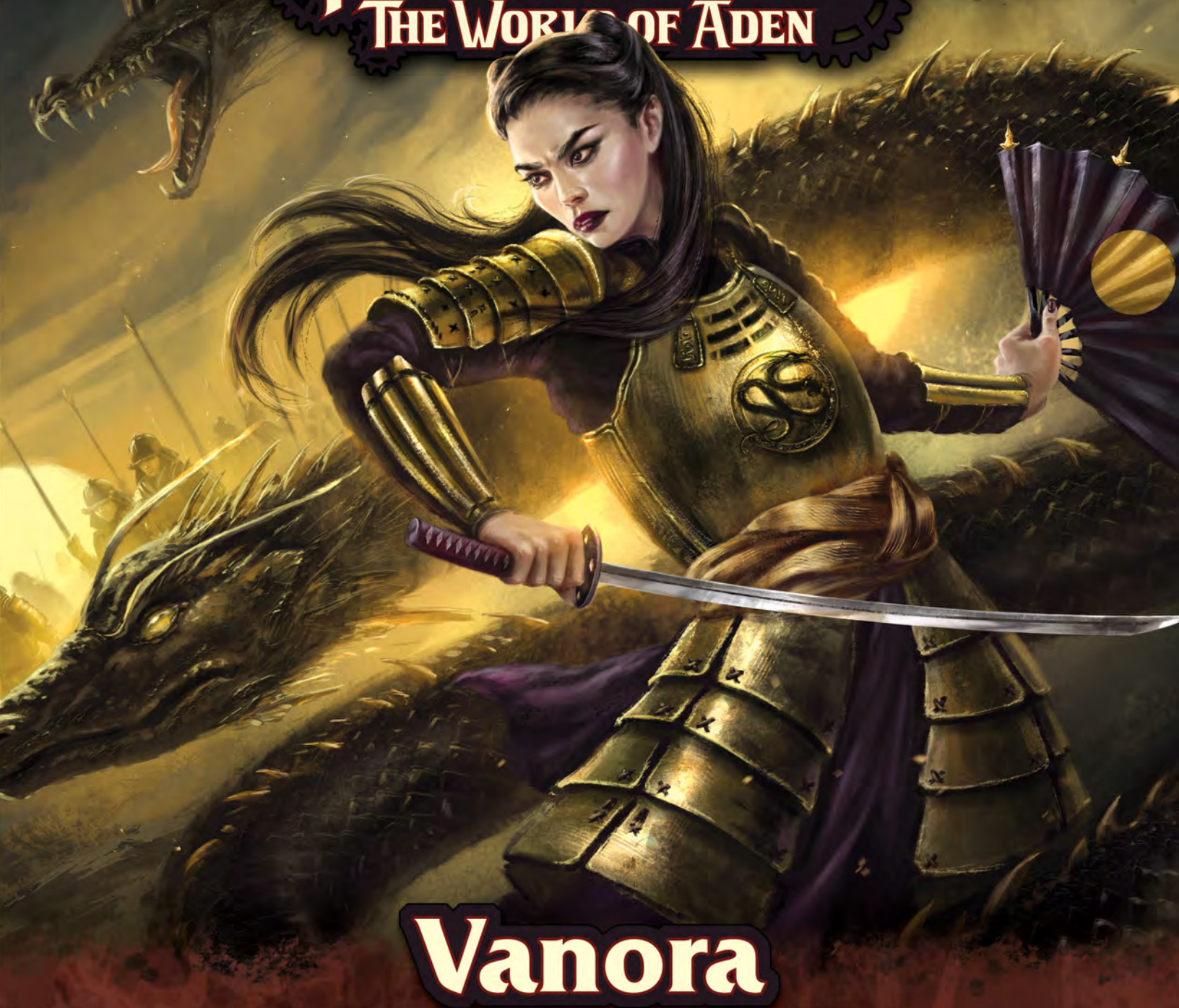


THUNDERSCAPE™

THE WORLD OF ADEN



Vanora

The Nations of Aden - Volume 1

PATHEFINDER
ROLEPLAYING GAME COMPATIBLE



THE WORLD OF ADEN ORIGINALLY CREATED BY SHANE LACY HENSLEY

VANORA

THE NATIONS OF ADEN - VOLUME 1

Written by Shawn Carman & Robert Denton



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Vanora - The Nations of Aden, Volume 1

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INTRODUCTION

Temaru was a small village, not much to speak of one way or another and very little to distinguish it in any way. The people were proud of their Cherry Blossom Festival in the spring, and the wine they made from the cherries that they harvested each year was something of a sensation throughout the province, but it was unlikely that anyone in the larger cities had ever heard of it, much less enjoyed its fruity bouquet. Those who had enjoyed it, Kyo Shinoda reflected, should savor the memory, because if something didn't happen soon, Temaru would be wiped from the face of Vanora.

There was another scream from the wall that surrounded the village. Kyo looked up just in time to see a glimpse of a man disappearing, snatched away from the top of the wall by a massive tentacle. He thought it might be Ingridson, the Aristinian warrior who had lived in the village for the last few years. He was a gifted swordsman, and his presence atop the wall would be missed. "Maybe not for long, though," Kyo muttered to himself as the wall shuddered again, something massive from outside hurling itself against the wooden barrier that protected the entirety of the village from the horrors that always lurked somewhere in the wilderness, waiting for the unwary. Not a day had passed in over ten years that Kyo had not cursed the Darkfall and the nocturnals that it had spawned, the infinitely variable creatures that lusted for nothing more than the destruction of all civilization.

Four days ago, the first few undead had wandered out of the forest. It was unusual, but not unheard of. The woods to the north of Temaru were part of the same unbroken forest that would, if followed for hundreds of miles, lead to the Dead Forests in the north. Still, it was unusual for more than a handful to ever appear at one time, so when they continued stumbling out in twos and threes throughout the day, the city watch had been placed on alert. Then, as twilight had settled that day, the true horde had emerged. Waves of them. Hundreds, perhaps thousands. The ground between the wall and the forest had disappeared, so thick was the crush of bodies swarming toward the village. And they had not been alone. Other things had come with them, some horrifying but familiar, others virtually indescribable. And they all sought the same thing: the destruction of the village.

Kyo checked that all four of the pistols he had holstered were loaded, and shifted his scaralla from one hand to the other. It was a relic of a trip he had taken to the High Steppes as a young man, but since the Darkfall, it had seen all too much use. The wall shuddered again. "Jinaro!" he shouted. "We really need some good news!"

The slightly built ape-ferran emerged from the old Herald's Tower with a look of consternation. "I inspected the ritual circle and performed the proper incantations, but I have no idea if it worked or not! I'm not familiar with this particular ritual!"

Kyo shook his head. It had been years since the Imperial arcanists had set up the ritual site within the abandoned tower, and months since it had last been inspected. It had been deemed in operable condition, but in Kyo's opinion, the inspector had seemed annoyed and eager to return to the city from where he had been dispatched. An assignment

to inspect the rural provinces must not be considered very prestigious, he imagined. "Look on the bright side," Kyo said. "Either way, you'll never have to study it!"

Jinaro frowned. "I don't understand. Do you mean because it will either work, or we will die? That isn't very humorous."

Kyo would have rolled his eyes, but at that moment the wall shuddered again and there was a massive cracking sound as a portion of it near him split from the top halfway down to the ground. Through the widening gap, he saw more of the massive tentacles, a snarling maw, and a large number of eyes of all different sizes and colors. Humor left him completely, and he wondered, if the thing pushed further through and he saw it in its entirety, would he go mad? He thought he might.

There was a series of dull thudding sounds and the beast beyond the wall screamed and withdrew from the crack. Kyo blinked in surprise. Had the thing's eyes suddenly... gone out? What did that mean? He turned and started to ask Jinaro what had happened, but froze at the sight of three newcomers who had emerged from the Herald's Tower.

One was a jurak that had to weight at least twice what Kyo did, and he was a large man in his village. The armor that covered him could have been used to plate an entire hut. The massive warrior held a katana that had clearly been custom made for him, because Kyo had never seen one so massive before. Another was a human, and one who had a very self-satisfied smirk on his face. He was carrying a crossbow of a type that Kyo had never seen, which seemed to have three separate bowstrings stacked top to bottom to allow it to hold three bolts when properly loaded. He was reloading it at the moment and there were runes visible on the bolts. Kyo wondered if that's why the beast had retreated, and if that was where the stench of burning flesh had suddenly come from.

The third was an elven woman clad in the same armor as the others. She bore the same dragon crest as the other two, and a wolf symbol on her sword arm. Blades and pistols both hung on her belt, but it was the ice-cold steel in her eyes that commanded Kyo's attention. "Tell me the situation, please," she said, but her tone was clear that it was not a request.

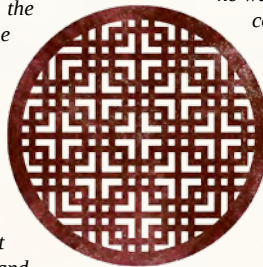
"Uh... siege?" Kyo offered. "Undead in greater numbers than we can dispatch. Some bigger things here and there. And then there's... whatever that thing was," he jerked a thumb back toward the wall. "We don't know what to call it."

"I suggest cephalosaurus," Jinaro offered meekly.

"Name it after we kill it and burn it," the human said, still smirking. "Eh, big brother?" The jurak glanced at the human as if annoyed, but said nothing.

"Wait..." Kyo said, suddenly finding his tongue. "There are only three of you? We sent a desperate plea for help to avoid our village being wiped from the map and they sent three people?"

The elf finally drew her blade. "No more are needed. The Sons of the Dragon have arrived. Now... show us to the gate and stay out of the way."



WELCOME TO VANORA!

This is the first in what we hope will be a line of books delving more deeply into the culture, history, and people of the nations in the Known Lands of Aden. The goal for Kyoudai Games has always been and will always be to provide more than a mere broad stroke of what a nation should be, relying less on stereotypes and conventional fantasy tropes and more on providing an enriching setting that GMs can use to create engaging, interactive sessions with their players and which players can use to make unique, nuanced characters that they enjoy playing and that provide the entire group with entertainment in one form or another.

It may come as no surprise that the primary (but not only!) inspiration for Vanora is the Tokugawa Era of Japanese history. It is our hope that we have taken that inspiration and merged it with the high fantasy and other cultural influences that were first used to create the World of Aden back in the 1990s in a way that is respectful, interesting, and enjoyable. Given that numerous members of the Thunderscape team cut their teeth on development of a collectible card game and role-playing game that was heavily inspired by Japanese history, we certainly hope that we've hit the mark, because we didn't have much of an excuse otherwise!

Thank you and, as always, please let us hear from you and let us know what you think. The feedback of our fans is of tremendous importance to us here at Kyoudai Games, and we hope to hear from you soon.

—Shawn Carman

Distinctions from other Nations

Vanora is in many ways unique from other nations in the Known Lands, not simply for the drastic difference in its culture but also in many more conventional means. In that respect, perhaps the only real kindred spirit among the other nations is Kyan. Both have a heavily stylized culture, both have relatively kept to themselves over the course of a thousand years since the Peace of the Rose was established (although admittedly Vanora has always conducted trade with its neighbors, unlike Kyan), and both have an unbroken line of succession that dates back to the founding of both nations. However, unlike Kyan, which as a more chaotic and fluid social structure, Vanora has a very regimented society where none are oppressed but all have a clear role to play and can only alter that role through great effort and skill. Those who are born to craftsmen or laborers tend to take up that life for themselves in time, although the military is always an option for anyone who wants a different life but lacks the resources to make that happen.

Vanora emerged from the Darkfall in relatively good shape compared to most of its neighbors. Aramyst and Columbey suffered the most significant upheaval, of course, although Le'Ciel and the Misland Republics have seen society-changing events in the immediate aftermath of the cataclysm as well. Carraway, Ionara, and Arasteen have suffered, but managed to survive and remain largely as they were before, and Kyan has suffered a constantly increasing threat in the form of the corrupted iltith hives that have been warring with them for years. And of course the Rhanate and High Steppes did not exist as they presently do at the time of the disaster, so comparing them to their previous incarnations is largely impossible.

Vanora is one nation where citizens could have led a largely stable, uneventful life, if not one free from hardship, in the decade that has passed since the Darkfall. The stability and efficiency of its government means that there are those who can go entire days or even longer without dwelling on how the Darkfall has marred their existence. Unfortunately, this does mean that when the nocturnals raise their insidious heads and make their presence known, it is all the more disturbing for those who encounter them, but all in all most Vanorans would not choose to live anywhere else. That is not a claim that the citizens of many nations could make.

Vital National Statistics

✧ **GOVERNMENT:** Vanora is ruled by an Emperor, a position that has been passed down via hereditary lines since its inception over a thousand years ago. Perhaps because this unbroken dynasty has been elven in nature, the throne has changed hands less than ten times and has proven remarkably stable throughout that period, with a few minor exceptions. Beyond the Emperor himself (or herself, depending upon the era in which one plays), there is a sizeable Imperial bureaucracy that carries out the wishes of the Emperor and ensures that his people are safe and provided for, as well as ensuring that there are no dangers lurking in the shadows that might pose a burgeoning threat to their lord, currently Dyok the Younger, Dragon Emperor of Vanora and Chosen of the Ten Beasts, long may he reign.

✧ **PREDOMINANT RACES:** Vanora is home to a multitude of races, with virtually all known races, or at least those races that have elected to participate in the greater society of Aden, represented. Notably, Vanora is home to the largest population of elves found anywhere in the Known Lands except for Arasteen, where the race's ancestral home is located. This is likely due to the uninterrupted reign of the Dyus Dynasty as the Emperors of Vanora, and the many elven families who have elected to serve him in one capacity or another. Elves do not have an inherent advantage in terms of social status, but because the families who serve him have done so almost since the inception of the Empire, they have accumulated significant economic and political power during that time. Vanora also has a high concentration of ferran citizens, almost certainly due to the prevalence of the Way of the Ten Beasts philosophy and the reverence that Vanorans feel for those ten creatures in particular and all creatures in general. There are some nations, Aramyst in particular but others to a lesser extent, where ferrans are still considered slightly less than other races due to their status as artificially created beings.

