riddled with mines and caves. Hermits, the dispossessed, and bandits make their homes within. Others serve as lairs for wild beasts and weird spirits. Rumors tell of bandit hoards or First Age treasures hidden deep within the caves.

WHO IS THE CHANOS FLICKER?

House Sesus' elders know *something* is operating within their city. They've kept it secret thus far to avoid losing face among the Dynasty, but attempts to capture the Flicker have failed ignominiously, and investigations haven't produced workable theories concerning her motivations or identity. Presented below are several options, but in truth, the Chanos Flicker could be anything.

- **Pekla** was born a peasant, thin and reedy, living in squalor mere blocks from a Sesus townhouse that, to her, seemed a mystical palace. From her tenement's roof, she could just see over the wall and in through the window of a room filled with swords, trophies, and other baubles — and oh, how she coveted them, until her desire boiled up in golden light when she finally vaulted the wall, jimmied the window, and made off with a cloak that seemed woven of whispers. She steals to support her family and raise them from poverty to luxury. Her mother always taught her that theft was wrong, but seems not to mind having meat on her plate more than once a season.
- **Chanos Tsunbal** was once the city's richest mortal, a cunning Dynastic merchant who dominated the black market and brought immense wealth to his Great House. Then, he awakened to a world where House Chanos no longer existed — struck from the Imperial ledgers centuries ago — and the city was administered by House Sesus, of which he had no memory. Not understanding what strange caprice of fate has plucked him from his former reality — nor his own newfound puissance — he's begun reclaiming what he sees as his property from House Sesus. In dreams, he hears a man with a devil's voice whispering to him, plying him with promises of vengeance, but Tsunbal refuses to abandon his birthright in Chanos to seek out this figure.
- **Eleven Thunder God's-Razor-Destroys-the-Thief** is a First Age relict, a servitor-entity woven from the Essence of forbidden gods and condemned spirits, bound with an unbreakable, eternal geas to safeguard its creator's treasures and reclaim them from any thief who dared plunder her vaults. Even after her death, Eleven Thunder dutifully guarded her hidden underwater tomb, its mind unraveling as centuries passed. It awakened when a Dynast discovered and raided the tomb beneath Chanos' bay. Eleven Thunder killed the grave robber, but its degraded mind can no longer distinguish its maker's treasures from any other. It haunts the city, stealing artifacts and interring them in the sunken tomb.



Pangu Prefecture

Pangu is among the Blessed Isle's most fertile prefectures, producing harvest after harvest of fruit, vegetables, and cereals year-round. Herds of cattle feed the Dynasty's aristocratic appetite for beef, while pigs and fowl fill the peasant's pot. Fields produce astronomical quantities of wheat to fuel the legions. This provender was once subsidized by the Imperial Treasury. Now, Cynis — Pangu's ruling house — charges rival houses steeper prices to feed their troops, and can cut them off should circumstances demand.

House Cynis has a taste for beauty and grace, and has reshaped the landscape to sate that appetite. Villagers plant trees and flowers in artful configurations alongside rivers and roadways, and dig carp ponds for aesthetics as well as food. Wealthy households invest heavily in gardens and statuary, and frequent the prefecture's countless skilled couturiers and perfumers. Especially lovely scenery attracts field gods and minor elementals to bask therein. Pangu's Immaculates drive such spirits away lest they fraternize with mortals.

This beauty is created and maintained by slave labor, for House Cynis' Imperial remit includes human trafficking. Guild factors and other slave peddlers ship human chattels from the North and East to Konjin, not far from Scarlet Prefecture, and march them inland to the forest-girt manse Dreams-in-Amber, whose well-guarded slave camp is the Blessed Isle's largest. Slaves are held there to recuperate from the sea journey. Then they're sorted, broken, given elementary training, and transported across the Isle. Attached to the manse is the First House of Equitable Prosperity, a palace whose overwhelming luxury aims to please visiting Cynises and intimidate Guild envoys.

Pangu

Foreign sailors and merchants throng the tangled streets and wharves of Pangu city. By the Empress' decree, Pangu is the Guild's sole gateway to the Realm, and Cynis senators have thus far voted down attempts to change this. This has made the city extremely rich, and the port's oldest structures have disappeared beneath waves of new construction. Pangu's architecture is a mélange of Threshold styles erected by wealthy foreigners and modish natives alike. Patricians and other houses' Dynasts alike follow trendsetting Cynis aesthetes in donning exotic River Province fashions, while peasants — many of Northern or Scavenger Lands

ancestry — easily slip between Low Realm and various pidgins as they wheedle with peddlers and fishmongers.

Pangu is a city of endless sensory delights. One might take tea beneath Serisena House's seven ivied gables, in a booth lit by varicolored glass lamps and enclosed by drapes of sapphire velvet; stroll through the many-branched floral maze of the Spring Rain Garden, which a devotee can navigate by scent alone; or visit the pleasure house of Demur Celadon, an artificial grotto where clients lounge with catamites and courtesans beside miniature waterfalls on beds of mossy stone more comfortable than eiderdown. Cynis estates overflow with parties and festivals year-round, welcoming the wealthy and powerful from across the Isle. Visitors keep to public areas of their hosts' manors and manses; guards show no mercy to those who'd infiltrate private quarters and steal Cynis secrets, particularly coded dossiers of blackmail information on rival Dynasts.

Houses and shops on stilts cover countless estuarial islets, where swarms of skiffs steer madly around pleasure barges and oceangoing vessels like mice beneath an elephant's feet. The largest, Turtle Island, hosts Heaven Fragrance Market, among Creation's richest and most varied pharmacopoeial bazaars. House Cynis imports medicines and recreational drugs in quantity from the Guild, such as sweet cordial, seven bounties paste, tobacco, and marijuana. Addictive or supernatural "hard drugs" — including cocaine, heroin, ghost tea, and bright morning — can only be purchased with jade, restricting their use to the Dynasty. Turtle Island's merchant families also compound healing and anagathic medicines from proprietary recipes. Long-standing vendettas between families stem from accusations of stealing these secrets; newly discovered Shogunate medical texts spur bidding wars of epic proportions.

Sizable bribes to Dynasts and harbor officials allow criminal syndicates to smuggle and sell hard drugs. In addition to profiting thereby, House Cynis keeps criminals under surveillance and away from such activities as insurrectionism or smuggling Anathema. Dynasts in Realm cities traditionally monitor and manipulate criminal organizations — controlling agents and informants with bribes, blackmail, and extortion — to prevent syndicates from growing too strong. But no other Blessed Isle city has such a numerous, powerful criminal element, fueled by the root of the Isle's drug trade and House Cynis' notorious venality. Especially powerful criminal bosses, such as unctuous Calinese restaurateur Hansei Falu or withered shipping magnate Bezel Gold, have sufficient wealth and experience to use the Cynises' own tools against them, bringing watchers to heel and gaining free rein to act as they please.

Numinous Rolling Wave Dominion

From the Imperial Mountain's foothills to Scarlet Prefecture's borders, a great river of Essence rolls. Its holiness can be felt, rising in waves like heat from well-tended embers, rippling along the valley that stretches across the Blessed Isle. Land, water, and sky surge with the numinous, the sense of sacred awe and the feeling of smallness that comes with it, dwarfed by the magnificence of Creation.

The dominion's villages are rife with superstition, finding occult significance and spiritual inspiration in every facet of the natural world. Farmers grow crops in supernaturally rich soil for export to lavish Dynastic estates lining the Valley of the Ancients. Villages host itinerant Immaculate monks several times each year, who come both to stamp out potential heresies and to contemplate the dominion's splendor. Outcaste households in rustic estates oversee many such villages, encouraged by the succession of outcaste prefects assigned here over the centuries at the Empress' behest.

Numinous Rolling Wave follows the dragon lines flowing from the Imperial Mountain to the Imperial Manse, empowering the Realm Defense Grid. Imperial decree forbids the raising of new manses to ensure the flow of Essence to the Empress' greatest weapon. Villages, towns, and cities are built in accordance with exacting geomantic designs. Woe unto the farmer who so much as raises a barn not considered in the geomancer's blueprints; the punishment is dispossession for her entire village.

IMPERIAL RIVER BASIN

The Imperial River's headwaters begin upon the eastern slopes of the Imperial Mountain, and make their way east to the sea. Folk have been immigrating to the Imperial River basin since the Empress' accession, making this the most heavily populated region on the Blessed Isle. The plains here are thickly settled, long since stripped of old-growth forest and purged of dangerous wildlife. Rice and other crops stream from numberless villages into towns and cities clustered along the Imperial River's many tributaries. Dynastic households maintain the Basin's many manses, their geomancy tuned over the centuries to moderate the weather and enhance the growing season.

With the Empress gone, the Deliberative has begun to question this proscription — but they've gone no further than questioning. Many senators still believe, deep down, that the Empress' five-year absence is a test, and that she watches even now from the shadows, waiting for the moment to destroy the disloyal. Only Houses Mnemon, Ragara, and Sesus champion the proposal to open Numinous Rolling Wave Dominion to construction, allowing the Great Houses to tap its immense power.

The Valley of the Ancients

Branching from the Imperial River valley in western Numinous Rolling Wave, the Valley of the Ancients possesses a skyline torn from a bygone age. Rising from the smooth, worn slopes of the hills, dozens of palatial, sunlit tomb-manses reach for the sky. Ages ago, before Realm or Shogunate, the ancients laid themselves to rest here, god-kings raising great monuments to millennia-long lives. Once, the Valley was a quiet sanctuary, a sacred place of pilgrimage and quiet contemplation of greatness lost. Since the Empress' decision to allow settlement within the Valley, it's been transformed into a city built atop the ancients' bones, where dwell the greatest scions that modernity has to offer.

Even the meanest of these tombs holds a queen's ransom, a mere fraction of the unimaginable wealth the ancients brought with them into death, including talents of raw magical materials, sorcerous workings lost to time, and puissant weaponry that this fallen age's finest wondersmiths couldn't hope to forge. The extant tombs are harmoniously balanced using geomantic secrets only the ancients held. To tamper with any of them, or to erect a new manse, might have eschatological consequences for surrounding prefectures, to say nothing of the Valley itself.

Life in the Valley

The Empress opened the Valley of the Ancients for settlement with a proviso — residing in this most prestigious of locales, surrounded by works of art older than empire, required her explicit permission. Every household in the Valley of the Ancients belongs to a hero of the Realm, who's earned through some service or meritorious deed the right to call the Valley home. Peasants only enter the Valley as servants and are rarely allowed to leave. For a patrician servant, joining a Dynast's Valley estate is a high honor, often awarded only after a lifetime of service.

Those who receive the right to build upon the tombs lining the Valley must take care not to disrupt their geomancy. Living here requires regular expenditures as others' construction necessitates adjustments in one's home — expenditures that, with more and more of Great House reserves going toward preparations for war, grow increasingly difficult to manage. New construction and renovations are managed by the August Council for the Maintenance of the Valley, to which by law all residents belong and are beholden. The Council owns a small army of slaves who perform maintenance and construction, and charges members to pay for the slave population's upkeep and replenishment.

Power blocs regularly form and disband within the Council, fueled by individual grudges, household-against-household scheming, and antipathies between Great Houses. Genteel conduct masks seething rage just beneath. With the attention of magistrates, ministers, and matriarchs directed elsewhere since the Empress' disappearance, these power plays and feuds escalate. Vicious brawls and duels grow more common — as does murder.

Buried beneath these tombs, or arrayed upon their pinnacles, rest the ancients themselves. Such tombs are

THE ANCIENTS

To not mince words: The ancients were actually Solar Exalted felled in the Usurpation, and the Valley a monument to soothe their enraged souls. Many details were lost over the centuries — folk assume they were Dragon-Blooded heroes — but not the imperative to keep the Valley's original inhabitants silent.

While many of those interred here have been forgotten apart from their names, a few stories live on, passed from neighbor to neighbor. These stories, older than the Shogunate, have grown in the telling, but a kernel of truth remains at the heart of each, and none wish to test the tales by rousing the ancient dead.

Keening Like Unto The Stars Themselves once sang a song so beautiful that nations deafened themselves rather than soil their ears with any lesser sound.

Mayura the Quick, whose blade was so swift it slew her enemies seven days before the blow that killed them, and who wept that she could never look her foes in the eye while they lived.

Tegres, Who Warred Against Death, strangled the dread masters of the dead until they revealed their secrets, which he used to raise a thousand mockeries of life still bound, undying, in his tomb.

the sweetest, most tempting forbidden fruit. Delving into them seeking riches is extremely illegal — and dangerous, for grave robbers and everyone around them. One cautionary tale presents a Ragara household destroyed in a single night, all but one of the family and servant staff dead on the mansion's floors. The outlier was eventually found below the house, dead as his kin, having removed a wall brick by brick to access the tomb beneath their wine cellar.

While no Dynast would admit to violating the proscription against tomb robbing, virtually the whole Valley has entertained thoughts of the vast riches just beneath their feet. As a result, the Valley contains more than one ongoing tomb-robbing operation, quietly probing tomb defenses for a crack they can exploit.

House Ragara's Ash Seekers, perhaps the most successful such enterprise, have burgled five tombs in the past two centuries, where most organizations of this type have, at most, one such victory to their name. They aren't merely thieves without compare, but smugglers, fences, sorcerers, and bureaucrats — a paper trail of impeccable lies must be forged for every relic and obol taken, lest the Honest and Humble Assessors of the Imperial Tax discover this secret wealth pipeline flowing into House Ragara's coffers. The Ash Seekers move slowly, but so treasure-laden is each tomb that they remain enormously profitable.

This, despite the dangers that lie within. Few of the entombed ancients sleep quietly, and their hungry ghosts are swollen with supernatural might. Even discounting these millennia-old structures' traps and other hazards, each spectacularly lethal in new and interesting ways, the tomb's resident (and the ghosts of anyone entombed alive with her) presents a hazard like no other. More than one tomb-robbing expedition met a calamitous end at the hands of a hungry ghost unlike any they've ever seen, terrifying and awesome in its sheer power and enraged beyond measure at the violation of its resting place.

Because any one of these ancient hungry ghosts is a match for a veteran Hearth, the Valley of the Ancients plays host to some of the Blessed Isle's finest priests and exorcists. These Guardians of Hallowed Antiquity carry out respectful sacrifices to mollify the dead, hunt down any who violate the prohibition against grave robbing in the Valley, and oversee the Festival of Remembrance.

The Festival of Remembrance

Each year, on the day before Calibration begins, the Valley is bedecked with banners, each bearing the name



WHITE JADE ELEPHANTS

The laws restricting construction in Numinous Rolling Wave Dominion, especially in the Valley of the Ancients, serve more than the Realm Defense Grid's integrity. Every scion the Empress invites to dwell in the Valley of the Ancients is forevermore on the hook, pouring his time and energy into ostentatious displays of wealth to match his neighbors', his attention focused on his home and his position in society's most prestigious clade of Dynasts, and not on advancement, self-aggrandizing power grabs, or treason against the Empress. She held a tiger by the tail, and the Valley of the Ancients strengthened her grip considerably.

(or the nearest known approximation) of an ancient buried within the Valley. Every household participates, as is obligatory. Feasts, music, and theater celebrate the long-dead ancients' lives in joyous remembrance of their titanic and legendary deeds that have survived through legend to the modern day. Swordsmen in cassocks of gold or silver duel with mock-jade blades, while sorcerers clear the skies to let the sun gaze down on the spectacle.

Only here, for this single day, are the ancients revered by all, in a display that would be deemed blasphemous at any other time or place. Cost is no concern — the entire purpose of the endeavor is to do one's utmost to sate the vengeful shades of the ancient dead and guard against their fury at their hallowed ground's transformation into a playground of the rich and ambitious. This Remembrance must be made every year, with each year just a little more spectacular than the last, for the dead sleep poorly beneath the Dynasts' feet.

Scarlet Prefecture

Scarlet Prefecture is the Blessed Isle's most densely populated prefecture. Fishing boats and brown-water cargo vessels throng its waterways; farms are packed cheek by jowl, maintained by the same families for generations. Dynastic and patrician estates have sprung up near the Imperial City over the centuries, particularly along the coastline, lakes, and rivers, for easy access to the Empress and her court. Villages, towns, and cities have accreted around these estates. Little wilderness remains except that set aside by Imperial decree.

Numinous Rolling Wave's dragon lines pass through Scarlet Prefecture as well. Their Essence sustains many powerful manses, such as the salubrious Bamboo Dragon Nest, lightning-wreathed Summer Storm Pagoda, and time-twisting House of Not Yet Midnight. In the Empress' absence, houses jockey to control the manses via the Deliberative and through direct negotiation, knowing that in a battle for the capital, these powerful, fortified structures may prove crucial to victory. House Mnemon retains the dragon's share. Ragara and Sesus have gobbled up several, while rivals in weak positions — such as Tepet and V'neef — ponder extravagant offers to sell their final Scarlet Prefecture redoubts, knowing such deals may cost them too much in the end.

Scarlet Prefecture also holds family estates for most of the influential patrician families dominating the Thousand Scales. These form a tangle of alliances, feuds, and polite suspicion, maneuvering for wealth, power, and marriage alliances with the Great Houses and one another. But even those that hate each other recognize the threat posed them by civil war, whose victor might burn the Thousand Scales to the ground and massacre its mortal elites. Patrician households expand their house guards. Families lacking rights to raise troops gather soldiers in backhanded ways, passing off mercenaries and retired legionnaires as gardeners, couriers, and other staff.

The families have largely agreed to work together, recognizing that cooperation maximizes their odds of retaining long-term power, and that pulling away to back the wrong contender for the throne will doom them individually. Nonetheless, many are negotiating private deals with individual houses, as the rewards of backing the right contender are great. Families with longtime ties to Great Houses — such as the Rose family of Chatoyant Hearth, prominent in the Stewards of Imperial Assets, and a client of House Mnemon — are expected to support their longtime patrons. Others hold off on tying themselves to Dynastic coattails until a contender's victory seems assured.

Numerous patrician and Dynastic estates, combined with constant passage of merchants to and from the Imperial City, provide a steady influx of wealth that filters down even to Scarlet Prefecture's peasantry. Inns, teahouses, and restaurants cluster along every road, canal, and river, some celebrated far and wide, others infamous; they often form the seeds of villages and towns. Many a proprietor or merchant parlays a fortune into marrying a patrician spouse. The prefecture's wealthier peasants have thus gained a reputation for ambition and undeserved hauteur, while some deem such nouveau-riche patricians callow and unsophisticated.

Mnemon Bata, prefect of Scarlet Prefecture, is one of Mnemon's un-Exalted sons. Once entrusted merely with carrying out the prefecture's day-to-day administration,

he's taken on increased responsibilities and prominence since the Empress vanished. An obstinate man, Bata rarely sides with his mother politically, which is why the Deliberative appointed him to the position. He enjoys his newfound importance, playing courtiers against each other and extracting favors from Mnemon kin for performing tasks he already intended to do, but he's unprepared to contend with the risks his position now holds.

Numerous wilderness reserves — forests, wooded hill lands, lakes, and high meadows — are set aside solely for the use of the Empress and her Dynasty. Wardens comb their borders for signs of poaching, a capital crime. Some are carefully tended, parklike spaces fringed with topiary and stocked with beautiful and tame animals, whose huntmasters release prey for Dynastic hunts. Others are tangles of wilderness infested by wild beasts. The Halewood — the Empress' own reserve — is off-limits to all, despite being stocked with such distinctive creatures as the Sijanese emperor rat; Rumari, the Elk of Flowers; and the immortal Nightshade Wyrm.

The Imperial City

Though the Imperial Mountain forms the Blessed Isle's physical center, the Realm's economic and spiritual heart is the Imperial City. Every major road on the Isle leads to its many gates, every Threshold port sends ships up the Imperial River to its docks, every patrician family of any note maintains a household within its walls, and every major god is represented in its countless Immaculate temples. Powerful dragon lines pass through the earth below, their Essence twining and tangling about the stones of foreign manses seized by the legions and wedded to the city's foundations. A sense of grandeur hangs over it all — the Empress' invisible presence, her mantle forever spread across this queen of cities.

With over a million residents from across the Blessed Isle and Threshold, the Imperial City is among Creation's most populous metropoli. Its walls, wide as they are, can't contain its multitudes. Buildings climb skyward, forming a forest of towers that loom above the walls. Other buildings rise athwart the streets, fragmenting major avenues and forming tortuous routes that twist like snakes across the city. Those who can't find lodging within the walls build outside, forming a great sprawl of habitation gathered around the city's skirts.

This may also be Creation's wealthiest city. All the world's treasure courses through the roots of empire to blossom here, and the Empress aimed to intimidate. Hundred-foot dragon statues of gold and tarnished bronze flank the city gates. Boulevards wide enough for legions to march along in formation spill into thronging plazas that could swallow small towns. Temple minarets brush the heavens, the entirety of Immaculate scripture carved across their marble facades. The outermost boughs of centuries-old trees spread from walled Dynastic estates to shade the surrounding streets.

Monumental edifices, often built on the foundations of the Empress' first military encampments, loom on every side — bridges, bathhouses, Cynis pleasure houses, ministries, courthouses, embassies, schools, libraries, museums, armories, garrisons, and gaols. A handful of millennia-old buildings stand amid among them — remnants of the Seat of Splendors, the ruined First Age fortress atop which the city was built. Dynasts and patricians flaunt their fortunes by erecting or renovating mansions and palazzos, funding festivals and public artworks, or parading vast, sumptuously clad entourages through the streets.

Every corner of the city displays architectural trophies brought back from seven centuries of conquest. Quartzite stelae sacked from summer-smoldering Zephyr line the Avenue of Finches. The shattered thrones of Psalter's fallen queens are inlaid among the mosaic tiles of the Plaza of Empress' Mercy. The gold and porphyry temple of Jiara's city gods, dismantled and rebuilt stone by stone, crouches in the shadow of the Five Enlightened Dragons Pagoda.

Trophies of the past, looted from the Realm Before, signal the Empress' ultimate authority as the Shoguns' successor. Everburning crystal lamps illuminate courtyards and concourses. Doorless obsidian domes by the city walls, built by the Empress to house nameless devices of the Anathema, emit an insectile hum; they flicker on Calibration nights with a many-colored nimbus. Massive arsenal-manses, sealed since the Empress' disappearance, contain all manner of First Age war engines, untested in battle for centuries.

The enormous, varicolored glass domes of the Palace of the Deliberative, masterworks of Mnemon craftsmanship, are matched by the peacock garb of the senators themselves as they parade to and from sessions, borne by gilded palanquins and escorted by scores of aides, servants, and slaves. Beyond the resplendent ranks of the Guardians of the Deliberative rise countless businesses geared toward Deliberative members' needs, supplying highest-quality parchment, ink, brushes, inkstones, scribes, couriers, refreshments, temporary lodgings, and courtesans. Across the plaza stands the squat, weathered Strix Tower, a Shogunate-era military bastion whose Imperial garrison — ostensibly set to guard the Deliberative against rioters or invaders — was



a tacit threat by the Empress to keep senators in line. Now it stands vacant, emptied on the Deliberative's own authority.

The Capital's Underbelly

Another, larger city throbs behind the Imperial City's facade of wealth and power. To support each patrician or Dynast dwelling in splendor, a hundred artisans, laborers, and slaves drudge through their days. Just past the grand avenues, cramped apartment blocks face manufactories and warehouses across tangles of narrow streets, while artfully sculpted jetties divide aristocratic marinas from mercantile docks crawling with stevedores. This second city is as multiethnic as Nexus, Chiaroscuro, Pangu, or Arjuf, its districts chockablock with unfamiliar garments and architectural styles. The air resounds with foreign dialects and strains of strange music; each breeze is redolent with exotic spices from barbarian cuisines.

Fighting the city's organic growth, Imperial architects struggle to conceal the lower classes from their betters, confining the stink of industry and clamor of crowds to the heart of commoners' districts. Pimps, madams, drug dealers, extortionists, thugs, and thieves do brisk business in this shadow city, and every night, blood is shed with little attention from the Black-Helms. Meanwhile, the Realm's grandees smell only the osmanthus trees lining their boulevards, and the distant din of the people sounds no louder to them than buzzing gnats.

Since the Empress' disappearance, the city's tenor has darkened for nobles and peasants alike. Citizens grumble about increased prices and higher taxes, then whisper of bloody intrigues — legionary officers culled, courtiers and archons murdered in the Imperial Palace, or conspiracies eating away at the Realm's heart. Ever more house troops escort Dynasts through the streets, shopkeepers scrub treasonous graffiti from their walls each morning, and foreign mercenaries and spies brawl in wine shops while awaiting employment. Mobilized to keep order, the Black-Helms offer rewards for information on seditious deeds — which only yields greater tension as neighbor falsely informs on neighbor.

The Imperial Palace

As the Imperial City stands at the Realm's heart, at its own heart stands the Imperial Palace. Though every avenue in the capital converges on the Palace, it's

GRI-FEL, GOD OF THE IMPERIAL CITY

Once a rustic deity of pastoral farmlands, Gri-Fel may now be the most prominent city father in Creation. A witty, sophisticated deity with a foppish bearing, he's a rarity among spirits in genuinely believing in the Immaculate Philosophy, convinced that the Dragon-Blooded are Creation's rightful rulers. He oversees the Imperial City dutifully while piously refraining from proscribed interference in mortal affairs; the Immaculate Order in turn allots him plentiful festivals in Scarlet Prefecture's prayer calendar. He's greatly worried by the Empress' disappearance, fearing that instability at the Realm's center may ripple outward throughout the entire Perfected Hierarchy. The return of the Solar Exalted has only strengthened his fears. If anything can drive him to meddle in Creation, it's the possibility of Anathema laying siege to his beloved city.

isolated by a many-towered wall pierced by jade-crusted gates, flanked by broad green swards and gardens, and patrolled by the formidable Legion of Silence. Only Dynasts and their personal entourages come and go freely; patricians, peasants, and foreign dignitaries may only enter by Imperial imprimatur — authority vested by the Empress in **Amon Mora** (**Dragon-Blooded**, p. 340), the stubbornly traditionalist Keeper of the First Imperial Seal.

The Empress' sorcery is wound about every door and every stone, protecting the Palace from intrusion. Spirit-fires flicker on rooftops at night, while inhuman shapes stand guard in every mirror's reflection. Lines of block salt ward the entire compound from ghosts, lest countless lives ended by the Empress' policies seek posthumous retribution.

The Palace grounds, a city unto themselves, encompass thousands of buildings occupied by innumerable servants, ministers, and Dynasts. Some of its quarters throng constantly with the business of empire. Others, their functions superseded by newer construction, are all but abandoned, leaving artfully overgrown structures perfect for all manner of assignations.

The grounds possess a solemn, timeless air transcending the hustle and bustle of the empire's day-to-day. Officials perambulate across tessellated plazas at a slow, measured pace, gorgeous robes barely fluttering, accompanied by servants to carry their writing cases and shade their heads with silken umbrellas. Courtiers and concubines stroll beneath pergolas wreathed in morning glory, or take tea in lacquered pavilions beside ornamental ponds. Even Imperial messengers move with calm, stately grace.

A luxurious suite of rooms stands ready for each of the Empress' surviving children, husbands, consorts, lovers, and favorites. Similar housing accomodates Great House matriarchs, generals, admirals, chief ministers, magistrates, and other noteworthy figures. Though many suites have gone unused for decades, they're maintained as though their owners will return at any moment, their possessions and private writings preserved. Since the Empress vanished, a few family members and intimates — such as her astrologer-advisor Rahesh the Varangian, elderly ex-husband Ledaal Harano, and mortal son Ivoret — have retreated to the Palace and the Silent Legion's protection. The Regent inhabits a small suite far from the Empress' own now-sealed residence.

Other edifices range from the sprawling, vaulted Scarlet Garda Pavilion where petitioners knelt before the Empress enthroned, to the Hall of Ten Thousand Seals, whose chambers contain centuries of Imperial regalia — from signets, collars, mantles, and diadems to scepters, parasols, breastplates, and daiklaves — many predating the Realm, having been borne by daimyos and shoguns, or queens and preterarchs from the Realm Before. Each tier of Jinmai Tower houses a menagerie from a different part of the Threshold; the floor of the Pure Wind Pagoda is a grand map of the Realm, carved in high relief and inlaid with semiprecious stones.

One also finds dozens of ministerial offices; kitchens large enough to prepare whole elephants and hybrocs; numerous dining pavilions, grand or intimate, each meant for different seasons and times of day; the Imperial Mint; the Legion of Silence barracks; countless gardens, temples, treasuries, museums, libraries, theaters, state rooms, parlors, chapels, cellars, workshops, servants' halls, storerooms, and stables; and the fortified domes housing the Realm's two infinitely rare Beasts of Resplendent Liquids, whose excretions yield the anagathic drugs that maintain the Dynasty's youth. Subterranean vaults house dangerous remnants of the Realm Before, trophies stripped from captured Anathema, and sorcerous wonders wrought by the Empress' own hand.

Where once the Empress' staff devoted themselves to Realm and throne, today's Palace is a hotbed of scheming ministers and courtiers swirling around the Regent, visiting senators, ministerial chiefs, and other key figures, deploying persuasion, rumors, skullduggery, and paperwork to undermine political enemies and sway the undecided. Some advance their own careers in the

THE IMPERIAL MANSE

Few places in Creation rival the power within the Imperial Manse. It's a singular marvel of the Realm Before's geomantic engineering and sorcerous prowess, anchoring a confluence of the Blessed Isle's most puissant dragon lines to empower the miracle-engines of what is now known as the Realm Defense Grid. None save the Empress know what lies within, though rumors abound — monstrous elemental prodigies arisen from the dragon lines, gateways into other worlds, the souls of fallen Shoguns, the shells from which the Elemental Dragons hatched, or stranger wonders yet. The Imperial Manse's geomancy is unassailable by almost any natural forces or deliberate intervention; a would-be saboteur seeking to tamper with the Realm Defense Grid would have to block off the dragon lines that tie the Imperial Manse to the rest of the grid.

present tumult. Others press for advantage for their family, ministry, or other faction, paving the ground for the economic and political — or, if it comes to that, military — strife they foresee overtaking the Realm and the Blessed Isle.

The soaring trees of the Hidden Raiton Garden, at the palace grounds' center, cannot conceal the squat, blocky shape of the Imperial Manse. The manse's foundations are sunk deep beneath the Palace, rooted in dragon lines flowing through the Isle's bedrock. Unlike the rest of the Palace, it has no guards. It needs none. It opened only to the Empress; without her it remains implacably sealed, leaving the Realm Defense Grid's power inaccessible. If there's any other way to rouse the Grid's eschatological might, no one speaks of it.

Sdoia Prefecture

Sdoia Prefecture is characterized by two greatly differing cultures. One, distributed along the prefecture's roads and rivers, encompasses country homes of Dynasts and patricians desiring privacy without venturing too far from the city. Many a plot was hatched in these old hunting mansions, often ending with a knife in someone's back after a sumptuous banquet. "Going to Sdoia" may therefore mean taking up with a new paramour for a week, luring a rival in with honeyed words and making short work of him, or perhaps both.

The other culture, centered on the city of Sdoia, is no less blessed with intrigues. Home to the Wood Fleet, the port of Sdoia is one of House Peleps' greatest strongholds, a political battlefield that may be the flashpoint of civil war in the Realm.

Sdoia

Centuries ago, the Empress named Sdoia city the Wood Fleet's home port. It's had a military air ever since. Almost all civilian residents are tied into the Fleet's municipal support structure, whether through shoreside services, logistical support, or other tasks outside the purview of House Peleps' wide-ranging naval authority.

Sdoia's harbor dominates the city, docks reaching into the water from every accessible inch of shoreline. The collection of moored ships changes with the tides as patrols depart or return. Twin fortresses flank the bay's mouth, their siege engines tracking each ship that sails through. Both also serve as lighthouses, their massive pyres stoked high every night. Virtually every outdoor surface in the city sports a flag or banner, with House Peleps' mon predominating.

Its ports occupied largely by Wood Fleet ships, Sdoia sees far less commercial traffic than comparable ports. This contributes to the city's austere air; lacking revenue from merchant ships, its teahouses, restaurants, and bordellos are shabbier than their peers at the docks. This mood lifts only in the city's handful of palatial Dynastic and patrician households — their scions largely naval officers and shipwrights — and in barracks and dockside taverns, where enlisted sailors congregate when at liberty to spend a month's wages in a night. Providing for the latter (and occasionally the former) supports a sizable black market despite the Wood Fleet's presence.

Prefect **Sesus Tudara** dwells full-time in the city. She addresses her provincial duties entirely through intermediaries, focused as she is on her ongoing operation against House Peleps. The two houses have long been locked in mutual antagonism — House Sesus fears the Imperial Navy cutting off profitable trade and tribute routes, while House Peleps has long been concerned with Sesus' infiltration of the Navy — and Sdoia is one more battleground in this longstanding rivalry. Tudara considers it her duty to interfere with the Wood Fleet's operations, sabotaging its morale and readiness and doing what she can to encourage piracy in nearby waters.

The Admiralty Board, no fools and disinclined to tolerate declining readiness for any reason, have charged Captain **Peleps Kishikaia** with hunting down the source of the sabotage. Even with covert support from governor **Fortune Jade** — who's offended by Tudara's interference with his oversight of the city — Kishikaia has yet to tie Tudara to the affair, nor has Tudara followed the chain

PLACES TO COME FROM

Raiton's Perch: This ancient mountain fastness overlooks Vane Prefecture's terraced hills and Dynastic estates. The patrician Relin family dwells here in faded splendor surrounded by dust and cobwebs, amid a labyrinth of vacant rooms and crumbling towers. Once Shogunate nobility, their blood has thinned, their treasury emptied. Now they command but a handful of peasant farmers whose efforts support them and their equally aloof, insular servants. But the Relins dream of reclaiming their ancestors' prestige. Students of sorcery, they command an ancient working they call the Incandescence that gathers and shapes sunlight, enriching harvests in the mountains' narrow, shady valleys. And now in this generation, Dragon-given fortune has Exalted seven young Relin sorcerers, whose united powers magnify the Incandescence into all-consuming solar fire. With the Empress gone and war looming, they look covetously on Vane Prefecture's rich lowland cities — Divan, Irevasa, Star-of-Prose — and dream of carving out a new kingdom.

Tears-of-the-Lotus: This lakeside market town in Incas Prefecture, with its communal tulou residences and lotus-pool gardens, its sampans and cicadas, was once a quiet, rustic bywater where little of note transpired. Now night winds carry dead voices to its shores. For centuries, a local Iselsi household cremated their fallen at the edge of Lake Fensan and scattered the ashes upon the waters within the Black Egret Pavilion. Even after that house's fall, the manse remained the residence of elderly Iselsi Bura — senile, impoverished, last of her line — until she died of old age last year. Rumors that ghosts of Iselsi dead haunted the manse were proven when specters assaulted its Nellens purchasers. A sorcerer-exorcist in the Nellens' employ drove the ghosts from the manse, but their ties to the dragon lines were too strong to expel them from the living world. Now Iselsi ghosts lurk beneath the lake, and fisherfolk shudder at the imprecations and dire prophecies that rise from the waters at night.