✧ **MAJOR EXPORTS:** Vanora is one of only a few nations, including Arasteen, Yzeem, and to a much lesser extent Carraway, that produce sufficient crops to feed its populace with enough surplus left over for trading. Vanora is particularly fortunate in this regard, and while the country does not produce the same volume of excess as Arasteen and Yzeem, it does produce enough to feed its people, conduct trade with the Rhanate and Urbana, and still has managed to keep many settlements within the ruins of Aramyst supplied despite trading at a significant loss with those poor, doomed souls. Additionally, Vanora is well known for the quality of its craftsmen, who regard their work not only as an occupation, but as a form of art. As a result, their work is coveted in other nations, particularly their weapons and armor. There are many prominent merchant families who employ a number of craftsmen and artisans specifically to produce large numbers of weapons and armor for export and trade. These are not of the same quality available to, for example, the Sons of the Dragon, but are still of outstanding quality and well worth the prices they fetch on the international market. Other exports of note are limited, but worth mentioning is that Vanora is home to the largest source of emeralds in the Known Lands. While emeralds continue to have value due to ornamentation, they are also primarily of interest because of their value in certain arcane rituals. They are not as in demand as diamonds, the primary source of which is the city-nation of Ionara far to the northwest, but they still command sufficient value to arcanists to be something of a minor sub-market among Vanoran merchant houses.

✧ **MAJOR IMPORTS:** Although Vanora is an industrialized nation, with technology commensurate with that found in other nations as well as its own railway system, the line of Emperors has never cared for the more extensive use of factories and other large-scale manufacturing processes found, for example, Urbana or even in Le'Ciel. For that reason, Vanora prefers to utilize its food surplus and demand for its crafted items to import goods that require excessive industrialization to produce in significant quantities. In particular, the Young Dragon's lifelong interest in mechamagic and its applications has ensured that he has a cabal of mechamages and steamwrights working directly for the throne, but has chosen to import a great deal of the materials they make use of in order to expedite their work on his behalf.



HISTORY OF VANORA

Vanora is one of the nations that has existed since before the Peace of the Rose was established, and has remained remarkably stable throughout most of its history, with only minor civil disruptions during a handful of instances. Even the Darkfall, while intensely disruptive, did not threaten to topple the nation as it did elsewhere in the Known Lands; certainly the level of horror visited upon neighboring Aramyst and former ally Columbey were nowhere to be seen. The Vanorans believe this is a result of their orderly society and their inherent respect for the authority wielded by the Emperor's forces. Settlements were lost, as were a great many lives, but on the whole, the nation's cities and most of its smaller towns and villages were either able to endure the attack or managed to evacuate their populations and resources to more well defended areas before they were lost.

YEAR 420BP: Simmering hostilities between the many tribes and kingdoms that dominate the continent of Aden break out into numerous small conflicts. These quickly escalate into a much larger battle that involves dozens of different groups and more than ten different kingdoms. Although participants come and go as different tribes dissolve, are created, and alliances are made and broken, the war does not completely stop for more than four centuries.

The region that will one day become Vanora changes little in this process, as there have always been tribes warring with one another in the region. The people in this region are highly shamanistic, and worship animal totems in various forms. Each tribe has its own totem, and the relationship between mundane animals has a great deal of influence over the tribal relationships. The tribes that revere Eagle and Hare are always at odds, for example, and so on.

YEAR 107 BP: An elven warrior named Dyus rises to lead his tribe after staging a coup against the previous, incompetent chieftain gets many of his finest warriors killed in a pointless confrontation. Dyus proposes a plan to his closest confederates to build their tribe to a point of strength and then use their power to unite with other tribes until the entire region is pacified. It is a difficult proposition, and Dyus has to endure several challenges to his rule before his tribe finally unites under his leadership and buys into his mission. He claims to have had a vision and that his tribe is renamed the Tribe of Dragon, although there are some who believe this was a convenient lie to convince his followers rather than a genuine vision (this belief is considered heretical). The Tribe of Dragon begins building its strength and resists the constant back-and-forth conflict with other tribes unless unavoidable.

YEAR 109 BP: After two years of effort, Dyus succeeds in rallying several other tribes to his banner and creates the largest, most stable tribal alliance yet to exist in the southeastern lands of Aden. Dyus declares the entire region to be under the control of his alliance, and further declares himself the first Emperor of Vanora. This move causes some consternation among the other tribes following his banner, by Dyus quickly allays these concerns by awarding each of the other nine tribes large tracts of land with vast resources, and grants them leave to oversee them in the name of their Emperor. Most agree that the arrangement is mutually beneficial, and those who protest are quietly placated with other, private discussions with the new Emperor.

YEAR 1: Although Vanora has been at peace for a century, with only a few skirmishes with outsiders attempting to broach their borders, the rest of the Known Lands has continued to endure the evolving, episodic conflict that has raged for four centuries. Dyus, now approaching an age where his son must begin preparing to succeed him, has no desire for his heir to inherit a nation at constant threat of war. Just as he gathered the warring tribes and united them as Vanora, Dyus begins reaching out to the most powerful leaders in the Known Lands, often finding them equally weary of war. Within a shockingly short period of time, some of the most powerful people in the world gather in a small, unremarkable town called Rose and begin discussing an end to war. The result of this month-long conference is the Rose Accords, also called the Peace of the Rose, which formally ends war in the Known Lands and brings about the beginning of the Golden Age. A single calendar and language are chosen to help unite the newly recognized nations of Aden, which include Vanora, Carraway, Kyan, Arasteen, Aramyst, and Columbey.

YEAR 217: With Vanora stable for centuries and relations with the other nations of the Known Lands at a comfortable level, Dyus's heir Daisuke, the second Emperor of Vanora, is eager to make his mark on history in the same way that his father did. He sets his eyes upon the large, unnamed island off of Vanora's southern shore and declares its annexation as part of the Dragon Empire, deploying his forces to occupy it for colonization. Unfortunately, he does not take into account the people living on the island at the time, who violently object to annexation and, in a shocking turn of events, manage to push out the Vanoran forces that land there expecting little resistance. The outraged Emperor vows to take the island at all costs and begins allotting more resources to the effort.

YEAR 221: After several attempted sorties to claim the island off of the coast, the Emperor Daisuke's rule has proven somewhat unstable, with the monarch obsessed with the annexation of the island above almost all else. The powerful magic at the command of the natives and their rugged resilience, as well as their skill at disappearing into the landscape after a successful strike, has thwarted all attempts at claiming the island. The Emperor's rhetoric becomes increasingly fervid on the topic and some among his advisors begin trying to counsel him to seek some other issue to focus upon, all without success.

YEAR 223: A massive bandit horde attacks the northern Vanoran provinces in the late fall, sweeping in like a storm front and decimating several smaller settlements before taking their pillaged spoils and retreating back to the Sundered Desert. The area in question was left vulnerable because the Emperor withdrew the vast majority of military assets from that region in order to focus more fully focus attempts to annex the southern island. When informed of the event, the Emperor is incensed and inexplicably blames the island natives for some manner of collaborative conspiracy with the bandits in an attempt to unseat him. This level of paranoia raises an immediate alarm among the Emperor's most powerful advisors and counselors, who fear that he may have become unstable.





YEAR 224: Early in the spring, the Emperor's son Daoshen quietly unseats his father from the throne with the aid of the highest-level members of the Imperial bureaucracy. Daoshen becomes the third Dragon Emperor and regretfully relegates his father to a remote keep where he can live comfortably but without causing any further threat to his own people with his militaristic obsession. The betrayal pushes his father over the precipice into madness, and those tasked with guarding him in his keep soon become accustomed to his vile, hateful rants against his son, his advisors, and most frequently, the people of the island he longed to conquer. Months later, Emperor Daoshen quietly attempts to make diplomatic overtures to the people of the island, but they have no interest in diplomatic relations with the mainland Vanorans, and he ultimately withdraws all forces from the island and the seas surrounding it to leave them in peace.

YEAR 332: After a lifetime of experimentation and failed attempts, a powerful wizard in Aramyst succeeds in his attempt to create a hybrid of men and animals. These creatures, which the wizard names ferrans, are intended to be like men in form, but much shorter lived and far less intelligent, making them a perfect race of servants for the sophisticated people of Aramyst. The experiment is vastly more successful than anticipated, however, dramatically increasing both the animals' lifespan and intelligence as they are transformed.

This development was of tremendous cultural impact within Vanora due to their reverence for the Ten Beasts. The Aramystian ambassador to Vanora brings numerous ferran servants as part of his contingent, each of whom has the form of one of the Ten Beasts. Their presence causes such a groundswell of fascination among the common people that the Emperor soon requests that they be returned to Aramyst until such time as the throne has time to address the existence of the beast-men with his people. The ambassador graciously agrees.

YEAR 416: After nearly a century of oppression and subjugation by their creators in Aramyst, the ferran people rise up and turn against their masters, uniting in a massive revolt that catches the Celestial College and its government completely off guard. The revolt spreads like wildfire, and soon embroils much of the nation in a guerilla war known as the War of Beasts. The ferran revolutionaries enjoy tremendous public support within Vanora, and in an effort to preserve the diplomatic relationship between the two nations, the Emperor has to publicly condemn Vanoran citizens sending money and supplies to the ferran forces fighting in the western Aramystian provinces. It is an unpopular move that causes numerous protests throughout the major cities of Vanora, something that the throne has not seen before and has little inkling how to deal with.

YEAR 424: After nearly a decade of war, emissaries from the Celestial College offer peace to the ferran rebels that have spent years disrupting every aspect of life within the nation, with the condition that the rebellion's leader surrenders himself for trial as a war criminal. The ferran's followers refuse, and continued war threatens until delegations from other nations Vanora foremost among them, make it clear that if the conflict progresses further, their support will be for the oppressed ferrans. The Celestial College grants amnesty the ferrans, and the War of Beasts comes to an end. Thousands of ferran refugees are welcomed into Vanora to make a new life for themselves as free men and women.

YEAR 559: The fearsome necromancer called the Silent One descends unexpectedly from the wilderness in the northern steppes and attacks the nation of Carraway, as well as launching lesser sorties into the western portion of Aramyst and the northeastern parts of the Sundered Desert. The arcanist's power is staggering, and other nations recognize the threat he poses almost instantly. Vanora is the first nation to respond by deploying an entire legion of the Sons of the Dragon, led by the Empress herself, to reinforce the faltering Carraway defenses. Aramyst's arcanists and even bandit groups from the Sundered Desert join the fray, and reinforcements from Yzeem, Columbey, and Arasteen arrive as quickly as they are able. Although the battle is eventually won at significant cost, the alliances forged in the Peace of the Rose are reinforced by the battle against a common foe. It is said that the Empress,

called by some the Steel Dragon, was particularly close to the High Theocrat of Carraway and mourns his loss greatly after the war is over.

YEAR 560: In the wake of the campaign against the Silent One, the Vanoran military is in a significantly weakened state and struggles to rebuild its numbers. Mourning the loss of her greatest friend and eager to see her nation strong once more, the Steel Empress travels alone to the island off Vanora's coast, left to its own devices for many years since the second Dragon Emperor's ouster, and seeks out the ruler of the smaller domain. Despite the vigorous protests of her military advisors, the Empress meets with the ruler, a powerful elf warrior, and offers an alliance of marriage. The island will join with Vanora and the sons and daughters of the two leaders will rule over a more powerful united empire. The lord of the island agrees, and the two are wed a short time thereafter. The island, long having been called by a variety of different names, is thereafter known as the Empress's Gift.

YEAR 561: Nestled amid the mountains, the hidden Forgotten Keep, a prison for dangerous political prisoners personally locked away by the Emperor, undergoes a sudden and deadly revolution. The ancient Daisuke, former Second Dragon Emperor, his life extended by alchemical secrets, has seen three of his line succeed the throne after him, and found their rules wanting. The alliance between the throne and the object of his obsession, the island and its tribes, leads him to form an infernal pact with beings from other planes, and he assumes mental domination over the others in his prison even as winter descends upon the mountains and isolates them from the outside world.

YEAR 562: The spring thaw comes with a wave of deadly zealots descending from the mountains and killing everything in their path. Led by the infernally empowered Daisuke, the zealots are nearly impossible to kill and possessed of near superhuman levels of strength and speed. Those few who are not killed outright quickly come under the mental domination of Daisuke, and soon it becomes clear that only elves are immune to his influence, a weakness borne of his own sense of racial superiority. The Emperor and Empress lead a small force of their finest elven warriors to strike at the enemy, and it is the two together who manage to take the head of the Empress's great-grandfather, ending the threat.

YEAR 667: Gunpowder is discovered by dwarven alchemists at Top of the World, and the secret of its creation quickly spreads across the Known Lands. Enterprising alchemists and craftsmen in Vanora are the first ones to use it as a component of recreational fireworks, and Vanoran fireworks displays soon become a common sight at festivals and in major cities, leading to an influx of tourism as nobles from other nations are eager to witness the spectacle.

YEAR 669: An uprising against the throne begins in a remote rural province, which is believed to have been instigated by surviving members of the treacherous former Emperor Daisuke that survived his brief insurrection years earlier. A charismatic warlord unites a large number of peasants resentful of the wealth of the cities under his banner and begins conquering increasingly larger settlements. He seizes control of the entire province before the Sons of the Dragon can fully mobilize to face him, by which time his forces are heavily entrenched. The Emperor, a cunning man borne of his mother's wisdom and his father's tenacity, imports a large number of firearms, a relatively new invention, and brings them to bear against the rebellion and its leader, a man called "the 11th Beast" by his adherents. With no familiarity with firearms, the rebellion is quickly crushed and the Sons of the Dragon are quick to embrace firearms, and the practice spreads throughout Vanora quickly in contrast to their normal cultural reluctance to accept new ideas.

YEAR 671: An enclave of goreaux arcanists, spurred on by the discovery of gunpowder a short time previously, discover the basic elements of steam power at their laboratory in the central Wall Mountains. Savvy in the ways of the world, the goreaux make their discoveries available to all the nations of Aden for a price, and soon become some of the wealthiest individuals in the world.

YEAR 845: A wizard and technologist in the nation of Aramyst discovers a new, rare mineral in the mountains of his homeland. Experimentation quickly reveals that once refined, this new substance, which is christened manite, retains enchantments placed upon it indefinitely, something that has never been accomplished with any other metal or alloy. Attempts to keep the discovery of this mineral are futile, and soon all nations are scouring their mountains and mines for any sign of it. While far rarer than other metals, manite is still discovered in at least one location in every nation, ensuring that trade for it remains relatively brisk and even. Although it is not recognized at the time, the radical improvements the discovery of manite has on the advancement of steam technology and the creation of mechamancy result in scholars later decreeing that the discovery of manite begins the Age of Thunder.

YEAR 1061: The Emperor and Empress of Vanora, seemingly long plagued with the common elven malady of infertility, give birth to a son whom they name Dyok, after his father. The birth of an heir is cause for the entire nation to celebrate, and festivals are held for weeks on end. The celebrations have a tragic end, however, as someone in attendance at the Emperor's court suggests that the sudden birth might be due to infidelity on the part of the Empress. Emperor Dyok has the man executed on the spot, a rare showing of wrath for a monarch known for his just rule.

YEAR 1096: The Emperor's son, Dyok the Younger, discovers a hidden journal from his ancestor, the Steel Empress, detailing her thoughts on the potential combination of scientific theories with magical applications. Young Dyok recognizes these theories as predating the discovery of manite but otherwise serving as preliminary thoughts that would eventually be recognized through the labor of others as mechamagic and even golemization. The young Dyok's interest in mechamagic is piqued, and he begins studying it in earnest despite his relative lack of significant arcane ability.

YEAR 1110: *Month of the Dragon:* In the final days of the year, the Red Prophet, Karasynn, comes before the Elders of the Celestial College in Aramyst and warns of a coming disaster. Convinced of his words and gravely concerned with the similarity between Karasynn's foresight and those offered a short time earlier by the Blind Seer of Arasteen, the Elders sent to the various nations of Aden in search of champions, and some of the world's greatest warriors respond. Among them is the Vanoran Emperor's favored swordsman, Tamachi Bloodtalon, a great friend and the personal martial instructor of Dyok the Younger.

YEAR 1111: *Month of the Serpent:* Champions from eight nations of Aden, trained by the Celestial College Elders, set out on a quest through the legendary nether portal, a gateway to worlds beyond Aden. They are gone for several weeks, and not all return. Tamachi Bloodtalon is among those who do not return from this epic quest, much to the sorrow of Vanora's royal family. Those who do return are in possession of an ancient and terrible skull, the origins of which are known only to the heroes themselves and the Celestial College. They promptly destroy the skull along with a number of other mysterious artifacts. The two pieces of Bloodtalon's broken sword are returned to Vanora, where they are given over to Dyok the Younger, who vows to reforge them into a blade in memory of his lost friend.

Month of the Eagle: The Darkfall takes place across Aden, beginning with the sudden immolation of Regorra in Aramyst and proceeding westward across the face of the Known Lands with alarming speed. As a neighboring nation, Vanora is one of the first countries struck by the cataclysm. Order is restored quickly within the major cities, but smaller settlements are left on their own for days before the Sons of the Dragon can mobilize on such a large scale. Numerous towns are lost and the death count is staggering, but unlike many of their allies, Vanora recovers quickly and begins developing defenses against the nocturnals for those settlements that survive the initial attacks.

Month of the Wolf: In Vanora, Emperor Dyok succumbs to the attack of a life-draining nocturnal and lapses into a coma. He is avenged within moments by his son Dyok, called Dyok the Younger or the Young

Dragon, but the young elf is unable to resuscitate his father, and is shortly thereafter proclaimed the new Emperor until such time as his father recovers from his injuries.

Month of the Shark: After fighting for survival in the weeks following the Darkfall, the massive nomad band under the control of a bandit calling himself the Dust King seeks refuge from the harsh conditions of the Sundered Desert and the predation of the nocturnals by traveling to the massive mesa known as Terrotaxus's Tower. The Dust King flies to the mesa alone atop a drake, and returns with one of the eyes of the great dragon Terrotaxus. His band of nomads quickly uses the drakes to reach the top of the mesa, where they begin constructing a permanent home from the dead dragon's nigh-indestructible bones. Rumors of the death of one of Aden's True Dragons reaches Vanora and causes significant unrest. Combined with the world-wide incidents stemming from the Darkfall, apocalyptic cults begin to arise among the populace, requiring the Emperor and his advisors to closely monitor the situation.

YEAR 1112: *Month of the Basilisk:* After a year of frantic construction, the Dust King's nomads complete the construction of the Black Citadel, a massive tower atop the mesa formerly known as Terrotaxus's Tower. The bandit lord known as the Dust King declares himself the Rhanate, ruler of a vast nation of the same name that stretches from the Wall Mountains east to the Veldt and encompasses the entirety of the Sundered Desert. Although his claim is never formally recognized, in short order he becomes equal to many monarchs in his degree of influence. In a particularly cunning move, the Dust King sends a large number of smaller bones of the dead dragon Terrotaxus to the Vanoran Emperor, suggesting that they are his due as the Dragon Emperor. This overture is sufficient to placate many in the Emperor's circle of influence, and Vanora adopts a neutral stance with the Rhanate and agrees to mutually beneficial trade relations between the settlements closest to the border.

YEAR 1113: *Month of the Basilisk:* More than two years after the Darkfall, the continent suffers tremendously from an inability to conduct trade. This changes when Lord Urbane of Urbana reveals the first of his thunder trains. A mechamagical construct of unprecedented scale, the thunder train immediately begins a trade route that takes it through all of western Aden, including numerous cities in Urbana, Arasteen, and Kyan. With the train heralded as an unprecedented success, Urbane immediately diverts significant resources to accelerate the completion of two more trains, already in the process of being built. The Dragon Emperor is stunned and awed by the existence of such wonders, and commissions numerous mechamages within his court to study such ideas and find ways to bring mechamagic more fully to serve the throne of Vanora.

YEAR 1117: The warrior Ivar, renowned as one of the deadliest men in the High Steppes, abandons his life as an adventuring warrior and founds a monastery atop a cliff. There, he adopts a monastic lifestyle and begins teaching his philosophy of the red haze to others, creating an order known as the Sanguine Monks. Curiosity among the monk sects within Vanora is high, and a delegation of monks is sent to study with Ivar to determine what secrets his madness may have unlocked along the path to oneness with the universe and to enlightenment.

YEAR 1120: *Month of the Basilisk:* On a hot summer night, a coup is attempted within the Palace of the Dragon in Vanora. Assassins wearing all-concealing armor make an attempt on the life of the Emperor at the command of a similarly masked individual called the Shogun. The Emperor defeats a half dozen of his would-be assassins before his guards are finally able to overcome the remaining assassins and rush to his side. The majority of the assassins are killed and revealed to be members of the Sons of the Dragon, but four, including the Shogun, escape. Their armor is found later, and their identities are never deduced. This changes the mood within Vanora significantly, given that the previously incorruptible Sons of the Dragon have been compromised.

YEAR 1121: The present.



THE PEOPLE OF VANORA

As with all the nations of the Known Lands, the people of Vanora are an incredibly varied lot, with many different races living side by side in relative harmony.

DWARVES

The people of Vanora take great pride in and place great value upon craftsmanship, which of course means that their cultural values align with those of the dwarven race in some ways. While dwarves are not particularly numerous here, or at least no more so than in other nations, it is easier for them to find a respected place in society because of their natural skill at crafting, particularly with regard to weapons and armor. A large number of dwarves are employed by the Sons of the Dragons as blacksmiths and armorers, ensuring that the Emperor's army has the finest equipment that is maintained in peak condition at all times.

ECHOES

Living alongside the other civilized races in secrecy, there are only a handful of people on the continent who are aware of the existence of the echoes and their strange ways. There have been many misunderstandings when they have been discovered in the past, but since the Darkfall, the discovery of an echo is a virtual death sentence, because they are automatically assumed to be some form of nocturnal. This situation is somewhat different in Vanora, however, because one of the very few who know of the existence of the echo race is the Dragon Emperor himself.

Nearly a century ago, a group of echoes desperate for a home to call their own presented themselves to the Emperor and begged for his mercy. In exchange for sanctuary for their families, these individuals pledged their lives and service to the Emperor for so long as he desired it. Dyok the Elder was a just and merciful lord, but also one who understood the necessity of ruling such a vast and comparatively wealthy nation. He had studied the writings of his ancestor, the first Dragon Emperor, and took them to heart. In exchange for the service of these beings, he granted their wish. A small, unnamed village was built high in the mountains, secure against all attack and enchanted to be all but invisible to those outside. In exchange, the twelve echoes who served the Emperor underwent extensive training as warriors and, more importantly, as ninja. Just as the first ninja served Dyus, the echoes have served the house of Dyok with distinction and absolute secrecy. Meanwhile, the secret village is home to perhaps the single largest concentration of the echo people anywhere in the Known Lands.

Since the Darkfall, the ninja have revealed themselves to Dyok the Younger and pledged their service to him. The Young Dragon, after

recovering from the shock of such a secret kept from him by his father, has tasked these echoes with uncovering the conspiracy that has attempted to overthrow his dynasty, and in determining if the conspiracy was in any way involved in his father's convalescence, something he suspects may very well be the case.

ELVES

As the people of the Dragon Emperors, elves enjoy something of a favored status within Vanora. There are a large number of their people within the nation, the largest number of anywhere outside of Sylfanus in Arasteen, and most are members of the extended families of elves who served the first Emperor more than a thousand years ago. While outsiders may falsely interpret this as elves automatically possessing noble status, the truth is that the elven families that have served the throne have done so for so long that they have, over time, accrued great wealth and status in the process, giving the impression of landed nobility as in other nations despite that this custom does not truly exist in Vanora, where anyone can own land.

FAERKIN

Despite that it is believed that their race originates from the High Steppes, the eastern portion of the Known Lands has traditionally had a relatively low population of the diminutive faerkin. They congregated in some numbers in Aramyst, but following the Darkfall many of them have found their way to Vanora. Because of their relative status as newcomers, most faerkin found in Vanora are not of particularly high economic or social standing. Their presumed origin as descendants of the ancient fey races that once called the Known Lands home has somewhat accurately branded them as tricksters, and faerkin in Vanora have embraced this stereotype to some degree. They are almost invariably followers of Fox and while they enjoy a good reputation with other adherents of that totem, many others do not trust them and tend to ostracize them somewhat as a result.

FERRANS

Ferrans are quite numerous among the people of Vanora, both because the shared border with Aramyst ensured that it was one of the first places to receive immigrants from that kingdom once the ferrans won their independence, and because their bestial nature aligns very

well with the philosophy of the Way of the Ten Beasts. In particular, ferrans with traits of foxes, bears, or wolves are particularly welcome because of their resemblance to the totems of Fox, Ursax, and Wolf respectively. Wolf-ferrans and bear-ferrans can easily find brotherhood among the militia or the Sons of the Dragon, where they serve in large numbers.

GOREAUX

The small but spectacularly intelligent goreaux have never been found in Vanora in any significant number. Since the Darkfall, Emperor Dyok the Younger's keen interest in mechamagic has caused some prominent goreaux experts and their families to relocate to the Dragon Empire in order to serve the Emperor, but they nevertheless remain one of the most sparsely represented races in the nation. Those who can be found there tend to congregate in the largest cities, typically Tanto and Shan Ti. There are a few who, not possessing the skill necessary to serve the Emperor directly, have relocated to smaller settlements in order to ply their trade as arcanists and technologists, but they tend to be no more than one or two per town at the very most.

HALF-ELVES

Due perhaps to the higher population of elves, half-elves are found more frequently in Vanora than in many other nations, again with the exception of Arasteen, which boasts the highest population of elves in the Known Lands. Elves are generally held in high esteem by Vanoran citizens, but because interracial marriages between elves and humans are uncommon, most half-elves are illegitimate children of dalliances and have no significant heraldry to speak of. Longer lived than humans but not as long-lived as elves, half-elves have the same difficulty relating to their parent races as they do elsewhere, and as a result often seek the company of others of their kind or even dwarvenkind, given the similarities in the lifespan of a dwarf and a half-elf. Still, half-elves are never one to turn their back on a potential ally or friend due to racial preconceptions; they are all too well aware of the sting such practices carry.

HUMANS

As always seems to be the case, humans are the most numerous people in Vanora just as they are throughout the entirety of the Known Lands. The families and bloodlines of humanity that originated in Vanora, those who were members of the tribes united by the first Dragon Emperor, were of slightly smaller stature than men found elsewhere in the Known Lands, and their skin was a slightly different shade. The Golden Age saw tremendous travel and relocation across all modern nations, however, and as a result there is a wide variety of heights, builds, and skin tones found among today's native Vanoran citizens.

JURAK

Vanoran society could accurately be described as somewhat more rigid than most other nations, barring perhaps the zealous religious practices of Carraway or oppressive military culture of Urbana. Many jurak find this an appealing aspect of society and are eager to find a

place among the militia and Sons of the Dragon, while others sell their services as mercenaries or bodyguards, particularly to those who live near the border with the Rhanate. The jurak people originate from the mountains, both from the Wall and other, smaller ranges such as the mountains found in Vanora. Jurak descended from those tribes tend to be less muscular than their more western kin, with a greater emphasis on speed and athleticism and a generally lithe build. They are no less adaptable than the others of their race, however, and are almost without exception a serious physical threat to most non-jurak opponents on the battlefield.

RAPACIANS

Although Vanora borders on the Rhanate, which is the racial homeland of the rapacian people, there is a comparatively small number of the lizard-folk found within the Dragon Empire. Those who do make their home there are generally well regarded because of their at least superficial resemblance to the powerful totems Dragon, Drake, or even Basilisk. Perhaps because of this, rapacians who make their home in Vanora often find their calling to serve among the priesthood of the Way of the Ten Beasts, making their living as beast shamans who conduct services for the various sects of totemic followers found among their neighbors.