Radimel's Seat: This island was once an idyllic vista off the Blessed Isle's coast, its balmy climate maintained by a First Age network of manses that diffused and ameliorated the influence of powerful fire demesnes. Several decades ago, the manses were sabotaged by a Circle of Lunar Anathema, creating a geomantic imbalance that scorched the island's eastern half to desert and beckoned a migration of winged fire spirits from the South. Manse repairs — still in progress, though largely halted since the Empress' disappearance — stabilized the island's Essence, but haven't undone the damage. Inhabitants have relocated to cities and towns on the western shore, though many of these immigrants are ill-used. With the magistrates' withdrawal, crime is more rampant than ever, and smugglers find the island an ideal base of operations.

of stabbings in alleys and taverns that nibble at the edges of her network to their origin. The two women dance around each other with their knives out, ready to stab the first thing they spy in the shadows. Sooner or later, one of them will act, and war will come to Sdoia.

Incas Prefecture

Located in a wide valley in the southeastern Blessed Isle, Incas Prefecture's expansive dairy ranches, farming operations, vineyards, and orchards offer a steady supply of foodstuffs to the region's cities. Incas also houses the Palace Sublime and the Cloister of Wisdom.

Once House Iselsi's seat of power, the fallen family's last few households still call this prefecture home. The renowned raksha-hunter **Ledaal Tajit** now governs Incas, but Iselsi remnants retain access to several manses, and their remaining wealth is heavily invested in the cities of Sion and Noble. In addition, Incas holds many immaculately manicured pastoral manors, choice country homes for retired legionnaires and influential politicians.

Incas is also home to the Radiant Synod, a spirit court of minor gods of fire and sunlight. Local citizens avoid beaches such spirits frequent; Immaculates watch to ensure the Radiant Synod doesn't form heretical cults or hide a Solar Anathema among its ranks. Occasionally, a sorcerer visits to petition the Synod, but the small gods are largely left in peace.

Sion

Founded centuries ago as a weavers' community, Sion has become one of the Blessed Isle's premier hubs for textile production and fashion design. The surrounding countryside supports Sion's primary industry, from vast cotton fields to zealously guarded herds of exactingly bred, soft-wooled sheep. Dyeworks and factories dominate the city's trade quarters. Most of the cloth manufactured within Sion is of sturdy, common quality, but

the city also produces materials suitable for Dynastic and patrician fashions.

Sion is home to many influential textile houses, but its true draws are professional studios and exclusive schools of acclaimed clothiers, many of whom are reclusive and mysterious. Catching a glimpse of the most elite fashion designers means the lucky onlooker has conversational centerpieces for weeks to come. The clothiers rarely emerge from their studios, sending agents and apprentices on errands from purchasing high-quality materials to ordering rice and tea from the food markets.

Every year, Sion hosts the Festival of Illustrious Innovation, a lavish celebration of textile design that encompasses the entire month of Descending Wood. Sion's finest clothiers unveil their latest designs, setting fashion trends for upcoming seasons. Clothiers from across the Blessed Isle and even the satrapies come to showcase their wares and compete for hefty prize purses awarded for novelty, elegance, and beauty. Several elite Sionese clothiers offer coveted apprenticeships to the winners.

The festival brings thousands of traders, artisans, merchants, patricians, and Dynasts over its duration, generating massive revenue. Unfortunately, criminal activity spikes during that month. Many thefts, assaults, and murders go unsolved by Black-Helms and magistrates alike.

The Palace Sublime

The Palace Sublime rarely meets first-time visitors' expectations. Rather than a glorious jade-crusted monastery encircled by serene, majestic gardens, the seat of the Immaculate Order is simultaneously unostentatious and intimidating — an austere fortress of rough-hewn stone, flanked by two of the tallest towers in the Realm. It shows no sign of riches, for the Philosophy doesn't prize wealth. Neither is it defensible, for none would dare threaten the Order's heart.

One tower houses the chambers and offices of the Mouth of Peace (p. XX). Here, she transacts the Order's day-to-day business, meeting with archimandrites of Directional missions, delegations from the Breaths of the Immaculate Dragons, and Great House emissaries. The floors below contain the offices of the Mouth of Peace's staff; halls of records; and lodgings for visiting Immaculates and Dynastic envoys, as well as several high-ranking, well-respected monks (including a number of prominent Iselsi scions).

The other tower encompasses libraries and archives containing authoritative collections of the Immaculate Texts, commentaries thereon, other texts of scholarly merit, and quotidian records of temple and monastery business, along with scriptoriums and residences of Immaculate scribes. Both towers hold altars, meditation chambers, and rock gardens. The central fortress — given over to Dynastic postulants seeking admission to the Order — contains dormitories, training yards, and simple devotional shrines.

Stairways descending beneath the Palace open onto well-guarded vaults containing the Order's wealth — trunks full of jade and silver, armories of artifact weapons and armor, catacombs brimming with sacred relics, and depositories for forbidden texts. Only a few of the Order's most trusted monks ever receive access to these hidden halls.

LUO-HAN PLAINS

This warm and pleasant province of the southeastern Isle, thick with farming villages, prospers under the Immaculate Order's eye. New itinerant monks often take their first rounds here, in the Palace Sublime's shadow, while personal agents of high-ranking Immaculate elders pass through on their way to and from meetings with their superiors. Prefects, governors, and ministers know better than to abuse the peasantry under such close attention, nor can peasants conceal large portions of the harvest from tax collectors.

Venerable mortal monks often request burial in quiet places in the Luo-Han countryside, or in villages that they had pleasant memories of from their rounds. Though not as often visited as such great religious sites as Myion or Juche, these scattered cenotaph-shrines receive a steady trickle of pilgrims. Iselsi agents use such shrines as meeting places and dead drops.

Noble

Despite Incas Prefecture's richness, the city of Noble has fallen on hard times of late. Founded as a military town, Noble has for generations housed Imperial legions and janissaries awaiting deployment to the South or East. Military housing, barracks, and commissaries comprise the bulk of its economy.

Since the Imperial legions' recall from the Threshold to key Blessed Isle cities and ancestral seats, Noble's economy has dwindled. Military units — once common to see in Noble's streets — are a rare sight, with the barracks empty since they were briefly lent to Mnemon

legions en route to Jiara a year ago. Businesses have shuttered for lack of commerce, and many families have abandoned the city to seek work elsewhere. Without fresh industry or returning legions to reinvigorate the economy, it's only a matter of time before Noble is little more than a ghost town.

Corin Prefecture

Rugged, rocky Corin Prefecture's many roads swarm with guarded caravans conveying silver, tin, jade, and other metals and gems from Ragara mines to the prefecture's ports and the Great Coast Road. Would-be bandits seeking easy wealth from the "Imperial Bank" find roads lined with their predecessors' crucified, raiton-mantled corpses.

While the Ragaras command riches beyond mortal dreams, most of their wealth exists on paper as loans and investments. The house and its scions leverage that into tangible prosperity, raising expansive manors encircled by draconic topiary and ornamental ponds, tended by armies of servants. Manses, too, rise many-towered from promontories and blossom like jade flowers alongside waterfalls and streams — so many that a sizable Mnemon household resides here to maintain them. Such expenditures channel money into the local economy, attracting skilled artisans and performers from across the Realm. Patrician families thriftily reward gifted clients not with money, but with marriage opportunities. Such patronage is beguiling in a society largely devoid of upward mobility.

While a miner's lot is miserable, peasant farmers, herders, and urban laborers don't suffer unduly under the Ragara yoke. While the house as a whole has little regard for the lower classes as people, seeing only their value on a balance sheet, they recognize that rebellion is as much a risk in prefectures as in satrapies, and invest in capable administrators. Corin's villages are quiet places whose peasants are taxed heavily but not *too* heavily, and itinerant Immaculates find little to criticize. But the people are well aware that their Dynastic masters don't love them; they still recall every mass grave where Ragara put down ancient peasant rebellions with infamous brutality.

Tapped-out mines nestle amid the mountains, at the ends of roads whose paving stones were thrust aside by new trees. Overgrown, abandoned mining towns are inhabited largely by birds and deer. Some retain a smattering of mortal residents — prospectors, hunters, trappers, bandits, hermits, and the dispossessed — dwelling beyond the Realm's laws and strictures. Others are haunts of elementals, ghosts, and stranger beings. Parties of Unclouded Stone Savants, Ragara's elite surveyors, investigate reopening dead mines to eke the last traces of wealth from their bones. This stirs up residents who fear losing independence, or that justice will catch up with them. Some have been moved to violence; at least one surveyor's corpse lies sunk beneath a flooded quarry.

Earthquakes recently rolled across the southern Isle's highlands, leveling buildings and killing many, but Corin's folk are already rebuilding. Unclouded Stone Savants are especially busy in the disaster's wake, finding routes into mines sealed by the tremors, and seeking new lodes — or lost treasures of the Realm Before — that the quake may have opened.

Riven Quay

Most of Corin Prefecture's population and wealth gather in riverine and coastal settlements, where streams of ore descending from the highlands merge into mighty rivers of riches. Foremost among these is Riven Quay, a port founded by Ragara himself and now among the Realm's greatest centers of industry.

Towers of foul smoke rise from foundries where silver and tin are smelted, and grimy streets echo with blacksmiths' pounding hammers. Patrician households encircle their estates with thick hedges to create islands of peace; they do much of their business in marble-walled public baths, while peasant laborers throng by the river to wash away the city's soot and stink. Launderers, clothiers, and perfumers do a brisk trade. Glittering emporia market exotic foreign wonders and pre-Contagion relics to the Dynasty.

As Riven Quay's industries have grown in prominence, so have its blasphemies. Blacksmiths pray to forge gods as they labor over their anvils; peasants seek healing from the river's spirit; visiting sailors practice nautical heresies. House Ragara makes a show of suppressing such practices, but it's never quashed them entirely. While most scions see this as lenience extended to a profitable locale, the house's inner circle would rather Immaculate monks in Corin Prefecture contend with such improprieties rather than pry into Ragara secrets.

Juche Prefecture

The populace of mountainous Juche Prefecture gathers into the green folds of river valleys, away from the coast's great, bustling cities. But theirs is a comfortable gathering, supported by House Nellens' wealth. For centuries, the house has invested heavily in businesses throughout Juche — terraced farms, tin mines, lumberyards, luthiers, water mills, and wineshops. It pays well to attract skilled artisans from across the Blessed Isle. Successful businesswomen fund House Nellens



THE MOUNTAIN FOLK

In the earth's depths lie the cities of the inhuman Mountain Folk, also called the Jadeborn. Little is known of them except that they're superlative artisans, and that those who dwell below the Blessed Isle have loyally served the throne since the Realm's dawn. They maintain an annual tribute of 100 jade talents, carried through Juche city and Numinous Rolling Wave Dominion to the capital. A dragon of their soldiers once served as auxiliaries to the Imperial legions, but withdrew upon the Regent's accession. Otherwise, they're rarely seen. Immaculates consider mortal dealings with Mountain Folk as inappropriate as with spirits. A few Dragon-Blooded — largely Ledaal, Mnemon, Nellens, and Ragara — study with their architects and artisans, or bargain for their wondrous wares.

with loan interest; unsuccessful ones can earn grace by providing favors to the house.

Juche is also eminently religious. Millennium-old Immaculate shrines speckle the countryside, towns having sprung up around them since the Contagion. Every village claims some renowned monk or other as a native daughter, or tells tales of her visiting on some holy task. Even the prefect's palace resembles an Immaculate temple, pillars twined with draconic shapes, images of Immaculate Dragons adorning the walls. Local merchants negotiate with peers not in offices or counting houses, but on temple steps after services. They also demonstrate piety via pilgrimage among the prefecture's sacred sites, or by witnessing alleged miracles from such mountain-dwelling Immaculate hermits as the irascible oracle Bramble, or the ever-young Agana of the Healing Hands.

The prefecture is also home to the dark, imposing compound called the Obsidian Mirror. There, a day's travel from Juche city, the Splendid and Just Arbiters of Purpose train young outcastes.

Nellens Dragon-Blooded roam the prefecture slaying predators and rooting out criminals and outlaws. This burnishes the Nellens' image among their mortal subjects — which the house values more than other Dynasts do — thus maintaining loyalty and morale. It also hinders rival houses' spies, and ensures that Dragon-Blooded heroes are on hand if another house moves militarily against Juche. However, the recent murder of young Nellens Serin in the town of Spider's Crossing has set

DRAGONSWRATH DESERT

The Dragonswrath Desert is a sun-blasted expanse of sandy dunes whose inhabitants, largely dispossessed folk hiding from the Realm's eye, eke out a desperate existence. Myriad shattered marble-and-gold remnants lie scattered like glacial boulders across the sands — according to local legend, remnants of an ancient battle between the dragons Dhoresh and Mhaltin, who sleep beneath the encircling mountain ranges that share their names. These irregularly shaped stones protrude here and there from the sands, surrounded by sacred ropes festooned with Immaculate wards.

his kin on edge. These heroes now watch their backs as they wander, wondering if a rival house — presumably Sesus — set an assassin in their midst.

Juche

Juche city dates back to the First Age. Many civic buildings survive from that hallowed era; citizens trace their lineage proudly to the city's original inhabitants. Its ruling house, Nellens, sinks much wealth into signaling that civic pride to the world. Gilded roofs blaze in the sun, flowerbeds and fountains brighten public plazas, and paved streets are kept in good repair and cleaned nightly. Pilgrims journeying to the Imperial Mountain gape in awe, while visiting Dynasts deem the city's ostentatiously garbed and bejeweled merchant-patricians arrogant beyond their station.

During the Shogunate, Juche was central to the nascent Immaculate Order. It remains one of the Blessed Isle's great pilgrimage sites, brimming with holy places from the Realm Before. Most venerated are the Pagoda of Pasiap's Footstep, where the Mouths of Peace resided ere the Palace Sublime was built, and the great shining dome of the Immaculate Temple of Perfected Fire, the golden bones in its sepulcher said to belong to Hesiesh. Fresh-faced cadets and legionnaires' kin visit the Palace of Sacred Strife, beside the red-granite parade ground where Mela is said to have marshaled the first Dragon-Blooded to war against the Anathema.

Catacombs contain cenotaphs and tombs of early Immaculate martyrs, missionaries, and proselytes. Pilgrims witness such relics as the wheel upon which blessed Selen Tor was broken, and the statue of Heshani the Ardent, which weeps tears of fire in times of crisis, as it has every Calibration since the Empress disappeared. Allowing access to holy texts and art objects for a fee enriches the city's temples, and makes them de facto libraries and museums.

PLACES TO COME FROM

Jinitama: This isolated farming village in lovely Aru-thistle Prefecture has unwittingly fallen to heresy. When blight struck every field but those hosting helpful spirits — threatening many families' livelihoods — neighbor accused neighbor of illicit worship, then of foul magical practices to steal the village's luck. Matters escalated to brawling, then arson; finally, rabble-rousers gathered to stone the so-called witches to death. When an itinerant monk turned up in the midst of the execution and accused the crowd of unrighteous action, one of the stones flung at the victims struck the monk instead, killing him. The locals are terrified and ashamed, and they've decided that the monk was an Anathema trying to sway them from righteousness.

Kizuna Prefecture: A powerful earthquake recently wracked Kizuna's hillside villages and densely settled valleys, shattering bridges, collapsing buildings, and breaking levees. House Peleps, which never valued the inland prefecture and is in difficult financial straits, hasn't invested in repairs. The peasantry grumbles, local patricians are outraged, and Immaculate monks march past the prefect's mansion in protest. Rumors speak of quake-slain ghosts haunting the prefect's household, or a great stone face pronouncing dooms from the crumbling Cliffs of Omaru. Others claim the earthquake mirrors the one that heralded Mnemon's birth, a sign that she should ascend the throne — or that her ascent would destroy the Realm. And refugees stream from the city of Waiting Pagoda, at the tremor's epicenter, where seals on a vault beneath the local Immaculate temple shattered, releasing a ravenous swarm of devil-locusts.

Trove: This market town stands amid the hills of tiny Bucolic Hymn Prefecture, storied for its citizens' filial loyalty, plain speech, and taste for mutton. Trove itself is best known for the looming Autumn Vine Pagoda, an Imperial gaol where criminals are temporarily held after a verdict of enslavement. Small and traditionally half-empty, the gaol is now full to bursting. Judges in neighboring prefectures send newly enslaved citizens here under minimal guard. Every few weeks, a coffle sets off toward a Cynis citadel. Recently, the Deliberative has replaced the old Tepet prefect with a Cynis. The new prefect is replacing local judges and bailiffs with officials beholden to her, ready to railroad peasants into slavery for a cut of the profits.

House Nellens prides itself on its mortal members' social graces. Many receive training at Arizei Academy, a

secondary school renowned for refinement, literature, and the arts. In addition to cultivating elegant socialites, the school trains brilliant authors, composers, musicians, dancers, painters, and sculptors. Its halls provide a gallery of their finest works.

Nellens patronage lures skilled artisans from across the Realm. Paintings, jewelry, and blades from Juche command high prices, while entertainers trained there rarely lack for patronage. Even Nellens genealogical records are said to be richly and beautifully illuminated, though those secret documents are hidden from outsiders.

Arjuf Dominion

Extending from the Porcelain Coast along the Caracal toward the Blessed Isle's heart — encompassing rich farmland, winding rivers, and low, dry hills — Arjuf is House Ledaal's ancestral seat. It's a land as strictly regimented as the Ledaals themselves. House officials follow circuits among Arjuf's cities and towns, inspecting for violations of Imperial law. Village fields, roads, homes, and shrines are laid out in geomantic patterns to evoke fertility, health, and fortune. The practice is rarely employed elsewhere; auspicious patterns become inauspicious with one ill-considered new path or rice paddy.

Arjuf's farms produce many fine harvests each year, their surpluses feeding much of the southern Isle and enriching Ledaal-affiliated merchants who annually export countless shiploads of rice, cotton, and other agricultural cargo. Any massive disruption — storms, unruly spirits, piracy, war — will send shockwaves throughout the South as wealthy speculators buy up goods, resulting in sudden wealth for a few, poverty for others, and widespread famine.

Arjuf's peasants are healthy, well-fed, and well-clothed even by Blessed Isle standards. But they're kept firmly in their place by Ledaal masters, who punish even the least slights to the fullest extent of the law. Few Ledaals are deliberately cruel, but the house deems it essential to impress upon their lessers the honor and dignity of all Dragon-Blooded — Ledaal or otherwise.

Ledaal honor galls patricians most of all. When Cirrus Hand recited a satirical poem about the house founder at one of Ledaal Cofar's salons, Cofar had Hand's tongue cut out. The Cirrus matriarch has reached out to other patrician families with grievances against House Ledaal, looking, perhaps, to see Arjuf Dominion in other hands.

Peasants who've personally suffered — or whose family or friends have suffered — at Ledaal hands nurse bitter grudges; this has fueled past revolts. Others respect that the Ledaal are even-handed in their justice, keeping themselves as much in line as their lessers, and policing one another for abuses of authority.

The lightly populated northern downs are a popular region for Dynasts to bury prestigious kin. Ledaal's hilltop tomb, when not wreathed in clouds, offers a commanding view of the Imperial Mountain. But older and more famous is the opulent manse-tomb of Rawar: the Vault of Ten Thousand Years, designed by his daughter Mnemon, funded by his son Ragara, and visited by both — though never at the same time. Un-Exalted members of their houses sometimes retire to its opal-flecked porphyry halls and gold-roofed minarets, tending their ancestor's remains and establishing a cordial relationship with their rivals rarely seen elsewhere. The Ledaals traditionally contribute to the manse-tomb's upkeep so as not to offend Rawar's descendants. However, recent earthquake damage demands extensive repair that the Ledaals can ill-afford to fund.

An oracle resides in a cliffside cave deep in northern Arjuf's hills. It has neither body nor face, merely a childlike voice rising from a smoldering fissure. Though it speaks only of what touches the Blessed Isle's soil — when it speaks at all, for it falls silent for years at a time — legend claims it's never wrong, though its cryptic verses remain open to interpretation. The Empress consulted it to uncover and command relics and sorceries from the Realm Before. Others, such as Mnemon, have offered favors to visit. But the Ledaals employ the oracle rarely. They know it requires a powerful will to hear the oracle without being swayed by it, compelled to make its prophecies come true. Ledaal's mother Jurul relied heavily on its wisdom; some suspect it was complicit in her corruption. House Ragara hopes to claim it by offering to cancel all debts to the local Ledaal household. The Ledaal elders can only pressure the impoverished household to reject the offer.

Arjuf

Obelisks and stelae taken in tribute from Southern city-states line the streets of Arjuf city. Among the Blessed Isle's largest and busiest ports, it's been tied to the South since the Realm's birth, when it took in thousands of shocked refugees from the Seven Tigers' demise. Its people are olive-skinned, their garments elaborately patterned, and their cuisine peppered with foreign spices. Many become mariners, crewing merchant vessels to and from Jiara, Chiaroscuro, An-Teng, and Goldenseal.

Arjuf was a free city before the Contagion, its governors answering only to the Shogun. The city submitted to the Empress on condition it retain its traditional autonomy, which she never saw fit to withdraw. This includes freedom from prefectural taxes — a boon that House Ledaal views with a jaundiced eye — and a writ empowering the city's Dragon-Blooded households to elect the governor.

A series of early governors — Burano Ren, Scale Sirocco, Min Sagar — made Arjuf a haven for savants, artists, philosophers, and teachers. Foreign thinkers, liberal merchants, and dissatisfied peasants flocked to the city, whose economy boomed. Despite later troubles, Arjuf's schools still attract scions of forward-thinking Dynastic and patrician families.

With the Empress gone, House Ledaal has replaced the old governor with one of its own, who's cracking down on freethinkers and heretics. Meanwhile, the Palace Sublime issues decrees removing texts and ideas from school curricula. Rowdy students brawl in wineshops with city guards, who must hold back lest they harm some Dynast's child.

Arjuf city was the Merchant Fleet's headquarters until the Empress turned that service over to House V'neef, which moved most Fleet operations to Eagle's Launch. Having little use for the abandoned Fleet facilities, the Ledaals leased the property piecemeal to local and foreign merchants. Called the Old Dock District, it's a maze of tiny shops and nameless warehouses adjoining the remaining Merchant Fleet quay, rife with low-level crime that the All-Seeing Eye fostered as a source of contacts and assets, and whose agents now have greater concerns than Arjuf's protection rackets, counterfeiters, blasphemers, and thieves.

The adjacent Jade Street markets are thick with Southern and Southwestern traders hawking fruit, wine, ivory, scrolls, silks, and spices. Varangian astrologers, Zebremani alchemists, Baihu sophists, and Chiaroscuran philosophers offer tutelage to wealthy passersby while awaiting Ledaal patronage.

Some Peleps and V'neef estates remain in Arjuf's wealthier districts, but most Dynasts here are Ledaals soaking up the city's wealth and culture, or readying expeditions to the Threshold. Other Dragon-Blooded come to hire ship captains and foreign guides, not knowing these are well paid by the Ledaals to report back on such ventures.

The House of Bells, the Realm's premier military secondary school, sprawls several miles from Arjuf. Though its students don't mingle with the citizenry, every year hundreds of peasants are summoned to the House's extensive grounds for mock battles with practice weapons. The school compensates families of those few who perish in such exercises — typically during a student's Exaltation.



Tuchara

Once merely a pottery-making town, Tuchara now holds a major role in shipping, providing amphorae for the Southern trade in wine and oils. Cynis, Ledaal, Mnemon, and Sesus estates dominate the green hills above the city. In their shadow stands the sprawling, tumbledown manor of **Ophris Selen**, matriarch of the patrician family that founded Tuchara and which stood among the Great Houses until its long-ago fall from grace. Selen nurses hope of restoring Ophris' fortunes. Dinner parties at the manor's Hall of Twelve Frescoes see occasional Dynastic guests, especially from House Nellens, with whom Selen is negotiating her family's support.

For most of the year, Tuchara is a sleepily sensual sort of place, its winding tree-shaded streets rich in businesses devoted to pleasure — teahouses, wineshops, restaurants, clothiers, galleries, theaters, and brothels. Wealthy households' mossy walls drip with honeysuckle and bougainvillea, while even poorer quarters seem torpid, full of shade and ivy and fathers' lullabies to children. Some visitors, lulled by the city's calm, are easy prey for cutpurses; others exhaust their funds in the cool, fusty depths of opium cellars.

The city is best known for its springtime Blue Star Festival praising Venus and other gods of love and matchmaking, which draws sybaritic Dynasts and peasant pilgrims alike. A week of prayer and vegetarian meals is followed by two weeks of parades, weddings, wild parties, rich food, alcohol, marijuana, assignations, and affairs. Babies born nine months afterward, called "Children of Venus" — often found on the doorstep of the Immaculate Temple of the Sower of Grass — are deemed lucky in love. Gods of desire walk the streets to bless festivalgoers — and to receive their prayers. Immaculate monks patrol the festival to catch love-cultists and rogue gods in the act, though they can't always spot chicanery amid dense festival crowds.

The population swells in Festival month, providing cover for trysts, crimes of passion, and conspiracies. Tuchara's underworld rakes in a year's income in that month. Muggers, pickpockets, and burglars "invest" earnings with madams, pimps, and respectable merchants such as artisans and teahouse owners, who dole it back out over the following year, keeping a cut for themselves. Parvenus who win fortunes during the festival erect multistory mansions with brilliant mosaic walls and dragon-backed terracotta roofs amid Tuchara's sea of low brick houses, only for their abodes to fall into disrepair once they fritter their wealth away.

Tarpan Wastes

This was once among the Blessed Isle's lushest regions. Orchards speckled fertile farmland along the Tarpan River's course and across the shores of Iris Lake. But the land's verdancy was the fruit of Solar magic, and early in the Empress' reign that magic began to wither. Now the Tarpan Wastes are largely desert. Soil blows away to reveal plains of bare rock. Thornbushes cling to life among stands of dead trees. The retreating lakeshore has left behind acres of salt flats and bone-dry reeds, and what remains of the lake is too brackish to drink.

A few cities, such as Ashara and Kissed-With-Jade, still linger. Some, at Tarpan's borders, subsist on rivers whose waters are quickly drunk by the desert. Others cling to life at dwindling oases, or around water and wood manses. Most buildings are empty shells, housing only foxes, feral cats, and the wind. Residents dwell in tight knots around water sources. There they blow glass, carve intaglios and musical instruments, and trade lakebed salt to passing merchants for foodstuffs, textiles, and hard goods. Unwomanly is their reputation: weak-willed, and prone to laughter and merriment. Gossip is as common as straightforward speech, and patricians and peasants alike indulge in vain sartorial displays that press the limits of propriety.

The Salt Road runs through Tarpan's three prefectures — Ashara, Seven Stars, and Willow's Edge — from Lord's Crossing to the southern coast. Travelers who'd avoid the high tariffs of Arjuf Dominion traverse the desert along ancient highways reinforced by Mnemon labor. These pass through husks of long-deserted towns, dry and dead but for caravanserais watered by sorcerous springs that fade far too swiftly.

Gods of lost towns, dried-up rivers, and withered fields roam the region, their purviews gone, leaving them purposeless and without place in the celestial order. Many sought new homes elsewhere on the Isle; while some escaped the gauntlet into the Isle's wilds, others were driven back into the desert by Immaculates lest they disrupt the proper activities of gods and mortals. Of those who remain, some watch over dead places and report to weak old gods of forest and lake, or to the desert's cruel new goddess, Tharasht Tears-of-Dust. Others aimlessly wander the desert, or find menial roles in the nascent spirit court of the newly fledged fire dragon Splendid Cinder, whose arrival has left the spirit hierarchy in disarray. The Immaculates quietly observe Splendid Cinder's activities. Wary of her power, they're unwilling to let a cocksure spirit-prince take advantage of the Realm's superstitious awe of dragons to establish a cult among the desert cities.

TWO ODD MONKS

Trigram Monastery is home to monks shuffled out of the hierarchy for various reasons — poor discipline, undesirable politics, borderline heterodoxy, or simple eccentricity. Among them are two of the Order's odder Dragon-Blooded.

Hualli, the Feathered Monk, was born to parrotfolk at Creation's edge. He Exalted as Fair Folk slaughtered his people, then spent years journeying through Eastern forests to find kin in the Realm. Fragile, unwarlike, and blatantly abhuman, he and the legions wanted no part of one another. Generous by nature, he spent years ministering across the Isle as an itinerant, but the celebrity his plumage brought wearied him until he retired to the cloister.

His closest companion is the towering, mute Grip. Bred for the inhuman-seeming Legion of Silence, she Exalted while guarding Sdoia's governor from a Lunar assassin, then broke her halberd over her knee and walked hundreds of miles to the Palace Sublime to present herself as a postulant in the Order. Though she cannot speak, her gestures convey volumes, and she spends her days turning her huge, clumsy-looking hands to producing astonishingly delicate calligraphy.

Ghosts linger in ruined temples of lifeless towns, breathlessly venerating the Dragons in vain hope of release. Others offer guidance to desert-lost treasures in exchange for prayer. Few travelers accept, fearing to be set back on the wheel of rebirth — or slain in the desert by the restless dead. But the dead are themselves wary, fearing the attentions of the Immaculate monks of Trigram Monastery, built here as much to restrain the desert's chaotic spirits as for isolation from worldly matters. Some desert ghosts have sworn themselves to Splendid Cinder's service, which the Immaculates will oppose when they learn of it. But many monks have left for Mnemon lands, leaving spirit-chastising tasks to a handful of stylites dwelling atop rocky pillars to commune with the desert's austere Essence.

That Essence has twisted and changed with the centuries. Dragon lines of wood and water have faded, supplanted by fire and air. Old manses have crumbled, melted, burst into flame. Others, reshaped and reinforced by Mnemon and her daughters, endure. The primeval Well of Holy Fire once burned on an island in Iris Lake, but the lake's evaporation has stranded it amid salt flats. Its sacred maples have withered; the guardian serpents have shed their skins. Once the Empress warded it jealously as a place of sorcerous power. Now its flame burns low and dark, and glassy inhuman footprints, melted into the salt flats, trail away into the desert.

Justiciar Prefecture

Apart from the capital, much of Justiciar Prefecture is indistinguishable from surrounding prefectures. As in those bucolic, seemingly timeless provinces, Justiciar's countryside is thick with farms handed down from mother to daughter, recognizable in travelogues written centuries ago. Untamed forests climb the slopes of mountains none have summited in decades.

Most traffic clings to major roads dotted with inns and the towns that have grown around them, leaving the hinterlands isolated. Itinerant monks attend to shrines and serve the peasantry as best they can, but the Immaculate Order always seems further away than it ought, and heresy grows in this region like few others — especially in these troubled times when even peasants can feel the tension in the air, and so in desperation turn to gods, ghosts, and demons for aid.

A MEMORY OF EMPIRE

The Abashmu Hills hide a particularly ancient strain of heresy, practiced by the Kashkassu peoples. Once, their oral history says, they led an empire that dominated the Blessed Isle. They ruled without mercy, crushing any who rose against them. Then the Dragon's blood deserted them, the gods refused their prayers, and the armies of the Shogun in the East broke their fortresses, scattered their people, and ruined forever the shining capital of Iqnu.

Kashkassu communities can be found across the western Blessed Isle, but many yet live in the hills of their ancient homeland, tending herds and traveling as the seasons require it. The mountaintop where Iqnu once stood, where only shattered columns now stand, is sacred to them. They venture there only to come of age or to die.

The Immaculate Order conducted mass purges of the Kashkassu over the centuries when they practiced their blasphemies too openly. Most now pay public lip service to the Immaculate Philosophy while observing their ancestral rituals in secret. They practice ancient arts of swordplay and mysticism, living and dying for the day when the gods hear their prayers once more, when they'll rise up and retake what's rightfully theirs.

PLACES TO COME FROM

Brilliant Autumn Shades Prefecture: Centuries ago, when retired officer Murex Blaze settled among Brilliant Autumn Shades' low, rolling orchards, her open-handed generosity won her many friends, and her children married into local patrician families. But Blaze and her offspring were blood-witches whose curses compelled rivals to kin-slaying and cannibalism. The witches' schemes were revealed by legendary magistrate Akiyo Reku, who slew Blaze and scattered the Murex clan. Descendants lingering among neighboring families were rooted out decades later by Peleps Decenin. But peasants whisper that ghosts of the witch-families haunt the prefecture, driving heads of household toward greed, cruelty, and the eventual murder and devouring of servants and kin. According to rumor, ghosts inhabit the shadow of the Murexes' ancestral home, the House of the Crimson Table — long since razed, yet visible on moonless nights, they say, wraiths and demons dancing around its cold violet beacon. Local monks have witnessed a few equivocal manifestations, but nothing to warrant attention from Immaculate exorcists. The sorcerer Venom Mercy, who's dwelt in his pale country house since Decenin's day, insists there's nothing to fear. But his abode radiates its own spectral phenomena. Some fear he isn't merely meddling with deathly powers, but is the blood-witches' heir.

Damson Prefecture: This small inland district's rocky fields and scrub-covered hills are peppered with farms and orchards. Once home to the legendary bandits of Boar-Thicket Fortress, outlawry continued to be a problem until half a century ago, when House Tepet began settling retired legionnaires on small land grants. The retirees and their families, whose militia pacified the prefecture, remain immensely loyal to the house. But the Tepets recently sold their lease over Damson to House Ragara to settle some of their debts. While doing so, they stripped the prefecture of retired legionnaires willing to rejoin service as Tepet house troops, offering the retirees' families travel papers to resettle in nearby Lord's Crossing. While the Ragaras fume at the denuded countryside, they nonetheless distrust those who remained, fearing spies and saboteurs.

Nine Envies Prefecture: This small, humid Cynis prefecture's slave plantations harvest cash crops while Dynastic households dwell in luxury. Due to tightened finances — caused by reduced tribute from the satrapies and fiscal pressure from House Ragara — owners press slaves ever harder to eke out another iota of profit. Increasing numbers of slaves rise up against their masters and escape into the countryside, turning to banditry against patricians, merchants, and occasionally the surrounding peasantry. A recent uprising rampaged through the prefecture for weeks until violently put down by Cynis house troops; its leader, Gavenne of Grieve, has been captured and awaits punishment. The revolt's other leaders — Lark, a newly Exalted Fire Aspect, cocksure and cunning, and Elam the Zephyrite, an elderly occultist who claims the gift of prophecy, both also slaves — remain at large. Soon, simmering tensions may break into full-scale revolt.

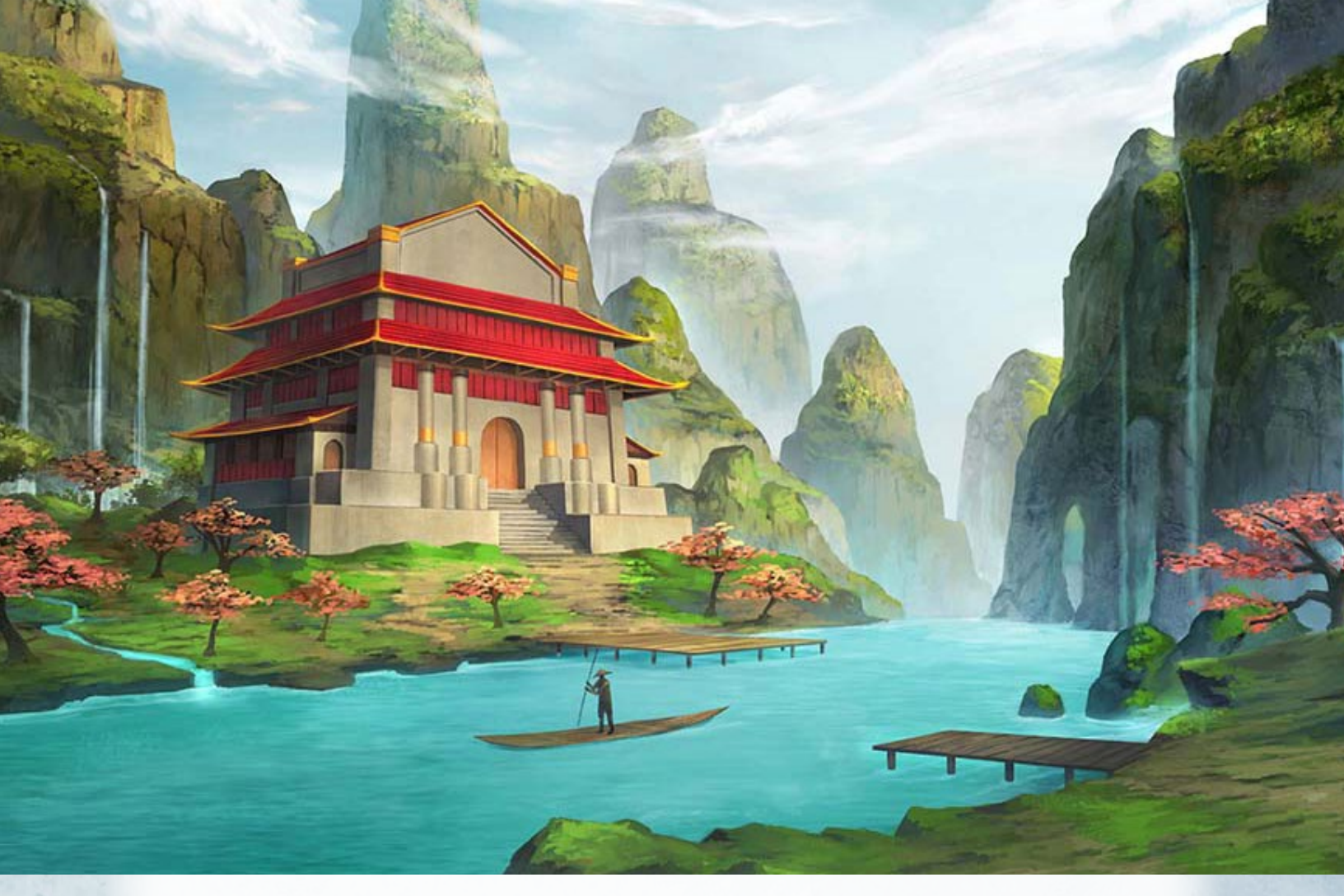
Justiciar

The prefectural capital and the region's only major city, Justiciar is a warren of ministerial buildings, judicial facilities, gaols, and archives, ringed by housing for the small army of bureaucrats that toils therein. Virtually the entire machinery of government here is turned to providing legal and bureaucratic services to the surrounding rural prefectures.

By day, Justiciar is sedate. Markets are quiet, in deference to the work of state transpiring around them. Many shops stay closed throughout the day, except for those few midday hours when the city's bureaucrats desert their posts en masse to take tea and luncheon. Justiciar enjoys a strong, cosmopolitan dining culture, with the styles of a dozen prefectures on offer at restaurants ranging from genteel to disreputable. When the sun sets, however, and bureaucratic offices shut their doors for the night, the city comes alive. Their reins slipped, markets grow raucous; in teahouses and pleasure houses alike, music and laughter ring out well into the night.

All streets lead to the city's heart, where the Garda Feather Temple stands. Here, on every fifth day, the regional goddess of lawfully ordained justice, Yuktata, is celebrated in grand style to appease her nigh-constant fury at the ever-increasing corruption — usury, perjury, bribery, and embezzlement — that surrounds her. Having seen the destruction wrought the last time she lost her temper, the Order has no interest in a repeat performance.

The street surrounding the central temple is given over to major ministries, Imperial court offices, and the palatial mansion of prefect **Ragara Eskana**, a genius mathematician who delights in calculating yearly tax rates. Her mansion is guarded at all hours by Ragara soldiers, and a sharp rivalry has taken shape as arrogant troopers



taunt the local Guardians of the Realm on the street and brawl with them in teahouses and wineshops. Tensions are rising, and any new pressure may represent a breaking point.

Though the Ragaras dominate Justiciar Prefecture, they do so having torn it from House Iselsi's grasp, replacing Iselsi-installed governors with Eskana's appointees, and pulling strings in the Thousand Scales and Deliberative to install patricians indebted to the house in local ministerial posts. Now, without the Empress' hand to hold them back, the Iselsi gleefully sharpen their knives, dreaming of vengeance upon their Ragara cousins and the day they'll paint the City of Justice's streets with Ragara blood.

Iselsi Narista, living as an Immaculate monk under the name Three Foxes, manages the local Iselsi network, crafting brilliant and beautiful sand mandalas in the Garda Feather Temple's open courtyard. Hidden within them are codes that her network of spies and cutthroats can read, a secure means of passing on information. Each day, beginning at dawn, she sends her messages — at sunset, she sweeps her mandalas away, leaving no evidence.

Paeon Prefecture

Sleepy and rural, blessed with comfortable climate and generous fertility, Paeon Prefecture sits on the Blessed Isle's southern coast, seemingly isolated from the bustle of farming, trade, and urban life. There are no major cities here, no great fortresses or monuments to ancient battles; only the quiet, placid Wandering River, locally called the Wanderer. It's the site of fishing villages, slow barges poling along to pull up crab pots from the riverbed for dinner, and river dolphins playing in the shallows to the delight of peasant children. It's also one of the Dynasty's most iconic rural retreats.

The Wandering River

Slowly and lazily, the river twists and turns to the sea. At its narrowest, near its source, one might jump across it. At its mouth, it's nearly a mile wide, sheltered by sandbars and a saltwater swamp. In exchange for privileged positions in the region's Immaculate prayer calendar, local weather spirits divert storms that might threaten the Wanderer or Dynastic estates along its shores.

Too shallow for serious commerce and highly picturesque, the Wanderer proved ideal for leisure. According

PLAINS OF RUSTED IRON

In the lands west of Arjuf, the soil remains red-orange with rust, centuries after the Empress invoked a storm of iron thistledown amid the Contagion to shatter a Fair Folk incursion. The area remains a backwater, its prairies and tangled scrubland haunted by a dwindling handful of hobgoblins, gryphons, and other faerie servitors.

Peasants in the Plains' few towns and villages remain superstitious about what might dwell in the wilderness. They're distrustful of strangers and loath to offer hospitality. And when a shepherd or traveler disappears, they blame Fair Folk who survived the Empress' wrath in havens beneath the earth.

to legend, the first Dynast to retire here was Ophris Kotaba. Her name is attached to various local tall tales — the time Kotaba caught a catfish the size of a yeddim, the time Kotaba fast-talked a crocodile spirit, and so on.

Dynastic estates speckle the Wanderer, each a careful distance from its neighbors and local villages to avoid spoiling the river's scenic beauty. All have docks or jetties for private yachts, spacious enough to accommodate many guests' vessels. Here, an unannounced visit from neighbors is a fact of life — easy as a quick jaunt across the river, either by boat or by a quick swim in the warm water — and appreciated as a chance to show off one's hospitality. Even patrician families participate in the practice, a mixing of social classes that's rare in its casual nature.

The Wanderer's climate is temperate year-round, though in summer the breeze off the river can't fight the heat. Some families decamp to cooler climates; others stay and enjoy the slow pace of life that accompanies heat and humidity. Some, at great expense, ship blocks of enchanted ice from the far North that can keep a room cool for weeks at a time.

A few, enamored of the natural beauty and ease of life on the Wanderer, live here full-time, eschewing ambition or greatness in favor of comfort, much to the disdain of their households and houses. More than one young scion seeking to escape the pressures of Dynastic life has been dragged kicking and shouting back to civilization and service to her house. Only after one's house receives its due can one shake its shackles, and that work may take decades or centuries.

As a result, the Wanderer is largely free from the intrigues of wider Dynastic society, with the local culture built and sustained by those who've given it up. The odd scheme or spasm of violence does find its way here on occasion, but by and large even these are centered around the Wanderer's culture. Here, one is more likely to be murdered in a fit of passion over a dalliance with another's husband than in a cold plot to usurp one's position in the Thousand Scales.

Falling Rain Prefecture

Inland on the Daoshin Peninsula, Falling Rain encompasses a broad marshland between high, flat plateaus. Essence pools where dragon lines meet, forming an abundance of water demesnes and drawing down more precipitation than geography would dictate. The rainy season lasts most of the year, ranging from hazy afternoon mists to ferocious, staccato lightning storms that rage into the night.

In the wetlands between the plateaus, raised earthen causeways connect the manses of outcastes and the occasional reclusive Dynast — some cut into the abutting cliffs, others rising directly from the marsh's waters. A few villages stand on low islets, but most rise above the water on stilts, using narrow bridges or log steps to cross from house to house. Folk subsist mostly on frogs, eels, rice, taro, and lotus, with the latter's great spreading leaves and brilliant pink flowers splashing villages with color. Rainlanders' reputation as impoverished bumpkins impairs their patricians' ability to make social engagements — or marriage alliances — with peers in neighboring prefectures.

Half-sunken ruins of the Realm Before lurk amid the waters. Draped in vines, they emit dreadful moans at the height of storms, and those who enter them and meddle with the mechanisms within find themselves afflicted with weird, symbolic dreams. Savants observe that these are the remnants of an ancient drainage system, fallen into ruin over the years. Adventurous children sometimes seek them out despite their families' warnings, and such visits take the blame for local disappearances or the onset of mental illness.

Deep in the marsh stands the infamous island fortress of Cypress Mountain. Razed decades ago after the Bloodied Scythe Uprising, it's being rebuilt by outlaws sworn to the Cloud Dragon Oath, a Kinship of Dragon-Blooded rebels ranging from outcastes purged from the legions to renegade Dynasts and defrocked monks. Turning their backs on the authority of Regent and Deliberative, they dedicate themselves solely to their Hearth's fortunes, raiding neighboring prefectures and buying the Rainlanders' loyalty with gifts of plunder. Their recent capture and ransom of a Ragara tax farmer only makes them more infamous in Dynastic circles.

Wading Crane Rookery Prefecture

Bucolic and wild, Wading Crane Rookery Prefecture consists of a wedge of coastal wetlands and scattered offshore islands, with fish-haunted ruins from the Realm Before still visible beneath the waves. Poor fisherfolks' coracles drift lazily through mazy channels and along the coast, within sight of scattered villages whose rice paddies and ribbon-decked water buffalo look bright amid dingy marshes and swamps. Villages, towns, and minor Dynastic estates speckle the largest, most fertile islands, but they draw little traffic from elsewhere in the Realm.

Established to lump together border territories of little economic or political value, Wading Crane became home to hunters, trappers, demophobes, outlaws, scavengers, smugglers, and runaway slaves. Locals are taciturn and suspicious. They avoid strangers — resentful of the prefect's agents and the Humble Assessors — but are deeply loyal to those who earn their trust.

The sizable island of Iora, several miles offshore, serves as the capital. Its eponymous port, the only noteworthy one in the prefecture, is known for hot spring baths, fermented fish sauce, and lily-bulb soup. The sundered First Age lighthouse Zarelin's Tower dominates the harbor, its toppled beacon glowing dimly beneath the water. Iora is built on the ruins of a city of the Realm Before, whose fleets ruled Southern sea-lanes and savaged city-states now forgotten, bringing back sorcerous treasures still occasionally unearthed in field or quarry. It's also home to a more recent relic — the Empress' houseless daughter **Berit** (**Dragon-Blooded**, p. 342), one of the Realm's most gifted warrior-generals, who has dwelt here in unofficial exile longer than any mortal can remember.

Myion Prefecture

Myion Prefecture lies far from the cosmopolitan heart of the Realm. An alluvial plain with gentle rolling hills, it's been known from ancient times as an agricultural giant, a blessing from Heaven for the Blessed Isle's inhabitants. Its rice, vegetables, and seafood feed much of the western Isle and nearby Cathak satrapies.

In ancient times, Myion was a center for the Unconquered Sun's cult. Obelisks bearing his sign may still be found in overgrown stands of trees or half-buried beneath flood-deposited silt — obelisks that are quickly and reverently destroyed by the Immaculate Order whenever a hapless peasant stumbles upon one and reports it. Some go unreported, however, and a secretive cult has sprung up around these hidden shrines, where peasants worship Hesiesh the Unconquered, He Who Burns in the Sky.

DAOSHIN PENINSULA

A warm, wet region beset by seemingly constant rains, the Daoshin Peninsula is a patchwork of plains, marshlands, and wooded hills. Though there's much fertile soil to be had, the marshes are mazy and treacherous, and most of the region is but lightly inhabited. Aside from a few cities like Myion, the Daoshin is seen as a rustic backwater.

The Cult of Hesiesh Unconquered has become endemic among hinterland peasants. Its cornerstone is the heretical belief that if the peasantry remains faithful and generous to their syncretic god, he'll bless their children and their children's children with the Dragons' blood.

Myion

A conurbation of fortresses, stadiums, amphitheaters, and temples, Myion stretches for miles near the Daoshin Peninsula's tip, its southern face turned to the sea and its northern face to the Gulf of Daana'd. Ancestral seat of House Cathak, it's a city of great beauty, every element designed to harmoniously complete its neighbors. Cathak city planners adopted the design philosophy as their own, so the city's newer districts, while markedly different in architectural style, coexist with streets that predate the Realm without being jarring.

Streets flow according to the land, with two hills — Yola and Karba, the two sisters local legend claims founded the city ages ago — rising gently to dominate the skyline. From Yola climbs the mammoth, twisting ash — said to have been planted by Sextes Jylis — that lies at the heart of the Evergreen Sanctuary, a famous Immaculate temple and pilgrimage site; the rest of the hill is lined with hostels that rarely empty. The ash has remained in bloom, day and night, summer and winter, for a thousand years. Upon Karba sits the Fortress of the Greatest General, a Shogunate-era manse. Here Cathak herself lies entombed, making the place holier in her descendants' eyes. Young Cathaks compete for the honor of an assignment here prior to entering service elsewhere.

Myion is an active port, with departures on every tide for satrapies throughout the South and West. Docks stretch all along the Inland Sea harbor; sounds of loading and unloading cargo can be heard day and night, with exotic spices and stranger scents filling the air and lingering

on one's person for hours after. Docks on the Gulf of Daana'd ship foodstuffs to the Silk-and-Pearl Peninsula and up the Serpentine River.

The breakwater, built of chatoyant stone, is a popular pilgrimage site, with several Immaculate temples constructed upon or near it. The Singing Tides Temple is particularly famed. Built half into the cliffside and stretching below the waterline, its fluted passages give rise to ethereal, atonal music with the changing tide. The city marks the hours more often by the sound of the Singing Tides than by the sun. Monks who follow Daana'd meditate to the loose, unplanned melodies, never twice the same.

Other, stranger things mark Myion, less holy and more otherworldly — sigils of ancient gods etched irrevocably into the streets (and inexpertly covered with new construction), a garden that quietly tends itself in the dark of night, a tower whose windows show the stars in different positions than they appear at street level, and so on. Even as religious fervor grips much of the city, a small coterie of patrician and outcaste savants, the Unrung Bell, keep sisterhood in Myion, sharing some secrets and hoarding others as they puzzle out the ancient past. They know their work verges on heresy — many of their findings contradict Immaculate teachings on the nature of the Anathema and the city's official histories — but the mystery is too tempting to ignore.

Should war come to Myion, its walls and bastions will make it a difficult nut to crack; Cathak martial discipline might make it impossible. For the last few years, the Ash and Ember Legion, a house legion renowned for discipline, piety, and fearlessness, has been stationed in and around the city, ostensibly to hunt bandits. The legion's general, **Cathak Alda**, is a capable woman with a century of legion service under her belt and who takes very much after her grandfather, Cathak Cainan. But those with designs on Myion rightly fear Cainan taking command to protect his city.

Fifteen-League Redoubt

As the name suggests, Fifteen-League Redoubt sits some 45 miles from Myion city, surrounded by farmland as far as the eye can see. The fortress' walls encircle a hillock, upon which sits a manse controlling the surrounding region's fertility — without it, Myion's crop yields would diminish significantly. Myion's production is key to the region's economy and House Cathak's war plans, making the Redoubt a critical strategic point.

A moat dotted with fortalice-islands encircles the Redoubt. Its walls, raised by sorcerers and legion engineers, are of heavy stone, their towers and bastions packed with siege engines and soldiers. The storehouse within holds enough supplies to support a legion for a year,

Officially, House Cathak's policy is that the fortress exists to protect the manse, and thereby the livelihoods of Myion's peasantry. But the officers stationed here have other orders. Should an enemy house's legions threaten Myion city, they're to sabotage the manse's geomantic alignment so it poisons the prefecture's landscape, a last-ditch plan to starve out any potential siege of Myion.

Voice-of-the-Tides Prefecture

Ancestral home of House Peleps, Voice-of-the-Tides is the westernmost mainland prefecture. Its people are a patchwork brought together by the sea — indigenous pearl-divers, purple-haired Westerners, retired sailors. Though outwardly devoted to the Dragons and obedient to the throne, the prefecture has long been a hotbed of conspiracy and heresy, much to the straitlaced Peleps' dismay.

Fishing and farming villages grow thickly along shore and islands. Many Tidefolk are retired sailors or their descendants. They're largely stubborn and foul-mouthed, disciplined outside of a penchant for drunkenness, and loyal to House Peleps. Their culture is strikingly diverse, incorporating traditions and customs brought back by sailors from exotic lands, including numerous imported and syncretic heresies. Only respect for Peleps honor and discipline keeps Voice-of-the-Tides from being equally fertile ground for rebellion; Dynasts who fail to uphold their house's traditions are in for a hard time.

Others descend from the purple-haired Rivanoa people, who sailed from the West to flee the Contagion and the Fair Folk. Renowned sailors, fishers, shipbuilders, and traders, they erect houses resembling upturned hulls and speak among themselves in Western-tinged dialect largely indecipherable to their neighbors. After centuries of Immaculate effort, heretical devotion to Rudhira, a red-haired Western goddess of sailing, has largely been sublimated into veneration of red-haired icons of Daana'd. Nonetheless, some cultic worship persists, especially on outlying islands. House Peleps traditionally looks the other way, maintaining an arrangement their founder made with the goddess to earn her favor at sea.

Inland, farmers and herders eke out a living from inhospitable plains and hill valleys where primeval forests were long ago logged into oblivion, while rugged highlands supply silver, tin, and precious jade. Though invaluable to House Peleps, these lands are woefully underprotected; all too many Dynastic captains and their retinues have gone west to aid their family's chances against the V'neef upstarts.

SILK-AND-PEARL PENINSULA

This westernmost reach of the Blessed Isle has always brought wealth to the Realm. Mulberry-grove villages on the southern coast produce masses of raw silk alongside their rice crop, while folk from the north coast and adjacent Tongma Archipelago dive for pearls and byssus. The peninsula's ports, once comfortable from the silk and pearl trades, now grow richer still through commerce with Wu-Jian and the distant West.

The Silk-and-Pearl Peninsula's native folk descend in large part from Western Contagion refugees. Rural areas remain culturally distinct; the cities are more cosmopolitan.

Banditry — persistent since the economic shock a generation ago of losing the Merchant Fleet — increases in their absence. Efforts by Peleps scions to hire or buy off brigand gangs are few and quiet, lest they lose face by treating with outlaws. Instead, most who remain seek glory by restoring order to the countryside through force of arms, despite the odds.

The Isle of Wrack

At the northern end of this storied island rises the great jagged mass of rock called Daana'd's Hand, resembling some grotesque tropical plant turned to stone. Its promontories were once home to the Anathema Kirani Twice-Born until the Dragon-Blooded slew her, tumbling her manse into the sea. Later the Maren daimyos claimed it as their seat in defying the Empress' rise, until their defeat at the hands of Admiral Alunat. Peleps herself took it as her personal estate.

Now the Rightly Guided Admiralty Board dwells here in luxury amid the grim fantasia of turrets, shrines, and bastions — linked by precarious stairs and bridges — clustered atop the Hand. Other Peleps elders inhabit sparser suites by their own choosing, while younger scions come and go. Foreign dignitaries and envoys from other houses are entertained with feasting and lavish gifts. But the desire to make an impression stands at odds with the family's current financial straits, and the Board finds cause to snub more callers than is its wont.

Beneath the waves, in the shadow of Daana'd's Hand, the house founder lies entombed in her sealed and scuttled flagship. Peleps scions descend to pay their respects in blue-green gloom. Many are buried in the seabed nearby, coral encrusting their sarcophagi until their effigies can no longer be distinguished.

The rest of the island is a spread of gray-green terraced plains, flanked by dock-girt cliffs once infamous for shipwrecks and cruel sea-spirits. The homes and gardens of Peleps servants gather beneath the Hand, alongside barracks housing Water Fleet sailors and marines. Together these form a sizable town, bustling with peasants and soldiers cooking, cleaning, weaving, mending, and hauling supplies up and down the narrow ways to the Admiralty's heights.

The town centers around sizable Imperial Navy docks facing the naval headquarters at Bittern, across the water. On an adjacent esplanade, teahouses and inns serve aristocratic visitors as they await appointments atop Daana'd's Hand, or tend to servants and sailors in their masters' absence.

Many of the naval depot's buildings are freshly hewn, and new structures keep rising. Three of the four Peleps legions abide here, spending days in military drills and nights bivouacked in repurposed naval barracks, though bunking soldiers and sailors in such close proximity has led to ongoing strife.

Bittern

The ancient city of Bittern, with its bustling wharves and tangled, narrow streets, bristles from the coast opposite the Isle of Wrack. Day or night, thousands of shipwrights, laborers, and sailors throng the array of drydocks forming the backbone of Peleps oceanic power. Scores of new hulls are laid down annually — increasing in time of trouble or war, as now — with timber imported at significant expense after centuries of local deforestation. Countless other ships pass through each year, including naval triremes, Water Fleet caravels, merchant vessels, courier boats, and pleasure yachts.

Only House V'neef avoids the port. Bittern's crotchety governor, **Peleps Adira**, remains aggrieved about her house's loss of the Merchant Fleet. On her instructions, the harbormaster impounds V'neef vessels on any pretext, releasing them with insincere apologies after their cargoes rot.

Where Eagle's Launch and other ports bring House V'neef wealth from its share in the Realm's systematic extortion of tributaries, Bittern fattens itself on treasures torn violently from the West, from jade and silver to pearls, byssus, mahogany, teak, cinnamon, nutmeg, murex, cochineal, and more. The city has regained some of its old economic stature from this surfeit. The rich demolish peasant shops and homes — many of which succumbed to urban blight in recent years — to expand workshops and manors, or build new villas in the hills. Meanwhile, many common folk earn enough to raise new dwellings in the districts spreading outside the city walls.

But less wealth flows to the citizenry than it should. Much rises like mist to cloud-scraping mansions atop the Hill of Seventeen Spires, whose Dynastic and patrician households form the backbone of city government and major industries, and which spent the years after losing the Merchant Fleet's income finding new income streams. A corrupt governor in a house that prides itself on incorruptibility, Peleps Adira takes bribes, selectively enforces laws, and confiscates property from those convicted to enrich herself and her cronies, toward whose monopolistic practices and extralegal activities she turns a blind eye. These activities pass largely unnoticed, as profits go to investments and house coffers rather than extravagances popular elsewhere in the Dynasty. Archons investigating these matters have died seemingly unrelated deaths. A handful of magistrates working with House V'neef's support have caught on to this pattern; their efforts to uncover the city's corruption grow ever more forceful.

Other treasures drain beneath the earth. A millennium ago, sinkholes opened beneath the city, causing entire districts to subside. Shogunate engineers erected supporting pillars and covered the gaps. Now a second city lies buried and partially flooded in caverns beneath the streets. Runoff and sewage flow through shattered city blocks from the Realm Before, forming torchlit stony islets inhabited by the city's dross. Smugglers enter via labyrinthine sea-caves, boats and barges forming a floating black market accessed by hidden stairs and shafts. Half-forgotten byways conceal bloodsport, dueling grounds, conspiratorial gatherings, sorcerers' experiments, and heretical worship. Corpses are dropped down the flooded, seemingly bottomless Blue Chimney. Two whole districts — the Doorless Palace and the White Rat Maze — are tainted by unraveling Solar magics, and avoided by all but the foolhardiest scavengers. House Peleps once policed the undercity to keep criminal and heretical activities under control, but with most of Bittern's Dragon-Blooded making war in the West, the house is largely blind to the city below.

Ayreon Prefecture

A rugged coastal prefecture in the northwestern Blessed Isle, Ayreon is prone to shrouds of fog and cool winds that come in off Mistral Bay. Its arable flatlands' farmsteads and dairies produce enough food to feed its population. In the Blunt Axe Hills along Ayreon's eastern edge, quarries and mines dig common ores from the earth, largely for local use. Despite basic self-sufficiency, most of the prefecture remains uninhabited. Lonely barrens and dense stretches of forest inspire superstitions of dangerous, strange beasts and easily offended wood spirits that steal babes from their cradles and lead travelers and hunters astray.

Ayreon's revenue has historically come from the sea, and almost half of its population lives in coastal fishing communities. Fleets of fishing vessels sail year-round into the bay and the shallow waters north and west of the Blessed Isle, following the traditional cycle of seasonal catches established centuries ago by their founding ancestors. Hardier, long-range trawlers leave the Eye of Creation harbor at autumn's end, an annual voyage braving the open Western ocean's dangerous weather and hostile spirits in search of valuable deep-sea catches.

As a people who've lived and died by the sea's moods for centuries, Ayreon's residents are largely superstitious and devout. No fishing season begins without a monk blessing the fleets, seeking protection for the boats and the fishers aboard them. Despite this deep, ingrained adherence to the state religion, Immaculate monks keep close watch on the residents, wary of potential heresy in smaller coastal villages apart from the major roadways.

Eye of Creation

Ayreon's largest city takes its name from the Shogunate-era lighthouse constructed on the cliffs protecting its harbor, restored from ruin in the late 450s by the Domakan patrician family, a client of House Peleps, and maintained by that family's descendants. Originally the site of seasonal longhouses for fishing-boat crews needing temporary accommodations, Eye of Creation grew over generations into a bustling community. As the hub of the region's fishing industry, it offers commercial docks, processing facilities, and warehouses dominating harborside real estate. Three mercantile houses compete fiercely in the business districts and on open water, each seeking a monopoly on the fishing industry.

Last Calibration, a fishing ship caught something wondrous and inexplicable in its nets, a coiling pearlescent serpent that spoke with a child's voice. None dared killed so beautiful a thing, yet the more pious crew feared it might be Anathema. The sailors resolved to place it in a vat of saltwater and hide it in a disused warehouse, where it could neither come to harm nor cause any. Distraught by isolation and confinement, the serpent keens mournfully each new moon, catching the notice of many of the city's children.

Werck

Nestled in the Blunt Axe Hills, Werck is the central hub around which several mining camps converge. Small and carefully regulated, the mines yield copper, sulfur, cinnabar, and semiprecious stones. **Fiera Salac**, the town's governor, strictly regulates mining permits to keep the mines producing. She incentivizes families with tax breaks and start-up seed and animals to establish farmsteads on arable land outside town.

PLACES TO COME FROM

Berm-and-Tiger Hollow: This broad and populous estate, overlooked by green-capped cliffs where wild mospids nest, is the residence of Nellens Rellusa. Once a peasant outcaste inducted into the newly formed House Nellens, Rellusa has always taken especial pride in Dynastic status. But now, in retirement, he finds it more difficult to remain the center of attention, and has taken to inviting patricians and younger Dynasts to sumptuous parties he can only afford by indebting himself to House Ragara. His greatest draw is his menagerie, extensive even by the Realm's notorious standards. Foreign slaves dwell in chambers furnished in their homelands' fashion. Many are Wyld mutants, or surgically altered to appear more exotic. All know enough High Realm to regale visitors with tales of faraway lands. Elsewhere, statuary-laden grottoes and cages contain exotic Threshold beasts. But the animals' handlers are untrained in their care, leaving many sickly and ailing. And as Rellusa's financial straits grow tighter, his household sells off various beasts, with little regard to what purpose buyers might put a quoll-lion or ichneumon hunter. His children, infuriated as their inheritance dwindles, consider ways to halt his expenditures.

The Sideshores: This cool, boreal archipelago just west of the Storm Coast consists of hundreds of tiny islets surrounding the great wooded islands Greencoast and Thistlefall. Home at first only to isolated fisherfolk, then to a short-lived Peleps shipbuilding effort, over the past two centuries the islets have become a popular summer resort for vacationing Dynasts from the western Isle, especially Cathaks, Ledaals, Pelepses, and V'neefs. Traditionally, yachts and pleasure barges ply the narrow sounds between island estates each summer in one vast floating party, while only a handful of Dynasts linger through the winter storms, tending the archipelago's manses and storm-breaking sky mantis towers. But today's summer galas have a frenetic tinge, while Peleps and V'neef maintain more and more house guards onshore each winter, preparing for the day when the beautiful Sideshores turn into a bloody cauldron as a battle to wrest control of it begins.

Silent Thunder Prefecture: Situated on a scroll plain shaded with scrub and punctuated by oxbow lakes, this was once a rich agricultural district administered by House Iselsi. Then the Empress deliberately ruined it with unsustainable taxation policies after the Iselsi coup as a warning to all who'd betray her. After years of grinding poverty led to an Immaculate-aided revolt, the Empress reversed her policies, but the damage was already done. Silent Thunder's cities are largely empty and overgrown, with only a handful of laborers and shopkeepers still eking out a living. Though farming villages have returned to bucolic normality, the soil hasn't yet fully recovered, and the peasantry remains wary of the throne's caprice. During and after the revolt, an Immaculate abbot quietly trained many residents in the martial arts. Local families maintain a tradition of martial discipline, practicing katas with agricultural implements, and sparring in barns and stables well into the night.

Though Salac claims permits are issued through a blind selection process, rumors persist that anyone with sufficient coin may purchase their "impartial selection." Frustrated mining families protesting her corruption have found an unlikely ally — a small colony of unhuman Mountain Folk, cast out from their kind's subterranean cities for some incomprehensible blasphemy. They've offered to furnish miners with incomparable arms and armor in exchange for assistance in retrieving fragments of relics from Werck's mines and performing certain obscure rituals aboveground.

Feverfew Valley

Feverfew Valley is an ill-omened place, inhabited by black-winged strix and raitons. Trees grow thick and close together; mist clings low to the ground. Locals claim to witness rogue spirits or ghosts, and legends tell of hunters who enter the woods only to wake just outside the valley with no memory of how they got there. Immaculate monks dispatched to investigate and purify the area haven't found substance to these stories.

Only the governor of Maya and his immediate family know the valley's truth: it's inhabited by the last surviving member of the prehuman Lloroch, dwelling in a hidden network of natural caves. Once a season, **Tower Stone** and his eldest son travel secretly to a hand-hewn altar to bargain, offering up human sacrifices — drawn from the ranks of criminals and indigents — and intricate clockwork toys in exchange for a bountiful harvest.

Eagle Prefecture

This timeworn province has always looked to the sea. Fishing boats' sails brighten the waters along the



surrounding coast, making way for treasure ships carrying Western booty. Inland, a long, slow sweep of hills offers fertile ground for terraced farms, pastureland, and old vineyards whose wines are borne around the Inland Sea to wealthy tables across the Realm.

Dynastic estates speckle the highlands, their owners wintering in Eagle's Launch for the social season. Most are V'neef, but the prefecture has passed through many houses' hands across the centuries, each wave of authority leaving households behind like sea wrack. Likewise, prefects of other houses appointed many of Eagle Prefecture's governors, and V'neef cannot be assured of their loyalty. Now genteel country manors sport new fortifications, and peasant militias find themselves training for battles they wish no part in.

Eagle's Launch

Long a small, sleepy port town — a stopover for ships from such Blessed Isle ports as Bittern or Eye of Creation — Eagle's Launch was transformed by the rise of the Western trade and by V'neef's acquisition of the Merchant Fleet. In recent years, it's multiplied in size through a massive influx of foreign and domestic immigrants. Old Eagle families blame economic troubles on immigrants. Ruthless policing and curfews largely confines their enmity to snubs and insults. But there was blood in the streets only a decade ago, and economic reverses or demagoguery could bring those days back.

Importing Western spices, hardwoods, and slaves has enriched House V'neef and the patrician families of Eagle's Launch. Dynastic and foreign travelers are greeted by gorgeous new civic architecture, tree-lined boulevards, and grids of wealthy storefronts dealing in exotic Western merchandise — pineapples, cinnamon, jewelry, talismans — funded by V'neef's foreign adventures. Some wealth trickles down to the peasantry, but not enough. Visitors rarely stumble into the city's labyrinthine slums, packed with families of dock laborers and service workers.

Due to the conflict between Houses V'neef and Peleps over control of the West, strife among wealthy merchants over shares in that trade, and recent V'neef efforts to conceal wealth from Imperial taxation, Eagle's Launch crawls with adventurers, smugglers, courtiers, and spies from various houses, consortiums, and ministries.

Cultural strife echoes to the top of the city's hierarchy. Distant from centers of power and culture for centuries, the city's patrician families grew rigidly traditionalist and formal. But the founder V'neef has filled her court with scholars, artists, and philosophers. Eagle's Launch is awash in new ideas, foreign styles, and unfamiliar idioms. V'neef's personal charm — and the wealth her house spills into the city — have brought some measure

FIELDS OF RUE

A patchwork of plains, hills, and woodlands in the northwestern Isle, the Fields of Rue suffer from erratic weather that tends toward cool, wet, and windy. The region encompasses many ancient battlefields, from First Age and Shogunate struggles to some of the last major resistance to the Empress' ascension. Many villages and towns are built around Immaculate temples raised over tombs and burial grounds.

of acceptance. But many would rather return to conservative values and familiar customs.

Several magistrates dwell here under V'neef protection. Most notable is the indomitable **Cynis Curan**, legendary for unraveling the theft of the Wolf-and-Chrysanthemum Palace's hearthstone from Ragara himself. Experience with her family's predilections gave her a keen understanding of human wickedness. When the young daughter of one of the Empress' servants barely survived poisoning, rumor spread that the girl was actually the Empress', begat between the two women by sorcery. The mother fled with her to Eagle's Launch, placing both in Curan's care.