SUBSETS OF THE POPULACE

Because of the particular nature of Vanoran society, there are several groups that are more or less unique to the nation. These groups do have some degree of representation throughout the rest of the Known Lands, but the vast majority of their numbers are within Vanora proper, and are often subject to significant misconceptions by outsiders.

Samurai

The term samurai is an ancient Vanoran word that means "servant." In the days before Vanora was formed under the first Emperor's banner, the chieftains of all the major tribes were served by an inner circle of warriors and advisors, all of whom were called samurai. The tradition carried over into Vanoran society as well, and those who serve the Emperor directly are known as samurai. Because of the nature of the imperial bureaucracy, this title is relatively limited to higher-ranking members of the government as well as the entirety of the Sons of the Dragon, the army of Vanora. As a result, most outsiders perceive that samurai is a term applied to elite warriors in Vanora, and while that is not an altogether accurate depiction, the fact is that more than ninety percent of all those who bear the title samurai are active members of the Vanoran military.

Because those who are classified as samurai are often from more well-to-do families within Vanora, there is an incorrect perception that the term samurai denotes a member of the nobility within that nation. Some nations have had a sharp class distinction between the nobility and the common folk, but Vanora has never had that. No citizens have more or less rights under the rule of law except for the Emperor himself and his immediate family, and even then the distinction is less pronounced than one might think given the typical separation between a monarch and his people in other nations. Samurai do possess certain authoritative powers that can make it appear to an outsider as if they are a more privileged class, but again, this is largely a misunderstanding of how Vanoran society functions rather than an accurate perception.



As agents of the throne, samurai are the only citizens who have the right to bear the symbol of Dragon, the greatest of the Ten Beats and the symbol of the Emperor himself. Most do so with great pride, with many also bearing smaller markings that indicate whatever Beast they followed most closely prior to being inducted into the rank of the Emperor's samurai. They have law enforcement powers that function anywhere within Vanora's borders, and are regarded in every settlement as the equivalent of magistrates, and can overrule all but the highest ranking civil officials in matters pertaining to the law and the defense of citizens. These powers are not invoked lightly, however, as there are those within the Emperor's trust, powerful men and women above reproach, whose only duty is to review the actions of samurai and determine if there are any who abuse their privileges. Those deemed to be doing so are dealt with immediately, and very harshly. Another aspect of service as a samurai is that they are expected to be served without payment by any they deal with within their home nation. What is not immediately obvious is that samurai are expected to submit to their superiors an account of where they have been and what businesses they have patronized, and the Imperial treasurers would send payment to those involved. While this seems an extremely complicated task, and it is, the vast majority of samurai remain with their military detachments and are not traveling independently with any frequency.

Service as a samurai is neither a life-long duty, nor is the position as a samurai hereditary. Those who serve in the militia and do so with distinction may apply for service with the Sons of the Dragon and be accepted, thus earning the title of samurai. They serve for however many years they choose, but there are regular intervals at which they may leave the Sons for a variety of reasons, whether personal or

because the Sons no longer have need of their services. This does not revoke their status as a samurai, although their law enforcement powers are significantly curtailed and they no longer have the backing of the imperial treasury (although many grant former members payment-free status regardless). Regardless of whether or not a samurai is currently serving, their children are not automatically accepted into the ranks of samurai, although statistically it is more likely that they will be granted admittance if they apply.

Samurai currently serving the Sons of the Dragon rarely travel outside Vanora for official business, although it is not unheard of. Samurai who have left the Sons for one reason or another, on the other hand, can and do travel extensively, having both the training and the wealth necessary to travel across the continent safely. It is not altogether uncommon to find samurai in major cities elsewhere in the Known Lands, and some set themselves up as martial instructors to pass on their skills to others. Students of such individuals can and do call themselves samurai, although they do so with the knowledge that such an action in Vanora would be tantamount to treason. And no one, not even the most disgruntled or disillusioned individuals, ever permit their students to bear the symbol of the dragon. Doing so would incriminate not only the student but their teacher, and no honorable Vanoran, expatriate or otherwise, would have anything to do with someone responsible for such disgraceful behavior.

The samurai who are enrolled within the Sons of the Dragon, which is the vast majority of them, are organized into ten orders named after the Ten Beasts and teaching martial techniques and practices devoted to those totems. Many choose the Order of the Dragon simply due to the prestige associated with such a thing, but many others choose to follow whatever totem they followed prior to becoming a Son of the Dragon.



Ninja

Although they are somewhat known in other nations as well, ninja are a Vanoran cultural phenomenon dating back to the days of the independent tribes that would one day form the Empire. The origin of the idea is unknown, but some have theorized that the idea first originated with the tribes following the totems of cunning, particularly Serpent. The word ninja originally meant "hidden fang," but has long since been generalized to mean a thief, spy, assassin, or other bogeyman that parents might threaten their children with but who might themselves fear under different circumstances. Because the three totems of cunning tended to have smaller tribes with less martial power, it was often necessary for them to achieve their goals in other ways, which included espionage or even assassination of rivals in order to weaken other tribes and prevent them from successfully warring on the smaller tribes.

As the various tribes became the Empire of Vanora, the society that they constructed together under the Emperor's guidance became increasingly structured and regimented; this was regarded as the best and most effective means of uniting such disparate groups under a single banner while ensuring that their differences did not cause them to drift apart. There was a small percentage within the different groups who chafed under such regimentation, and who had little love for the new version of law and order that reigned over them. It was from the ranks of these few that the first criminals appeared in Vanora, and in any environment where crime is present, there are those who flourish within that dark section of society. Within a decade of Vanora's founding, there were criminal organizations, syndicates, and all manner of disreputable individuals lurking beneath the surface of the honorable veneer of Vanora.

The first Emperor, Dyus, knew that this had happened, and had known that it was inevitable. He likewise knew that a perfect society could not exist and that there was no way to prevent some degree of corruption from staining his legacy. However, he also knew that this dark side could be curtailed and kept within acceptable parameters so that Vanora would not succumb to darkness in the manner he had seen other nations suffer during the Great War. He gathered together a small number



of those who had served the totems of cunning before the unification, and through them, hunted down the most dangerous warriors that had lived among those tribes. Some of them had already fallen into a life of crime and dishonor, while others were struggling to live more reputable lives and to leave their past behind them. The Emperor sought their services, as they had once served others. Some eagerly returned to their former lives, while others were reluctant and were only swayed by their loyalty to the Emperor or for the rewards heaped upon their families. These men and women became the first ninja to exist in service to the Emperor, and committed terrible, albeit necessary, atrocities in his name.

Under guidance from Dyus, these ninja became the shadowy police that ensured the criminal element within Vanora did not stray too far from the minor offenses that the Emperor deemed able to be overlooked. Anyone whose behavior verged upon treason was snuffed out in an instant, as were the worst of the violent offenders and anyone whose efforts threatened to destabilize the new government, such as those who would forge currency or attempted to bribe or otherwise corrupt agents of the Emperor's bureaucracy. Via these ninja, the Emperor and his advisors managed to ensure that crime within Vanora remained relatively controlled and less dangerous than it might otherwise have become. This was not a permanent solution, of course, and in time crime spread, but more slowly and cautiously, and the truth is that the average Vanoran citizen has relatively little to fear from criminals compared to the citizens of other nations.

In the thousand years since the Peace of the Rose, the ranks of the ninja have expanded relatively little, but there have been those who have strayed from the path. As a result, enough ninja have become freelance agents, or have taken their own students to train in their techniques, that independent ninja now exist in limited numbers in Vanora, and in extremely limited numbers elsewhere in the Known Lands. While lesser scoundrels serve as spies and thieves, ninja are more effective as undercover espionage agents and assassins, and to infiltrate locations that make normal thieves invoke long-forgotten religious beliefs and relocate to avoid repercussions. Those few who have learned of their existence have spread knowledge of them into the public consciousness, and their prowess has led them to be viewed as boogymen of the first order, as shadows that come and go in the night where even nocturnals fear to tread. Many, in fact, readily blur the line when describing ninja and nocturnals. Most ninja are amused by the entire affair, and find it perfectly acceptable.

While it is true that other ninja exist beyond Vanora's borders, there is a unique quality to the secretive family orders that have existed within the nation since its birth that sets them apart: the practice of an ancient arcane art known as kuji-in. Kuji-in was created a thousand years ago to address the fact that few who possessed the skill necessary to become ninja also possessed the gift for the arcane arts. Kuji-in was developed at the command of the Emperor by a handful of his most powerful arcanist advisors, working in conjunction with the secretive ninja at his command. Together, these two unlikely allies discovered a means of creating highly complex formula that could be reproduced by intricate hand signals. These hand signals, when performed correctly, channeled latent arcane energy from the area and from the practitioner himself, invoking minor but nevertheless clearly supernatural effects that would be impossible to replicate without magic. The secrets of kuji-in have remained with the Emperor's ninja vassals for ten centuries, and if anyone outside of Vanora were ever to be discovered practicing the method, they would be sought out, captured, brought back to Vanora for interrogation as to the source of their knowledge, and then quietly executed, all by the ninja in service to the Dragon Emperor.

Monks

Unlike ninja, monks remain an almost exclusively Vanoran tradition, with only a small number of their like found in the High Steppes and Carraway, and very few other locations save for traveling expatriates and adventurers. The largest monastic sects in Vanora believe in

tempering the body to achieve spiritual enlightenment, and thus they tend to travel and experience the world through hardship and adventure.

The Way of the Ten Beasts is a very robust philosophy, some would say theology, and those who are truly devout in its beliefs tend to devote themselves utterly to understanding its secrets. Some become members of the Vanoran priesthood, individuals who call themselves beast shamans. Others, typically those without the overt talent for magic, instead join monasteries and embrace a life of study and contemplation, attempting to decipher the true nature of the Beasts and their influence in the modern world. Although there is a great deal of variety among the various monastic sects found in Vanora, there are certain common traits that can be expected among most of them.

For the most part, monks are ascetic, choosing to eschew most physical comforts and material goods. Monks consider such things distractions and prefer to limit their body's adjustment to such things. They believe, generally speaking, that by allowing themselves only the minimum physical requirements, including bland foods, water to drink (or perhaps tea under certain circumstances), and a flat place to sleep and/or meditate, they can "quiet" their physical needs and focus instead on the spiritual, with their body becoming only a tool for their mind. Mental acuity is regarded as essential, and literacy is among the first things taught to any applicant who is not already literate. History and philosophy are among the most important subjects, and monks are not only expected to spend a portion of each day reading, but debating and even writing, for those who show a talent for such things.

There are a number of different monastic sects that are common throughout Vanora. There are sects devoted to each of the Ten Beasts, of course, although these sects are smaller and have one or two monasteries each scattered across the countryside. Much more common are the sects devoted to the three primary totem groups: the Totems of Cunning, the Totems of Power, and the Warrior Totems. Monks of these three sects are generally referred to as fusei, inkyo, and sohei, respectively, and while they largely share the traits described above, they are significantly different in their other practices.

The monks called fusei are the least like their various brothers throughout Vanora, and adhere less strongly to the conventions described above. The occasional master of drunken boxing is almost invariably a fusei, for example, as are those odd tricksters who believe in education through the subversion of expectations. They are humorous almost to a fault, eager to laugh and to teach lessons in the most unconventional ways, much as their patrons do. Some believe that this is an indication that fusei are less dangerous than other monks; this is a dangerous misconception that has led more than one potential opponent into a deadly, one-sided confrontation. Not only are fusei fully trained and martially capable, they also engage in what some might easily call underhanded tactics in order to accomplish that which they desire.

Inkyo are the most introspective and spiritual of the various monk sects, and spend much of their day in reading and contemplation, attempting to commune with their totems. They are generally much less physically developed than other monks because they place relatively little emphasis on that type of conditioning. However, their tremendous emphasis on communion with the Beasts and their capabilities grants them varying abilities that can only be described as sorcerous in nature. There are accounts of inkyo landing unarmed strikes against opponents that leave frostbite or third degree burns where they hit, among various other things. Perhaps because of this, the inkyo sects tend to have close relationships with arcanists of varying types, including some organizations who have alliances that go back decades or even centuries.

Sohei are warrior monks who attempt to emulate the practices of their totems of choice, Shark, Ursax, and Wolf. Their physical conditioning is vastly more intense than that of other sects, and martial prowess is regarded as one of the key aspects of an individual's understanding of their totem. They are by far the most likely to wander the Known Lands in search of enlightenment, which they believe that they can achieve by overcoming powerful opponents. Nocturnals are among their favored prey, as they believe that the Darkfall is the antithesis of the Ten Beasts and must inevitably be defeated in order for the rightful order of the world to be restored.



CULTURE OF VANORA

All nations of the Known Lands have their own unique practices and cultural mores, and Vanora is no different. Vanoran society is much more regimented than that of most other countries, however, with perhaps only the rigid theological expectations in Carraway rivaling the highly structured existence that most Vanorans experience from day to day.

THE WAY OF THE TEN BEASTS

Depending upon who one asks, the Way of the Ten Beasts is either a philosophy or a religion, and one that is incredibly pervasive within the borders of Vanora in southeast Aden. Although it has not spread much beyond Vanora, with only a handful of adherents in other nations, mostly those who once dwelled within Vanora before emigrating somewhere else in the Known Lands, and therefore does not have the widespread acceptance of other faiths like the Church of All Saints or the Radiant Path, the sheer, overwhelming dominance of the Way in its home nation ensures that it is one of the most prevalent faiths in the Known Lands. Although it is not the oldest faith currently practiced in Aden, it is one of the oldest and has perhaps the most well documented history.

In the waning days of the Great War, there were many who had lost everything to the continent-spanning conflict. Whatever kingdoms or young nations had existed in the region that currently makes up Vanora had long since fallen, leaving the area to be dominated by a number of tribes, most of which had predated the now-fallen kingdoms in the first place and had survived the conflict thus far intact. These tribes held shamanistic beliefs, a holdover from a previous age that no one remembered any longer. They varied according to their specific beliefs, but each was a proud group of warriors, and they were perpetually at one another's throat over every conceivable reason: territory, resources, and feuds so old that no one remembered how they started.