Ventus Prefecture

Ventus is among the Blessed Isle's wildest regions outside the Imperial Mountain, distant from the Realm's metropoli. It contains but one city worth the name and a few scattered towns, encircled by icy mountains, tree-cloaked hills, jagged gorges, and white waters. This pristine land provides timber for navy vessels, ore for legionnaires' blades, and herbs for chirurgical and sorcerous arts. It also offers peril to those who venture beyond civilization's walls.

The Skyhewn Mountains form this landlocked prefecture's backbone, snowy peaks and ice-slicked ridges anathema to mortals and beasts alike. Slave miners purchased from House Cynis carve ice from the peaks and copper, sulfur, and quicksilver from the earth, which merchants convey to adjoining prefectures' ports and the Great Coast Road. Other merchants follow ancient roadways deeper inland, winding through high passes guarded by ill-staffed Sesus fortalices. These mountains are an important artistic symbol in the Realm. Suffering in the mines, the mountaintop gaol Ice-Above-the-Water, and the wintry passes speaks to the cruelty that beauty and power conceal, and of stark necessities in the background of contented lives.

Ice-Above-the-Water and other mountain fastnesses, such as the Sesus spy-training manse Silken Diamond, scarcely impact life elsewhere in the prefecture, other than occasional heavily armed contingents traversing the mountains every few months, guarding condemned prisoners or Dynastic travelers. A lone prisoner's recent escape set an entire Hearth to combing the area, backed by hundreds of Sesus soldiers. The effort met unexpected resistance from outlaws, bandits, beasts, and spirits; the prisoner remains at large.

The mountains descend into rough, forested highlands where backwoods folk procure furs and healing herbs to sell. Shepherding villages speckle alpine valleys, residents only meeting lowland neighbors when bringing flocks and fleeces to market. Folk are raised with sling in hand to fend off wolves, raptors, cougars, and snow leopards — and more puissant beasts with which House Sesus stocks its hunting preserves, and which occasionally wander into populated lands. Several houses maintain hunting lodges here.

Ventus folk's skills make them desirable skirmishers, but skirmishers' poor pay, status, and life expectancy offer no impetus to enlist. Before the Empress vanished, Imperial staff officers encouraged Ventus' courts to find locals guilty, levy harsh sentences, then commute those sentences in exchange for enlistment. Now a Sesus prefect bribes judges and directs enlistees to her house's legions. Generations of quiet resentment toward the distant Imperial government have shifted to House Sesus. Suspects melt into the hills before magistrates arrive, neighbors claiming no knowledge of their whereabouts. Sesus plans to make an example of the next village to conceal suspects, while forward-thinking peasants — abetted by Immaculate monks from Turning Sky Monastery — prepare to rebel against the house in the Empress' name.

Ice-Above-the-Water

Built atop and within a precipitous crag, accessible only via a narrow, dizzying bridge, Ice-Above-the-Water glows like a beacon among the mountains, its pagoda-like upper works hung with a thousand lamps to illuminate intruders or escapees. Elite Sesus and Silent Legion troops garrison the gaol, always including at least one Dragon-Blood. These guard a handful of prisoners — those the Empress deemed more useful alive than dead, but too important to roam free — including insurrectionists, outlaws, and heretics best not martyred; Dynasts, patricians, and Threshold dignitaries whose deaths would incense their families; and the occasional spirit.

The most longstanding prisoner is an ageless albino snakewoman, bound by a legendary Immaculate monk

during the Shogunate using forgotten means, around whose prison the gaol was constructed. The Empress came every few decades to question her. But after a Sesus interrogator's recent attempt to do the same left him dangerously unhinged, the house wonders whether it's best to kill the creature instead, especially given the legend that one of her undying kinfolk roams the mountains, awaiting the opportunity to set her free.

Bright Obelisk

High in the mountains, the isolated city of Bright Obelisk offers a stunning vista of the Five-Color River's tumbling, unnavigable rapids. The river wends hither and yon amid the rumpled green of forested hills brindled with terraced wheat farms, pear orchards, and open-pit mines. Local miners and trappers mingle in the city's bazaar with students at the Talus Academy — a small, tight-knit secondary school focused on forestry and mountaineering — and merchants traveling between the Isle's center and coastline, creating a rough-hewn cosmopolitanism. All gossip about the once-blessed city's newfound curse.

At Bright Obelisk's center, amid the Plaza of Light's vivid mosaics, stands an ancient pylon of white stone inlaid with imperishable silvery metal. The plaza is ringed by walled Dynastic manors, mostly Sesus and Mnemon, designed by geomancer-architects to gather the pylon's beneficent Essence. Its subtle blessing wards off negative emotions and evil dreams, filling the town with tranquility. But this isn't wholly without disadvantage; lessened fear increases accidents, while Dynastic artists seeking a placid setting find their work lacks its former edge.

Unbeknownst to Bright Obelisk, its curse is born of Lunar sabotage. Years ago, the trickster-queen Laughs-at-Armies entered the city wearing a monk's face, and subtly warped the pylon's geomantic alignment under the pretense of blessing it. Ever since, the negative emotions the pylon subsumes have taken on a life of their own. People talk worriedly of a horrid shadow lurking in their peripheral vision, making hackles rise and skin crawl. Such witnesses, eventually possessed by the entity, go mad. Some assault family or neighbors in furious rages; others withdraw into howling, suicidal terror.

Governor **Sesus Nerys** sought to conceal the trouble lest Imperial investigation uncover house secrets and indiscretions. After a visiting Dragon-Blood's demise, she wonders what to fear more — the curse, or the coming magistrate.

Lord's Crossing Dominion

House Tepet makes its home in the ancient stronghold of great heroes of the Shogunate. Mossy, crumbling piles of stone — ruins of thousand-year-old fortresses and fortalices — lie strewn across the dominion's steep hills and valleys. Every village tells stories of an ancient general or monster-slayer born on some nearby estate, or who won a great battle upon this ridge or that riverbank.

Despite being governed by a military house, Lord's Crossing is a place of trade. Mines in the mountains produce jade, precious metals, and building stone. Caravans from every quarter of the Isle travel through the dominion's mountain roads, escorting geomancers from Mnemon-Darjilis to Arjuf, or carrying clockworks from Juche to Bright Obelisk. And the withering of Tarpan funnels trade through Tepet lands from merchants unwilling to follow the Salt Road to the sea.

Much of the Tepets' outlying territory is leased to Dynasts of other houses, and the towns and villages that subsequently grew around Dragon-Blooded vacation manors maintain a fanatical devotion to the quaint and out-of-time feeling that attracts Dynastic tourists. Any architect worth the jade has grown adept at concealing modern homes, facilities, and storehouses behind picturesque facades.

Lord's Crossing

In the city of Lord's Crossing, one might think the Shogunate had never fallen. Citizens take great pride in their contentious, glorious history. Edifices of that bygone age still stand at the city's heart, while new constructions emulate their antique architecture.

Some of the Realm's premier schools of theater and debate nestle between ore-processing facilities and marbleworks, and every public park of note boasts an attractive, open-air theater. Cunning feats of architecture baffle the ceaseless barking that comes from the kennels of the city's master dog breeders, who christen each newborn pup with verses of Shogunate literature commending the bond between hound and master. Theater companies and respected philosophers share time at these amphitheaters, and it's a rare week that passes without dramatic readings of wartime poetry, performances of comedies and tragedies inspired by heroes of the past, or fiery monologues interpreting a renowned local general's philosophies.

Though Lord's Crossing remains an industrious — even prosperous — city, every street corner and hearth shivers with the deep, numbing chill of grief. Though the governor of Lord's Crossing and the dominion's prefect, both Tepets, have met several times with the house's leadership, attempting to reinvigorate the dominion with new celebrations and festivals, the downfall of its

THE WALL OF TEN THOUSAND TEARS

Lord's Crossing once bore the name Karashelen, capital of an early Shogunate dynasty, home to Dragon-Blooded heroes whose tales are remembered today. After the Contagion, Karashelen stood against the newborn Realm. The Empress captured the city, executed its ruling family, and razed the old Shogun's palace. She bestowed high honors upon Akiyo Leskara, the general who won the siege, and granted stewardship of the city to Gens Akiyo. To commemorate this, a barefoot Akiyo carried a stone pried from the city walls to the Empress every year thereafter.

When the Empress established the first Great Houses, House Akiyo stood proudly among them. But after Lord's Crossing was sacked in Trae Leng's Revolt, the Empress viewed House Akiyo with a jaundiced eye. The house fell into decline, eventually being struck from the Imperial ledgers a century later. The Empress then granted the city to House Tepet. The transfer of power was called "The Year of One Hundred Penitents," as Tepet scions carried stones to the Imperial City, one for every year since the peasant revolt.

Today, the Tepets carry no more stones to the Imperial Palace, as there's no Empress to receive them. A new tradition has sprung up in its place: Folk who lost kin in the campaign against the Bull of the North scratch their dead relatives' names onto the wall itself. Some hire sculptors to carve names, or ask Immaculate monks to bless the writing. The Tepet name appears on many of these stones.

WILDLIFE

Thousands of years of civilization have left few large, powerful wild beasts on the Blessed Isle, aside from occasional oddities in the deepest backcountry or on the Imperial Mountain. The taming of wilderness into agricultural land has eliminated many habitats, while Exalted heroes cull animals that offer exciting hunts or threaten their subjects' lives and livelihood. What remains are mostly livestock, pets, and such small wild creatures as foxes, birds, and snakes.

A few larger indigenous animals, like cougars, wolves, bears, and boars, stubbornly persist in the wilderness. In addition, the Dynasty deliberately introduces Threshold beasts — whether claw striders, emperor sloths, hellboars, rhinoceroses, or strix — to Imperial preserves. These provide Dynasts with interesting prey, and discourage peasants from poaching. On rare occasions when such creatures wander into civilized lands, Dragon-Blooded heroes eagerly take them down.

legions has left it unwilling to bear what it sees as an unnecessary expense.

Eseon Forest

West of the Imperial Mountain stands a woodland that was ancient when sun and moon were young. Immaculate scriptures say Sextes Jylis was born beneath its boughs; even its eldest elementals cannot recall its origin. Its towering canopy is woven with ancient sorceries that the Dragon-Blooded have yet to untangle. Those who enter find a realm as much imagined as real, haunted in moonlight by visions of pasts that never were; twisted reflections of that which is; and futures that may yet come to pass. The Blessed Isle's great beasts have taken refuge here, too, as have dark sorcerers, forbidden gods, Fair Folk, and nameless monsters.

At the forest's edge stands a small riverine city named Glass. Though Eseon's reputation is fearful, Glass' furriers, coppicers, and herbalists dare its outermost groves. The city's governor, **Cathak Nerin**, is old and widowed, and won't remarry. Instead he plays host to a revolving cast of young Princes of the Earth questing for weird adventure — to rescue imperiled travelers; hunt the Opal Stag; seek the enigmatic, phantasmal treasure called the Noumenon; explore ancient ruins tangled beneath a thousand years of overgrowth; or find the mythical manse named Promise, hidden at Eseon's unreachable heart, that legend says predates Creation.

From the roof of the potentate's palace, one could see the whole of Eashaldha. At sunset, the city's windpumps stood out as spinning shadows against the multihued horizon. As these marvels drew water from beneath the Southern desert, so did two friends draw wine from a shared skin, sitting side by side on the rooftop. They had come here for years, and grown accustomed to speaking freely. Today they measured their words, for rumor suggested that the wind carried careless speech.

"The world grows worse, continuously," said the elder, Tarham, who had been a scribe for more years than her friend had lived. "Once, I had the satrap's ear, and the respect of her staff. Once, the Realm respected our ways."

"The Realm has only ever respected our silver," said the younger, Suyul, who ran decrees from the palace to the ends of the city. "But it was once judicious. How am I to afford a tax for each of my children? The potentate allows the Realm to pluck food from our mouths."

"You don't say so elsewhere, do you?"

"No. My eyes see enough whippings when I pass the town square. My back needs no demonstration."

The two friends were silent a moment. Tarham imagined the crack of a whip, and Suyul's back itched. Wine soothed both.

Tarham swept the wineskin east, toward the farmland beyond the city. "We'd have no such problems if the peasants were obedient. The Dragons have surely abandoned us because of their unruliness."

"What, should they lie down and die?" demanded Suyul. "Their lot's hard enough when Dynasts leave more than one in ten millet seeds."

"Banditry's no answer, Suyul."

Suyul claimed the wineskin and asked, "Then what is?" before taking another pull.

Tarham tapped the rooftop with a manicured hand. "Someone must go to the satrap. She was always fair to us before, and made few requests of the potentate. Now she demands more and more, and speaks to none but her young advisor. Perhaps she doesn't know what's truly happening." When Suyul scoffed, Tarham grew insistent: "Think, boy. Didn't all this start when Ledaal Marek came to Eashaldha?"

Suyul set down the wineskin and made an old sign for undoing rash words, as Tarham covered her mouth. They sat in silence, listening to the wind, wondering if it might carry the name to its owner.

"That's been my observation," said a third voice, and Tarham nearly leapt from the roof in startlement. Suyul caught her, and calmed her, and they held hands as they turned to see the voice's owner. He was a small man, unfamiliar, with little spare flesh and a waggish hooked nose. "Ah, don't fear," he said, hands raised. "As you can see, I'm not Marek."

"You were sitting right next to me," said Suyul, accusing, "and I never saw or heard you."

"Don't be disrespectful," hissed Tarham, and she knelt before the stranger, dragging Suyul to his knees as well. "Honored Prince of the — "

"Thorn," said the stranger. "Call me Thorn." He drew from his sleeve a circular jade seal, and held it in the light of the setting sun. The Imperial magistrates' mon was known even in Eashaldha. This eased the friends' fears, and inspired new ones.

"What do you want?" asked Suyul, even as Tarham asked, "What can we do for you?"

"I need someone to write down a story, and someone to speak it." He picked up the wineskin, took a pull, and grimaced at it. He drank the rest. "It begins in a far-off land, with a cunning, hungry fox. How it ends... well, that may be up to us."



Chapter Six

The World We Rule

Hundreds of nations across the Threshold bend the knee to the ferocious dragon at Creation's center. These client states are satrapies: components of the Scarlet Empress's world-spanning war-machine, driven by Dragon-Blooded ambition and greased by offerings of wealth, sweat, and blood. Satrapies carry the Realm's influence and protection, and labor under the weight of the empire's immense appetites. As the Dynasty moves toward civil war, Great House patrons neglect their satrapies' defenses while demanding ever more tribute. Few satrapies can weather these conditions for long, but none wish to stir the legendary wrath of the Princes of the Earth.

The Satrapy System

Young Dynasts joke that the best way to tell a mortal noble from a laborer is by how quickly they bow in a Dragon-Blood's presence — with the educated and perceptive noble by far the quicker. The novelty of their divine authority fades in time, replaced by absolute assurance in their mandate to rule Creation's lesser nations. This is the world that the Empress and her children built: a vast hunting ground dominated by a jealous, hungry nest of dragons. The encircling satrapies are servant-states and staging grounds for the Realm, which has built a centuries-long reputation of brutally punishing any threat to its interests. More often than not, those threats are broken and yoked, and the empire's shadow grows larger.

Satrapies are states that have sworn fealty to the Empress, and through her, to the Scarlet Realm. Some few states — particularly those with powerful enemies such as Lunars — enter this arrangement eager to shelter beneath the empire's wing. Others succumb to overwhelming financial pressure, or to military invasion. When a state's leadership is too stubbornly independent, assassins and Great House–funded revolutionaries can make room for more pliable leadership.

Not every satrapy was a state before its subjugation. In some cases, the Realm carves an extant nation into multiple satrapies. In others, the Realm merges multiple city-states into a single satrapy. And sometimes the Realm establishes a colony, or impresses nomadic peoples into permanent settlements. However it came to kneel, a satrapy agrees to abide by Imperial law, and receives the protections granted thereby.

Satrapies have several broad responsibilities as Realm tributaries. They may retain any governmental system capable of maintaining order, but must accept a Dragon-Blooded overseer — called a satrap — and a military garrison. Satrapies embrace the Immaculate Philosophy as their state religion, and are expected to surrender their former modes of worship and offer full support to Immaculate Order activities. Provinces must support Wyld Hunts in particular, and report any Anathema presence to their satraps. Finally, satrapies provide their Dragon-Blooded overlords with regular tribute — massive quantities of valuables, materials, and hard currency. The Empress often demanded specific tributes to satisfy the Realm's needs, manipulate satrapial economies, or encourage aggression against neighbors with desirable goods. The Dragon-Blooded hunger for jade above all else, but other currencies like silver and cash help Dynasts and legionnaires operate in the Threshold.

Though the satrapies owe fealty to the Empress, their maintenance falls to the Great Houses, which purchase satrapial leases from the throne. A satrapy's Great House patron appoints a satrap, extracts tribute, and provides house troops to maintain order and defense. The Empress expected houses to manage satrapies unaided. If a house couldn't put down rebellions and minor threats without the Imperial legions, that house would likely lose its lease. Centuries of selective pressure have made the houses ruthlessly efficient at preventing and suppressing satrapial unrest.

Greater threats, such as Anathema, provide an exception to house autonomy in the provinces. Lunar invaders, Fair Folk raiders, and Solar revolutionaries threaten the

empire's foundations. These true enemies of the Realm demand immediate and overwhelming force: the Wyld Hunt, backed as needed by Imperial legions and local auxiliaries. Hunting Anathema is a sacred duty and a first priority, superseding house rivalries and financial interests.

The Benefits of Empire

The Empress built her new world order in the ashes of the Creation-spanning Shogunate. Unlike Lookshy's Seventh Legion, the young Empress rejected the idea of resurrecting the broken Shogunate. She knew that the Dragon-Blooded host lacked the numbers, infrastructure, and lingering First Age magic to recreate anything more than a shadow of the Shogunate. In addition, the Shogunate had been prone to constant, bloody wars of ambition, which the Empress had no desire to repeat. Such wars would have threatened the Empress as they had the shoguns, and weakened Creation's defenses against further invasion.

Thus she made herself a strong central power, and aimed the Princes of the Earth out at the Threshold. Once brought to heel, lesser states would serve the Realm as mortals serve a Dragon-Blood, and all would answer to the Empress.

The Realm is first and foremost an engine of war. Satrapies serve as large-scale defensive measures against invasion on any scale, and impose order across much of the Threshold. They act as staging grounds for the legions and allow the empire to conquer new nations and expand. Perhaps most importantly, satrapies provide intelligence and support for the Wyld Hunt, so that it can quickly descend on threats to the Realm before those threats grow too powerful. In particular, Lunar Anathema habitually build armies capable of threatening Imperial security, or infiltrate provincial governments. They further threaten the Realm with their blasphemous existence, which defies the natural order. Fair Folk, Exigents, and the newly discovered deathknights offer different threats, but they're all vulnerable to intelligent application of sudden, overwhelming force.

As the Realm girds itself with the satrapies, so too does it feed upon them. The Great Houses funnel immense wealth into the Imperial Treasury through payments on their satrapial leases, wealth that keeps the massive empire functioning. In turn, the houses extract tribute from the satrapies to recoup their investments, and more. Satrapial wealth keeps the houses competitive, and rare satrapial commodities allow Dynasts to live in splendor and opulence. By the Immaculate Philosophy's tenets, these lives of extravagance are the just and proper reward for the Princes of the Earth, who safeguard the mortal masses' physical and spiritual well-being. As such, not providing appropriate tribute is a spiritual failing that the satrapy's patron house must correct.

On Clientage

Few rulers enjoy exploiting their people and resources for a foreign power's benefit, so why do so many states become Realm tributaries? Most have no choice. The Realm is a voracious, expansionist government bolstered by the personal might and savvy of the Princes of the Earth. Imperial envoys demand fealty under threat of invasion by the legions, a military force unmatched in Creation. Some nations attempt to resist Realm domination with their own resources and allies, but few succeed, especially over the long haul. Resources dwindle and fail against the empire's might, allies are intimidated or suborned, and holdout states pay for their obstinacy in blood.

Once a state surrenders, its newly acquired Great House patron dissuades unrest by publicly executing troublemakers and taking hostages from high-risk populations. If the population is too depleted to provide sufficient tribute, the house may import slaves and serfs, or offer incentives for immigration. Favored methods for instilling obedience vary from house to house: House Tepet drafts janissaries as hostages to keep their families well-behaved, while House Cynis floods troublesome regions with opium to render the masses sedate and addicted.

Some satrapies join the empire with minimal violence. These client states may have been founded with Realm funding, or turned to the empire to shield them from invaders and Anathema. Weak rulers and pretenders can be suborned, willingly trading their people's independence to secure their own grip on the throne. Distant, well-defended states whose rulers see satrapy status as profitable or simply inevitable may seek favorable terms in exchange for submission — the Empress was generous to such satrapies, knowing they'd eventually give her cause to renegotiate.

Other satrapies view the Realm's oppressive presence as a necessary evil. Many depend on house garrisons for defense, allowing their own armies to wither in the bargain. Satrapies receive favored trade status with other satrapies and with the Realm, Creation's breadbasket. The Immaculate Order supports and enforces the class order, and keeps spirits from exploiting mortals. As long as a satrapy can maintain order and appease its patron house with tribute, the Realm's patronage provides stability nigh-unparalleled in the Second Age.



Attitudes toward the Realm vary by culture, history, location, and patron house. A bloody transition from independent state to satrapy can breed generations-long cycles of seething resentment and uprisings. A province near a Lunar dominion may view the legions as stoic defenders against rapacious beast-headed invaders. Populations that cannot abide the Immaculate Order's limitations on spiritual congress undergo repeated purges by battle-hardened monks.

One of the few points of consensus is that Dragon-Blooded should be treated with all possible respect, for they're proud and quick to punish any slight. Common wisdom among Dynasts states that this impression needs to be reinforced early and often; softer Dragon-Blooded may be accused of writing their commands "in ink." Punishments, examples, and cleansings are far more lasting ways to impress the proper way of things upon mortals.

The most successful provinces aren't merely obedient, but also reliably wealthy enough to provide expected tribute. The Great Houses pressure satrapies to amass jade, silver, natural resources, and exotic goods such as firedust and ironwood. Many satrapies raid their neighbors and rely on Realm garrisons to avoid military repercussions. When this practice brings more tribute than trouble, the houses encourage it. The Empress even allowed satrapies to raid each other as long as the violence didn't threaten tribute flow. In cases of outright war between satrapies, the Empress ruled in favor of one satrapy and sent legions to break the other. The houses spent centuries learning to precisely measure violence against rival satrapies, to avoid the Empress' intervention.

Tumult in the Provinces

The Empress imposed few laws on her satrapies, largely regulating finances and responsibilities to the Realm. She was more concerned with amassing and maintaining power than with dictating how the satrapies would be run. The Great Houses were left to maintain the satrapies however they saw fit. The Empress reinforced effective satrapial management through her authority over prices of satrapial leases. More than one house fell from power at the Empress' whim. Others learned to measure extraction of tribute and to maintain order through methods appropriate to the province, balancing short-term gain against long-term sustainability. Shortsighted houses lost satrapies to rivals, negating the spoils of over-exploitation.

When the Empress disappeared, she took with her the authority to renegotiate satrapial leases. As a result, the

houses have evaded the greatest check on their power in the provinces. Now, more than ever before, the satrapies groan under the weight of the houses' ambitions. Satraps demand more and more tribute, and Dragon-Blooded overseers make up for reduced support with increased brutality. Centuries of oppression have taught the provinces that resistance only brings bloodshed, but the houses' redoubled cruelties in some satrapies build levels of resentment unseen in generations. In other satrapies, the people are too broken to even consider rebellion, and thousands starve as the food they grew travels to the Blessed Isle. Bandit gangs swell and multiply, driven by hunger and resentment.

Even as they wring the satrapies dry, the houses largely prepare to abandon the Threshold, undercutting the longstanding Imperial myth that the Realm never yields an inch of ground. The first sign of this shift was the recall of the legions to the Blessed Isle, where they were cannibalized to swell the houses' might. Soon after, many house paramilitary forces were recalled from their satrapies, leaving garrisons empty but for token forces, local auxiliaries, or cheap mercenary companies. Satrapies that once relied on Realm defenders now hemorrhage resources on hiring or training soldiers, or attempt to hide their weakness from enemies. Other satrapies consider outside alliances, but fear angering their patron houses. Territories once contested by the Imperial legions now lie open for conquest by the Realm's enemies. Only a handful of rich or strategically important satrapies remain well-protected, not for their own sake but for their ruling houses' interests.

As the Great Houses drive the provinces toward rebellion or collapse, the Threshold's heroes find horrors and opportunities. Lunars see a chance to inflict greater wounds on the Realm than ever before. The Mask of Winters' conquest of Thorns may be but the prelude to a greater campaign. Sidereal Exalted engage in secret battles for the Realm's future, wielding cults as catspaws. The Solar Exalted have roused from their age-long slumber to find nations desperate for just rulers. The Dragon-Blooded, Dynast and outcaste alike, must decide whether to fight to preserve the empire, or to claim a piece of it for themselves.

The Guiding Hand: Governance of the Satrapies

This is the Realm's theory of rule:

Enforcing the Empress' will throughout the satrapies is no mean feat, and only with her guiding hand can so many disparate places be brought to order as subordinates of the Realm. Existing government isn't actually supplanted:

BEWARE THE REALM AGRONOMIST

While it's up to a satrap to appoint most of her administration, each satrapy retains permanent infrastructure made up of ministerial officials who remain in place to ensure a smooth transition from one house to another. These administrators are intimately familiar with the region, and they can provide invaluable advice and guidance to an incoming satrap. This permanent ministerial installation is also a perfect hiding place for the All-Seeing Eye. The Empress wanted to be informed of any situations that might arise in the far-flung reaches of her empire. Some satraps are more aware of this fact than others, and with the Empress' disappearance, they seek to remove these potential spies from their midst.

The land will continue to be ruled by whatever authority was in place before the Scarlet Empire arrived. The Realm doesn't want to break a region, but simply take it under the wing of the greatest, most enlightened civilization of the Second Age. The only political change is the installation of a satrap, who ensures the satrapy pays tribute to the Realm and follows the Immaculate Philosophy. In exchange, satrapies benefit from the protection of the greatest military force in Creation.

The ruled, alas, must frequently be persuaded to accept the wisdom of this arrangement.

Forging a Satrapy

When a satrapy is officially formed, the region falls immediately under the Realm's protection and control. As the Empress couldn't be expected to directly command all of Creation alone, she gave the Great Houses the opportunity to bid for jurisdiction over her satrapies. The Empress' decision regarding who controls a satrapy was final, and whichever house was chosen was awarded a lease to oversee the satrapy in question. There's no official length for these leases, although they could be reassessed or revoked at any time at the Empress' sole discretion.

Once a house has been awarded a satrapy, house leadership chooses a satrap from among its ranks. Those chosen as satraps are often Spiral Academy graduates, preferably with past experience on another satrap's staff. The house must choose a satrap capable enough to maintain control in her territory and bring in tribute on time, but must avoid appointing an overly ambitious or greedy satrap. Overseeing a satrapy is one thing, but

a satrap establishing a wider power base or placing her own interests above the Realm's is another matter.

A satrap is expected to be aware of everything transpiring in her domain. For that, she'll need advisors to update her on everything from military movements and reports of Anathema to the state of public welfare and trade. Traditionally, she'd have four chief assistants, three appointed by the Empress from outside the satrap's house. Each of the five would send their own report back to the Foreign Office and the Empress, their critiques serving to keep one another honest.

Today, satraps typically choose their staff of advisors entirely from their own house and its patrician clients. The highest ranks and cushiest postings tend to be filled with personal friends and those with close family ties. Together they send five identical reports to the Home Office, leaving the Thousand Scales in the dark.

Oversight of the Overseers

Satraps fall under the administration of the Wise and Knowledgeable Advisors of Foreign Tributaries — more commonly called the Foreign Office. Satraps are expected to submit regular reports covering military postings, census data, tribute levels, trade disruptions, crime statistics, and other information about their satrapies that the Foreign Office deems relevant. The Knowledgeable Advisors dispatch regular reports notifying satraps of information that may affect them — rumors of bandit activity in a neighboring region that might spill over into their territory, for example — plus recommendations on everything from troop movement to tribute levels.

In addition to scribes and clerks who collect, compile, and distribute a staggering amount of reports, the Foreign Office contains numerous advisors whose recommendations shape Realm foreign policy. Most of these advisors serve on Itinerant Advisory Committees that regularly travel to satrapies to meet satraps face to face, offer advice, and address any concerns they might have. These visits, occurring roughly every five years, help ensure that all satraps know they have the Realm's support and can call upon the Knowledgeable Advisors' guidance and counsel at any time.

These visits also serve as inspections by the Foreign Office to ensure that satraps are (relatively) honest in their reports. Itinerant Advisory Committee travel plans are typically announced in advance, but most committees arrive quietly several days ahead of schedule to examine the satrapy independently before the official tour with the satrap and her people. Committees occasionally arrive unannounced, generally in response to reports of especially cruel or demanding satraps, or those suspected of allowing unrest to grow. Spot inspections can also be prompted by unusual success, such as a sudden upswing in trade or an excess of tribute being delivered — ostensibly for the committee to learn from a satrapy's success, but more practically to ensure that it's genuine and not the result of falsified records. Typically, if a satrap receives more than one visit every five years, she's doing something incredibly right or disastrously wrong.

While Itinerant Advisory Committees are authorized to travel and observe the administration in any given region, they're just advisory committees. They can't change things they deem problematic or even dangerous. Any misconduct they uncover is reported to the Foreign Office, who brought serious concerns to the Empress' attention so that she could react accordingly.

Now that the Empress is gone, Foreign Office chief minister Ledaal Arnis finds herself with no one to report to. She can appeal to a satrapy's controlling house for change, but if the house is already complicit in the satrap's activities, this accomplishes nothing. As houses begin squeezing more and more from satrapies and ignoring reports of external threats, Arnis can only watch as the Realm's grip grows weaker.

House Control

Often, the Great House that initially conquers a state and claims it for the Realm isn't the house that will oversee it. Since a house can't count on being granted satrapial leases of the lands it conquers, it benefits from scouting the region for the best holdings and aiming to secure them for itself. The Empress did nothing to discourage this behavior, and it's understood that a certain amount of "spoils" will be claimed before a satrap sets foot on her new holdings.

By the time a satrapy has been officially granted to a house, rival houses likely already have several business and trade arrangements in place. Depending on how valuable a satrapy is, even houses without business ties to the region may have interest in setting up there. It's common for scions of one house to go adventuring or to take extended vacations in satrapies controlled by other houses. This provides an easy way to funnel information back to the Blessed Isle, where the Great Houses can assess the strengths and weaknesses of their siblings.

Some houses have attempted to sabotage rivals' control in volatile regions. A century ago, an uprising against House Ledaal in the Northern satrapy of Threepeaks was made possible by weapons and mercenaries supplied by House Sesus. The Empress was forced to send a legion to put down the unrest, and when the dust settled, she stripped Ledaal of its contract. Instead of passing to House Sesus,

however, the lease went to House Mnemon — along with the lease for another Sesus satrapy.

Open sabotage was once rare, as no one wished to gamble on losing a satrapy. With the Empress' disappearance, the houses grow bolder. Ambitious satraps look for exploitable weaknesses in their neighbors, and without the threat of the Empress to check their actions, any move against a vulnerable satrapy could be the spark that ignites open warfare between the houses.

The Outstretched Fingers: Taxation and Tribute

When a satrapy is first established, the satrap's financial advisors work with the conquered nation's treasurer and the Foreign Office. Together, they review the conquered state's economic history and suggest a tribute level reflecting what the new satrapy has to offer the Realm.

Assessing the Tribute

Currency (jade, sometimes silver, and occasionally cash) comprises the bulk of a satrapy's annual tribute. This is the easiest tribute to quantify, and the first things agreed upon are how much currency the Realm will see and how often it will arrive. Typically, tribute is sent once or twice a year, depending on how often houses want to see satrapial revenue and how difficult and expensive it is to secure transport.

While tribute is generally currency, a satrapy's controlling house and the Empress herself might stipulate payment of tribute in specific goods. Many satrapies beyond the Inland Sea were annexed because they could contribute something to the Realm not easily obtained elsewhere. Raw materials like crops, timber, dyes, spices, and ore are common, while some satrapies produce textiles, ceramics, metalwork, or other finished goods. A Cynis-controlled satrapy might be asked to contribute fine silks or rare drugs, while House Mnemon might require a particular wood or stone as building material. The Empress sometimes requested that a satrapy provide her with something it lacked, but a neighbor had in abundance — whether to encourage commerce or raiding.

First Age relics are highly prized tribute — it's expected that any such artifacts a satrap finds will be turned over immediately to the Empress. Because of their scarcity, these relics are more valuable than virtually any other tribute satrapies can produce. Locals are quick to investigate and exploit First Age ruins for this purpose.

Some tribute takes the form of slaves, whether menial laborers or skilled artisans and artists. These range from masons, potters, jewelers, and weaponsmiths to musicians, painters, dancers, or concubines. Still others are indentured janissary troops. As the houses consolidate their forces, more and more accept tribute in the form of able-bodied soldiers. Many satraps currying favor with their houses make this a requirement and use conscription to keep the flow of soldiers coming. This is universally unpopular, and several satrapies have had riots in protest — reports of which have been quickly hushed up.

Filling the Coffers

Once tribute has been assessed, the satrap instructs the current ruler to see that it's collected promptly. The actual amount of tribute the satrap ultimately demands significantly exceeds the assessment. While the dragon's share of tribute is transported to the Imperial Treasury (with silver going to the Bursars of Barbarian Tribute and cash to the Empress' Private Purse), a portion is set aside for the Merchant Fleet to offset escort fees. The satrap's Great House claims another portion to recoup the satrapial lease's cost and investments in satrapial defense and maintenance. Add in satraps and bureaucrats looking to line their own pockets, and taxes need to be very high indeed to ensure everyone sees a profit.

Most satraps try to squeeze as much as possible out of the tributary. This has increased since the Empress' disappearance, and satrapies struggle under these demands. In more affluent trade districts, this could mean merchants unhappy with the sales tax they have to charge. In rural outskirts, this could mean farmers watching their children starve because of increased tributes.

This drives rural farmers to get creative. Where taxes are based on a percentage of harvested crops, farmers habitually lie about their harvests, sometimes claiming to have brought in less than they did, sometimes claiming that the entire crop was lost to disease or fire. Some have hidden fields or rice paddies, cut off from the rest of their property. A farmer caught evading taxes faces punishments including enslavement, the forced conscription of her children, or death.

Securing Passage

Bringing Creation's wealth home to the Blessed Isle is no simple feat. With more and more troops being recalled to the Blessed Isle from the Threshold, there are fewer soldiers to guard tribute caravans — and much greater temptation for them to defect and run off with more wealth than they'd otherwise see in their lifetimes. A caravan loaded with silver and jade is a prime target for bandits, and securing safe passage isn't cheap.

To carry tribute across the Inland Sea, satraps rely on the Merchant Fleet for protection. In exchange for escorting a satrapy's tribute and keeping it safe from pirates, V'neef captains collect a portion for themselves.

Fees depend on the tribute's size. No satrap wants to detail exactly how much tribute she's transporting — particularly when it's much less than the previous year. Nonetheless, satraps and their houses prefer to quietly lose a portion of their tribute to House V'neef than to lose *all* of their tribute to pirates.

The Upturned Palm: Missionaries and Religion

While a satrap rarely meddles overmuch with local government, she does require that the conquered nation embrace the Immaculate Philosophy. In this way, even the most far-flung provinces learn their place in the Perfected Hierarchy. The transition from one belief system to another isn't instantaneous — but it *is* expected to be complete. Immaculate monks won't tolerate heresy, and if a population doesn't willingly accept the faith, they'll be made to obey.

Accepting the Order

Once a satrapy is established, the Immaculate Order begins converting its populace. This is typically achieved not through wholesale eradication of indigenous faiths, but by assimilating them into the Immaculate way of worship. Local gods are offered a place in the Immaculate prayer calendar; shrines and temples are stripped of their iconography and adorned with dragon altars. If the satrapy's mortal and spirit populaces accept this transfer peacefully, they need not come to harm. More often, though, dissidence will arise from some quarter, necessitating a swift and forceful response.

In some cases, the Order petitions the satrap to have the local ruler issue a proclamation and implement it with local law enforcement. In others, Immaculate monks circulate door to door, confiscating blasphemous texts and false idols to be burned. Unruly mortals are cowed into submission with displays of Immaculate martial arts and Exalted power. Local clergy who preach against the Immaculates or against Realm control meet with "unfortunate accidents" on the road, or public execution as an example of what happens when people go against the divine right of the Realm. In the end, every citizen of the satrapy must embrace the fact that the Dragon-Blooded are a step closer to enlightenment than they, and should therefore be admired, feared, and — most importantly — obeyed.

Gods accustomed to receiving worship are more difficult to persuade, but the Order has much experience in dealing with unruly spirits. A god who's initially unwilling to comply with the Order's demands in exchange for a place in the local prayer calendar may change her mind after being starved of prayers for months. Spirits who publicly undermine or retaliate against the Order require harsher treatment at the hands of Immaculate martial artists. Those who relent in defeat are given another chance to obey the Order's strictures. A stubborn spirit finds itself hunted by Dragon-Blooded capable of driving it from the region, or seasoned elders that can seal it away for centuries to contemplate its mistakes. A small handful of Kinships of these elite Immaculate "god breakers" can be requisitioned throughout the Blessed Isle and the Threshold to deal with stubborn spirits.

For every nine citizens who see reason and submit to the Immaculates' will, one clings even more fiercely to the old ways. In even the best-controlled satrapies, one can find outlawed worship to old gods in hidden basement temples, mobile shipboard shrines, and secret wilderness tabernacles. Such worship is conducted in secret at great personal risk. If Immaculate monks learn of pockets of heresy, they descend swiftly and deal with them without hesitation.

Still, not every subjugated land responds well to brute force. The monks know that an outstretched hand can be as effective as a closed fist.

Immaculate Missionaries

Out beyond the Realm's borders, or in isolated satrapial backwaters such as mountainous regions or scattered skerries, Immaculate missionaries spread the word and offer an outstretched hand, to lead the uninitiated into civilization rather than drag them by force. In addition to guiding inhabitants toward enlightenment, local converts can ease the path toward future Realm conquest.

Missionary monks establish temples for public welfare, perhaps offering to feed the homeless if they stay for a sermon

THE EXCEPTIONS

A rare few satrapies, such as Fajad, have been permitted to continue their former religious practices without the imposition of the Immaculate Philosophy. Some satrapies volunteer for vassalage despite possessing sufficient military strength for a protracted fight, enabling them to negotiate more favorable terms. Other satrapies are so far beyond the Realm's usual sphere of influence that it would be inconvenient to maintain control without more support from the populace.

No matter the reason, the Empress and the Order see this sort of arrangement as temporary; eventually the locals will provide an opportunity for renegotiation. Until then, the Order begins laying the foundation through missionary work.

or two. They create or fund schools for children in areas where few have the opportunity to learn to read. By educating children (and sometimes adults) in the Immaculate Texts, monks teach the Immaculate Philosophy in a more welcome manner than burning local holy books.

In addition to sermons, monks reinterpret Immaculate texts as songs and plays. Some missionaries serve as traveling musicians, singing tales of the Dragon-Blooded at inns and teahouses until these stories are swept up into local legend. Dramatizations of the Empress's military feats and how they were made possible through the Dragons' will have been staged everywhere from grand palaces to remote fishing villages.

Stubborn Gods

The ultimate goal is for the Philosophy to supplant preexisting religion throughout the satrapies, thus urging the Realm's conquests to acknowledge Dragon-Blooded superiority. But while people pay lip service to the Philosophy when faced with a monk, some communities still worship their gods in secret. If other communities are powerful enough and their worship and traditions aren't disruptive to the local authorities and the flow of tribute, some celebrations may be permitted by authorities in the interest of peace.

In some areas where the Philosophy has a longstanding presence, syncretic traditions emerge. As peasants struggle to reconcile different religions, they seek compromise, forging nonexistent associations between their old gods and the Dragons. More often than not, these old gods go along with the ruse — or even encourage it — so that the locals continue to honor them. For example, the rural farming community of Dereda has moved its traditional harvest celebration to a day sacred to Sextes Jylis, during which they quietly pray and make small sacrifices to their own harvest god.

The Closed Fist: Military and the Satrapies

The Great Houses are responsible for their satrapies' military might, and are expected to provide adequate troops to protect their interests.

Imperial Involvement

Conquest of a principality usually involves the legions breaking a land's defenses and bringing it to heel. Once it's pacified, the Empress expects the houses to manage their own interests. After the legions withdraw, a satrap must maintain control over the satrapy with a garrison of non-legionary troops supplied by her house, supplemented by local auxiliaries as needed.

In the event of unrest or uprising, a satrap usually seeks aid from her house to keep things contained and quiet. Once, the houses could call on the Imperial legions for aid, though this risked making them appear weak in rivals' eyes, and the Empress levied harsh punishments for frivolous appeals. Houses Cathak, Sesus, and Tepet sometimes loaned out house legions in exchange for political favors, while mercenaries could be hired for exorbitant fees. Mass conscription both damages the economy and makes a generation of peasants more capable of armed insurgency against the local ruler and the Realm. With the Empress and the Imperial legions gone, options are fewer.

Satrapial Garrisons

Just as a satrap leaves her satrapy's government structure intact, she builds on the existing army structure as well.

Troops controlled by the satrap's house are brought in to maintain order. The Deliberative names garrison commanders, though the Empress habitually vetoed any garrison leader from the satrapy's ruling house. This was meant to ensure that the garrison's actions were in the best interests of the satrapy and the Realm, rather than the controlling house's. This occasionally causes friction in garrisons, as officers from the satrap's house chafe under such leadership. In the Empress' absence, some houses have ousted these commanders and replaced them with their own appointees. This usually involves maneuvering and bribery within the Deliberative. In recent months, several garrison commanders have met with sudden deaths both on and off the battlefield, though others have successfully overcome all would-be assassins' efforts.

More peaceful areas that submitted to the Realm willingly and have little to no standing military usually require garrison forces for protection. Realm soldiers represent safety and protection against bandits, revolutionaries, hostile neighbors, and dangerous Anathema, and are welcomed gratefully by these weaker nations. A relatively peaceful principality with no standing army is less likely to rebel against the Realm, and requires fewer soldiers to maintain order.

More warlike conquered principalities also require garrison troops — in this case, to keep the natives in line. A conquered nation will have suffered a crushing military defeat at the Realm's hands; a satrap must bring in troops to fill the depleted ranks. Often, satraps use this opportunity to weave their own people into positions of power while moving promising local forces into the garrison as auxiliaries or abroad as janissaries.

Managing a satrapy's military is a delicate process requiring constant attention by a satrap and her advisors.

HOSTAGE ARMIES

A garrison typically supplements its forces with auxiliaries drawn from the satrapy's existing military or from its able-bodied citizens. Sometimes, these local troops remain in their homeland as a sign of the mutually beneficial relationship between a satrapy and the Realm, but more often than not, they're deployed to other satrapies entirely. In this instance, a satrap's control is doubly ensured. Peasants don't dare attempt an uprising when so many of their family members are stationed half a world away, and soldiers on dangerous postings in the most war-torn parts of Creation won't attempt to desert if they know that their families back home would face reprisal for their insubordination.

Its forces must be strong enough to defend the satrapy, but not strong enough to shrug off the Realm yoke.

Compliance

Most satrapies are kept in line by the Realm's martial superiority. Local militaries are co-opted as auxiliaries or janissaries, leaving few trained fighters within the population who might attempt to rebel. Signs of dissent are dealt with quickly and efficiently. If a tax assessor is returned to the satrap in pieces, the satrap may march a wing of garrison troops into the area to take everything that isn't nailed down and put anyone who tries to interfere to the sword. Such a brutal display of force is made even more effective when the squad contains local soldiers forced to break their countrymen's will.

When more drastic measures are called for, the Realm pulls no punches. In areas with an unusual amount of resistance and unrest, the legions are called in to ensure that a region is thoroughly "pacified." Public beatings, lashings, decimations, executions, and enslavement are just some of the weapons in a satrap's arsenal to ensure control. How long it takes to break a region and what methods are needed varies depending on the locals' stubbornness, but bringing a satrapy to heel — at least for the short term — is a matter of *when*, not *if*.

The Receding Tide

Even before the last five years' events, the Realm faced diminishing returns on its growth over the past few centuries. Between increased administrative overhead and a broader front against Lunar incursions, the Empress became more selective about new targets for expansion. Meanwhile, a handful of satrapies too ravaged by war or other disasters to be profitable were folded together or even quietly abandoned under some face-saving pretext.

Now, the Realm faces even greater obstacles in holding the satrapies. With the Empress' disappearance and the legions' distribution among the Great Houses, satrapies hoped to see even more troops arriving to protect their lands and subjects. If anything, military support is dwindling in many, if not most, satrapies. Areas providing crucial resources to the Realm retain a significant troop presence, but well-trained, well-equipped troops withdraw from less profitable or strategically unimportant satrapies, leaving defense in the hands of less experienced soldiers struggling under the weight of their new responsibility. A few marginal satrapies even find themselves completely stripped of garrison troops, with chaotic results.

The houses demand more and more tribute from their satrapies as they struggle to gain the upper hand over their rivals. This effect is more pronounced in lands held by stricter houses like Cathak, Ledaal, and Peleps, but almost every tributary nation feels this strain. Pressure from the houses forces satraps to demand higher tribute, causing local rulers to raise taxes and lose public favor. Some houses demand not only tribute in jade but also janissary soldiers; such conscription causes significant unrest.

The recall also leaves the satrapies vulnerable to external threats. While bandits or neighboring Lunars might have thought twice before attacking a nation protected by a sizable garrison, they grow bolder as they see troops withdraw. To protect their borders, satraps rely more heavily on local auxiliaries and conscripts. This is dangerous: Arming locals and training them to fight is always risky, but doing so while increasing taxes and demanding more conscription and janissary service is downright reckless.

In the last few years, tribute collected has noticeably decreased as satraps demand more and more of client states. Merchants go bankrupt, farmers starve, unpaid soldiers turn to banditry, trade is driven away, and soon the satrapy's house is left trying to wring blood from a stone. Many house matriarchs have been so focused on rival houses' schemes and machinations that they've become blind to the fact that they're losing control of the Threshold, while those positioned to see the problems rarely have the power to effect change. It's only a matter of time before the volatile situation in the Threshold ignites.

Fajad

Like a hidden treasure, jewel-bright Fajad nestles amid the far Northwestern coast's cold whiteness. The city



is strangely temperate, its harbor free of pack ice, the snow melting as it touches the particolored domes of the prince's palace and the Grand Mosque's airy minarets. This alien warmth grows strongest at the city's heart, where steaming hot springs gather at the base of the thousand-foot stony spire called the Needle. Drawn down from the heavens by its master, the sorcerer Aqadar, it yet pins the behemoth Pyrevein's smoldering, still-living body beneath the earth.

But the jewel of Fajad has lost its luster. Trade that once enriched the city now flows along different routes — or into pirates' holds — while its satrap squeezes more from its coffers than it has to give. And while there are those who'd pry it free of the Realm's grip, others would see it crushed.

A Faltering Economy

Key for centuries to the treasures of the West, Fajad is the last port of call for deep-bellied Northern ships traveling to the Coral Archipelago. The wealth of half a Direction once passed through its wharves and warehouses, making its merchants — and its prince — fabulously rich. Queens, pretenders, crusaders, and adventurers from the Coral Archipelago and the White Sea have raided and even conquered Fajad, but it always shook off the foreign yoke until the Realm came a century ago. The city was wealthy enough to weather even the Empress' tribute, but when the Wu-Jian route opened shortly thereafter, Fajad's economy began to founder.

With the Empress' disappearance, House Cathak's tribute demands have further increased. Sea captains withdraw from the city, fall into bankruptcy, or take up piracy. Dockworkers and other city folk go hungry, as do their kin; many of those unwilling or unable to find passage elsewhere turn to petty crime. Even the manors of the rich grow dark, dingy, and hollow, lost behind overgrown gardens and unkempt hedges.

Wealth now flows primarily from below. The Taraq consortium, in service to Aqadar, has long held a royal monopoly to mine the vast, entombed body of Pyrevein. Tanks of boiling, syrupy behemoth blood; smoldering brazen hairs as thick as a man's thigh; steaming sheets of many-colored membrane — these things find their way into the sorcerer's workings, or are purchased by traders from distant climes for obscure purposes.

Fishing, whaling, and sealing remain gainful, if not lucrative, and merchants labor to market preserved seafood in distant ports. Farms nearest the city fare well, their soil warmed by Pyrevein. Farther out, farmsteading grows difficult, with arable land scarce and dangers numerous; hillfolk have no qualms about raiding lowland neighbors, while wild beasts and stranger things haunt the boreal forest. Fortified tower houses spring up in the countryside as locals take defense into their own hands.

The Abhari Creed

For centuries, Fajad's citizens have followed the Abhari creed. They believe in a transcendent God, beyond name and gender, who welcomes the souls of the righteous to Paradise, and whose truths are revealed to the Fajadi people by its prophets. The long-dead mystic Hari of Fai-Yasar, first of the prophets, wrote the *Atzal Shekinta*, foremost of the Abhari scriptures and key to the faith. Other prophets have emerged since, each providing new insight into divine truth.

Today, all living prophets are spirits, served by lesser spirits as messengers. Marabouts lead the Abhari in prayer to God and its prophets in Fajad's sprawling Grand Mosque and several lesser places of worship. Each prophet also commands a mystery cult. Spirits that reject the faith — or who delve into apostasy, becoming fallen prophets — are left to the Immaculates' mercies. The Abhari acknowledge the Immaculate Dragons as ancient prophets whose time has passed, their message superseded by the *Atzal Shekinta*, their souls passed on to Paradise.

So zealous are the Abhari that the Empress, recognizing the difficulty of holding such a distant city against religious rebellion, kept the Immaculate Order leashed. Immaculate monks can only proselytize; they've made little headway, though Fajad's growing economic troubles have brought a handful of new adherents. An Immaculate temple, the Pagoda of Mela's Righteous Blade, stands near the prince's palace, and nearer still to the satrap's townhouse. Its Exalted abbot spends much time visiting each.

The age of grand heterodoxies is seemingly past, but the proscribed un'Atzali heresy — rejecting the prophets to worship God alone — still lingers underground, breaking out in times of trouble like this one. Meanwhile, heterodox Fajadi colonies acknowledge local spirits as prophets without confirmation from the Grand Mosque; such heresies lead to war.

The Prophets

Amku of the Lunar Egg: A pale woman with nacreous hair and robe, her face always hidden in shadow, escorted by birds that guide the soul in dreams. An inveterate meddler; irredeemably cryptic. Patron of avengers, lovers, lunatics, musicians, and mystics.

Cherast-Arat, the Prince of Harrows: A gaunt figure whose head is a ram's skull, clad in a straw coat, bearing a grimscythe dripping with sea buckthorn. Kindly to those in need, but proud, prickly, and quick to take offense. Patron of cooks, farmers, midwives, philanthropists, and soldiers.

Ennu Resplendent-in-Silver: A salmon-headed man dressed as a sea captain, adorned with jewelry of silver and gemstones, commanding a ship with nets for sails. Cordial but lugubrious, he tests the faithful with bargains they should know better than to accept. Patron of explorers, fisherfolk, merchants, scholars, and sailors.

Metsa'an the Edgewalker: A tiger-sized black hound

QUESTIONS OF FAITH

Immaculate monks argue that the Abhari creed, like every form of direct spirit worship, exploits mortals and upsets the Perfected Hierarchy. Abhari adherents disagree, finding meaningful moral guidance and inspiring wisdom in its tenets. It may be that some prophets take advantage of their devotees, but others genuinely seem to believe in the faith and their duty to care for their flock.

APHORISMS FROM THE *ATZAL SHEKINTA*

"Pray to the prophets for the concerns of this world; pray to God for those of the next."

"It is nobler to warm your enemy by your hearthfire than to cast them into the snow."

"The false gods of this world are wayward and selfish, serving themselves rather than God. If they grant your prayers, it is only so that they can further exploit you, not out of any interest for your soul."

"Wealth is no virtue, but it paves virtue's road. Without it, there is neither charity nor sacrifice."

"On their own, mortals cannot escape the labyrinth of reincarnation. Only the prophets can lead them into the light of Paradise."

wearing a mask of mossy stone, wild greenery springing up in her wake. Concerned with society rather than individuals, and notoriously unforgiving. Patron of bureaucrats, guardians, hunters, jurists, and landowners.

Nir-Netari the Underworld Sun: A black-skinned woman, unarmed, armored in white and gold, dwelling in the House of a Thousand Lamps in the Underworld. Compassionate, yet melancholy; the most human of the prophets. Patron of diplomats, funerists, mourners, orphans, and students.

Uqbal Storm-Chisel: A white-bearded, many-handed man in a tattered gray robe and mantle, his mattock a stormcloud, his chisel a thunderbolt. Weather shifts to match his moods, expressing his passions in grandiose cloud formations. Fussy and meticulous; obsessed with the artistic process. Patron of architects, artisans, the elderly, manual laborers, and sculptors.

Fajadi Politics

Prince Aalani, a pious and scholarly young man, finds his authority constrained. The palace guard is loyal to his family and the treasury, and the people respect his office. But each prince is elected by a religious council comprising the Abhari Grand Marabout, the prophets' own high priests, and — since the Realm conquest — the Immaculate abbot. Aalani is in their debt; and should he offend their sensibilities too deeply, any assassin would be solemnly absolved of his murder.

While the prince holds authority in matters of state, juridical authority, vested in religious officials called qadis, derives from Abhari scripture — albeit subject to interpretation. Qadis assess the legitimacy of princely edicts, arbitrate financial and personal disputes, and determine defendants' guilt and sentencing. The Grand Marabout can call a council of nine qadis to determine whether a spirit is a prophet — or whether a prophet has fallen. A would-be qadi must be Abhari, pass a test of law and theology by a council of marabouts, and have 100 fellow Abhari attest to her character.

Still, many seek the prince's ear. Merchants and landowners press for suppression of pirates and brigands — matters wherein the state has grown dependent on the Realm — along with a bewildering array of desired changes in fiscal policies. They're alternately led by or at odds with **Yasimin Taraq**, first among the city's optimates; where their accounts dwindle, she's rich beyond avarice and intends to remain so. Court officers seek increased funding or authority, or support for policies ranging from expulsion of non-Fajadi families to conquest of heterodox Abhari settlements. And **Grand Marabout Kevurah** converses regularly with the Prince to remain assured of his continued piety.

Satrap **Cathak Mei**, a former dragonlord, finds the Fajadi religious obsession troubling. Though her house's focus is on extracting every last obol from the prince's treasury, the otherwise scrupulous Mei has considered — with gentle nudges from the abbot, **Breath of Spring** — relaxing tribute demands in exchange for giving the Immaculates free rein to suppress the Abhari creed. This puts her at odds with charismatic garrison commander **Mnemon Senesh**, whose fascination with Abhari philosophy leads her to spend her off-hours at the Grand Mosque in dialogue with marabouts and qadis, rather than with a garrison whose numbers have diminished sharply, the majority having been recalled to Myion.

Aqadar, the Sorcerer

From time immemorial, the sorcerer Aqadar has practiced his art atop the Needle, a thousand-foot basaltic spire whose unhewn exterior sprouts clusters of turrets like toadstools, and from atop which he showers curses and invective upon the Realm and its representatives. Strange spirits and flying beasts visit the Needle. These include known Lunar Anathema, and it's rumored that he counts among their number.

Aqadar doesn't meddle in war or politics. He won't stir to protect one of his own guests beset by foes on the streets below, but he's deadly when roused to his own defense, destroying Wyld Hunts against him with demonic servants and sorcery. Doubtless a greater force could slay him, but the Empress didn't wish the city destroyed in the conflict.

Fajad disquiets visiting thaumaturgists and others with mystic gifts. Most associate this influence with Aqadar's sorcery, or the behemoth pinned beneath the Needle. They are mistaken. The far Northwest beyond Fajad's borders is a seething cauldron of weird forces, and Aqadar may be the satrapy's only bulwark against them.

Neighbors

Taiga, marsh, and rocky hills cover much of the great island Jazrafel that holds Fajad, and the long island Jazmir to the west. Fajadi civilization is receding from its high-water mark. Homesteads and villages huddle in the ruins of towns destroyed in war or by wild things. The Realm garrison and Fajadi soldiers patrol against beasts, bandits, and hill-folk raiders. Farmer-militias posted at the edge of settled territory to gather intelligence and stop raids are now inadequately supplied and insufficiently paid, and extort or steal from Fajadi settlements to make up the gap.

On the peninsula to the north, there's more taiga for hundreds of miles, rising into alpine tundra — home

FAJADI LANGUAGES

Fajad's upper classes speak an obscure Skytongue dialect, as do much of the lower classes. Most fisherfolk and dockworker families speak a Fajadi creole derived primarily from the Coral dialect of Seatongue.

to the caribou-herding **Pyanda nomads** — and barren snowy peaks. Still farther north, legend says a dark queen with many lovely sons and daughters holds court beneath the Tree of Moonless Night. She holds the mythical treasure Oumrala's Cornucopia; once the source of all health and good fortune, in her hands it now disgorges plague and ill luck into the world.

Many of the region's other cities and peoples have withered or been destroyed over the centuries. The satrapy **Crocus**, at the southeast tip of Jazrafel, is still recovering from bitter war with Fajad over its former devotion to the false prophet Za-Ishat, the Burning Blade, and the V'neef satrap is throwing money at expanding its docks to compete with Fajad. The **Rodla-clan towns** of Jazmir are quietly rejecting Fajadi rule, refusing to pay tribute. And the shadowland of **Fai-Yasar**, the mother-city that once ruled Fajad until its destruction, remains populated by angry and jealous shades, who restock their numbers with the ghosts of those who die in shipwreck or war.

Pneuma

Few cities in all the Realm are as thick with Immaculate temples and religious devotion as sacred Pneuma. The Nail of Truth at its heart — that marmoreal monolith said to have been cast from the sky by Mela to crush an Anathema beneath its weight — has been a site of veneration and pilgrimage for Dragon-Blooded since the days of the Shogunate. Today, it's the beating heart of the Immaculate Order's presence in the northern Threshold. But not all is serene in blessed Pneuma. The city is also key to the Realm's military presence in the North. Now, legions and Order are at war for the city's soul.

A City Inspired

The Immaculate Order permeates the city. Postulants of the Order — from sons of peasants to daughters of queens — enter Pneuma's gates to begin their novitiate, passing itinerant monks departing for distant lands. Abbots and temple matriarchs contemplate the Order's needs in high-walled monastic gardens. Order-run orphanages, almshouses, and workhouses accommodate thousands of the impoverished and the invalid, while shikari train for the Wyld Hunt in the Nail of Truth's heights.

When the Realm besieged the city, Immaculate monks opened the gates to her legions. House Madun, a cadet branch that immigrated to the newly conquered territory, soon found itself bent to the Order's will. Today, Pneuma's archimandrite controls the succession, naming each new prince when the old one abdicates or dies. Her mission exacts a share of local taxes, supporting the Order's public works and social welfare efforts. The current prince, **Madun Jakath**, was selected for both piety and lack of ambition, and though she's not quite a figurehead for the Order, she poses them no obstacle.

Esprit de Corps

Pneuma esteems the Realm's legions almost as highly as the Order. When the Anathema Jochim rampaged across the North two centuries ago, Pneuma was spared his wrath only through the legions' courage and tenacity. House Tepet, which held the satrapy, built upon this goodwill, making Pneuma the staging ground for house legions en route to military campaigns throughout the North.

The legions' presence has always been a source of tension between local Tepet leadership and the Order. Legionnaires are predisposed to heretical worship of the warrior-avatar Mela, and House Tepet's Melaism and Shogunate-era spiritual traditions only exacerbate this tendency. Monks' challenges to heresy often escalated to teahouse brawls and street duels, each side seeking to prove their faith through victory.

Winds of Change

After the Tepet legions' downfall, House Ragara claimed Pneuma — in part because the house founder, **Ragara**, had retired there — striking a deal to unofficially acquire administrative and tribute rights to the satrapy in exchange for writing off debts House Tepet could no longer repay. Centuries of housing and accommodating legions make it an ideal staging ground for Ragara Banoba's plan to season his new house legions by deploying them to the Threshold, but local Immaculates draw little distinction between them and the old legions — the tendency towards Melaist heresy may be lesser, but it's still there.

The avaricious new satrap, **Ragara Kiris**, has little understanding of, or concern for, the long history between

Pneuma's satraps and archimandrites. This has led her into conflict with arrogant archimandrite **Mnemon Selima**, who expects to retain all the political power she held under House Tepet's reign. When House Ragara negotiated the transfer of Pneuma, it also ousted its V'neef garrison commander through well-placed bribes in the Deliberative, replacing her with the foppish **Ragara Misati**. Chosen more for loyalty than skill, his attempts at maintaining peaceful relations between the Order and the Ragara legions have proven unsucessful. Legionnaires and monks have clashed in the streets more in the last year than in the last decade, and more radical members of the Order urge Selima to overthrow the Ragara satrap in a theocratic coup.

House Ragara, however, has interests other than governance. The dungeons beneath the Nail of Truth hold Anathema imprisoned by Wyld Hunts, Exigents undergoing reconditioning at the hands of Kerlei the Chain (p. XX), and perhaps even darker secrets. The house's inner circle seeks to claim whatever forbidden powers lie buried beneath the Nail, and would gladly sacrifice Kiris to the Order's censure if it let them seize control of that unholy power.

Life in Pneuma

When House Madun and its mortal entourage took command of old Pneuma half a millennium ago, they brought a slew of cultural and social elements from the Blessed Isle of their day, and these still influence the city's mortal elites. Pneuman patricians speak an archaic dialect of High Realm, wear styles passé for centuries in the Imperial City — most notably their comically tall hats — and serve in ministries modeled on the Thousand Scales.

Although farms do produce oats and barley, the rural peasantry's agricultural output is geared heavily toward sheep farming. Well suited to Pneuma's hilly environs, sheep provide milk, mutton, wool, sheepskin, parchment, and vellum. The city's workshops turn out woolen and leather garments for the legions' winter gear, and writing material for the city's ministries and the Order's libraries. Hunters and trappers range afield for pelts to fill the aristocracy's craving for fur garments.

Neighbors

The port of **Gildei** has been dead for two centuries, murdered by the Anathema Jochim as a warning to others who'd oppose his dominion. It remains a blight on the landscape, its ruins haunted by thousands of hungry ghosts. None but the most reckless scavengers and outlaws dare travel within a day's ride, and passing ships keep well clear of shore.

THE NORTHERN COLONIES

When the Empress eliminated the old Shogunate gentes' remaining privileges in RY 266, she offered land grants in the northern Threshold to several of the most fractious and ambitious families. Many of these colonies remain today, ruled by cadet houses descended from those original gentes. Culturally, many resemble the Realm, with peasants and patricians, and often tie their own laws to the Realm's as though they were prefectures rather than satrapies. But their customs have had half a millennium to diverge from the Blessed Isle's, giving them an uncanny half-familiar strangeness to visiting Dynasts.

The Dragonguard of the Sacred Waters (p. XX) rules the **Monastic States of Berzen and Jagelloc**. In the aftermath of devastation wrought by the Anathema Jochim, the Dragonguard unified villages and towns he'd decimated, installing themselves as temporal rulers. Their theocratic governance makes them natural allies of Pneuma's Immaculate Order. Like her recent predecessors, the Dragonguard's Blue Lotus General rules with a firm hand. City streets here follow a military encampment's grid; fortalices dot rural roads, taxing merchants and dissuading bandits; the Berzen docks host Dragonguard naval vessels and customs offices. But the General grows old, and feuding over the succession has already begun.

Though nominally under Pneuman authority, the tiny, fragmented **Vichas Principalities** retain effective independence of their highland domains, maintaining ancestral charters tracing back centuries to long-defunct Shogunate successor states. Their feuds support a warrior caste given to mercenary work and to sheep-raids into Pneuman pastureland. The Tepets once used these raids to practice rapid deployment, drawing out raiders to fight in the open rather than in mountainous terrain. With the Ragara garrison proving unfit to contest these raids, the Vichas warriors grow more aggressive.

Cherak

Had the tides of history flowed differently, Cherak — located on the peninsula between Pneuma and Medo — might rival Lookshy or even the Realm.

The Second Age saw Grand Cherak with a Shogunate force under Dragon-Blooded officers, a great and well-defended capital, and a surviving First Age weapons cache. But the sorcerer Bagrash Köl's northern

empire subjugated Grand Cherak, cutting its promise short. After Köl's demise, the victorious Empress divided the nation into smaller satrapies lest it rise to challenge her too, with only the former capital keeping the name Cherak. What little remained of Grand Cherak's arsenal was seized by the Realm as tribute. (Armaments too ruined to interest the Empress were repurposed, such as constructing agricultural machines from destroyed warstriders' motive components to till the ravaged countryside.)

Cherak today, with its picturesque white houses and meandering streets, shows little of that history outwardly. But houses are stone with thick shutters concealing windows like arrow slits, and the cobbled streets are made of ancient carved rubble. Cheraki citizens are merchants capitalizing on trade routes leading further north, and pleasant — if a little distant — to outsiders. They're also quietly but fiercely proud of their heritage — Cherak survived against all odds, and it will survive the Empress' disappearance too.

Life in Cherak

Cherak has a class system not unlike the Realm's. At the bottom are slaves, typically war captives and criminals, along with their descendants. Slaves labor in fields, row ships, and raise Cheraki nobles' children. Above them, serfs participate in fishing, sailing, commerce, and menial professions. Kulaks are a step above — artisans, bankers, savants, and the like. At the apex stands Cherak's hereditary aristocracy, the families comprising House Ferem.

Cherak's fishing industry supplies much of its citizens' sustenance. Halibut and cod are staples; smoked herring and eel are delicacies. Despite its poor soil and cool climate, Cherak's fields produce rye, wheat, potatoes, turnips, and cauliflower, thanks to its slave workforce and use of repurposed First Age mechanisms. Cattle, pigs, and poultry supplement the Cheraki diet.

The satrapy's armed services mainly ward off pirates and bandits, along with some privateering, minor border skirmishes, and mercenary work. Ultimately, however, Cherak's military tradition is an end in itself. Every level of society treasures Grand Cherak's martial heritage as a birthright. Ferem scions claim commissions in the Cheraki navy or join the Imperial legions. Kulaks serve as officers in the satrapy's tiny professional army. Even serfs serve as footsoldiers or train in local militias. Only slaves lack a role.

Rival Houses

Two houses battle for supremacy in Cherak. House Ferem is a cadet house of noble families with marriage ties to various Great Houses of the Realm, whose Dragon-Blooded trace their lineages back to the Shogunate officers ruling Grand Cherak. Ferem's leaders realized early they'd need more than northern crops and dwindling weaponry to secure their position in the Realm, and cultivated a naval military.

House Margard lacks the Dragon's blood or Dynastic marriage ties, but these kulak merchants almost make up for it in ruthlessness and ingenuity. While they frequently have to explain they're *not* pirates, they do have a lot of criminal *contacts*. Margard has grown rich off privateering, selling back items pirated from other traders, and fencing foreign treasures. Despite Margard's poor reputation with both the Realm and the Guild, each deems it a useful tool for opposing the other's schemes — and for occasionally undermining Ferem mercantile efforts — thus forestalling overt aggression against it.

Local Powers

Satrap **Ragara Razha** is devout student of the Immaculate Philosophy, striving for humility and service in all things. She quietly maintains the heretical belief that her great-great-grandfather, Ragara, is Pasiap's closest representative in Creation, and turns all her religious fervor to serving her house.

Commander **Nellens Ulfer** oversees the Ragara garrison. Commanding a skeleton force, nearing retirement, and largely uninterested in his job, he spends most of his time antagonizing Razha. Ulfer's greatest fear is being called to war before he can gracefully retire.

Ferem Remini is House Ferem's matriarch, a master shipwright and canny socialite who thinks ten steps ahead. She focuses on maintaining Cherak's security from all sides, prioritizing domestic affairs over Dynastic politics.

Admiral **Ferem Helkar** is the living embodiment of a well-liked but dim-witted child of Hesiesh, a notorious carouser and womanizer. This oafish persona is a façade for his intrigues against Ragara Razha — his spies in the satrap's palace feed him information as he seeks to destroy her pious reputation for all Cherak to see.

Margard Merta is a shrewd businesswoman and diplomat, whose abilities belie her merely mortal status. She rules her house absolutely, walking the tight line between expanding its operations and drawing too much ire from the Guild or Realm.

THE PINNACLE OF THE EYE OF THE HUNT

Among the mountains between Cherak and Northern Ivory stands the Pinnacle of the Eye of the Hunt. An ancient manse atop a winding stair of ten thousand steps, it's a nerve center for Wyld Hunts in the North, explicitly independent of the powerful Pneuman archimandrite. The manse's Immaculates and soldiers serve under the direction of the Pinnacle's master, the brutally overzealous monk Peleps Deled.

Northern Ambitions

House Ferem has long kept its head down and its nose out of anyone's business. It focused on whaling and planting crops suited to the cold land. Its comprehensive charts of the Northern seas, masterful shipbuilding techniques, and control of Cherak's docks have proven lucrative sources of income, as traders from across the North seek Ferem captains to ply the icy waters. Even after tithes to the Empress, the house has money to spend — and now it does, on *more* military might.

Ferem patrols the Inland Sea's northern coast while the Great Houses recall their legions to prepare for civil war. The house sees this as its duty to the Realm, and also as an excellent opportunity to reunite Grand Cherak. It's reached out to other cadet houses hailing from the same Shogunate officers within Grand Cherak's sphere, to discuss joining forces.