The Forms of the Beasts

Those who have studied the Way of the Ten Beasts, which includes almost every educated soul within Vanora, readily notice that the Beasts fall into three approximate groupings, each of which represents a vast cross-section of all within Vanora and its society. The Shark, Ursax, and Wolf all represent warriors or martial prowess in some form or fashion. The Basilisk, Drake, and Leviathan all confer potency to those who have taken spellcasting as their emphasis in life. The Eagle, Fox, and Serpent represent cunning for those who are not as strong or as wise as the other groups. And of course Dragon is all these things, the perfect combination of all Beasts, ruling over them as the first among equals to provide perfect order for Vanora.

There are some scholars of Vanoran history who believe that when the first Emperor united the tribes and created the Way of Ten Beasts, there were other tribes that venerated other totems present at that time. These scholars point to references to "many tribes" and "others" who rejected the Emperor. In the most remote, rural areas of the Vanoran wilderness, one can occasionally find the last remains of ruins or occasional artifacts that bear stylized symbols of other animals, which some experts claim is proof that ancient, pre-Vanoran tribes revered other totems as well. Some believe that, if these tribes did exist, they fled ancient Vanora in the face of the burgeoning Dragon Empire, or were simply absorbed into other existing tribes. Others have suggested, somewhat more darkly, that the first Emperor needed a common foe to unite those tribes he felt could serve his new Empire, and that he would have used any other lingering presence in the area as an anvil against which to forge his new nation. Others find this suggestion borderline treasonous, thus it has never gained any real traction and has been relegated largely to the scholarly fringe and a handful of conspiracy theorists.

The Basilisk

In the days before Vanora, the tribe that venerated Basilisk was the smallest of the ten great tribes that united under Dyok, but was feared and respected nevertheless due to their great proficiency with sorcery. In particular the tribe was known for the bloodline that served as its leaders, arcanists with a powerful, natural connection to the elemental power of earth. The leaders always claimed that this power was a gift from Basilisk, but it is equally likely that the founders of the bloodline chose Basilisk as their totem because of the similarity in their magic and its supernatural ability to petrify its foes. The leader of the Basilisk tribe during the days of Vanora's formation, a jurak sorcerer named Akiara,

Other Beasts

Are there other Beasts? Are the theorists correct that there was something of a cover up during the earliest days of Vanora's founding? That, dear reader, is entirely up to you. We explore the idea later in this text that another tribe did exist, and that its near-extinction is the cause of some of Vanora's stranger difficulties of late, but that is an entirely optional direction that individual Game Masters can choose to take, and the possibility of more than eleven is absolutely viable as a campaign secret. In particular, one might ask why, of all the mundane creatures on which the Ten Beasts are based, only dragons are truly intelligent, whereas the others are largely regarded as mere animals (with the possible exception of leviathans, about which very little is known)? It could be nothing more than symbology, since the first Emperor chose his totem specifically to serve as a rallying point for other tribes. After all, choosing a powerful, intelligent creature to serve as a symbol might well be a wise decision. Or, there could be a more sinister reason. We leave that up to you.

was one of the first to join Dyok's banner and she served as one of his most trusted advisors for decades afterwards.

In modern day Vanora, Basilisk remains one of the less specifically venerated Beasts but remains highly respected by all; the presence of magic in the everyday lives of Aden's people demands that they hold magic and those who wield it in high respect. Those who command magic, both arcane and divine, are prone to reverence toward Basilisk in particular regardless of the nature of magic at their command. Even those with an affinity for the elemental magic of air, traditionally in opposition to earth, pay homage to Basilisk as the most powerful of the sorcerous Beasts. Those who harness arcane power in the name of Dragon often bear a secondary crest of Basilisk out of respect for the service of the Basilisk tribe to the first Dragon Emperor.

The month of Basilisk is the final month of summer, often the hottest year of the summer and one filled with the most back-breaking labor in preparation for the harvest. Those crops that inevitably fail earlier in the summer are replaced with later-planting crops that must be tended closely and require extensive attention in order to make certain that the yield is sufficient to make it through the winter months. Although all of the constellations named after the Beasts are dominant in the sky during the month named after them, there is a sect of arcanists who believe that the stars lend particularly potent power to those who follow Basilisk during its month. Those who subscribe to the strange and esoteric practices of astromancy assure others that this is the case, but most arcanists lack the specialized expertise necessary to determine if this in fact true or not. Regardless, the month of Basilisk is often host to a number of different festivals that rely upon spellcasters utilizing their power in displays that honor primarily Basilisk but the other Beasts as well, ensuring that they are popular among commoners who enjoy them much in the same fashion as the annual fireworks displays during the new year celebration.

The Dragon

Although all Ten Beasts are revered equally, there is no question that the Dragon is the first among equals. The Dragon is the most revered of the Beasts, due primarily to the fact that it is the symbol of the Emperor and his family, the lineage that has guided the nation of Vanora since its inception when the first Dragon Emperor united the tribes and created the Way all those years ago. While the Emperor and those who serve him directly, the Sons of the Dragon, are the only ones permitted to wear the symbol of Dragon, displaying its symbol other than upon one's person is not prohibited, and it is rare to find a home in Vanora that does not have some depiction of Dragon somewhere within it. The Dragon's greatest virtue is that it represents the best qualities of all the other Beasts, with relatively few of their weaknesses, but does not use its power to lord over the others; instead it rules because the others defer to its wisdom and power. It is believed that the first Emperor, Dyok, was of a tribe the venerated Dragon. Some have suggested that the first Emperor instead created Dragon in order to serve as a unifying symbol for the tribes of the other Beasts, but this belief is generally regarded as scandalous in Vanoran society.

The most ardent and devoted followers of Dragon are the members of the samurai caste that serve the Emperor, the militant order known as the Sons of the Dragon. They adamantly believe in a rigid code of honor that demands both service to their Emperor and duty to his people. It is in no small part due to this belief system and their devotion to Dragon that the samurai of Vanora have become so beloved by its people and regarded as heroes, whereas in other nations the undying loyalty of the military to a monarch can sometimes be viewed as frightening,

much as it is in Urbana. The countless times throughout its history that samurai have given their lives to protect the common people of Vanora, however, ensures that this is not the case in that kingdom.

The month of the Dragon is the tenth and final month in Aden's calendar, and the first month of the winter season. Although winters can be difficult, particularly since the Darkfall, historically they have represented an end to the labor of summer and a time when family can begin to spend time together, living off the fruits of their difficult work over the course of spring, summer, and autumn. Even after the Darkfall, it is a time for families to enjoy one another's company without the struggles of planting, maintaining, or harvesting crops, or the myriad of other activities that are so demanding of their time during the other seasons. Feasting regularly is not uncommon because of the variety of foods that cannot be preserved properly during the long winter months, leaving more bland fare to last the remainder of the winter.

The Drake

Considered by most to be a lesser relative of Dragon, Drake is like Basilisk in that it commands significant arcane abilities and is venerated by spellcasters of all sorts. Where Basilisk is most often portrayed as an avatar of the power of earth, Drake is more often presented as a powerful force of elemental fire. Several members of the Drake tribe in ancient Vanora were alleged to be powerful pyromancers who were respected for their prowess in battle as well as their gifts in crafting fine weaponry at the forge. Ironically, despite the similarity between Dragon and Drake, the Drake tribe were among the first and most vocal opponents of the would-be Emperor Dyok's attempt to unify the tribes, believing that accepting a place second to Dragon would be an insult to their totem spirit. Unlike many other tribes, the winning over of Drake was not accomplished through battle or sheer physical prowess, but through time and respect. It is said that Dyok frequently spoke of Drake's power and wisdom, and sought the wisdom of the tribe whenever possible, although their hostility made this difficult. When common foes would present themselves, however, Dyok always took care to win the respect of the Drake tribe. Some believe that Dyok, a notoriously cunning man, manufactured threats to give him enough time to win the tribe over. Regardless, his gambit was successful, and within a handful of months after beginning his enterprise, he brought the Drake tribe into his fold.

Unsurprisingly, Drake is considered the patron of choice for spellcasters of all sorts, right alongside Basilisk. While Basilisk attracts the more esoteric arcanists, those whose magic is used in non-direct ways, for research, or almost anything except direct combat, those who venerate Drake are more likely to be combat-oriented. Evokers in particular elevate Drake above the other Beasts as their patron and totem when practicing their arts. Pyromancers in particular have a very strong affinity for Drake as well, and it is rare to find any Vanoran gifted with fire magic who is not an adherent of Drake (unless of course they have been honored with the right to bear the symbol of Dragon instead, most often as an arcane member of the Sons of the Dragon).

The month of the Drake is the first month of autumn, a time when the harvests that dominate that season truly begin. The first crops planted in springtime are ripe by now and begin being brought in from the fields. In some ways, the back-breaking labor of summer is eclipsed by the activities in the month of Drake, because the first harvests are being conducted while other crops are still being tended to, essentially expanding the amount of work that must be done. At least the heat of summer abates somewhat, however, and for most Vanorans, that is enough to welcome autumn home with open arms.





The Eagle

Eagle is a proud and powerful totem, one of the Beasts that is the most noble in the eyes of the Vanoran people. It is not one of the warrior totems, but it is nevertheless known to be as fierce as it is wise. Those who follow the path of the Eagle may not be warriors, but they fight with everything they have when they are pressed into combat. Should they not be on the road to victory, however, they recognize the situation for what it is and choose discretion over valor so that they can live to fight another day. This does not stem from cowardice, but from wisdom. Although Eagle has much in common with Fox and Snake in that none of them are warriors, those who follow Eagle believe that they are above the others, for Fox and Snake tend to be craven and only strike when opportunity favors them. Eagle, on the other hand, will fight when needed regardless of the circumstances, and is often considered an ally of Wolf and Ursax as a result. The Eagle tribe of early Vanora dwelled within the highest peaks, above the clouds and among the snowfalls and avalanches. Many claim that Eagle was first to join Dragon, but no one knows for certain if this is actually true. The oldest Eagle texts suggest that the tribe coasted on thermals with hide-bound gliders, but this is considered somewhat of an exaggeration at best.

Followers of Eagle tend to be relatively affluent or at least respectable members of society, including the wealthy nobility, well-known craftsmen, low-level members of the government, and others of that nature. Many who follow Eagle like to claim that Eagle is the major-domo of Dragon, serving it just as they serve their Emperor in capacities that are not yet sufficient to allow them to wear Dragon's symbol, but may one day lead to that. Even those who do not have prestige or clout to their name, but who follow a strict code of honor, revere Eagle above the other cunning totems, who are more popular with the poor and disreputable portions of the population.

The month of the Eagle occurs late in the winter, when snow blankets much of Vanora and the temperature plummets to its lowest points. These are times that families spend together, nestled in their homes and safe from the terrible risk of death the outside offers. But it is also the final month of the winter, and although the temperatures are at their lowest as the month begins, they steadily begin climbing as Eagle progresses, making way for the following month and the advent of spring. Although the preceding month is similar in its low temperatures and longer-lasting, Eagle can be a tenser time regardless because the winter stockpiles finally begin to dwindle and there is always the fear that they will not last until spring truly begins. For that reason, hunting winter game is not uncommon in the middle or latter part of Eagle, but it is a dangerous pursuit nevertheless.

The Fox

Of all the Beasts who lack the skill of the warrior or the power of the spellcasters, Fox is by far the trickiest. Eagle is wiser and Serpent is deadlier, but Fox is the most cunning, deceitful, and humorous. Fox is often portrayed as being disliked by the other Beasts, but respected because of his sheer cunning and strategic nature. Even Dragon is said to find Fox's mind brilliant and keeps Fox close to aid in matters where a different perspective is required. The Fox tribe in ancient Vanora was one of the smallest tribes and, along with their occasional allies among the Serpent, kept moving and hidden to avoid the punishment of other tribes who looked down upon them. However, unlike the Serpent tribe, individual members of the Fox tribe were occasionally permitted in the lands of others, where they survived as traveling entertainers, storytellers, or musicians. Although closely watched at all times, because no tribe was so foolish as to trust the Fox, they were nevertheless permitted because of their ability to entertain others. It was for this reason that the first Emperor accepted Fox into the fold over the protestations of other tribes such as Basilisk and Wolf: he knew that to survive a society would need more than simple martial and arcane prowess, or it could very well turn on itself.

Fox is one of the most popular Beasts, with vast numbers of the lowest classes of Vanoran society devoted to its path. Fox is the most cunning of all the Beasts, even though it is one of the weakest if not the weakest of all ten. It is also perhaps the only Beast that possesses a

sense of humor, and its tricks upon the other Beasts and their followers are a thing of true delight for those whose daily lives are filled with the most struggle and hardship of all Vanorans. Those whose sense of honor is less than absolute flock to Fox, and there are few thieves or criminals who do not venerate the Beast in one way or another. For its part, according to the ancient teachings of the Fox tribe, texts that are largely proscribed and difficult to find at this point, suggest that thievery pleases Fox, for taking from more powerful predators has ever been its method. This is all the approval that the thieves and ninja of Vanora require in order to make their living in a criminal manner within one of the most lawful and honorable nations in all the Known Lands.

The first month of spring is the month of the Fox, and that it is perhaps the most popular month of the year among the common people. During the month of Fox, they emerge from their homes, imprisoned by the stark winter weather for the past three months, and begin to enjoy life again. The long stores of dried foods come to an end and fresh fish and game become available again in abundance. Even if the work of planting the new year's first crops comes quickly, there is still a brief reprieve during which the cold weather has ended but the planting waits to ensure that no late frosts will cripple the farmlands, and during this time, the commoners of Vanora enjoy what essentially amounts to a short vacation, filled with friendship and laughter, as well as delicious, fresh food that washes away the memories of stark winter fare.