House Japor, the cadet house of **Northern Ivory**, eagerly jumped on the plan, officially calling on their Ferem cousins to protect Northern Ivory after the satrapy's Tepet garrison withdrew from the Threshold. Satrap Tepet Lissen is ill-pleased with the Ferem garrison holding her city, but can do little about it as the governing house requested their presence.

House Nandorun of the distant fortress-city **Tallow**, however, is dragging its feet. Nandorun welcomes reunification, but believes its heritage nobler than Ferem's. The house demands a higher position in New Grand Cherak before committing, and Tallow's position on the mountain pass to Medo — a crucial defensive position should the two powers clash — provides leverage.

House Ferem desires the reunification of Grand Cherak, believing that the combined domain and power would surely elevate it to Great House status. Ferem's leaders know their efforts hinge on keeping Margard Merta in the dark, though; she'd eagerly snitch to Ragara Razha, and her spies are everywhere.

Greyfalls

Where the Redstag Highlands flow into the No-Sky Forest stands one of Creation's natural wonders. Here, the Hawk's Run and Southern Deljie rivers join the Giant's Maw River to pass through its namesake, an ancient carved stone head called the Giant. Together they cascade over the Grey Falls, a five-hundred-foot sheer drop down the cliffside, to become the Lesser Rock River. Crowning the Giant's head sits the war manse called the Four Winds Throne. The valley beneath, just downriver from the waterfall, glitters with spires and cupolas rising among the broad, tree-shaded boulevards of the far-flung satrapy of Greyfalls.

A Distant Outpost

Desiring control over the Four Winds Throne — one of the war manses empowering the Realm Defense Grid — the Empress sent her legions to seize it in RY 89. Since then, a standing military force and the satrap's access to the war manse's destructive power has deterred most serious military attempts against the Realm's only Scavenger Lands bastion. The military camp around the manse grew over the centuries into a respectable city, and became a secure focal point for trade with the farthest East.

The satrapy is officially titled the Eastern Threshold Administrative District, encompassing the entirety of the Scavenger Lands. In reality, it covers Greyfalls and a handful of adjacent principalities and townships that owe it fealty. As the Empress considered the enclave a potential power base for rebellious Dynasts, she made sure no one house held it for too long at a time. In addition, the garrison has always remained under the command of a Pasiap's Stair graduate personally loyal to the Empress. Imperial legion forces were traditionally rotated in as a show of force; the reigning house, Cynis, currently maintains a dragon of legionary troops on site.

For Lookshy, Greyfalls is a convenient scapegoat. While the Realm's military presence and the war manse's puissance have rebuked all of the Confederation of Rivers' military attempts at recapturing Greyfalls, it's become a useful symbol of the danger the Realm poses, a political tool to undermine discontent among Confederation members. For centuries, Lookshy has maintained a covert détente with the satrapy, giving aid in extremis — particularly against assaults from nearby Lunar dominions — in exchange for occasional saber rattling.

The Golden Road

As one of the easternmost river ports reachable from the Inland Sea, Greyfalls is a natural trade hub for goods flowing in and out of Ixcoatli, and the legendary Golden Road trade route begins at the city's gates. Steel, silk, and gold flow east, while silver, valuable herbs, spices, and exotic animals flow west, along with all sorts of curios and rarities, like spider-quartz knife blades and the purple-tinted blue jade mined near the Suspended Lake of Balatl.

House Cynis spent significant political capital regaining control of Greyfalls specifically for control of the Golden Road. It monopolizes the exotic drugs, slaves, and other foreign wonders the route provides.

Realm merchants cluster here to take advantage of Golden Road trade. A treaty with the Confederation of Rivers allows Realm ships unfettered river access to the Lesser Rock, Rock, and Yellow Rivers without local customs inspections and tariffs, in exchange for annual fees paid to river states' treasuries. Since the Empress' disappearance, river states have begun to stop Realm merchants, in violation of the treaty.

Princes Far from Home

Satrap **Cynis Verheen**'s soirées are as infamous as her own lack of participation therein. Instead, she sits on the sidelines and sips her drink, watching the debauchery with amused contempt, secure in her superiority to the revelers. A satrap for much of her long life, she's overseen Greyfalls for five years. She's intensely, passionately loyal to her house, while her loyalty to the Realm is lukewarm at best.

Her husband is **Cynis Knife Dancer**, an outcaste and graduate of Pasiap's Stair. Clear-headed and coldly honorable, loyal to the Empress, Knife Dancer was a natural choice to command the Greyfalls garrison, whose numbers House Cynis has kept at full strength to secure the Golden Road. But no one expected him to fall in love with Verheen. The two were married this year in a clandestine ceremony overseen by a visiting Cynis judge.

The Empress maintained a ceremonial residence in Greyfalls, the Imperial Residence for Greeting the Dawn, that she never used, and only occasionally made available to visiting magistrates or Dynastic grandees. Its majordomos have traditionally leveraged the Empress' authority to accumulate power and wealth. The current majordomo, Dragon-Blooded patrician **Pazal Jat**, keeps a sizable personal guard, and is influential among local



THE NURI

The green-haired Nuri people, refugees from conflicts in the far East, were oppressed by Greyfalls' natives until the Realm freed them and elevated them to a highborn caste of soldiers, officers, and ministers. Today the Nuri fight fiercely and loyally on the Realm's behalf. They recognize that they're outnumbered by Greyfalls folk who hate them for their ascendancy, and they fear the Realm's departure. The Nuri hope either to become so indispensable to their patrons that they'll be brought back to the Blessed Isle, or to gain sufficient power to defend themselves without the Realm's aid.

nobles and important merchants. Calculating and sly despite his bluff manner, he acknowledges Cynis' total dominance over the satrapy, but his ambitions remain his own. On multiple occasions since the Empress' disappearance, Jat has quietly or imperiously *denied*, unprompted or in response to planted rumors, that the Residence hosted unnamed Imperial guests. As intended, the resulting gossip has increased his standing, otherwise precarious now that there's no Empress for him to serve.

Greyfalls' prince, **Thay Small-Shadow**, is a figurehead. Understanding that her clan, the Nuri, depends utterly on the Realm, she bends to the will of the satrap, garrison commander, and other Realm grandees and magnates.

Neighbors

Sindeq is the next major trade city along the Golden Road, its buildings interwoven with the overgrowth of giant vines that rise from the ruins of an ancient manse in the city's center. Its natives export all manner of exotic venoms and medicinal compounds harvested from the unnatural vines, as well as weaponry fashioned from their huge thorns.

Robe, one of the so-called Hundred Kingdoms, is presided over by a duumvirate. While one throne is held by the reigning prince of the kingdom's royal line, the other has been held for centuries by the rat-god Echo Drinker. Greyfalls' Immaculate monks have long expressed outrage over this, but their isolation from the Blessed Isle and lack of support from House Cynis has left them unable to take action.

The flying mountain **Mount Metagalapa** is too distant for its hawkriders to raid Greyfalls. However, the airborne Metagalapan raiders have frustrated local and Realm merchants alike, stymieing efforts at charting

PRASADI LANGUAGES

The Dragon Caste primarily speaks an archaic, idiosyncratic version of High Realm that borrows heavily from Flametongue. The other Castes speak various Flametongue dialects, though a few jatis use Forest-tongue dialects or local tongues.

a land route to the northwest that circumvents the Hundred Kingdoms.

The Empire of Prasad

The Jade Road across the Summer Mountains carries countless jade talents north toward the Blessed Isle, and just as many adventurers, opportunists, and vacationing Dynasts to the south. Those who complete the journey find a nation at the height of ambition and opulence. The Empire of Prasad crusades across the Dreaming Sea, a conquering heir to the Scarlet Dynasty.

The Dreaming Frontier

The Dreaming Sea's coast teems with kingdoms and empires, each fighting to hold their homes against strange and aggressive fauna, Fair Folk raiders, and each other. Gods and elementals claim earthly territory with impunity. The region varies from one journey to the next; even when national borders aren't shifting, Wyld storms occasionally roll off the sea and alter the coastal terrain. Scavengers find sites not seen since the First Age, if ever, and lose those sites just as suddenly.

Several grand empires rise above the mayfly kingdoms of the Dreaming Sea. In three hundred years, Prasad has expanded from the city-state of Kamthahar to a great empire, competing for territory with strange and decadent neighbors. Dragon Caste charioteers and elephant riders lead mortal armies across the flatlands; fire-cannons gird holdings against invaders. Where the Dragon Caste goes, they bring order. Like the Realm, Prasad allows its subjects to retain their national identities; unlike the Realm, it scatters them to minimize organized resistance.

Empire of a Thousand Names

The Prasadi people are many and varied, and each of them has a place. Prasadi society is regimented, yet fluid, and it demands the best of each culture it consumes. Overlapping systems of social stratification have created hundreds of subcultures. For each such subculture,



Prasadi cities assign enclaves and duties. Enclaves elect their own ruling councils, which in turn answer to the Dragon Caste.

When Kamthahar stood alone, four **castes** broadly defined its social hierarchy: the God-Blooded Exemplar Caste, rulers and shepherds of souls; the Sage Caste, advisors and designers of society's greater order; the Caravaner Caste, masters of battle, travel, and trade; and the Corporal Caste, entrusted with unclean tasks such as tanning leather, hauling garbage, or assassination. When the Dragon-Blooded conquered Kamthahar, they claimed and renamed the Exemplar Caste, and cemented their spiritual authority through marriage to the God-Blooded.

The four castes often work in concert, delegating duties according to their role. Caravaner farmers direct Corporal field hands to grow valuable trade crops, while Sages oversee plantations and vineyards requiring careful soil management, and Dragons cultivate private gardens. Caravaner soldiers and junior officers make up the bulk of Prasad's armies, led by Dragon generals and senior officers, advised by Sage strategists and engineers, and maintained by Corporal farriers, sappers, and field medics.

Kamthahar's familial **clans** persisted with little change as the empire expanded, for they came naturally to the formerly Dynastic Dragon Caste. Prasadi clans compete ruthlessly for prestige and advantageous marriages, and rigorously track their bloodlines. The Dragon Caste consists of two sprawling clans, Burano and Ophris. Mortal members of Clans Burano and Ophris serve as members of the Sage Caste, and receive constant courtship from mortal clans seeking advantageous marriage.

The Empire of Prasad claims a hundred cultures, each with its own **jati**. A jati is a tribe of people, either subsumed by the empire or broken off from another jati over time. Jatis build reputations for particular skills and virtues, reputations that affect their social standing and even their caste. Some jatis straddle castes, while others may change from one caste to another if their contributions to the empire demand it. When a jati's place is improved (or worsened), each member is affected, and so each is accountable for the whole. Most members of the Dragon Caste descend from high-caste, Realm-born jatis. Once they Exalt, they swear a greater allegiance to their superhuman peers than to any mortal community, though some favoritism is common and expected.

MANY NATIONS, MANY STORIES

Each jati carries extensive written, oral, and artistic histories, including unique founding myths. Prasadi citizens prize their jatis' historical accomplishments, allies, and rivals. A few examples follow.

The **Maharan** descend from the first Dynasts to discover Prasad; other Dynastic jatis have splintered off from them across the centuries. The reigning rani-satrap, Burano Rohavin, hails from this jati, and her position secures considerable political power for her fellow Maharan.

The prestige of the **Namika** comes both from their Realm-born descent and the strong pedigree that sees more of its members Exalt than almost any other jati. Their marriage prospects are among the strongest of any Prasadi Dragon-Blooded, and some even marry Dynasts.

The **Katora** once hailed from a valley blessed by the gods, and are now valued as graceful dancers and patient servants.

The **Lasarat** are ill-regarded, despite their reputation for charity and excellent storytelling, for they're notoriously unlucky, a curse thought to afflict anyone who comes near them.

Recent and resentful additions to the empire, the **Thakan** carry reputations as hardworking sailors, woodworkers, and cheats.

Nermaia judges and merchants keep centuries' worth of scrupulous records, and fiercely assert their legendary honesty.

The blood of the hill-god Munsarin runs in the veins of the **Manik**, renowned as priests and architects of Clan Akatha.

The warriors and farmers of the **Qibin** descend from Realm legionnaires, but feuding clans threaten to break their jati apart.

THE INDISPENSABLE CHEF

Some societal duties are too important to leave to members of a single caste, and so are practiced in some form by members of each caste. The Caravaner Caste has its teachers, some Sages learn esoteric arts of self-defense, and every caste needs cooks. Lower castes may not cook for their betters for fear of spiritual contamination, and likewise may not handle or gather ingredients beyond their station without direction and ritual cleansing from the appropriate caste. The time and expense required to purify imported foods can be prohibitive, so high caste chefs often broker custom supply chains, creating monopolies on uncontaminated novelties.

Corporal citizens subsist mostly on rice, root vegetables, fish, fowl, beer, and "lesser" fruits like breadfruit and coconuts. They pay well for goat meat and superior fruits, like kiwi, prepared by a Caravaner. Many dream of being honored with Dragon Caste delicacies such as chocolate, cherries, tiger meat, and above all, peafowl.

Strangers in a Strange Land

Foreigners in Prasad don't fit into the caste system. Depending on their nature and intent, they may be viewed as either guests or strangers.

Guests are those with legitimate business in the empire, such as foreign ambassadors, visiting merchants, or immigrants working to accumulate sufficient dowry to marry into an established clan and jati. For a foreigner to become a guest, he must find a Prasadi household matriarch willing to serve as his guarantor. He's treated as a member of his guarantor's clan and jati, and she's held responsible for any crimes or faux pas that he commits while in Prasad. A guest's slaves remain her property, though the Prasadi — who keep no slaves themselves — find the practice troubling.

A foreigner who lacks legitimate business in Prasad is a **stranger**. Strangers have no role in Prasadi society, and no rights to speak of. Even the lowliest Corporal may bully them freely, though they may eke out a living as drudges, fed and clothed in exchange for performing thankless or dangerous tasks. Strangers are seen as inherently untrustworthy, and prolonged interaction with them is considered impure. Strangers have no right to own slaves, though the Prasadi usually don't interfere directly with their control over their slaves. Their slaves are also deemed strangers unless they find refuge as guests.

A Vision of Purity

The Pure Way of Prasad is a syncretic religion born from the Immaculate Order's influence over ancient Kamthahari traditions. Adherents believe in a natural place and order for all, judged and controlled by the Elemental Dragons. Unlike Immaculate canon, gods and elementals have their place in the cycle of reincarnation, and greed and hubris can drag them down to mere

THE WINDING ROAD TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Prasadi society discourages isolation but encourages insularity. Even in tight-packed cities, caravans, and military camps, citizens mostly interact with and marry within their own caste and jati. Prasadi often believe they'll reincarnate among peers and loved ones repeatedly, perfecting familial bonds across lifetimes. Paragons of enlightenment are mourned for the certainty that they have left for a superior incarnation.

Within the long-lived Exalted of the Dragon Caste, beliefs regarding reincarnation are especially significant. Many Kinships swear loyalty across lifetimes, and launch quests to find young Exalted worthy of claiming reincarnation from a lost Hearthmate. Legendary Dragon-Blooded leave bequests to their reincarnations, prompting great competitions to prove that the fallen hero has returned to resume her destiny.

humanity. According to the Pure Way, the Dragon Caste are a worldly breed of gods, clothed in flesh like the Exemplars before them, and just as worthy of worship.

Monks of the Pure Way proselytize, train, and enforce the social order as zealously as their Immaculate cousins. They don't police mortal worship as strictly, but they quickly strike down spirits who extort worship or deny Dragon-Blooded divinity. A monk has neither jati nor clan, set apart from secular society. Pure monks traditionally spend a year in personal service — called *nivedana* — to one of Prasad's pantheon of gods, to better recognize and enforce divine propriety.

With divine insight, God-Blooded and Exigents easily find a place in the Pure monkhood. Immaculate monks occasionally journey to Prasad to prove the Pure Way's hypocrisy, by debate or by duel. At the rani-satrap's request, most Immaculate monks visit only for a season. A rare few stay, wishing to become Pure. Others stay in secret, developing underground cults to disrupt Prasad's heresy.

The central temple of the Pure Way is the Most Pristine Sanctuary of the Spirit, in the heart of Kamthahar. It's sumptuously decorated with gilded idols, vividly painted murals of divine pantheons, and statuary of Dragon-Blooded demigods, as the Pure Way long ago abandoned the Immaculate Order's aniconism. Their recruitment and training practices closely align with the wisdom of the Immaculate Order, though many of their instructors are gods or elementals capable of sharing particular insight into Creation's Essence.

A week's ride from Kamthahar, a valley conceals the Inner Crucible Monastery, a staging ground for the Pure Way's Wyld Hunts. Sometimes they return with captives: ghosts, demons, Fair Folk, and even Lunar Anathema may surrender to the shikari and seek the wisdom of the Pure Way. These are brought to the bucolic confines of the nearby Monastery of the Red Butterfly. There, through hard work, obedience, and purifying rituals, unclean creatures seek a cleaner death, and a place in the cycle of reincarnation.

Twin Dragons Circling

Once, Kamthahar was a rebellious satrapy, and its captors — Burano and Ophris — were ambitious Great Houses hungry for wealth and glory. They were rivals with opposite temperaments, chosen for the task because the Empress expected each to undercut the other. Yet in Kamthahar the two houses found victory, camaraderie, and opportunity that they'd never find on the Blessed Isle. They embraced their differences, and claimed the satrapy together.

Clan Burano hews closely to traditions inherited in centuries past from both the Dynasty and the old Exemplar Caste. They work tirelessly to create a more perfect empire, and make countless adjustments to social planning so that Prasad's many cultures can work in harmony. It was Burano that first saw the promise of the budding syncretic cult that would become the Pure Way, and propped up its order to lend legitimacy to the Dragon-Blooded. In peace, they're contemplative and aloof. In battle, Burano cataphracts are impossible to miss, clad in heavy armor, with siege weapons trailing behind them.

Clan Ophris forever seeks new pleasures and adventures, evolving along with the changing landscape of the Dreaming Sea. They're performers and demagogues, ready to take chances and clever enough to tilt the odds in their favor. In the aftermath of the conquest of Kamthahar, Ophris dared to negotiate with the Empress for the city's future, and secured her mercy for only a century of doubled tribute. Sensual and hedonistic, members of Clan Ophris delight in finding new frontiers to explore and new enemies to duel with words and weapons.

The two halves of the Dragon Caste compete in many things, but they're true partners in the expansion of their empire. They practice a system of imperial inheritance known as tanistry: While a member of one clan rules as rani- or raja-satrap, the ruler's heir is elected from the other clan. Every member of the Dragon Caste,

THE CLAN INVISIBLE

When the Exemplar gave way to the Dragon, some God-Blooded embraced new lives with their divine parents and cousins, out of the public eye. Clan Akatha has married further both into Prasad's divine pantheon of gods and its reigning Dragon-Blooded families. No longer a part of day-to-day mortal government, the Akatha reside in a network of interconnected divine sanctums, and politick with spirits. They appear in public to perform important Prasadi religious ceremonies and speak on the gods' behalf. Most of the time, they work unseen to build Prasad's spiritual strength and subdue rival pantheons.

THE SEA PRIMEVAL

According to ancient Kamthahari myth, the Dreaming Sea was strange and wondrous long before the Fair Folk invaded and twisted vast stretches of seascape. Sages debate whether the Dreaming Sea was the birthplace of humans, elementals, or all natural life, but most agree that it's a sacred, life-giving font. This myth serves as one of the driving forces behind Prasad's expansion; the faithful cannot allow the region's backward, debased empires to foul the Dreaming Sea's waters unchallenged.

all across the empire, has the right to a vote, as long as all votes are tallied by the final night of Calibration on an election year. Once an heir is elected, she retains the position until the current ruler either dies or demands a new election. Unless the heir dies, the ruler can only call for a new election every five years. Repeated elections can bankrupt an heir through campaigning costs, but risk outraging her clan. Because of this alternating succession, each Dragon Clan typically works to elect one of the other's eldest members as heir, hoping to see the throne return to them quickly. This also makes the heir of an age with the reigning rani-satrap, who may find such a peer a closer friend than younger kin from her own clan.

Prasad's current rani-satrap, Burano Rohavin, was a celebrated warrior and diplomat, strengths that won her an election and throne. Then, nearly a decade ago, Rohavin's trusted heir vanished on a voyage across the Dreaming Sea. Suspicious of sabotage, Rohavin now issues orders and decrees without leaving her Kamthahar palace. After centuries of steady land conquest, Rohavin plans to expand into the Dreaming Sea within her lifetime, and studies the Realm's legendary naval power for inspiration. Kamthahar's location slows her ability to manage armies, so Rohavin has commissioned a fortified palace near Prasad's eastern border. She has thus far resisted demands for a new election, insisting her old heir isn't yet lost. Clan Ophris funds expeditions into the Dreaming Sea to find proof of their prior tanist's life or death. Rohavin is old; many fear what may happen should she perish without an heir.

The Shining Coast

For most of Creation, Prasad's claim to fame lies in the so-called Jade Road, a trade route painstakingly mapped out by Dynastic explorers early in the Empress' reign. Desert-weary travelers and escaped slaves of the Fair Folk spoke of mountains made of multicolored jade in the distant southeast. Though no Jade Mountain has ever been found, the young Realm's explorers did find quarries filled with great veins of multihued jade. The rich and powerful city-state of Kamthahar, which had claimed many of these fruitful quarries, quickly bent the knee to the distant Empress for the promise of Imperial garrisons to protect its lands. The Immaculate Order was an unwelcome addition to the arrangement, which the Kamthahari initially assumed would be no more than a nuisance. Heavy religious suppression, backed by the very Realm garrisons that Kamthahar had desired, brought about rebellion and a more lasting conquest.

Today, Kamthahar provides more raw jade to the Blessed Isle than any other two satrapies. The Foreign Office assumes that it could provide much more, for Kamthahar is now the capital of a great empire. The Empress only increased Prasad's expected tribute incrementally, for she didn't wish to overextend her legions to force compliance, or test the loyalties of any Great Houses by sending them to bring Prasad to heel. In her absence, many Dynasts who've visited Prasad and seen its wealth find it intolerable that so much jade should be wasted on a mere satrapy, however grand.

Jade is far from the only commodity Prasad offers. Uncanny creatures run wild across plains south of the Dreaming Sea, many carrying some mix of divine blood and Wyld influence. Massive sea creatures circle in the Dreaming depths, overflowing with oils treasured for occult perfumes. Scavengers have found medicinal herbs thought lost in the Second Age, relegated to historical accounts of their wondrous effects. Strange, alien-seeming manses and artifacts await the fortunate or skilled explorer — evidence of Wyld taint, perhaps, or wonders that predate any age of humankind.

Jewels on the Diadem

The Empire of Prasad stretches from the deserts west of the Summer Mountains to the Dreaming Sea's tip, and it's still expanding. With its wealth and power, Prasad doesn't need to conquer every nation in its path. Some states offer valuable services or military might in exchange for a measure of autonomy under Prasadi control. The empire often accepts nations ruled by gods and outcastes as allies. Most other nations, Prasad claims or conquers, remaking each in a variation of its image.

Prasad forcibly divides a portion of the new territory's population across multiple cities, accustoming them to their role as a new jati while discouraging organized revolt. The empire also imports citizens from older territories to establish proper social order, and to reshape the territory according to the empire's needs at the time. First- and second-generation citizens may purchase relocation to any Prasadi territory but their homeland, and visit their homeland in small numbers every five years. Third-generation citizens may return to their jati's homeland, if they wish.

The small city of **Reverie** began as a campsite around a monument to some forgotten god, growing in concert with the monument's legend. Those who enter its great doorways and sleep beneath its towering minarets dream of those they love the most, and these dreams always carry the ring of truth. Reverie has a reputation for hospitality and relaxation. Spirits view Reverie with respect, and visit its ancient monument to negotiate with each other, or with stranger creatures.

The bluntly named **Rockship** is an industrious city known for its mining and metalwork. It's built around and within its namesake, an enormous, many-masted ship. The dreadnought is partially buried in the earth, made of an imperishable ochre stone, and far from the sea. The Dragon Caste has stepped up excavation efforts, for if the Rockship actually floats, it will dwarf any vessel of Ysyr, the Fair Folk, or the Gigantes of Dis.

Screeward was built on a mountainside by several fractious clans of goatfolk. They fought against the empire bravely, then accepted their new rulers quickly. The Screeward jati now serves across the empire as hardy members of the Caravaner and Corporal castes. As many humans now live in Screeward as goatfolk, with rope-and-pulley elevators for citizens incapable of climbing sheer rock faces. Screeward's patron deity, Kajisti-of-the-Heights, serves as an honored advisor when Dragon Caste generals must deal with challenging or unnatural terrain, or when lovers navigate complicated romantic tangles.

UNCUT GEMS

Though some neighbors bow to the empire's hunger for expansion, many offer bitter resistance. The city **Loha Kamta** straddles a great chasm that stymies infantry and siege engines, and offers refuge (for a price) to gods fleeing Pure monks.

After decades spent avoiding Prasadi armies, the **Austrech Nomads** of the plains now raid and ruin Prasadi settlements, then escape on bird-beasts to hidden Wyld sanctuaries.

A triad of ancient stone cities in the jungles northwest of Kamthahar, **the Sisters** wield small armies of ghost-animated stone soldiers to guard their control of a river-trade route to distant Nexus.

The port city of **Champoor** has remained independent in part thanks to the patronage of the divine Court of Secrets, but the rani-satrap has begun discussing plans for an invasion with the Pure Way's monks.

The Lap

Deep in the Southern Threshold, the Last Penitent rests its immense bulk, an ancient megalithic idol carved from a single lonely mountain, its cloud-crowned head and rainswept shoulders rising above the low surrounding hills. Cradled within the Penitent's lotus-crossed legs is the Lap, a busy, prosperous city that's the breadbasket of the Southern Threshold and among the Realm's most important Southern holdings.

Anatomy of the Lap

The Penitent faces northeast, toward the Imperial City. Adobe villages gather around its skirts, home to workers too poor to afford the security of the city proper. Laplanders navigate the city by body part. Northleg is a wealthy district, adorned with quality homes, markets, auditoriums, and arenas. Eastleg is a sprawl of low-quality housing and industry. The area where the legs cross is known as the Fold, site of wheat-grinding windmills, harvest-storing warehouses, giant hoists and rope-and-ladder elevators, and the homes of the most impoverished and the criminally desperate. The Lap Proper, colloquially named the Crotch, houses government buildings, Immaculate shrines, and the wealthiest Laplander's mansions. A small valley of fertile land called the Verdant Triangle is cradled between the Penitent's thighs.

A forest grows along the Penitent's folded arms. Landowners visit to hunt game birds, picnic, and enjoy the view, and the richest magnates maintain summer homes there. Streams of rainwater from the forest flow into the Step Fountains, an elaborate network of aqueducts and reservoirs that provides water to the city, supplementing cisterns and deep wells. Rough trails leading to the statue's shoulders are haunted by wildcats and birds of prey, and see snowfall in winter.

Two upward-sloping tunnels carved through the Penitent's feet permit entry and exit to and from the Fold; a third tunnel exists, but is restricted to business. Rope-and-winch elevators haul cargo, beasts of burden, and anything else too large to cross the tunnels into the city. Scaling the outer portions of the Penitent's legs is a difficult feat, while approaching over its back is all but impossible.

Economy

The Verdant Triangle and the broad, fertile fields below the Penitent permit year-round harvests, enhanced by the Realm's most sophisticated agronomic technology and scholarship. This feeds the Realm's legions and auxiliaries in the region without relying on shipments from the Blessed Isle. The Lap also has a thriving administrative and religious culture. The Lap hosts twice-yearly summits on regional trade and economy, an event considered important enough that virtually all communities and tribal groups reliant on the Diamond Road to distant Gem send envoys to participate in the discussions.

Quality of life varies greatly with one's economic standing and location on the Penitent. The Crotch's gentry dress in dyed silks and jewelry, feast on roast oxen and fowl prepared with foreign spices and honey-sweetened cakes, and drink wine and fresh water. Wealthy Northleggers wear cashmere, drink sweet beer, and eat dried meats, flavored bread, and dates, while the lower-class Eastleggers make do with linen robes, ordinary beer, and plain bread. The Fold's inhabitants make do with linen shentis, stale bread, and the grimy, gritty water that trickles down from the Step Fountains.

At age 13, native youths accept indenture to the state — the alternative being exile. Indentured citizens endure backbreaking menial labor until retiring at age 43, except for those promoted to leadership positions during quinquennial reviews. High-ranking retirees receive pensions, and possibly administrative positions in government or on state plantations. Nepotism, always rife, is spiraling out of control since the Empress' disappearance.



SOMEBODY ELSE'S PROBLEM

Despite the Lap's importance to its satraps' houses, the city-state's garrison has shrunk significantly over the past few years. Each house took turns withdrawing troops, intending for the other two houses to take up the slack. By the time this game of brinksmanship ended, the garrison was down to less than half of its original numbers. Garrison commander Cynis Rylan has leveraged this vulnerability to justify the expansion of her auxiliary forces.

The Lap's native military patrols a long stretch of the Diamond Road, guarding caravans and hunting bandits. Scouts braving the dangerous climb to the Penitent's shoulders can see for dozens of miles in every direction, revealing incoming shipments along the Road — or raiders sweeping in from the hills. In exchange for this protection, the Lap has negotiated favorable trade deals for the grains it exports, and collects a tariff on any goods brought into the city. Visiting merchants sometimes evade these fees by setting up markets in the outlying villages, but these make easy pickings for neighboring steppe tribes. While the Lap's military protects caravans traveling the Diamond Road, those who've stopped to trade outside the city receive no such protection.

Government

The Lap's civil government, the Majilis — a council of two dozen major landholders under **Prince Vallish Macotri**, a figurehead dying of old age — is theoretically in charge of the day-to-day management of the town and outlying farms. But in practice, the Realm manages almost every aspect of its governance, far beyond the usual hands-off arrangement. Satraps from Houses Cathak, Peleps, and Ragara form the so-called Golden Triumvirate, ensuring that no one of them has too much influence over the massive wealth entering the Lap via the Diamond Road. The garrison is under House Cynis' command.

The current triumvirate speak as one publicly— indeed, their edicts must be unanimous — but in truth are bitter rivals. Until the Empress's disappearance, their infighting was kept in check by the threat of removal from their post. Since then, each has grown bolder in her efforts to oust her rivals and claim the Lap for her house. Their machinations threaten to upend the Lap's civil order.

Co-satrap **Cathak Sijip** won a reputation in the Cathak legions for tenacity and pragmatism. Now she's seen the writing on the wall. When Realm civil war breaks out, she plans to crown herself prince of the Lap, leveraging the city's bounty for high rank in whatever new order comes to pass. This requires eliminating her co-satraps.

Co-satrap **Ragara Aloru**, an experienced merchant, has proven effective in squeezing money out of the Lap, earning him local magnates' enmity. Now he labors to strongarm neighboring satrapies for trade concessions. His fiscal preeminence only fails at the gaming table. Normally devoted to the Realm and House Ragara, he's notorious for selling his vote to pay off gambling debts.

Co-satrap **Peleps Tuchet**, youngest and newest of the triumvirate, is more socialite than administrator. Of the three, he's the only one actually loved by the Laplanders, and he's the Triumvirate's face in negotiations. But his discomfort with committing to decisions infuriates his peers, and he takes perverse pleasure in stringing them along.

Garrison commander **Cynis Rylan** is as ambitious as Sijip. When not subverting officers in the three house garrisons or training up auxiliary troops loyal to her alone, she schemes with her lover, Vallish Argo — grandson and heir to the dying prince — to consolidate real political power for Argo, and to rule the region together.

Neighbors

The Southern port **Chalan** brings Gem's riches and the Lap's foodstuffs to the Inland Sea. Its people are loyal to the Realm, whose troops traditionally guarded against weird beasts and human-faced monsters arising from the nearby Weepstone Waste. But they hate their rulers — House Simendor, a cadet line of sorcerer-kings propped up by a Mnemon satrap. In this time of tumult, pirates raid Chalanese shipping, a resistance of oppressed minority groups and Guild-backed merchants plots to overthrow the ruling house, and younger Simendors hope to usurp the throne. And if the Realm descends into civil war, the trade wealth flowing through Chalan makes it a target for Great Houses seeking funds for their war effort.

Like many of its neighbors, **Kovental** strengthens ties with the Lap. Located in foothills west of the Lap amid prime acreage for extensive flocks of goats, sheep, and zebu cattle, Kovental has always relied on the Lap's military for defense. Fearing property damage and financial ruin should Rylan enforce her dictates, the zebu barons acquiesce to every demand issued in the prince-regent's name. A few of the wealthiest seek to recruit God-Blooded, outcastes, and other champions to guard their caravans.

Lake Oathel's small but profitable pearl fishery relies heavily on foodstuffs from the Lap, freeing citizens from farming and ranching responsibilities to spend more time in the mussel beds beneath the lake. Despite this,

PRONUNCIATION

In Zhao words, "zh" sounds like the "s" in "usual," while "j" sounds like the "y" in "you."

Lake Oathel's governor refuses to bow down to Rylan's demands for greater tithes of pearls to be sent to the Lap, fearing overharvesting of the delicate mussel beds.

Steppe and hill tribes raid the villages surrounding the Lap and caravans on the Diamond Road. The **Tebyan** ride claw striders in pursuit of caravans, enslaving their crews and burning their cargos as a sacrifice for their patron oasis-gods. The **Sedra** are infamously bloodthirsty, but the Realm's missionaries have seen great success in converting them to the Immaculate Philosophy in the last century. They acknowledge the spiritual supremacy of the Golden Triumvirate and the rest of the Lap's Dragon-Blooded, but contend that their raiding is a sacred homage to Mela.

Zhaojūn

The story of Zhaojūn begins with fire from the sky.

When the Seven Tigers raised their banners against the Empress, they were joined by many peoples. The proud Zhao pledged their spears to the cause, the cunning Baihu their ships. But the Tigers burned in the fires of the Sword of Creation, and the Zhao and Baihu fled in fear of the Empress' retribution. They traveled west and south for many years, eventually settling along the Meiyu Sea's shores.

Where the Baihu raised feuding city-states on isles offshore, the Zhao armies marched inland, subduing peoples still recovering from the Contagion. They built a great nation, establishing trade with distant lands from Gem to the Caul. But they couldn't escape the Empress forever.

Imperial expeditionary forces carved province after province from Greater Zhao in successive wars, making each a new satrapy. Finally, half a century ago, the High Queen proclaimed from her throne in Goldenseal — the old capital of Red Fan long since lost — that to avoid war, she would marry a scion of House Mnemon, and bring her nation of Zhaojūn into the arms of the Realm.

Goldenseal

Goldenseal, built along the Changdao River estuary, is the richest and most cosmopolitan city on the Meiyu Coast. It's a melting pot of small, blue-haired Meiyu natives; dark and powerfully built Zhao; lean, olive-skinned Baihu; and any number of foreigners, from visiting Dynasts to Tengese laborers, descendants of foreign merchants, and folk of neighboring tribes.

Palaces, manors, and monasteries stand on hillsides above the city, mantled in brilliant gardens and jewel-bright aviaries. Beneath lies urban sprawl from a city grown too large too quickly, having gathered foreigners with its wealth, and Zhao and Baihu refugees from Realm conquest of the northern provinces. Its docks are a forest of masts thick with fishing boats and merchant vessels, its slums a veritable swamp infested with street gangs — the cocky Hammer Gang; the brutal, drug-dealing Snakefire Syndicate; the Tengese immigrants' secretive Golden Root; the nativist insurrectionists of the Sea-and-Mountain Brotherhood.

Architecture varies widely. Many-tiered upswept gables are traditional, though the slums simply pile one flat-roofed story upon the next, while the rich often adopt foreign styles, and immigrants employ their homelands' traditional methods. Structures near the river are raised on stilts to avoid damp and vermin.

The streets themselves throng with folk of many cultures and every class. Merchants in shop and stall loudly hawk Western spices, Tengese silk, and precious stones and slaves from Gem. Students of medicine, music, astrology, and law argue drunkenly in wineshops. Even beasts are of every stripe — dogs laze, cats stalk, snakes and lizards bask, turtles crawl, caged chickens squawk, bright songbirds preen, and monkeys thieve.

Beyond Goldenseal

The rich, wet lands surrounding Goldenseal are speckled with farming villages and webbed with irrigation canals that terminate in "market ponds" outside trading towns. Giant frogs as big as boars, raised in hutches amid rice fields, snap up vermin with long sticky tongues; fed household waste, they're themselves harvested for meat and leather. Orchards produce tropical fruits such as banana, coconut, mangosteen, and rambutan, as well as honey and beeswax.

Farther down the estuary, near the sea, stand the shadowland ruins of two cities destroyed in Greater Zhao's wars. Alder, on the north shore, is being salted by overburdened Immaculate monks slowly struggling to close the shadowland. Riven, to the south, still throngs with hungry ghosts and other shades. Smugglers visit to broker deals on neutral ground, or to partake in the "ghost trade" — exchanging mortal goods for unearthly merchandise and dark favors from the dead. Legitimate

ZHAOJŪN'S MINISTRIES

Ministry of the Blue Robe: Jurists and inspectors responsible for investigating and prosecuting breaches of Zhao law. Rumored to have a secret police branch.

Ministry of Earth and Water: Organizes peasant labor for government works such as building or repairing roads, canals, and levees.

Ministry of the Heavenly Sword: Staff officers responsible for levying, supplying, and directing Zhao military forces. Agitating to crush Hawkflower and reassimilate the other Zhao satrapies.

Ministry of the Immaculate Dragons (formerly the Ministry of Gods and Ancestors): Responsible for negotiating with spirits, arranging festivals and sacrifices, and liaising with the Immaculate Order.

Ministry of Iron and Salt: Manages government monopolies, such as iron mining, salt harvesting, and the state mint.

Ministry of Red Paper: Creates and verifies documentation guaranteeing citizens' ethnic backgrounds and other matters of lineage, including testaments and noble succession. Notoriously venal.

Ministry of Silver and Jade: Zhaojūn's treasury, responsible for collecting and spending revenues. Constantly working to hide money from the satrap.

Ministry of Spring and Autumn: Responsible for managing public granaries and cisterns.

Ministry of the Unimpeachable Signet: Arranges contracts and guarantees debts between the government and private entities. Locked in rivalry with the treasury.

Ministry of the Zhao Palace: Maintains the High Queen's household, lands, and properties; staffs the palace guard; and handles royal ceremonies.

merchants sail to other Meiyu ports and beyond for seafood and spices to appease adventurous Zhao palates.

Upriver along the Changdao rises the ancient city of Holy Fire, its fanes to Zhaojūn's old gods transformed into prestigious Immaculate temples to which the High Queen performs an annual pilgrimage — visiting every noble household along the route. Farther east rises the trade city of Footprint, the juncture between river commerce and the mountain passes leading to Gem and other Southern lands.

Civilization largely peters out beyond the Changdao basin. Jungles are home to wild beasts and reclusive tribes. Zhaojūn mines iron from the Stonewake range, jutting from the Firepeaks. Independent-minded hill tribes shelter there, and have since been joined by rebel Zhao princelings who reject the Realm. Together they've formed an inchoate pretender state, Hawkflower, whose raids trouble Zhaojūn and neighboring Zhao satrapies.

Government

Zhao Mnemonrai Enzei, High Queen of Zhaojūn and Queen of Goldenseal, rules from the Summer-and-Winter Palace at the head of a complex bureaucracy. Gracious and revered, she's devoted to her people and family, but also ruthless, jealous, and vain. Her eldest daughter **Zhao Mnemonrai Feiyen**, a ranking official in the Ministry of the Blue Robe, is balanced between loyalty to Enzei and impatience to rule. Holy Fire and Footprint have their own lesser cousin-monarchs.

The royal Mnemonrai family, renamed for its Dynastic ancestor, has not begotten enough Princes of the Earth to become a cadet house. Enzei's Dragon-Blooded siblings were pledged by their mother to the Immaculate Order lest they usurp the throne, and none of Enzei's children have yet Exalted.

Satrap **V'neef Boru**, comely and charming, was chosen specifically to court Crown Princess Feiyen and secure a marriage alliance. Feiyen responded by persuading the sardonic garrison commander, **Sesus Chay Darim**, to court her as well. Now each suitor frantically corresponds with his house over ways to sweeten the pot, and seeks aid from visiting Dynasts to help press his suit and undercut his rival.

ZHAOJŪN NAMING PRACTICES

Zhaojūn natives have three names: ethnonym, family, and personal. Zhao aristocrats take the ethnonym Zhao. Commoner Zhao clans employ ethnonyms like Baizhao, Gongzhao, or Suzhao. Ethnonyms for non-Zhao include Bai for Baihu, Nha for Tay Chai Nha, Mei for native Meiyu folk, Teng for Tengese immigrants, and Wàn for Blessed Isle immigrants (even those who aren't ethnically Wàn). This nomenclature doesn't apply to foreigners.

Zhao family names are typically two- to three-syllable names in the vein of Biru, Kuasa, Suria, and Zharen. Aristocratic given names are similar: Berani, Tanlo, Sutera, Zhiye. Commoners' given names are usually plain words like Jade, Lake, or Rose. But Zhaojūn is a melting pot. Each ethnicity has its own naming conventions, and often borrows from the others.

Acting under a false ethnonym is a crime — a capital crime for the Zhao ethnonym. Misnaming other people, especially with invented ethnonyms, can be affectionate behavior with family or close friends, but is more often used as an insult.

LANGUAGES OF THE MEIYU COAST

Zhao and Baihu speak archaic Flametongue dialects, while the native Meiyu folk speak a Seatongue dialect. Many other tribes, such as the Tay Chai Nha and Tay Man Tau, each speak their own local tongues.

Society and Culture

Zhaojūn society is ethnically hierarchical, with one's ethnicity affecting taxes, legal protections, and general prestige. The Zhao hold the highest rank, followed by the "Three Righteous Peoples" — Blessed Isle natives, Baihu, and the Tay Chai Nha, a tribe that aided the Zhao upon their arrival. Beneath these are the native Meiyu folk; neighboring peoples such as the fiercely independent, marsh-dwelling Tay Man Tau and the fractious, militant Rao; and immigrants such as the Tengese. Persons of mixed ancestry have the rights and privileges of their least prestigious lineage. Marriage between the Zhao and lesser ethnicities is forbidden. Rampant corruption in the Ministry of Red Paper allows wealthy or well-connected citizens to evade these restrictions.

Immaculate proselytization predates the Realm conquest by centuries. The royal family adopted the Immaculate Philosophy and supports suppression of heretical worship. But wealthy merchants and nobles still find their way to the estuary god Blue Jasper Dream's wandering pleasure boat, its luxurious interior far larger than the outside, to gamble and take their leisure in exchange for prayer. Though the Tay Chai Nha outwardly follow the Immaculate Philosophy, they're rumored to retain secret copies of an ancestral scripture devoted to gods of night. And the proscribed Empty Path philosophy preaches freedom from reincarnation through the Six Harmonious Emptinesses — "without cruelty, without duplicity, without selfishness, without fear, without indifference, without pride" — and reviles the Fair Folk as incarnate reminders of the crimes of the Anathema.

Neighbors

The long, wooded peninsula called **the Spine** that encloses the Meiyu Sea remains home to native peoples who resent the Zhao and Baihu conquests. Isolated by cliff-girt shores and by shadowlands at the Spine's base, they remain fiercely independent.

Three other Zhao satrapies look on resentfully from the north. **Maichu**, northernmost and former capital, fell first and bloodiest; it remains impoverished and full of ghosts, downtrodden by Ragara satraps and prostrate before brigands and foreign raiders. Forest-girt **Ferazha**, its decadent rulers overthrown by fanatical Immaculate hill folk decades ago, is now in decline, its Tepet satrap powerless, its common folk resigned to banditry. And coastal **Zhujen** — clasped in Ferazha's arms — controls that satrapy's river trade and enriches the Cynis satrap thereby.

Farther north, tiny Baihu city-states speckle the Spine's tip, and cluster along the peninsula called **the Talon** and its surrounding islands. These fell to the Realm as the Zhao did, and have been grouped together into a handful of satrapies. The largest of these city-states, **Huang Hei**, is a major Imperial navy depot, its royal family a Peleps cadet house. Peleps has been bivouacking and drilling ever more marines there; these now outnumber the Ledaal garrison.

To the south, Meiyu cities once ruled by Greater Zhao have had decades to shake off the yoke. Even so, a few still pay tribute to Zhaojūn, while others suffer from border raids meant to accumulate booty and keep the Zhao military sharp. Inspired by the Empress' disappearance, an anti-Zhao confederation is brewing among the southern cities' leadership.

Beyond the southern Meiyu Coast lie wildlands and badlands. From there, the feared reavers of **Raolai Damay** — that legendary mountain fastness of blood-wild warriors sworn to cruel gods — emboldened by the Realm's purported weakness, come forth to raid and pillage.

Wu-Jian

Built atop a First Age city bearing the same name, Wu-Jian's narrow maze of dead-end alleys, teetering houses, and rickety rope bridges is confusing and hostile. Yet, starry-eyed sailors flock here — they dream of settling the gateway island, only to find land at a premium and themselves relegated to the slums, or seek passage further West to be stranded by overpriced berths and unscrupulous captains. The locals pay them no heed and no pity — they have their own struggles to contend with.

Strength is Law

Wu-Jian is a seemingly lawless den of crime. Its ruler, **Nissar Vedan**, belongs to a cadet house that broke the reign of the Lords Criminal and installed itself as Wu-Jian's governing authority with House Peleps' assistance, yet the downfall of the city's crime princes has merely left Vedan to contend with countless smaller gangs and syndicates. Meanwhile, satrap **Sesus Nemoia** cultivates influence with local gangs to circumvent Vedan and House Nissar, as well as the drunkard garrison commander **Tepet Berel Alun**.

Nemoia is unaccountable to anyone but the Empress, and the latter hasn't been an issue for five years. House Sesus has inquired if Nemoia would — hypothetically speaking — back a play for the throne, but she's politely postponed the conversation. Nemoia is loyal to her house, and Wu-Jian would be invaluable in moving troops and resources from the Western Archipelago to the Blessed Isle, but she needs more assurance than mere hypotheticals.

Sesus Nemoia is very laissez-faire: As long as trade flows unhindered and respect is paid — at least nominally — to the Immaculate Philosophy, citizens and Dynasts are free to do as they will. Nemoia does come down on fights between scions or sailors of House Peleps and V'neef, both of whom use Wu-Jian as a steady harbor, but she can be bribed to turn a blind eye. Meanwhile she fills the empire's coffers, and her own pockets, with gains both well and ill-gotten.

Thirteen Schools

The so-called Thirteen Schools, underground martial arts societies whose initiates swear mighty oaths of obedience to their masters, have existed in some form or another for centuries. Some ancient and some newly fledged, all thrive in the vacuum left by Nemoia's hands-off reign, and they've never been more powerful. Some protect the downtrodden against thugs and thieves. Others form criminal gangs controlling their domain through violence and intimidation. Each school claims a corner of Wu-Jian as its own and, capricious as the ocean, forms alliances and enmities at a dazzling pace. When members of opposing schools meet, citizens scatter — Wu-Jian's rickety buildings are no match for the fists of a martial artist.

Ocean's Endless Slumber is one of Wu-Jian's oldest schools. Its masked disciples claim their master comes to them in waterlogged dreams to teach them the flowing murder-movements of Seven-Limbed Tempest style. The school rules the sluice streets in Mud, demanding a tithe from all sluice farmers. Those who can't, or won't, pay are taken during the five nights of Calibration — when the school sacrifices wine, flowers, and its enemies to the dark waves.

Thousand Waves Break the Shore is comprised of mortals rising in unity — and anonymity — against Dragon-Blooded dominance. The Guild funnels money to the school, made untraceable through a web of pirates. The school actively undermines the Dynasty, hiding suspects wanted (for any reason) by the Realm, stealing taxes, and offering protection to preachers willing to go against the Immaculate Philosophy. The school's Prince-Eating Mendicant style focuses on attacking in groups, and striking quickly before vanishing again into Wu-Jian's alleys.

The Blood paint their bodies and faces with dark red sigils. These are meaningless, intended only to intimidate and misdirect enemies and lend members a mysterious air. The Blood run a racketeering ring in Shades, offering protection against malignant ocean spirits and raksha. So far, the only real victims are shopkeepers who refuse to pay, though the Blood stage an elaborate ceremony replete with props once a year to make it seem they're indeed driving off spirits and fae. The school's Roaring Iron style incorporates firewands — not all in working condition, but the Blood manage to obscure that with their forceful posturing.

Places to Go

The rich and powerful claim the countryside, while Wu-Jian's citizens are crammed together in precariously stacked high-rises. Wu-Jian is far larger than its population warrants, as the city is riddled with uninhabited pockets infested with ghosts and malignant spirits, taken over by gangs and underworld princes claiming whole blocks for themselves, sealed off due to plague and never reopened, or simply too deteriorated to live in. The

LINTHA IN WU-JIAN

Wu-Jian's lawlessness provides an ideal environment for the dreaded Lintha crime family. Reavers run protection rackets in Topside and Shades, the spoils of piracy are fenced at underworld auctions, and smuggler ships loaded with all kinds of contraband set sail from Wu-Jian's docks to ports all across Creation. Far from the family's headquarters on Bluehaven, its local operations are overseen by a pair of Lintha elders.

Grandmother Fang is the local family's unquestioned crime queen, a master necromancer served by a spectral retinue of Lintha ghosts that spy on her foes and scour the ocean floor for sunken relics. **Grandfather Maw** is a retired admiral who mastered countless exotic martial arts in his journeys, and whose clout with the Thirteen Schools has made him an arbiter of disputes among them. He prefers to resolve disputes in his illegal bloodsport arena, pitting a student of each school against each other in a fight to the death.

OFFSHORE

Far from the Realm and the Western archipelago, Wu-Jian is mostly untroubled by neighboring states above the waves. Beneath is another matter.

The Spirit Court of Drowned Promises consists of old allies of Luna, and they've failed to impress the Immaculate Order. Starved of prayers, the spirits have turned against each other — rumors swirl that Kindly Hetrokonta devoured one of her grandchildren — and their discord is spilling over to worshippers in Shades.

The Gazrhan People are a seafloor civilization of eelfolk. In times of prosperity, they conduct trade with Wu-Jian; in times of want, they raid merchant vessels sailing to and from its ports. They worship an ancient crystal idol that sank beneath the waves an age ago, which speaks to Gazrhan priests during certain convergences of the stars.

Aquatic fae dwell in the **Azure Dunes of the Deep**, ill-pleased at the Realm driving them from Wu-Jian. The court's raksha prince, Dreaming Coral, works to bring the Ocean's Endless Slumber school under her sway, teaching martial prowess in exchange for access to dreams and minds. Dreaming Coral plans to unleash the school on a murderous rampage during Calibration, so the Azure Dunes of the Deep may feast on the victims' souls.

Shades and Mud districts make up most of the city, and see the most visitors looking for danger and adventure.

Inland

Wu-Jian's island is steep and rocky, but it nonetheless contains a few attractive pieces of land. After two centuries of dispossession, thuggery, and bribing the satrap, the Dragon-Blooded have claimed every scrap of worthwhile countryside — driving out what farmers and shepherds the island once had, replacing rice and sheep with lawns and gardens. Each estate is walled, gated, and patrolled. All land is privately owned, and trespassers dealt with at the owner's discretion.

Sesus Nemoia holds a modest estate here, where she hosts valued guests and emissaries of the Realm. The Sesus garrison is also stationed here, led by Tepet Berel Alun and — as satrap Nemoia intended — far removed from the bustle of daily life in Wu-Jian. Much of the garrison's manpower has been withdrawn to the Blessed Isle or other Sesus satrapies, as the house believes the city's geography makes it unassailable by any but the most powerful naval forces.

Topside

Merchants lacking resources to claim an Inland estate, powerful gang bosses, and Dynasts looking to "rough it with the natives" find a place in Topside. At the upmost levels of Wu-Jian, these homes are narrow, lopsided, and sway dangerously in the wind — but at least they *have* wind, and sunlight. Topside also grants a spectacular view of the ocean. Sesus Nemoia spends most of her time here, valuing the proximity to her kingdom of criminals.

Selachii raptors occasionally ravage Topside, carrying death on swift wings. Birds of prey with water and coral substituting for flesh and bone, these monsters were created by the aquatic raksha — a parting gift to the Realm. When the raptors come, the elite of Topside move to lower districts — hiring thugs and bribing guards to forcibly evict lesser citizens from any semi-appealing homes.

Shades

High enough above Mud's sluice streets to diminish the stench of stagnant ocean water, yet low enough that houses are affordable, Shades is packed with every entertainment. Bars lure customers with homebrewed liquor, and brothels are open at all hours. Arenas hold regular competitions — none officially to the death, but they offer no guarantees after a wounded combatant leaves. Gambling is rampant, with casinos packed into

WU-JIAN'S IMMACULATES

The Immaculate Order maintains a mission near the island's pinnacle, housed in an ancient temple-manse, serving as support haven for Wyld Hunts heading West. Beyond that, a few small temples and numerous shrines are scattered throughout Topside and the Shades. Monks do their best to tend to the faithful, but much of the city is too lawless for even Immaculates to travel safely. The Thirteen Schools have largely opposed the Order's attempts at rooting out heresy in Shades and Mud, though a few schools seek to gain power or help defend the weak by allying themselves with the Immaculates.

tiny corner shops while bookies take bets on everything from the weather to the next Wyld Hunt. Shops peddle all manner of fish, rice, seaweed, and occasionally meat.

Wu-Jian's citizens live wedged between this cacophony, sharing too-small rooms in buildings cast in perpetual shadow. But much of Shades remains untenanted, though not necessarily empty. Abandoned buildings hold a plethora of shrines to ocean spirits — be they gods outlawed by the Immaculate Order, demons of the deep, or aquatic raksha.

Mud

Wu-Jian's tidal sluices officially open and close twice a day, diverting ocean water to canals used for traffic and sewage, then draining out to sea when the tide falls again. In reality, many sluices are so clogged no one remembers when they last functioned. Never wasting resources, the people of Mud grow rice and raise small livestock atop the trash and ocean silt. They're sponsored by gangs who claim a lion's share of the profit. Citizens unwilling to indebt themselves turn to mudlarking, digging up lost treasure and coins carried on the tides.

Mud is filled with practices and creatures outlawed by the Realm. Two outcaste sisters practice their sorcery, rebuffing any offers of adoption by the Dynasty. An exiled Fair Folk, Crimson Water Hues At Twilight, makes their home on Pig Street, selling invocations of luck in exchange for a suckle on a soul — and disposing of accidentally dream-eaten customers in the ocean. The Hungry, a family of bandits whose ancestors mated with raksha, come out to hunt mortal flesh on moonless nights. Rumors persist of an Anathema, a demon-goddess of war, who escaped the Wyld Hunt and now hides under the filth and wreckage. Restless dead return to Mud on the tide, spirits of murder victims and undocumented travelers unceremoniously flushed out through the sluice system.



The Docks

Wu-Jian's massive port offers berths for vessels traveling to and from the West. The bulk of these are Imperial Navy ships belonging to House Peleps, outnumbering Merchant Fleet vessels outfitted by House V'neef. Guards patrol the docks, as much to keep Dynasts of the



rival houses from escalating their petty feuds to a street war as to protect the warehouses. The latter are stocked with goods, sometimes deliberately held back to create shortage and drive up prices.

Even with the Dynastic presence and mortal guards, pirates dock under cover of night and false flags to fill Wu-Jian with illicit wares. The outcaste pirate Storm Mother's Son still makes regular stops, trading gems and firedust stolen in the South. Underwater lie the broken remnants of the Crescent Temple — dedicated to Luna, her Chosen toppled it into the sea at the end of the First Age lest the usurpers desecrate it.

Utahi

In the West, at the southernmost extent of the Neck archipelago, sits the mountain city of Utahi on the island of the same name. An ancient and dignified city-state,

Utahi commanded tribute from 13 other nearby city-states at its height four centuries ago. The great system of hanging bridges and narrow mountain paths between the city-states of their dominion — the Feathered Roads, originally constructed under the rule of Great Hero Imen-Ath-Kuru-Au-Bala — still exists. Peleps architects carefully tend this vital trade and military network now, the veins and arteries of a subjugated power, to make sure they never collapse into the dizzyingly distant sounds and valleys below.

Utahi sits on the sheer side of a mountain, Teue Utahila, which looms majestically over the bay below. It's a city of brass-sheathed stone and soaring ziggurats, carved from rock and built upon for countless generations with quarried stone, burnished metal, and gaily painted wood. In the city's center sits the Remembrance-of-Heroes-Past Plaza, wherein burns a score of braziers, one for every Great Hero the city has seen. Here is found the Palace of the Hero, a great stepped pyramid that culminates in a glorious gold-sheathed palace, as well as the Temple of the Honored Past, wherein the genealogical records of each Great Hero are kept. Here also stands the satrap's estate, a grand walled enclave once claimed as the home of each successive reigning Hero's family, now flying banners showing the Peleps mon above the central spire.

Once, representatives of each of Utahi's vassal city-states and villages would form a procession through this plaza every day at noon, a reminder of the city's glorious place at the pinnacle of Creation. But the vassals grew tired of their masters' abuses, and rose up in a series of wars over the course of centuries. By the time House Peleps seized control of its satrapial lease a decade ago, only two city-states and a few dozen villages still sent conscripts to serve Utahi. Since then, Peleps forces have warred to place their satrapy's traditional vassals back under their control, a fact which has once again united them against a single foe.

Bloodlines of the Great Heroes

Power in Utahi comes from heroic lineage. Each family keeps its own records, with copies held in the Temple of the Honored Past. The closeness of the ancestry, the number of Great Heroes in the family's past, and what deeds they performed create a complex tapestry of social expectations and privileges. Descent from the Great Hero Anuk the Astronomer gives authority in matters of prophecy and mathematics, for example. Families that cannot claim descent from any Great Hero form the satrapy's underclass, toiling in menial labor and dreaming of the day that one of their kin raises their lineage out of the dust. Utahin families are perfectly willing to kill over genealogical disputes, or die to protect a rare copy of an outlawed lineage record showing their ancestral ties to the behemoth slayer Aua Lo.

The Great Hero is central to Utahin culture, a being who transcends his limitations and becomes more than his flesh and blood permits. When the reigning Great Hero dies, steps down, or is denounced as infirm by a majority of the populace, the time comes to choose a new Great Hero. The heads of every family that claims descent from a Great Hero form a council, and every Utahin has the right to address them, proclaiming her mighty deeds and explaining why she deserves to be chosen. Until they choose a new Great Hero — and years may pass before they find a suitable candidate — the council of families lends temporal authority to one of the former Great Hero's descendants, who reigns as the Hero.

When House Peleps first learned of this custom, they believed it would be all too easy for a Dragon-Blood to be acknowledged as a Great Hero, founding a cadet house offshoot to dominate Utahi even if House Peleps' satrapial lease should lapse. To their frustration, this isn't the case. While fighting off ten pirates single-handedly would suffice to prove a mortal's heroism, more is expected of the Exalted. They must achieve feats that test the limits of their own divine might to prove themselves to the Utahin, and as of yet, Peleps' scions have failed to do so. Immaculate missionaries argue that the Dragon-Blooded inherently possess this spiritual superiority, and more than one has been driven to rage by an Utahin's refusal to submit to the idea of Dragon-Blooded superiority.

As more missionaries arrive monthly, though, more Utahin convert to the Immaculate Philosophy, and many more have begun to keep their opinions to themselves. They know that no matter what the foreign monks say, the Utahin choose the Great Hero, and they hold only their own council. Only great deeds combined with great spirit will make the next Great Hero, and not the Realm's political pressure. The most recent Great Hero was Akapa, who earned his place by making peace with the Realm. His grandson, **the Third Hero Akapa**, is the current Hero of Utahi, appointed for his keen foresight and skill with the leiomano.

The Third Hero Akapa is publicly the voice of his people in the satrap's ear, protecting his people from the excesses a tributary state can expect. In reality, satrap **Peleps Teseri Nef** keeps the Hero in check by a combination of threats and bribes. She keeps him entertained with drugs, concubines and rare delicacies, combined with the promise to execute him publicly and assert direct control over Utahi if he ever tries to exercise his

power. With the native Utahin military having already been in decline before being savaged by the Peleps conquest, the Third Hero sees little recourse against such threats. He resents being made House Peleps' puppet, but fears his people would suffer greatly if he disobeyed. As time passes, he gradually loses more and more of his people's approval.

Life in Utahi

An Utahin's garments and abode are determined by the Great Hero she claims descent from. The lineage of Anuk the Astronomer wears robes embroidered with constellations and lives in open-roofed homes, while descendants of Sword-Handed Halu dye the left sleeve of their clothing red and adorn their dwellings' walls with hawk feathers.

Cassava, taro, sweet potatoes, coconuts, bananas, and breadfruit are staples of the Utahin diet, along with fish, pork, chicken, monkey, dog, and shellfish. A variety of chili peppers are used as seasoning, and have become favorites of the Dynastic palate.

The Immaculate Order has seen great success in suppressing Utahi's indigenous religion, which centers around veneration of the first Great Heroes — the siblings Kaloli the Trickster Sun and Komaka the Jaguar Moon — as creators of the world. The Immaculate Dragons are now worshipped in their stead, although syncretization of Kaloli with Daana'd and Komaka with Mela have come into prominence. Suspicious of Anathema infiltration of these syncretic cults, archimandrite **Ice Shatters Stone** has summoned inquisitors from the Blessed Isle to investigate.

Neighbors

Bisajé was one of the first Utahin vassal-cities to rebel after the Great Hero Lau Wo the Conqueror executed their representative. Their army is small, but their warriors invoked urchin-devils to inhabit their bodies and fill them with strength, while Bisajén haruspices guided their lightning raids. House Peleps' efforts at reconquest have met with failure thus far. They believe House V'neef is assisting Bisajé, despite the Utahin's insistence that unhale forces are at work.

Repanga began trading with Utahi after it conquered their trade partner, the city of Arafa Aru. Utahin ships carry bronze weapons, breadfruit, and golden ornaments to Repanga, and return laden with slaves, cacao beans, and pearls. At the time House Peleps conquered Utahi, Repanga was stricken by plague, and agreed to submit to Utahi in exchange for medications imported for the Blessed Isle and the services of Dragon-Blooded physicians. Now that the island has recovered, it seeks to renege on its bargain.

Starfoam is one of the few cities that remains an Utahin vassal, its latest effort at rebellion utterly crushed by the Peleps garrison. Its wind-turned prayer wheels were smashed by Immaculate monks, and the remnants of its army conscripted as Realm janissaries. The Utahin are troubled, feeling that Starfoam has become Peleps' vassal, not theirs.

Nellens Tregane watched another officer being carried out of the courtyard on a stretcher. It was the third this month, putting yet another of Faxai's sword-saints out of commission. She found it pointless, this dueling to replace their fallen leader. What use was killing your brothers and sisters at arms when their strength was needed to retake the shrine cities? Tregane was too new to the order, too low-ranked. Posing such a question would be inappropriate. She could only watch as her betters maimed or slew one another in pursuit of power.

She'd abandoned her dreams of a respectable rank and a quiet retirement after the disaster in Juche. While her failure hadn't brought about all of House Nellens' troubles in the prefecture, it had been one of many contributing factors, and for that she was deeply ashamed. Coming here to Faxai-on-the-Caul and assisting the Sword-Saints of the Divine Tempest was a way to start over. A way to atone.

Here, protected by Faxai's hieroglyph-covered walls, she found a kind of peace. When she wasn't drilling with her unit, she was out on patrol. As she drifted off to an exhausted sleep, contemplation of the *Thousand Correct Actions* kept her mind off her failings and instead on redemption: Aid the sword-saints in taking back the shrine cities, let Dragon-Blooded pilgrims seek Feng-Yi once more, and thereby strengthen her house and stabilize the Realm.

It was different here on the Caul, and that was its own kind of balm. Never before had she seen so many outcaste flags flying beside those of the Great Houses. Their bright colors stood out against Faxai's gray walls like flashes of hope. More than once, Tregane found herself swept up in a street procession, or had her already-light sleep interrupted by hymns, bells, or chanting. So much life here, defiant in the face of so much death.

Because alongside the color and clamor, she'd seen hawkfolk circling overhead, and heard the howls of turtlewolves in the dead of night. She'd been tumbled from her bed when the ground below set the city's pillars to shaking, a sign that Sha'a Oka was on the move.

Now a horn blew, calling Faxai's defenders to their posts. Tregane nodded to other soldiers as she maneuvered her way through the crowds. What tension there was between house guards and other Faxai-based orders was, if not completely erased, at least tamped down when the Lunar threat came calling.

The hawkfolk's shrieking jeers made Tregane's blood run cold, and her relief at not being in command against that unnatural force came tinged with shame. She recalled a quotation from the *Thousand Correct Actions* — "The upright soldier sacrifices her desire for personal glory" — and held it in her mind. It took the rest of the walk, but as she joined her unit, tranquility returned.

The sword-saint beside her was anything but calm. The young man's hands shook as he checked the fastenings on his armor. Tregane knew him; he'd arrived from Arjuf the week before. She remembered how she'd felt that day on Juche's border and saw that same panic in his eyes. "Soldier," she said, gruff but soft.

He glanced at her, eyes wide.

She was no Exalt. She couldn't offer him earth's strength or water's stillness. But she clapped a hand on his shoulder and nodded in solidarity. He relaxed just enough, nodded back.

The gates opened, and they marched out to face the enemy.



Chapter Seven

The War for the Caul

It doesn't heave into view over the horizon, as land ought. One might watch the seas ahead as one sails, but a moment's glance away or even an eyeblink suffices. A great landmass is suddenly there, as though one first sighted it hours ago. There's no scent of land as elsewhere in Creation, nor the scent of seaweed and dead fish that landfolk think is the smell of the sea.

Sailors who come here bear every talisman their faith provides, for to cross the line separating the sacred from the profane is a terrifying thing. This is no mere island — this is the Caul. The Caul is and is not, a place out of time that calls to the Exalted's souls. This mythic continent, only real in the most tenuous of senses, may be the key to the salvation of the Dragon-Blooded and the Realm. It may also spell the ultimate destruction of both.

Myth No Longer

The Caul slipped away long ago, one of many casualties of Creation's slow decline. When it vanished in the Great Contagion's wake, it was thought lost to the Wyld; in time, only savants and those few ancient Exalted who'd been there remembered it. And then, suddenly, the Caul returned, discovered by a ship bearing the ascendant Scarlet Realm's flag. The news spread like wildfire; popular imagination was seized by this strange unmade-and-made continent, mythic home of the Elemental Dragons and claimed birthplace of the Dragon-Blooded themselves. Pilgrims flocked to the newly risen continent. But they weren't alone.

The Lunar Anathema felt the Caul's return, a siren call from a sacred realm where Gaia and Luna once walked as one. Here, they thought, was a chance to reclaim miracles and nightmares thought lost to the ages, and a crucial battleground in their long war against the Realm. That Sha'a Oka, the Black Lion lost and mourned long ago, returned with the Caul only lent fuel to the fire. The war commenced immediately, and has raged ever since, the Empress declaring a grand crusade to protect the birthplace of the Exalted and to keep forever open the way to Feng-Yi, the otherworldly Last City at the end of the pilgrim's path.

In this endless struggle, each side's fortunes have waxed and waned over the centuries. At times, the Realm has held all five of the Caul's shrine cities — at others, the Lunars claimed two, even three of the sacred shrine cities, barring the pilgrimage route to Feng-Yi. But as the Deliberative withdrew the Realm's legions from the Caul, dividing them up amongst the Great Houses in preparation for the coming civil war, the Lunar host struck decisively, taking four of the five shrine cities in a rout and leaving the Realm's remaining forces pinned behind the walls of Faxai-on-the-Caul, the Realm's primary port of entry to the sacred continent. The faithful clamor for a counterattack, and in Faxai crusaders sharpen their blades and await reinforcements.

In truth, the crusade to retake the Caul isn't as popular as pilgrims and warriors in Faxai would hope. The Great Houses have been sending daughters and sons to spill their blood on the Caul's strange soil, and for what? To ensure that more Dragon-Blooded will be born by sacrificing those who already live? Though some see the Caul's conquest as a spiritual imperative that will preserve the Dragon-Blooded forever, many in the Deliberative see the struggle as a waste, like casting talents of jade into the ocean's depths.

Nonetheless, as a concession to militarists and Immaculate zealots, the Deliberative voted to order the immediate liberation of the Caul's shrine cities. But to provide legions would be tantamount to admitting that they never should have left the Caul in the first place, and would meet stiff resistance from the Great Houses that had claimed the legions for their own purposes. Instead, they encouraged the Realm's outcastes to join martial orders (p. XX) in the Caul and fight to restore what was rightfully theirs by their birthright as Dragon-Blooded.

The Pilgrimage to Feng-Yi

When the five shrine cities are held by the Dragon-Blooded, the resonance of their elemental Essences can open the way to Feng-Yi. A Dragon-Blood who completes the path of

THOSE WHO TREAD SACRED GROUND

Before the Realm discovered the Caul, before the Lunars descended upon it like a storm, Southwestern sailors knew of this strange continent's return. A few settled there — and their descendants dwell there still. The Caulborn are a strange, insular people who keep many superstitions and rituals. Both sides in the war know the Caulborn have an innate sense for the Caul's rhythms, and use them as guides. Caulborn clans engage in dealings with both sides — but neither side truly trusts them, who have no reason to love the armies that have made their home a war zone for centuries.

pilgrimage between the five shrine cities and then to the Last City receives the blessings of the land where the Elemental Dragons once dwelled — her next child is assured to draw his Second Breath, receiving the Dragons' gift.

Not all pilgrims can complete their journey, whether repelled by the Caul's daunting perils or called away by some urgent crisis. Should they wish to renew their quest to Feng-Yi, they walk the pilgrimage route anew from Faxai, though they need not attempt the trials of any shrines they've already passed a second time.