The Leviathan

By far the strangest and most distant of the Ten Beasts, Leviathan is poorly understood even by many of its adherents. While it can truthfully be said that many who follow Basilisk and Dragon may never see the mortal version of their incarnations, both being rare and the former, at least, being extremely hazardous to even look at, almost none in Vanora have ever laid eyes upon one of the great leviathans. Native to the deepest ocean, the children of Leviathan are spectacularly huge creatures that move constantly through the deep water, solitary creatures of unknown intelligence and habits. They possess strange, sorcerous powers, and it is believed that their mournful songs can lull all those who hear them into a deep, magical slumber. The tribe of Leviathan dwelled upon the largest of the islands off the coast of Vanora, a territory they shared only with a handful of Shark tribesmen. Both tribes respected one another and kept their distance; although they were not enemies, nor were they allies, and they merely tolerated one another's presence in mutual territory so long as they did not find reason to be at cross purposes. The first Emperor sought their counsel on matters related to the sea so that, allegedly, the naval strength of nation he hoped to build would not be beholden exclusively to the savagery of the Shark tribe.

There are perhaps fewer adherents of Leviathan than any of the other Ten Beasts, but Leviathan has never sought numbers to follow its path. The third of the three Beasts associated with spellcasters, Leviathan is generally regarded as the patron of those who wield the elemental power of water. Limited to a handful of particularly powerful spellcasters and their apprentices, many of whom serve Vanora directly as part of its naval forces, the priesthood of Leviathan is a distinct, separate branch of the government that serves the Emperor directly. Accordingly, while they are within their rights to wear the symbol of Dragon, but most respectfully decline and maintain their reverence for Leviathan alone. There are very few among the common folk who choose to pay frequent homage to this Beast, and those who do are almost exclusively limited to those who make their living upon the water, primarily fishermen. These individuals also pay homage to Shark, but Shark is fearsome and its power frightens most fishermen, while Leviathan, perhaps more powerful than Shark, is nevertheless regarded as more benevolent and likely to lend its blessings.

The month of Leviathan is the last month of autumn, when the final harvests are being brought in and the temperature begins to drop toward the early moments of winter. There is joy because the long labors of summer and autumn are ending, but there is also sorrow because the pain of winter approaches. It is a month filled with song, both in celebration and mourning, and for that reason it was chosen to honor

Leviathan. Before the Darkfall made travel so perilous, many choose this month to make an annual pilgrimage to pay homage to Leviathan, particularly if the summer and autumn had been prosperous.

The Serpent

If any of the Ten Beasts can truly be said to be sinister, then that Beast is surely Serpent. Serpent is not considered evil, of course; none of the Ten Beasts are either good or evil, merely natural forces with inclinations in one direction or another. Eagle is noble, for example, while Fox is tricky. Serpent joins these two Beasts as the triumvirate of totems whose power lies not with a warrior's strength or with a spellcaster's power, but instead with their own cunning. Serpent conceals itself from its enemies, all of whom are larger and potentially more powerful. When Serpent does strike, it is from a position of strength, and uses its potent venom to cripple and slay enemies even if they may savagely wound Serpent in retaliation from its initial attack. Serpent does not win by being strongest. Serpent wins by using what many might consider an unfair advantage. But is Basilisk's petrification unfair? Is Leviathan's size unfair? Or Wolf's pack? Then, say the Serpent's followers, neither is its strength. The ancient tribe of Serpent was reviled by other tribes for this philosophy, and it is likely they would have been wiped out before the first Emperor brought them into his fold, save for their skill at concealing themselves and striking out at their foes with ambushes, poison, and assassination. They were feared despite their small size and lack of numbers, and for good reason; few were the tribes of the other Beasts who had not felt the sting of Serpent's bite.

Serpent is a popular patron for those who lack martial prowess, and as a result tends to be more popular among the common folk than with any of the various military sects that exist within the Vanoran national power structure. In fact, while such sacrilege would never be openly admitted, many dedicated warriors find Serpent and its practices distasteful if not outright dishonorable, and tend to pay only brief lip service to it when honoring the pantheon of the Ten Beasts. Commoners who have had little to no military training, having never served more than a brief obligatory stint within the militia, find Serpent's approach to victory through cunning and guile to be greatly appealing, as it means that even the weak can be victorious if they are smart enough and willing to perhaps engage in underhanded tactics. It is this latter tenet that most sharply separates the followers of Serpent from their similarly-minded comrades among the followers of Fox, who prefer guile without the skullduggery and use of 'tricks' such as poison and assassination.

The middle month of winter is named for Serpent because, like the beast from which the totem takes its name, the people of Vanora can do little during that time other than huddle in their homes and wait for the thaws of spring. It is a still, quiet time, filled with unsatisfying meals and never enough heat to enjoy life despite the respite from the back-breaking labor of the growing and harvesting seasons. It is also a time when the tactics of Serpent are most effective, because the power of arms is of limited use during the winter, and even arcane power can falter during the unrelenting onslaught of the elements. Guile and assassination, however, remain remarkably effective.

The Shark

Several of the Ten Beasts are patrons of warriors, each in a different way or representing a different aspect of the warrior's way. Shark is one of the warrior's totems, albeit one not generally embraced by the more traditional warriors. Shark is a fiercely solitary, brutally aggressive hunter that stalks its prey without remorse or rest, then attacks with everything ounce of strength and violence it possesses. The tribe that revered Shark was a smaller sized tribe that ruled the coastal region near the southern seas, and though they were few in number, the warriors of the Shark tribe were avoided by the other tribes for fear of their wrathful nature and their insistence on hunting down anyone who wronged them, no matter the cost or distance involved. The circumstances surrounding the Shark tribe joining with the first Dragon Emperor are something of a mystery, as Dyok travelled alone into the territory of the tribe,

something that was regarded as a veritable death sentence, and emerged intact three days later with the allegiance of the Shark.

Modern day adherents of Shark are an odd and mixed group. All warriors pay at least minimal homage to Shark in hopes that, if they should find themselves standing alone against a horde of enemies, that they will have the ferocity and strength to overcome them or at least take as many with them into the next world as possible. Those warriors who are by nature solitary sometimes revere Shark if they find other warrior totems less palatable for whatever reason, and many who make their life upon the sea and pursue the path of the warrior choose Shark above the other Beasts as their inspiration and emulate its tendencies whenever possible. It is perhaps for this reason that the sailors who make their living on the waters around Vanora are not preyed upon by foreign pirates, although the pirates of Vanora are equally fierce; battles between the two are legendary for their ferocity, and it is rare that both ships entering into a battle emerge.

The month of Shark is the mid-month of summer in Aden, perhaps the most ruthlessly hot and relentless month of the year. Even when it rains, and in Vanora summer rains often take the form of powerful monsoons, the people have no choice but to forge ahead and labor in the fields regardless of conditions. The threat of crop failure, greatly exacerbated by the presence of nocturnals eager to inflict such misery on the people of the Known Lands, is so great that nothing else comes close, not even weather that could be deadly for the incautious.

The Ursax

One of the three powerful warrior totems that were adopted into the Way of the Ten Beasts when Vanora's early tribes were united. The tribe of Ursax made their home around the foothills of Vanora's mountain ranges, where the great forests ended and gave way to stone. The mundane ursax that could be found there, reptilian creatures similar in most ways to the common bear but almost supernaturally adaptable, were revered by the tribe and never hunted (to be fair, no one hunted them due to their incredible strength, durability, and ferocity). The rival tribes that dominated the nearby forests, Wolf primarily but others as well, were always careful not to cross the boundaries into Ursax territory unless it was intentional, because the Ursax did not forget or forgive any slight, no matter how minor. The first Emperor traveled to the edge of Ursax territory and remained there for two weeks, never crossing the border but waiting patiently and living off of the land. The stalwart Ursax tribe eventually became curious and asked him what it was he wanted. The discussion that ensued eventually, over months and months of convincing and consideration, led the tribe to join with the first Emperor and begin the earliest days of the Vanoran nation.

Those who follow the path of Ursax value adaptability above all things, although hardiness is a very close second. Mundane ursax are known to develop significant, sometimes supernatural abilities closely tied to their environment, often elemental in nature. While it isn't possible for the followers of Ursax to mirror this level of alteration, they do believe that they must be strong enough to change to suit any given circumstance, no matter what the challenges they pose are. Warriors who favor Ursax tend to employ heavier armor as well, due to Ursax's legendary durability and thick armor. This sets them apart from Shark and Wolf, who favor different fighting styles, none of which focus on an individual's ability to endure an enemy's attack and then counterattack while they are exhausted from their failed assault.

The month of the Ursax is the first month of summer, when the heat of the season truly begins to climb and farming efforts are well underway. This is also when most major construction projects undertaken by the Emperor's government or even private individuals are taking place in earnest, due to the first month of spring being avoided because of soft ground and damp conditions from melting snow. It is a time of strenuous but honest labor, a time when men and women take comfort from their hard work in the form of their families. The last vestiges of bulk gained over the winter, when work is scarce, melt away in the face of arduous exercise and high temperatures, ensuring that all who labor in the name of their Emperor adapt to the new season just as Ursax adapts to whatever it encounters.



The Wolf

Wolf is a fearsome Beast, a hunter and a pack animal who thrives in the company of others. The Wolf tribe was one of the last to join the first Dragon Emperor, as they preferred their own company to that of the other tribes. Although the men and women of the Wolf tribe were smaller physically than many of the other tribes, and included a larger number of smaller races such as goreaux and faerkin, they nevertheless had a fearsome reputation due to their ability to work well together and bring down larger prey, including warriors of other tribes. According to legend, Dyok won their loyalty by defeating three of the Wolf tribe's greatest warriors in combat single-handedly, claiming a rightful position as the new alpha warrior of their tribe. This is widely considered apocryphal, but it is a colorful story that is popular nonetheless.

Wolf is a particularly popular patron for warriors that work together to accomplish their duties. Because of the nature of their duties, Wolf is especially venerated among the militia that protects the cities and boundaries of Vanora, those who serve beneath the Sons of the Dragon and who are not yet permitted to bear the crest of the Emperor themselves. Wolf is also a popular choice for young adventurers who want to forge their way in the world, either as a group or, less frequently, as individuals. This is much more common in more rural portions of the nation, particularly smaller settlements like Shang, the smallest major city of Vanora, and walled villages smaller than it. The Sons of the Dragon show respect to Wolf and the fact that a great many of their members were once strict adherents of it by displaying Wolf's symbols throughout their dojo, and often call upon Wolf extensively when training nascent Sons in tactics fighting alongside their brothers in arms.

The month named after Wolf is one of the spring months, which is appropriate because of the extensive labor necessary in large groups to oversee the planting and maintenance of crops during that season. Offerings to Wolf are common during this period so that individual village groups will be blessed with strength and the spirit of cooperation necessary for them to succeed in their work, bringing prosperity and a plentiful harvest to feed their extended families. The people who work the fields in large groups honor Wolf with long songs that mirror the howls of wolves, a song beginning at the edge of a field and carrying from one worker to the next for long distances, until a single song can cross miles of fields before its conclusion.



Exclusivity

The edits of the Dragon Emperor have repeatedly declared the Way of the Ten Beasts a philosophy, not a religion. This has not prevented the people of Vanora from treating it more like a religion than anything else, with the Beasts like minor deities, with Dragon being the only object of reverence similar to a true god. However, there is no animosity toward other faiths. Those who follow the Beasts' path bear no ill will for other major faiths present in the Known Lands, such as the Radiant Path or the Church of All Saints. Both of those faiths have a limited presence in Vanora, but there are small numbers of followers there. Most are natives of other nations that have found themselves perma-

nent residents of Vanora for one reason or another, whether due to the difficulties associated with travel in the wake of the Darkfall, personal business making it necessary for them to remain there, or simply the circumstances of life bringing them to another land to make a life for themselves.

There are native Vanorans who do not follow the Way. This is relatively uncommon, as the Beasts are part of every native's life from the moment they are born. However, some choose to turn their back on the path of their families. Those who do so are not looked upon with hostility or animosity by faithful Vanorans, but instead perhaps simply a little sadness that they have fallen away from the true path. Most Vanorans who choose to put aside the Way of the Ten Beasts do not put aside other traditions of their people, and thus do not forfeit their place in Vanoran society. Those malcontents who eschew all the traditions of the Dragon Empire are tolerated, but do not find their place among their kinsmen particularly warm and comforting any longer.

LAW & ORDER



The Emperor of Vanora and his people place tremendous value on order and stability. Ironically, even those who engage in criminal activities take a certain degree of comfort in their nation's level of order, because it minimizes their risk from competitors and gives them a very predictable framework in which to operate. Unlike other nations, where compliance with law enforcement agents has increased since the Darkfall, Vanoran citizens have always held those who enforce the Emperor's laws in very high regard, and corruption among those ranks remains very low, even more so after the cataclysm.

All law enforcement falls under the auspices of both the Imperial bureaucracy and the Sons of the Dragon. Except at the lowest levels, members of law enforcement are also considered members of the Sons of the Dragon, although it is not necessarily the case that they possess military training. They have a rank and unit designation, but are answerable to the bureaucracy instead, and are trained more as investigative agents than as soldiers.

The smallest settlements are served by a constable. Constables receive limited on-site training by more senior agents from larger towns. They are not considered members of the Sons of the Dragon, but they are given a seal indicating their level of authority on behalf of the Imperial bureaucracy. Constables are paid a modest stipend, and are typically given a small budget to allow for the construction or upkeep for a small jail to be used as needed. Depending on the size of the village, this may also be sufficient for the constable to hire full- or part-time assistants, called either deputies or occasionally by the old Vanoran term "yoriki," typically depending on the age of the person involved. Individuals arrested by constables and deemed guilty of a crime are either judged for their actions by the village leadership or, if the matter is deemed serious enough, they are taken to the nearest city to be handled by a proper magistrate.

Astromancy

Although as a people the Vanorans are steeped in tradition and what some consider an archaic philosophy, they are nevertheless an educated and relatively progressive society. One of the lesser known aspects of the Way of the Ten Beasts is that during the month named after each of the Beasts, there is a constellation named for the Beast as well that is dominant in the sky. These are the most visible from Vanora, obviously, and can be difficult to see as clearly from far away such as in Ionara, but are visible across the whole of the Known Lands. Arcanists of all sorts in Vanora study the stars extensively, particularly the one affiliated with the Beast that they revere in particular. It is a common belief, and one that has been repeatedly proven through practice, that there are means by which spellcasters can harness the power of the stars when they are in ascendance, lending additional power to their magic. The few surviving scholars of Aramyst refer to this practice as astromancy, although the Vanorans have not embraced the term. To them, it is merely one more aspect of their long, intricate relationship with the Ten Beasts and their patronage of the Empire of Vanora.

Larger settlements are served by individuals called magistrates, who possess full standing as a member of the sons of the Dragon, complete with armor and weaponry that they may or may not wear in the execution of their duties depending on the circumstances. A town that is large enough may have more than one magistrate, and individual cities may be divided into quarters (not necessarily for per city, however) that each have their own magistrate. Magistrates have constables that can aid them in the enforcement of the law, although they are the lowest ranking recognized members operating within a city; deputies are generally regarded as a necessity of rural life and are not made use of in larger settlements. Magistrates are responsible for their own individual settlements and are also the point of contact for all constables in the area around their office. Furthermore, when a constable's position is vacated

through death, retirement, or other reasons, the magistrate is responsible for ensuring that the new constable, either appointed by the magistrate himself or by the village's leaders, is properly trained and able to fulfill their duties to Vanora and its Emperor. Magistrates hold individuals for judgment by the leadership of the towns they oversee, and serve as the authority on the law. They are de facto prosecutors of sorts, although many magistrates specially select constables with a talent in this area and have them serve as a proxy when matters of judgment are at hand. Serious offenses, including anything treasonous (including association with corrupted, nocturnals, or any other agent of the Darkfall), are sent to a major city for judgment by members of the Imperial bureaucracy.

The largest cities, including Tanto, Shan Ti, Yalek, and Tara, have an individual who bears the title of justicar, responsible for overseeing



not only the magistrates working in the city itself, but also any and all magistrates operating independently in the surrounding area. Justicars oversee any due process that is deemed necessary at the highest level. They are also responsible for coordinating with courts convened by the Imperial bureaucracy within the city in order to deal with the most serious crimes from outlying districts, or crimes from within the city itself. Justicars can and often do sit in a position of judgment, since they do not conduct investigations on their own and are therefore theoretically unbiased toward the accused. Justicars are expected to recuse themselves from any judgment wherein they are compromised by personal involvement.

There is very little in the way of court for civil matters in Vanora. Citizens are expected to resolve their non-criminal disputes in a manner that does not burden the Imperial bureaucracy. This obviously varies, but there are some settlements, particularly smaller ones, where village authorities will hear and adjudicate civil matters as appropriate depending on their severity. In larger settlements, a rather odd system of resolution has endured the centuries since the founding of the Empire. Members of the samurai caste can and do resolve significant disputes with a formal duel. These duels were, at one time, conducted either to first blood or to the death, but the practice of dueling to the death was already invoked very infrequently in the decades leading up to the Darkfall and now is invoked almost never; the Emperor has been clear that all his vassals are needed to fight against the enemy they face, and losing one to another member of the caste is a loss that should be avoided at all times. Duels to first blood or with practice weaponry are still acceptable, however, and frequently used to resolve disputes of all sorts, although they tend to skew heavily toward matters of honor; resolving a mercantile manner via dueling is considered incredibly gauche. Wealthy individuals who are not of the samurai caste, typically merchants or highly successful artisans, can and do hire samurai to duel on their behalf, particularly if they fear that the local court will not find in their favor. Most samurai find this practice disdainful but there are enough who will indulge in it for the financial rewards that the practice continues.

PROMINENT OCCUPATIONS

The culture of Vanora places great value upon the pursuit of crafting and military careers, and holds such individuals in high regard. This is not to say that they look down upon others, because Vanorans view all occupations as a duty and disdain only those who refuse to accept the norms of the society in which they live, a category that includes primarily criminals.

Bureaucratic Careers

Serving as any part of the Imperial bureaucracy, from the Dairini who oversee the nation's most important cities to the constables who protect the smallest villages, is service directly to the Emperor himself, no matter how distant the connection. The prevalence of the Way of the Ten Beasts as a guiding philosophy ensures that the vast majority of Vanoran citizens view the Emperor as the chosen servant of Dragon, and therefore service to him is also service to Dragon, which pleases all the Beasts. Essentially, serving the bureaucracy is viewed as a near-religious imperative that is both an incredibly honor and a solemn responsibility.

The smallest settlements, villages and small towns, do not have a formal presence of the bureaucracy permanently stationed there. Some

representatives will visit the settlement on a semi-regular basis to check in with those parties who conduct business in the bureaucracy's name. This includes anyone in a position of authority, including village mayors or hetman, and constables trained by the magistrates of larger areas. Despite popular conception to the contrary, most bureaucratic careers have very little significant glory associated with them, as the bureaucracy on the whole largely serves as a federal government for Vanora and is largely populated by clerks, tax collectors, and bookkeepers of various sorts. Nevertheless, they are permitted to wear the emblem of the Dragon, and that is sufficient for most.

Crafting Careers

Vanorans have great respect for skill, particularly skill that must be acquired over a long period of time. For this reason, they take particular pride in their national reputation as unparalleled craftsmen, and celebrate skilled crafters and artisans among their numbers. Every settlement large enough to have survived the Darkfall has at least one blacksmith or armorer, and often both. Weapons and armor are considered among the most prestigious items for crafting, not only because of their importance to the military and the defense of Vanora, but also because of the complexity in their creation. Now that mechemagic has become more common in the nation, those who can use that art, as well as steamwrights that are purely technological in nature, are also held in very high regard, although the latter are still somewhat less common than in other modern nations.

In previous eras, cartography was considered an art much like calligraphy, which of course may explain the presence of chapter houses for the Ancient and Intrepid Cartographer's Society in both Tanto and Shan Ti. Unlike in other locations, where the necessity of updated maps steadily decreased over time as the continent's frontiers were explored and there were few mysteries remaining, the Society continued to thrive in Vanora. The artisanry involved in creating such maps ensured that they prospered. Those who could not travel the Known Lands would often instead collect maps of distant locations they might wish to one day see, whether the Crystal Forest in Arasteen or the depths of the Skar in the neighboring Sundered Desert.

Military Careers

A career in the Vanoran military is easy to achieve for any citizen who desires one and who has an affinity for one of the myriad of tasks required by such a large fighting force. All able-bodied citizens are expected to contribute in at least some minor way to the functioning of the militia that defends its cities and farmlands, including shifts among the city guard and other common tasks. Those who show talent in any area, whether strength at arms or even simply logistical acumen, can find themselves promoted within the militia and given a stipend to ensure that they can devote their time exclusively to that task. The most skilled among these individuals can receive one of the nation's greatest honors and be offered a position within the Sons of the Dragon.

If distinguished service to the militia is viewed as respectable, then service to the Sons of the Dragon borders upon celebrity, particularly to Vanorans who do not live within the major cities. It is not uncommon to find villages and small towns who have very public displays honoring any of their citizens, past or present, who serve the Sons of the Dragon. They make no distinction as to the type of service; any who find an appointment within that force are considered equally favored. Mid-range officers and supervisory quartermasters are equally revered despite the generally bureaucratic nature of the latter. Vanorans are, despite some evidence to the contrary, a very practical people at heart, and while a quartermaster or logistical clerk might not earn great glory on the battlefield, they make it possible for others to achieve victory, and that is as essential to their nation's survival as anyone carrying a blade.

PROMINENT INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, & ORGANIZATIONS

Vanoran society tends to be very regimented, with everyone knowing exactly what their place and role is, more often than not determined by their occupation. Some are to be expected, such as the Emperor and his closest advisors, the Dairini. However, despite the regimentation of society, there are some groups and individuals who possess disproportionate levels of influence, either with the Emperor himself, the Imperial bureaucracy, or even the common folk.

The Emperor and His Dairini

Emperor Dyok the Second, also called Dyok the Younger, also called the Young Dragon, is a restless heart heavily burdened by the crown he has no choice but to wear. The Emperor is scarcely past his sixtieth birthday, which is remarkably young for an elf, barely beyond adolescence, and the past decade has seen him sit upon a throne for which he feels he was not ready despite the successes he has experienced since the Darkfall took his father from him. He knows that there are those few among his subjects who believe he may have had a role in his father's poisoning in order to take the throne, and he despises them for it. Those who have seen him at his father's side, speaking softly to his father of times they have spent together, know that these rumors are lies; the Young Dragon loves his father dearly and wishes for nothing more than for him to awaken and resume leadership. While he presents a calm, almost casual demeanor to his subjects, the Emperor is privately often tormented by the enormities of what he must do, and how he can best protect his people. There are few in whom he can truly confide, however, including the general of his armies, the golemancer who oversees his cadre of mechamages, and of course his most trusted advisors, the Dairini.

The position of Dairini is an ancient custom that dates back to the first Dragon Emperor. Dyus chose his first Dairini from his most trusted advisors in order to keep watch over the various tribes that had joined his banner, for he knew full well that there would be those who would chafe under another's rule in time. In the beginning, there was a hand-chosen Dairini in each major settlement, but as the centuries passed, it became less concerning to so closely monitor his people, and the position gradually evolved into a sort of provincial governor that oversaw the largest and most important regions in Vanora. For the past three centuries, there have been only two Dairini, overseeing the cities of Shan Ti and Yalek in the Emperor's name. In theory, a Dairini has absolute authority over everything in the region assigned to them, and can be overruled only by the Emperor himself. In practice, however, the Dairini tend to work with other high-ranking members of both the Imperial bureaucracy and military in order to prevent hard feelings or political friction, which the line of Dragon Emperors has looked upon unfavorably almost without exception.

The importance of Shan Ti's port, which focuses primarily on international trade with other cities in the Known Lands, ensures that it is in practice the most important appointment chosen by the Emperor when selecting his Dairini. Immediately before the Darkfall, the Dairini of Shan Ti was an older academic, a politically adroit elf who was a longtime ally of Dyok the Elder. The stress of the chaos following the Darkfall was managed by his hand, although in his age he had difficulty adapting quickly to the new world, and within a year he had passed away from stress-exacerbated natural causes. Still relatively new to the throne and unsure of how to govern, the Young Dragon appointed one of his closest allies, a member of his personal guard and hunting party, a tigress-ferran named Miwauk. Dyok the Younger and Miwauk have always had a particularly close relationship, and many have specu-

lated that they may be involved in a romantic manner of some sort, despite that ferrans having a relationship with non-ferrans is virtually unheard of and considered something of a taboo. For her part, Miwauk possessed very little experience in the way of governance or administration upon receiving her post, but her eminently practical nature and rigid military discipline has made left her equal to the task. The port at Shan Ti is well known to run with precision and efficiency, with very little of the chaos or delays found in other major port cities. Miwauk is perplexed by the rumors surrounding her and the Emperor, a man she admires, respects, and considers one of her only friends, but since they seem to amuse him, she does not allow her irritation at them to overwhelm her sense of duty.

The only other current Dairini is the one tasked with the defense of Yalek, the third largest city in Vanora. Unlike Shan Ti and Tanto, Yalek suffered significant damage during the chaos following the Darkfall, and thus it has focused much of the last decade on rebuilding and fortifying against any additional attacks, of which there have been several. At the time of the Darkfall, the Dairini in command of the city had retired and there was an interim appointment from within the Sons of the Dragon, a brilliant jurak officer named Raeganna. When the cataclysm happened, Raeganna and her twin sister led the city's defenses and managed to keep it from being lost, but her sister died in the effort. The city's surviving leaders and high-ranking bureaucrats unanimously voiced their gratitude and support for Raeganna and readily admitted that the city would have been lost if not for her leadership. The Young Dragon, eager to maintain order as much as possible, granted Raeganna the permanent position as Dairini and offered her his personal gratitude. The only thing she asked in exchange for accepting such a massive responsibility was her desire to be known henceforth only as Rage, a result of her overwhelming hatred of the Darkfall and its nocturnals due to the death of her sister. It is said throughout Vanora that even the corrupted fear to operate within Yalek, for Rage has a sixth sense about hunting down such individuals and extracting terrible vengeance for her personal loss, and the losses suffered by the city.

The Imperial Golemancer

Vanora has only recently embraced mechamagic in any significant capacity, thanks in no small part to the endorsement of the most recent Emperor. Centuries of insular culture left Vanora far behind other nations in the mechamagic arts, but that gap is swiftly closing, leading to the creation of some of Aden's most wondrous and fascinating mechamagical creations. Mechamages, particularly those in the employ of the Imperial bureaucracy, have become increasingly well respected among the populace. Among the Imperial mechamages, none is more respected than the Imperial Golemancer.

The Imperial Golemancer is the foremost of Vanora's mechamages. It is a position granted only by the Emperor himself, reserved only for the most talented, dedicated, and loyal of mechamagic students. The Imperial Golemancer answers only to the Emperor, and is granted a grand estate and virtually limitless resources with which to carry out their work. Their only duty is to create mechamagical guardians, golem *yojimbo* to protect the Imperial line (and those honored few under which Imperial protection extends) against any and all threats. This means the Imperial Golemancer is directly responsible for the Emperor's very safety... and will be the first to be blamed should any misfortune befall him. This is why it is said that the Imperial Golemancer "drinks from an overflowing cup, yet stands beneath a readied blade."

History

The Imperial Golemancer appointment is the newest Imperial Appointment within the Silver Dragon's Court, created by the proclamation of Emperor Dyok the Younger. Although the recent Emperor is the first to support the spread of mechamagic within Vanora, the creation of the title came from necessity. Two years ago, a coup from within the Sons of the Dragon, orchestrated by a mysterious entity known only as "Shogun," nearly claimed the Emperor's life. Although the coup failed, it proved how woefully unprepared the Emperor's guardians were

against the modern tactics of his enemies. Worse, it threw those sworn to protect the Imperial line beneath the prevailing shadows of doubt and cast shame into the Sons of Dragon. No longer were the honor and oaths of the Emperor's primary guardians adequate to assure his safety. With doubt comes weakness; while the Sons of the Dragon endeavored to reclaim their lost honor, what was required now were protectors who could not be turned, whose loyalty was truly beyond question.