Even when the Realm held the shrine cities, the way to Feng-Yi opened only sporadically; the right to undertake a pilgrimage could be granted only by the Empress' decree. She reserved this gift of a miracle for Dragon-Blooded who'd won her favor through deeds of legendary heroism that served her will, scions of families she wished to elevate or restore to power, and the rare outcaste in whom she saw the potential for greatness. Now, this power is held by the Deliberative, though with the Realm's loss of control over the shrine cities, they believe it a moot point. Not all Dragon-Blooded are so pessimistic; some hope to launch a conquering pilgrimage, reclaiming the shrine cities from their Lunar occupiers and then waiting for the way to Feng-Yi to open.

But the Dragon-Blooded aren't the only ones who might undertake the pilgrimage. If all five shrine cities were to fall under the Lunars' control, if the Caul were to fully resonate with their otherworldly Essence, the gates of Feng-Yi might open in the other direction. No Lunar has completed the pilgrimage in living memory, so none know what its result might be, but elders and neonates of the Silver Pact alike speak wistfully of what lost wonders might be regained thereby.



A War of Gods and Monsters

Though the Lunar Anathema lash out at the Realm's presence throughout the Threshold, the bloodiest battleground between the two is the Caul. When armored turtlewolves rise up from the forests and the sea, when hawkfolk swoop down from the mountains screeching, and when the Black Lion's presence is felt, it's no subtle thing. Though the Lunars ever harass the Realm's forces, none can forget when the Caul's entire Lunar host marches together to war.

Historically, there were always at least two legions stationed in the Caul. These legions guarded the cities, made safe the roads between them, and escorted important pilgrims. When the Lunars' armies fell upon them, they retreated behind great earthworks and fought the horde to a standstill.

Both Dragon-Blooded and Lunar hold the Caul sacred; neither will countenance disruption of the Essence flowing through the land. Nothing is built in the isle's sacred demesnes, and any new construction must be undertaken with the greatest care to avoid disrupting the dragon lines, especially near the shrine cities. Armies of savants check and recheck every pillar, every nail, to ensure it leaves the natural geomancy untouched. Legions, rather than taking up position in the shrine cities, construct fortresses nearby — Lunars, similarly, are loath to let their massed forces dwell there. Neither side will risk defacing the divine gift that the Caul represents.

Once, the legions' fortresses stood proudly along the path of pilgrimage, their walls firm and guarded 24 hours a day. Now their earthworks are shattered, their personnel scattered across the Blessed Isle as the houses gird themselves for civil war. Realm citizens unable to flee the shrine cities have been enslaved or slain by Lunars.

Faxai-on-the-Caul

From the sea, Faxai-on-the-Caul seems a port city like any other, a grey and brown mass that sprawls along the shore, its ancient, hieroglyph-crusted walls curving around it in a protective embrace. Flags of every Great House fly in the wind, along with the flags of innumerable outcaste families and martial orders. As the ship ties up at dockside, the first glimpse of the city's strangeness can be seen — the dockside district sways upon the waves, and the docks continue into Faxai, becoming its streets and paths. Every building stands on thick pillars that lift it above the Caul's soil, for the very earth here is sacred, and none tread it lightly. Anything buried in the earth of Faxai will endure beyond time, and Imperial decree forbids the interment of both the living and the dead.

THE EFFACED WALLS

Faxai's hieroglyph-covered walls tell stories of the First Age, of gods and heroes, of wars against monsters and demons, and of the founding of the Caul's first civilizations. Dynastic scholars study these writings to the extent that they remain legible. Wind, tide, and vegetation have taken their toll, weathering many of these ancient inscriptions to near-indecipherability. But beyond that, some of the writings have been deliberately destroyed.

Centuries ago, when the Realm first seized Faxai, Immaculate monks took chisels to the city walls, obliterating many of its hieroglyphs and bas-reliefs. The people were forbidden to pass on any knowledge thus expunged. Even so, stories linger, whispered from parent to child in Faxai's homes, or chanted among Caulborn tribes in the wild lands. But whether the subjects of these lost stories — Nahundau the Hour-Drinker, Axe Saint Malinti, Walanua of the Many-Colored Dawn, and their ilk — were heroes, gods, or devils is no longer remembered.

Faxai is the Realm's last foothold in the Caul, the last bastion of civilization before the hills and woods of the interior, where Lunar warlords rule over hordes of beastfolk and whatever unfortunates survived their sudden assault five years ago. The city is a melting pot, houses that loathe each other sleeping beneath the same roof, Dynastic royalty dining across from penniless outcaste crusaders. Here is the last breath of fellowship and safety before the pall of unending dread descends, where scions of Mnemon and Ragara break bread in the name of a greater good — the quest to drive the Lunars from the Caul forever. Yet even here, all the Realm's intrigues remain, set against the Caul's terrifying and alien backdrop. Whether faith in the cause or ancient Dynastic rivalries will win out in the end is yet to be seen.

Life in Faxai-on-the-Caul

Walking down the street, it seems that every other building houses an Immaculate temple, a chapter of the Wyld Hunt, or a paradoxically quiet urban monastery. Faxai teems with Immaculate monks, no surprise in a land held to be the home of the Immaculate Dragons themselves. A tenth of the resident population have either taken monastic vows as oblates, or serve a martial order (p. XX) that's come to reclaim the Caul; this lends the local culture a deeply spiritual weight. The majority, however, are here for more pragmatic purposes, for all they may kneel on the boardwalks when a procession bearing a portable shrine passes, bells ringing in time with each step and priests calling out the praises of the Immaculate Dragons.

Faxai is kept supplied by some of the wealthiest and most exotic Western and Southwestern satrapies and trade networks. As a result, the city frequently has the air of a slightly crazed celebration that never ends, even in the face of the worst setbacks the Realm has experienced in all its history in the Caul. For some, it's because they've yet to set foot outside the Walled City — for others, it's the only way they can keep themselves anchored having done so. Faxai is a bright, raucous city that never truly sleeps.

The Walled City's Caulborn royal family was extinguished by conquering Dynasts long ago, though rumors persist of a surviving heir. Now **Mayavin Utterdepth,** a puppet prince from a lesser lineage, rules at the satrap's bidding. Young and fearful, she dares not defy Faxai's satrap or engage in Dynastic politics, spending her days painting impossible landscapes and composing philosophical treatises when not acting as a figurehead.

The Earth Shrine

Alone among all structures in Faxai, the Earth Shrine is built directly upon the soil. The sacred, all-preserving earth keeps the shrine in perfect condition even in the midst of a bustling port city at war, seemingly enduring out of time. All pilgrimages on the way to Feng-Yi begin here — a supplicant ritually cleanses herself with oil and dust before descending the steps into the Earth Shrine, first of wood and then of ancient, unbowed stone. Once she crosses the threshold, the true test begins. A sense of awe and power fills the supplicant if she's judged worthy to undertake the pilgrimage. Should she be wanting, she feels nothing.

When she turns to leave, the sun doesn't shine so high in the sky, or night has fallen, or the season is later than it was. To the pilgrim, she's judged in an instant, but those who cautiously observe from the top of the stairway know the truth — it's been hours, days, even weeks. Those who are worthy, the earth of Faxai preserves. None know how it, or any of the Caul's other shrines pass such judgments, but failure is perilous. Those found unworthy are left to the tender mercies of time, without awareness of its passage — whether they survive or not depends only on how long the earth of Faxai holds them. In some cases, it even seems to speed time along its course — one infamous case, now legend, tells of an unworthy pilgrim who rotted away into dust within seconds of setting foot in the Earth Shrine. The way to Feng-Yi does not open without risk.

Garianghis, The Garden of Dreams

As one leaves Faxai-on-the-Caul, the world simultaneously opens wide and closes in. The walls are left behind, and now it's the trees that deny the horizon to the traveler. Still, the road is well marked with ancient stones that the Lunar Anathema won't defile. The forest grows thicker, darker, more foreboding. Just as one might wonder if the Lunars tampered with the road, Garianghis appears.

The buildings are overcome with vines and moss, but even as the plants force their way into the cracks between the stones, they take up its form — a tree becomes a brick wall, a weed a paving stone, all flowering and reaching for the sun that filters into the clearing that the city fills. Garianghis is a mélange of natural and artificial, and for the supplicant it serves as the border between. She's left Faxai-on-the-Caul, and now she walks her pilgrimage.

Life in Garianghis

Before the Lunars came, the Realm held Garianghis for centuries, and despite the city's strangeness a thriving community dwelled here, supporting trade and the Realm's presence. Garianghis wasn't as celebrant a town as Faxai, but there was a certain joie de vivre that seemed to rise up from the soil, present in each bite of food, breath of air, and draught of water.

Now, Garianghis is all but abandoned. When the Lunars rose up in wake of the legions' departure, Third Daughter of the Leaves took Garianghis, and she holds it now for her own, having slain citizens that couldn't escape. Her turtlewolves are all she needs, and they prowl the woods around Garianghis, hunting animals and would-be pilgrims seeking to oust her alike while she contents herself with strange rituals that, rumor has it, are intended to poison the dreams of what few Dragon-Blooded remain in the Caul.

The Wood Shrine

Rising from the center of Garianghis is what seems to be an enormous tree. But as one approaches and lesser structures fall behind, it becomes clear that this is no mere tree, but a majestic shrine whose entire structure has been superseded by plant life. Its many roots do not find purchase in the soil, but coil around the open space of the shrine before coming to rest on the countless banyans that uphold the gigantic trunk like so many pillars. This is the Wood Shrine of Garianghis.

Strictly speaking, a pilgrim may "open the gates" to the Wood Shrine from anywhere in Garianghis, but it's traditional to do it from the shrine's steps, and history bears out that those who do so are more often successful. The physical gates to the Wood Shrine are themselves ever shut tight, and cannot be opened. In any case, the pilgrim lies down to rest and falls into a deep sleep, where she begins to dream.

The dream is always the same — she is chasing something. What it may be, she cannot tell, until she's able

to catch it and bring it to ground. Then, and only then, does she see what she's been pursuing, and has a heartbeat to make a choice — does she let her quarry go, or kill it? If she takes its life, when she rises, the gates will be open. If she doesn't, they remain shut.

And of those who were successful in their dream-hunt? The Wood Shrine demands blood, for nature is red in tooth and claw. The prey may be a small animal or a great one, and at times the Wood Shrine makes the dreamer hunt a person. When the victorious dream-hunter arises, she finds her quarry dead on the shrine's steps, slain in precisely the manner she slew it in her dream. The way to Feng-Yi does not open without a sacrifice.

Houshou, The Pyre That Consumes Itself

One leaves the forest and the hungry Wood Shrine behind, journeying north through hill and dale. Wet grasses give way to dry shrubbery, and before long Houshou appears in the distance. Houshou is a city with two faces. By day, it seems to be like any other, its buildings erected in the humble, simple style common to the Caul, but the very moment the sun vanishes below the horizon, it bursts into flame, consuming itself and sending flames roaring up into the sky. On a clear night, the Pyre of Houshou is visible as far as Faxai-on-the-Caul, a dull and subtle glow from over the horizon, but to the traveler outside its gates, the flames are almost too intense to behold. The city burns itself to the ground each night, and each morning it stands anew, as though the fire had never been.

Life in Houshou

While Houshou has walls, these burn with the city. The flames of Houshou consume any permanent structures within a mile of the Fire Shrine, and so the Realm forbade construction within this boundary — thus, the outer city of Houshou sprang up, a scattered ring of newer buildings circling the old, all of sturdy stone and fireproof tile. The inhabitants of inner Houshou were never many in number, and at dusk they forsook the city, the population streaming out through the gates as bells tolled out the coming night hours ahead of time.

The legions' earthworks now smashed by the ferocity of the invading Lunars, the outer city stands largely empty. What few Realm citizens remain are held in thrall or hunted for sport by the terrifying Skathra Venomchild, who dwells in the inner city by day and by night. In mockery of Hesiesh, Skathra paints each of their scales to resemble a single flame and dances in the light of Houshou's Pyre, cackling and howling as they flirt with the all-consuming fire, darting in and out of the city even as it burns. Even the other Lunars of the Caul, monstrous and puissant though they are, find Skathra unsettling.

The Fire Shrine

A squat structure of onyx and obsidian, the Fire Shrine's sealed gates hide a stairway that spirals down into an ancient lava tube.It's tended by an ancient order of Caulborn monks, pledged to burn with Houshou each night, and return to life each dawn. They believe the shrine is a gate to the secrets of life and death, and can only be unlocked by the agony of fire. Their religion is a separate mystery altogether from the pilgrimage to Feng-Yi, but they offer what wisdom they can to pilgrims.

The Fire Shrine's gates won't open to any save one who has braved the Pyre of Houshou. A would-be supplicant must remain behind as any others depart the city, and when night falls, the flames erupt and consume her. Even Immaculate Monks walking the path of Hesiesh never endure such pain as the city of Houshou demands of a pilgrim; it burns them down to their very bones, and then consumes even those. Many cannot endure the pain, and flee the city screaming for help only to be consumed by the flames just outside the gates. While they rise once more with the dawn, the gates will not open for them. Only by accepting the flames can one become worthy of entry to the Fire Shrine. The way to Feng-Yi does not open without surpassing the self.

Sekima, The Whisper of Memory

As one leaves the smoke and flame of Houshou behind and ascends the Ghost-Hand Mountains, the air grows thin and chilly far quicker than it should. The trees give way to scrub grasses and shrubs that cling to cracks in the rock, and at last the pilgrim arrives at the place she's been told to seek, the city of Sekima, only to find no city there. Thin grasses, waving in the near-constant wind, only just hide the scattered remains of foundations of buildings that once stood here, surrounded by a few recent villages and a series of pillars draped in pale, ragged banners. In the winter, snowfall will hide them further under gentle inches of pure white. The city of Sekima was destroyed long ago, and nothing, not even the sacred Air Shrine, remains.

For all this, the pilgrim can remember the city as it once was in perfect detail, so vividly that she can walk down what once the high street and smell the scent of cooking meat and pastries, hear the laughter of children and the quiet chatter of friends and neighbors. She remembers conversations with these people that she's never had, homes she's slept in that crumbled ages before her birth. It's impossible to forget the city of Sekima once one has trod upon its sacred earth, even without ever seeing the city as it was.



Life in Sekima

The Memory of Sekima is powerful and vivid, such that even though a pilgrim may, to the outside observer, be eating nothing but empty air as she wanders through a wasteland, she'll nonetheless be nourished by the meal she remembers. A fire that guttered and died in the ancient past will still warm her in the chill of Sekima's night. When the Realm held the city, a Hearth of Immaculate monks dwelt full-time within, sitting in a circle on the cold ground while remembering their time in a monastery that crumbled to dust ages ago.

Centuries ago, the legions constructed great pillars of stone around the city's circumference, hung with simple banners of white silk, to mark the boundary and prevent the unwary from being enmeshed in a memory not their own. Outside these pillars, they raised settlements around it much in the manner of Houshou, far below. Here the legions and the local population lived, ever mindful of the gaping hole that tugged at their thoughts. The old walls of the legions' fortresses still stand, a reminder of the days when the Realm held Sekima — fortresses that offered them no protection from the sky.

Sandswept Garda-Empress, a Lunar who wears the shape of a titanic raptor, has claimed the city, her hawkfolk flocking around the mountain peaks surrounding Sekima and eagerly awaiting Dynastic travelers. Any who approach the city now must deal with them, for their mistress doesn't suffer the hated Dragon-Blooded disturbing what's hers and hers alone, and they'll fight eagerly for the hope of gaining her favor.

The Air Shrine

How does one enter a building that no longer exists? This riddle sits at the heart of the pilgrimage to Sekima, a koan that must be understood before the Air Shrine's gates will open. The city lives on in memory, perfectly inscribed into the mind of anyone who has stood upon the ground where it once was. Though the bustling, raucous city may seem nothing but a strange miracle and a distraction from one's true purpose, these memories are in fact the key to progressing on one's pilgrimage.

The Memory of Sekima is such that one can interact with it, remembering conversations as they take place. The pilgrim speaks at once with the empty air and with an innkeeper, and she remembers taking a room as any traveler might. She remembers meeting a lovely person in a teahouse that's now little more than scattered stones, conversing with that person for hours, and walking home with them that evening. With a little

effort, an entire life in Sekima begins to unfold within the pilgrim's mind as she acts out its particulars, comes to know the locals, and, in time, finds her way to the sacred Air Shrine, where she petitions for entry. Such a petition isn't always granted by the Caulborn monks within the memory, but the greater ties one has with the community, the more likely they are to look on a request favorably.

After a journey to Sekima, many take up an artistic pursuit, the better to craft representations of the city so indelibly carved into their minds. Yet, no matter how many are made, one difference persists — no one ever renders their perfectly remembered Air Shrine quite the same. The way to Feng-Yi does not open without remembrance.

Melilune, the Reflection of the Self

Crossing the Ghost-Hand Mountains at the pass of Sekima, the pilgrim now descends onto the western slope, past streams that coalesce into ponds, which feed great rivers that pour into an enormous freshwater lake. Here, the stories say, is Melilune, and tall, beautifully worked spires gleaming with opal and pearl indeed rise from the lake, reaching into the sky. As one draws closer, it becomes clear; the lake is but a few inches deep, leaving an undisturbed surface that acts as a perfect mirror, which echoes the graceful towers down into vertigo-fueled infinity.

The water of Melilune is, despite what one might expect, nothing but pure, clean stream water, still cold from the glacial runoff that feeds it. It has no unusual properties, though vials of it fetch unheard-of prices from collectors of relics. Beneath the shimmering surface are great wells that suck excess water into underground channels, ancient magic and artifice perfectly regulating the flow that carries the water to a spring a few miles distant, from whence it flows into the sea. Water Aspects on pilgrimage have plumbed these depths, but there are no answers to be found in the caves beneath Melilune.

The Water Shrine is an enigma beyond enigmas, for though it appears solid, carved of a single enormous piece of lapis lazuli, its form wavers and ripples when touched, and objects pass through as though it's not there — what seems real and solid is only the Water Shrine's reflection. A majestic waterfall descends from its heights, cascading over its walls; this waterfall has no source that can be found, nor does it raise the level of the lake's water.

Life in Melilune

Throughout the Realm's tenure in the Caul, Melilune has never hosted a large population. This is partially due to the city's indefensibility — it has no walls, and archers taking advantage of the tall towers quickly find themselves stranded with no hope of escape.

But there's another reason few choose to live in Melilune: It's simply too strange. The first of Melilune's secrets isn't difficult to intuit: By day, the skies reflected in the water's surface twinkle with starlight, and by night brightly lit clouds play in the reflected sky, all while reflections go about their lives — some without any visible source, others cast by those standing atop the mirror-flat surface of Melilune's lake-streets. More unsettling is the fact that the reflections differ from those who cast them, sometimes in significant and disturbing ways, and few can long bear the sight of it.

The Water Shrine

Melilune is not one city, but two, one reflected by sunlight and one by moonlight, that become one only when both of those light sources are extinguished — in other words, at the new moon or during an eclipse. For these brief moments, it's possible to approach the Water Shrine, but though the steps are rendered solid, the way remains barred. The pilgrim's own reflection stands before the gate, stepping out from the glass-smooth surface of the waterfall that pours over the shrine's outer pavilion, and will not move aside. In her reflection, the pilgrim faces her own self laid bare, a study in contrast, for at some point in the pilgrim's past, she came to a decision that affected the rest of her life — and in that moment, her reflection made a very different decision.

To pass, the pilgrim must intuit that pivotal moment, be it through conversation, contests, or even battle — for here, on the Water Shrine's steps, her reflection is as real as she is. Many pilgrimages end here, either for the pilgrim's inability to face herself, or because she and her reflection come to blows and, in the struggle, she is slain.

But understanding isn't enough, for the pilgrim must also accept the choice her reflection made, the reality that, had she chosen thus, *she* would be the reflection. When this moment of acceptance dawns — when, like Melilune, the two become one — the reflected self vanishes, and the doors to the Water Shrine open. When the pilgrim returns from within, she casts no reflection, not in the sacred waters of Melilune nor in any other surface.

And what of the other self, the absent reflection of a life not lived? No known sorcery can coax the pilgrim's reflection, identical or otherwise, back into existence, and the weight of understanding the different decision is bested only by the weight of never knowing what might have been had she made it herself, for the way to Feng-Yi does not open without a question unanswered.

Feng-Yi, the Last City

The journey's end can be seen in the gates of Feng-Yi. A humble city, long uninhabited, it nonetheless possesses a profound serenity in its simple architecture. Here is something ancient and lost, and something that has not yet come. Many have come to Feng-Yi, only to find abandoned buildings overgrown with vines and toppled statues without faces. The true way to Feng-Yi can only be walked by a pilgrim who's passed through the five shrines, and opens only when the stars and seasons are right, and all five shrine cities are held by the same masters. Sometimes the way has remained closed for years at a time; at others, it has reopened mere hours after a pilgrimage's end. Until it opens, pilgrims wait on Feng-Yi's outskirts.

The way to Feng-Yi is not a door. The pilgrim understands this, for she's tempered her soul with the trials of her passage through the Caul. The way to Feng-Yi is a road, for Feng-Yi has not yet come. The way to Feng-Yi is a map that shows the path to what once was, for Feng-Yi is unspeakably old. The pilgrim possesses the way to Feng-Yi within her heart, but it's only when she passes through the Last City's gates that the truth becomes clear to her. She walks, calm and sure, through the streets, approaching the tall doors of the Shrine of Feng-Yi, which open at her passage.

In Faxai-on-the-Caul, the earth breaks its long vigil and dances, rolling and shifting like the sea it stands beside. The city on stilts trembles for a moment, tossed like foam on the sea, and the inhabitants are reminded how fragile and ephemeral the world is. They rebuild what has been lost nonetheless.

In Garianghis, all residents fall into a deep sleep, dreaming strange, green dreams they cannot articulate. When they awaken, five sleepers have vanished without trace, while five young, healthy trees have appeared in the grove surrounding the Wood Shrine. Some say that those who vanish are reborn as the pilgrims' children, finding enlightenment as Dragon-Blooded. This may be true.

In Houshou, fire rains from the sky, but nothing is burned. The flame is cool, slippery to the touch, and doesn't consume itself, but evaporates in the day like water after rain. Relic hunters prize this liquid flame, and it fetches an unheard-of price from sorcerers and the faithful alike.

In Sekima, a terrible gale descends, and those present must take cover against the storm. Then, with equal suddenness, the winds die down, and the air is calm as it never is in the mountain pass. For a heartbeat, as the winds die, the remembered city is real again, in the rush of dust and debris. But only for a heartbeat.

In Melilune, the floodgates open, and the lake is pulled, churning, into the caverns below. It will take a day to fill once more, the water flowing in through the channels and cracks and giving rise to a strange music that many strive to recreate, but never do.

When the pilgrim reemerges, she carries something sacred about her, something that even the casual observer can easily see. Her very person seems inviolable, her voice ringing with the deep mystery of the Caul. Her next child will bear the Dragons' blessing — she knows this as she knows herself, for the way to Feng-Yi has opened within her heart, and she will never again be as she was.

BEYOND THE SHRINE CITIES

Realm expansion has been thwarted by the Caul's difficult terrain — high mountains, jagged green hills, dense jungles, treacherous marshes, and reptile-haunted pampas. Caulborn clans are far better suited to battle here than the Realm's legions, such as the toadfolk of Guchol, who drag their foes beneath the waters of their swamps to drown, or the warriors of Caligo, who hurl arrows and javelins from howdahs mounted atop the shoulders of colossal apes.

In addition to Caulborn and Lunars, the Caul is home to all manner of inhabitants. Wild beasts haunt jungle, hill, and plain. Fair Folk princes' freeholds sparkle on mountain peaks. Demons crawl into the world through the liminal boundaries of the Caul's shores. And elementals and forgotten gods hold court deep beneath the earth.

Enemies Ancient and Powerful

The Lunars of the Caul, who dwell in wild cities of beastfolk and revere pristine demesnes, have long struggled to rid the sacred continent of the Dragon-Blooded. Historically, they know that they and their beastfolk cannot stand against the might of the Realm's legions, and to do so would be folly. Therefore, the Lunar war effort in the Caul combines asymmetric raiding and open warfare. Only rarely do they send great forces against walled cities, when they believe there's advantage to be gained from doing so. Rather, they interdict supply caravans and merchant convoys, hunt traveling Dynasts, and raise vast armies of beastfolk to unleash at the right moment. There has never been a stand-up fight against

the Realm's undivided strength in the history of the war for the Caul, which vexes the legions stationed here to no end.

Sha'a Oka, the Black Lion

Sha'a Oka is dead. He died when the Caul sank beneath him into chaos. He died when the Caul returned, slain by the jade daiklaves of the Realm. He died when he led an army against Garianghis, taking hundreds with him before an Immaculate follower of Sextes Jylis sacrificed himself to put the monster down. Sha'a Oka is dead.

Sha'a Oka lives. Every tale of his death is exaggeration, falsehood, or misunderstanding, for more than any of his Lunar kin the Black Lion has a talent for feigning his death and surviving the impossible. His adherents call him His Divine Lunar Presence. The sense that Sha'a Oka stands beside them, even when he goes into seclusion to prepare a massive attack, is more than just faith in him, and it drives them ever onward, reminding them at all times of the law of the Caul — if you dwell here, you fight the Realm. All those who come to the Caul, from ancient elders to the rawest of the recently Exalted, uphold this rule, for though he's not among the eldest, none can gainsay his greatness.

When Sha'a Oka begins to move, it's like nothing else in Creation. For some days prior, there come great roars from the hills — yet no hawkfolk can find their source. The rivers reverse their flow, drawing brackish water up their great lengths for a day before relaxing and letting it rush out to sea in a torrent. The whole of the Caul seems to quake with his passage, and then, he and an army of lionfolk rise to batter down the walls of the Realm's fortresses. Many times, some hero of the Realm has claimed to have slain the Black Lion, but ever he rises again. Each time, the call goes up: Sha'a Oka is dead. Sha'a Oka lives.

Third Daughter of the Leaves, the Stone-and-Flesh Witch

When the shadows grow long, Third Daughter listens. When the rains fall, Third Daughter listens. When Calibration comes, or the moon swallows the sun, Third Daughter listens. What she hears, only she knows, but her enemies fear that she hears all. They're not far from the truth.

Her rage is so cold as to be mistaken for serenity, born of memories of the death of her Solar love in a past incarnation. Third Daughter won't forgive Heaven or the Realm until the suffering meted out to the Dragon-Blooded and the Sidereals equals that which they inflicted in the Usurpation. Third Daughter has plagued the Realm's forces in the Caul for centuries, summoning great storms to send against their ships, calling forth unheard-of numbers of elementals to her service as shock troops, and even turning loyal legionnaires against their comrades with wicked trickery. Her turtlewolves — armor-plated pack hunters as tall as a man at the shoulder and fast as a horse at a gallop — prowl forest and waves alike, picking off those foolish enough to walk outside the Realm's walls.

It is she who took Garianghis, she who marshaled every living turtlewolf and set them against the legions there, and she who summoned the demon Kurunnu, the Flesh Dirge, who bathed in Exalted blood and sang gleefully, loud enough to be heard in Faxai. Paradoxically, the rest of the Caul is safer now than it once was; her wolfturtles stick close to the city now, guarding it in their dark mother's name, while she sleeps and dreams.

Skathra Venomchild

Skathra dances with death to prove they are immortal. They do not burn in the flames of Houshou — behold the flesh that knows not how to die! They're set upon by wild beasts and devoured, yet do not perish — behold the wounds that heal themselves! They shed no blood upon the spears of the Dragon-Blooded — behold the scales invincible! Their soul is not degraded by the depredations of the raksha — behold the nightmare that teaches the fae to fear! Skathra laughs at all these, knowing that Luna's blessing is also a well-told joke upon the world.

The Venomchild kills at will with the poison of ten thousand beasts, with the moonsilver edge of their grimcleaver, with bare hands that crush bone and strangle dragons. The Venomchild enthralls and beguiles, their skin slick with psychedelic toxin, their comely features borrowed from countless lovers, their eyes piercing the best-guarded hearts. Skathra doesn't rage against the Realm as their brethren do, but they freely share their gifts of madness and violence with the Dragon-Blooded, and that will suffice for the Silver Pact.

Sandswept Garda-Empress

Few think to look up when they search for danger, but those who've been stationed in the Caul for any length of time have learned better, scanning clouds fearfully for flocks of hawkfolk — or worse, their mother, who has snatched up siege engines in her claws and carried them off. This is Sandswept Garda-Empress, a hawk whose wings birth a storm with every beat, whose claws pierce jade, whose cry deafens. It's she who seized Sekima from the Realm, she who roosts there, she who grows restless and takes flight to hunt the Dragon-Blooded and their lackeys.

Though few know it, Sandswept Garda-Empress is the last of a dead people from the far South, obliterated by the Imperial legions for being insufficiently generous in tribute. It was her survival that caught Luna's eye, her thirst for revenge that empowered her to destroy those who orphaned her. She won't be satisfied until she's destroyed the Realm's very nest, but first, she will break their spirit here, in the Caul.

Lintha Haquen Fia-Shaw Flowers Unbending in the Storm

The enclave of Lintha who dwell in Asura, on the southern coast, have long been a thorn in the Realm's side. The Imperial Navy has many times attempted to blockade the port, but misty waters with sharp outcroppings of rock lurking within have stymied every attempt, for only the Lintha know their secret routes and witch-ways. What the Realm doesn't know is this is no mere pirate port, for these Lintha are a weapon wielded by a Lunar sprung from among their own — Flowers Unbending in the Storm, who stalks the coastal waters as a bloody-jawed siaka, guiding her cousins to ships that stray from convoys. Few who fled the Lunars' onslaught five years ago from the Caul's southern shore survived, the Lintha falling upon the refugee fleet en masse, Fia-Shaw herself devouring dozens. She could hold Melilune, if she wished, but there's far more prey at sea, and she is ever hungry.

Withdrawal and Reorganization

With the Imperial legions dismembered and the Great Houses bringing every asset they can home to the Blessed Isle, it's no surprise that the Lunars were able to overwhelm the Realm's forces, driving them all the way back to Faxai's sacred walls. Refugees from the other cities — those who survived the initial assault and the long flight to Faxai — squat in barely seaworthy ships moored to the long, sprawling docks of Faxai, or else in the rapidly growing shantytown just outside the city's walls. Citizens of the Realm able to arrange passage leave the Caul day by day, a steady stream of the best and brightest the crusade has to offer.

The War Effort

Faxai has ever been the headquarters of the Realm's war effort in the Caul. While the satrap and the garrison commander play a vital role in coordinating military endeavors, they alone cannot oversee the continent-spanning crusade. They share that duty with the Harmoniously Guided Strategos and the Most Serene Hyparch, twin officials appointed by the Empress' hand. The strategos oversees all military operations outside of Faxai's satrapial boundaries, coordinating with the satrapy's garrison commander and the hyparch to manage their combined forces. The hyparch provides spiritual guidance to the Realm's assembled forces on the Caul, administers the Caul's martial orders within Faxai, and liaises with the Immaculate Order. If these four figures were at loggerheads at times — or constantly — it only displayed their fervor for retaking the Caul. This balance of power has held, with the Empress' careful hand guiding it, through the present day.

The current satrap of Faxai is **V'neef Lanusa**, though her house lacks the numbers for her to effectively consolidate power in the Caul, necessitating frequent compromises with the war effort's other leaders. Faxai's garrison leader is **Ledaal Deja**, a zealous devotee of both the Immaculate Philosophy and her house's Shadow Crusade who publicly rails against the other houses' failure to support the Caul. Deja nominally shares command of the crusade's armies with strategos **Cathak Nejara Rin**, but the Empress' disappearance and the looming specter of civil war on the Blessed Isle have reduced Rin's forces to scarcely anything, as the houses recall their soldiers and paramilitaries. The hollow shell of her army now serves only to maintain the lie that the Realm has not given up on the Caul entirely; it cannot coordinate the flow of goods and materiel as it once did. This power vacuum has given hyparch **Mnemon Torala** the perfect excuse to absorb more and more of the strategos' traditional authority through her close ties to Faxai's martial orders, though she has little experience with directing such vast quantities of desperately needed supplies. Deja is happy to undercut the house loyalist Rin by working with Torala, seeing it as a pragmatic necessity for securing the Caul's future.

Unable to rely on Lanusa or Deja for support and with few assistants, Rin is in the unenviable position of defending Faxai with the disparate elements of martial orders, house militias, and the few veterans who remain, trying to weld together a stable social order while resisting Torala's efforts to bring the garrison commander under her influence. The political game isn't Rin's chosen vocation — it's why she stayed with the legions well into her sixteenth decade before accepting the position of strategos — but she has no choice. Common purpose must be maintained, no matter the cost, or Faxai will surely fall.

Turnabout and Recrimination

There's still great anger over the withdrawal, especially within the Immaculate Order and the more pious quarters of the Dynasty, and violence has already been done. Though garrison troops clamp down on any serious social unrest, a murder here or there is easy enough to miss amidst rising tensions. Sooner or later, though, someone important will fall to this brewing storm, and Faxai's guardians will turn against each other, leaving its walls vulnerable.

Of the Caul and the Future

With outcastes streaming into Faxai, there's hope for the Realm. Faxai can rely on what it has and nothing more, but every outcaste weights the scales just a little in the Realm's favor — even as they begin to outnumber Dynasts. There are religious celebrations seemingly every night in Faxai as an eschatological fever grips the population — they'll either crush the Lunars, or die trying. There are no longer any other options.

And if they die — if the Lunars descend as one upon Faxai, Sha'a Oka leading them at the head of an army of lionfolk — then the Caul will become a bastion for their wider war against the Realm, its sacred power turned to the Anathemas' ends. One isle will have fallen before them — surely another, much more important one won't be far behind.

But if the crusaders are successful? They owe allegiance to no house, the Empress is gone, the Deliberative is a band of impious cowards, and the Dynasty pulling their strings is venal and unworthy. No, if the Dragon-Blooded are to be saved, and Creation with them, a *new* Realm must be born, upon the Caul's sacred ground. This hope already flickers within a few hearts in Faxai, the dimmest of embers in a dying fire, but it may yet be kindled to greatness.





From the chaos of the Dragon-Blooded Shogunate's collapse arose the Scarlet Empress, hero-tyrant and founder of the Realm. In the centuries since her ascendancy, the Scarlet Realm has become Creation's foremost imperial power. Kingdoms and city-states across Creation look toward the Blessed Isle at the world's center and bow in submission to the authority of the Scarlet Throne, the might of the Imperial legions, and the doctrine of the Immaculate Order. The Great Houses of the Scarlet Dynasty, Dragon-Blooded descendants of the Empress, scheme against each other and vie for power. Now, the Empress is gone, and the Realm's future will be forged by the deeds of heroes.=

The Realm expands on the history, politics, culture, law, and economics of Creation's greatest and most terrible empire. It details the Realm's governmental institutions — the Thousand Scales ministries, the Deliberative, the magistracy, and the All-Seeing Eye — military, and its state religion, the Immaculate Order. It also provides an in-depth look at the lands that make up the Realm — both its heart on the Blessed Isle, and its satrapies scattered across the world.

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