Thus it was decided, in the Emperor's infinite wisdom, that the Silver Dragon's personal defenses would be adequately modernized. With new mechemagic advancements arriving from neighboring kingdoms daily, Dyok envisioned personal mechemagic bodyguards, specialized golem *yojimbo*, warriors of bronze and manite who never tire and whose hearts cannot be turned. For this, he needed a truly gifted mechemage, one whose mastery of the golemic arts was secondary only to their devotion. So it was that the Imperial Golemancer position was born.

The two years following the defeated coup has seen the Emperor's personal retinue of golem *yojimbo* grow significantly. From the living clockwork suits of Dragon Armor standing vigil in the throne room, to the steam-powered *komainu* statues that spring to life when any threat approaches the grand staircase, to the skillfully folded metal *origami* that spy on guests from the darkened corners of their quarters, the ingenuity of the Imperial Golemancer has been fully brought to bear. But not all are pleased with the newest addition to the Silver Dragon's Court, and some see the position as an outward affront to not only tradition, but the very honor of the Emperor's living guardians. It is fair to say that in spite of their service to the Dyok line, the so called "Copper Drake" has more enemies than friends...

In spite of the position's newness, there have already been two Imperial Golemancers. The first, Oda Hitashi, is responsible for the creation of the famous Iron Drakes, the invention of which earned him the appointment. After several seasons, the *Hatamoto* of the Sons of the Dragon took umbrage with Hitashi's placement of golem *yojimbo* within the Emperor's living quarters and personal shrine, claiming this to be an overreach of the position's authority, disgraceful of a named official, and a challenge to the honor of the Sons. But when Hitashi was brought before the court to formally face his accuser (and an expected duel), the Imperial Golemancer passionately argued the necessity of mechemagic to combat the "inherent treachery of a noble's heart," apologized to the *Hatamoto*, and offered his own life to demonstrate the sincerity of his convictions. Before permission could be granted, he revealed to the court his self-inflicted disemboweling; he had chosen to kill himself in order to spare the Emperor the disgrace of involvement. With a snap of Hitashi's fingers, a golem *yojimbo* severed his head. Dyok the Younger, moved by Hitashi's conviction, formally expanded the powers of the Imperial Golemancer to rival that of the highest-ranked Son of the Dragon. The *Hatamoto* retired soon after, and the courts have already forgotten his name.

Currently the position is held by a woman named Hatsumei, the first (and only) human to ever hold the position. Due to a clerical error, it was decided that she was Hitashi's foremost student at Tanto's School of Mechemagic, and her strange, fanciful inventions (little more than whimsical trinkets) made Emperor Dyok smile. Upon accepting the position, she became Hatsumei no Chindōgu, a title for which she endeavors to be worthy. But in addition to the newly-expanded rights and high status of the position, Hatsumei may have also inherited her predecessor's enemies.

The Copper Drake

As an appointed court official and personal advisor to the Emperor, the Imperial Golemancer enjoys a number of special privileges. The foremost is the Copper Dragon Estate, a palace within Tanto that incorporates an extensive metalmagic library and personal laboratory. Metalmagic texts sought from throughout Aden are brought to this place, as are the limited writings regarding the Darkfall. The Imperial Golemancer is also considered one of the headmasters of the Metalmagic College, and as such enjoys access to their extensive resources. There is also an impressive stipend, access to the higher echelons of society, and all other perks inherent to such a coveted position.

These benefits are considered integral to the duty of the Imperial Golemancer: to build guardians that protect and serve the Emperor. At any time, the Imperial Golemancer is inventing new golem *yojimbo* or improving upon prior designs. Each must be created to accept the commands of only a handful, and among them, always the Emperor himself. The palace in Tanto is filled with these clockwork automatons, and some mechanical *yojimbo* always accompany the Emperor along with his personal retinue.

Even though the Imperial Golemancer is hand-chosen by the Emperor, and therefore always among his most loyal servants, there is another reason why those who hold the position are especially invested in the Emperor's well-being. By the law of Vanora, if the Emperor is ever assassinated while the clockwork *yojimbo* are present, the Imperial Golemancer is automatically sentenced to death. While it is expected that the Golemancer would disembowel themselves, the execution duty officially falls to the leader of the Sons of the Dragon. The law was written this way specifically to assuage the Emperor's other servants and ensure the dependency of the station. So far, there hasn't been another attempt on Dyok's life. But it is only a matter of time, and when it comes, the true test of the station begins...

Occasionally, a golem *yojimbo* will be made to protect someone other than the Emperor himself. To be placed under the care of such a *yojimbo* is a great and rare honor, and this gift is reserved for only the most deserving. Other things the Imperial Golemancer has created include the Dragon Chariot, a steam-powered palanquin meant only for Dyok and his line, and the Splendid Turtle, a seafaring pleasure craft built to modern standards.

The nickname of the Imperial Golemancer is "The Copper Drake." This comes from the personal heraldry of the position, which depicts a copper drake in flight. This emblem was specifically chosen to appease the existing servants of the Emperor; the drake is lesser than the dragon, which is the totem animal of the Emperor and his servants, while also being representative of the Golemancer's training and duties.

The life of the Copper Drake is a lonely one. Due to the circumstances of its creation, many look upon the position with suspicion. Were he well enough, surely the elder Emperor would never have approved such an office! Other court officials see the newcomer as a threat to their positions in the delicate court hierarchy, while others see the Imperial Golemancer as a mere puppet of the Emperor whose clout is all theory. The Sons of the Dragon see the existence of the office as a direct affront to their honor and very reason for existing, a stain on centuries of tradition and an insult to their very way of life. However, they are helpless to challenge the young Emperor, for they are still burdened by the betrayal that once sprang from their ranks. Distrusting of the "tin bugei" protecting the scion of Dyok and eager to recover their face, for now they simply wait for the Imperial Golemancer to fail so they can prove their traditions superior to a charlatan's parlor tricks.



Yojimbo Golems

Although the art of golem creation is new to Vanora, it has advanced rapidly since Tanto's first metalmagic college was installed. Vanoran mechamages tend to create fewer golems than those of other nations, but spend far more time in perfecting them towards a specific ideal. This is because the creation of golems is more than just a necessity to Vanoran mechamages. It is an art form all to itself.

As the highest-ranked mechamage (at least theoretically), *yojimbo* golems invented by the Imperial Golemancer are expected to adhere to a number of specific principles. The foremost concern is the absolute protection of their charge, and for this reason a good *yojimbo* golem should have considerable defensive capabilities. Rebuffing and disarming attackers is prerequisite, as is intercepting assassination attempts, proficiency with weaponry, and the ability to sustain damage and continue operation. Golem *yojimbo* must also be able to follow the commands of their charge. Most are therefore created for specific charges, but the most complex contain a rudimentary intelligence capable of accepting (and prioritizing) commands from multiple masters. The writs created for these golems take the form of lightning-shaped paper strips emblazoned with runes of spiritual power, which are affixed to the golem via specially-made ropes. In combination, these writs create a web of behaviors and bestowed abilities that can surpass even the most highly-trained mortal bodyguards.

But just as important as a *yojimbo*'s capabilities is its ability to preserve of the surrounding harmony. A good golem *yojimbo* does not "stand out" and announce its presence, as the imposing golems of other nations often do. They instead appear as though they belong in their surroundings. Vanora golems are appreciated as works of art in addition to servants and artificial warriors, and so a certain aesthetic quality is expected. They are created with their intended environment in mind; the clockwork armor *yojimbo* blend in flawlessly with the decor of the Silver Court, steam-powered shrine guardians appear as statues or mythological beasts, and unfolding "origami" golems integrate seamlessly with a castle's sliding doors and paper wall dividers. When made without a specific environment in mind, the ideal golem visually represents some aspect of transience, the beauty of flawed and imperfect things, or an aspect of the Way of the Ten Beasts.

Golem *yojimbo* have a number of advantages over living bodyguards. They do not tire. They require no sleep. They surpass mortal senses and act unwaveringly, without regard to their own personal safety. Most importantly, they are incapable of betrayal... or any emotion, for that matter. Indeed, the golem *yojimbo* is the perfect embodiment of the warrior ideal "*mushin no shin*," or "The Mind Without Mind." This state, in which the warrior is free from ego, hesitation, discursive thought, and judgment, a state in which there is no reliance on technique and action flows naturally without interruption, can take decades of training for human beings to achieve, and centuries for long-lived peoples such as elves (whose long lifespans ironically reinforce the embrace of pre-conceived notions and the reliance on patterns, hindering their path to this state of warrior consciousness). But the expertly created metalmagic golem is already born into this state of being, defending their charges with the skill it would take decades for others to master. Perhaps this is why they are so resented by mortal charges.

Hatsumei no Chindogu, Imperial Golemancer

Born the daughter of a mere farming family, Hatsumei's life changed when she first encountered a merchant caravan's steamwagon passing through a nearby trade village. She became fascinated by the machine, and questions on how it worked occupied her every waking thought. Every season she would accompany her family to the market and trade for any invention blueprints or documents she could find. She began making inventions of her own, simple things to help on the farm or impractical trinkets that made her younger brothers laugh. Her parents deemed her eccentric hobby "harmless," so they never directly discouraged her aspirations. Soon enough she would be married off for a dowry, and she would give up on such silly dreams. But fate had other things in mind. When the new Emperor established his School of Mechamagic, he was eager to prove its worth to the world, and so his servants searched

Vanora for anyone who showed aptitude. Hatsumei was discovered by chance entertaining the market with one of her little dancing clockwork trinkets. They saw in her a capability for the arcane, and within days she was in the city of Tanto, overwhelmed by its massive buildings and dense culture. The rest, as some might say, is history.

As the second Imperial Golemancer, the only human to hold the title, and the youngest official of the Silver Dragon's court, Hatsumei is quite the fish out of water. Her grasp of magic is second to her inventive ability, but the office requires both in equal measure, and so she relies heavily on her hand-picked assistants. Politicians work circles around her, and almost no one takes her seriously. She is overworked, stressed out, and always exhausted. But every now and again, she gets to see one of her creations brought to exquisite life, doing something wonderful, beautiful, and previously-believed to be impossible. Those are the moments where she feels most alive. That makes it all worth it.

Hatsumei is a human female of twenty-two years of age. She is a dual-class Mechamage and Steamwright, and shows it. She is most often found in her laboratory or seeking new assistants to aid in her massive stack of orders and commissions. Hatsumei is most easily identified by the dark rings beneath her sleep-deprived eyes, the numerous gadgets adorning her outfit, and the almost-insane smirk she gives when she's on the verge of something *amazing*.



Bakemono Bandits

Although they are more infamous than famous, and less influential than something that others must react to, the Bakemono Bandits are nevertheless very well-known throughout much of Vanora. Trade caravans moving north from Tara and Shan Ti rarely attempt to save time by taking the mountain passes along the Vanoran Ridge. To do so would tempt the hidden lords of those mountains, a gang of Ferran thieves, scoundrels, and outlaws who call themselves the *Surudoï-kaze*, but are colloquially known as the Bakemono Bandits. Embracing the Way of Fox, these bandits have become local legends for their outlandish and daring thefts, but also for defending rural mountain villages when the Sons of the Dragon could (or would) not. Their lawless lives in defiance of the Emperor, many lords would see these notorious rascals cast down and justly punished. But they are so entrenched in those untamed hills, that many simply accept them as a consequence of the times, choosing to avoid them completely.

History

Because the dense hills and mountains are so remote in spite of their relative proximity to the port city of Shan Ti, the Vanoran Ridge has always been attractive to various bandit gangs throughout Vanoran history. But these gangs never lasted for more than a few years at a time. Eventually the law of the Dragon Emperor would muster to root them out and order would return.

This changed when a badger ferran named Sanada built a fortress at the top of the highest peak and declared himself the bandit lord of the range. Little is known for sure about Sanada, but local legend claims that he was born under another name and loyally served a Vanoran lord until he was betrayed. Sanada was a devout follower of Fox, recommitting himself to Fox's teachings daily and establishing a shrine to the Fox aspect near the top of the mountain.

The first mention of Sanada The Smiling is an attack on a large caravan leaving from Shan Ti, in which Sanada and his well-trained and coordinated bandits overcame the guards "in the space of five breaths" and took one-fifth of their goods "as a road tax," without any loss of life. The guards believed they were outnumbered three to one; in truth, they outnumbered the bandits by five times, a truth that, when released, catapulted Sanada and his band of outlaws into legend.

Over the next several years, he and the *Surudoï-kaze* staged a number of increasingly-daring thefts and raids, targeting merchant caravans and wealthy fortresses, from the mountain passes to as far West as Shang. He and his cohorts stole a mountain of wealth from the richest lords of the province. As his successes grew, his thefts grew more outlandish,





including ancestral weaponry, lineage papers held for ransom, and in one well-documented case, an entire merchant junk of exotic beasts from the Misland Republics. He kept only a portion of the wealth for himself, distributing the rest to the poor rural farming villages scattered throughout the mountains, some of whom would have starved were it not for the coin. His exploits became the subject of countless folk songs, and disenfranchised ferran longing for purpose flocked to his banner. Villagers became more loyal to him than to their own lords, referring to him as “Lord Sanada of the Ridge.”

This was unacceptable to the local lords, but especially so to a provincial governor named Toyoyasu. He poured his city’s taxes into caravan guards, paid assassins to find Sanada in the mountains, doubled the security of his vassals’ palaces, and even offered 200 gold bars to whomever turned Sanada in. Yet for all his efforts, the bandit king remained uncaught. The rivalry between Toyoyasu and Sanada captured the imagination of the populace, becoming the subject of plays and puppet shows (featuring protagonists with different names, of course), always depicting Sanada as the charming, taunting victor, and Toyoyasu as a man out of his depth.

The final insult came when Sanada won the heart of a shrine priestess who was the niece of Toyoyasu. It is said that the priest of that very shrine was the one who married them. This was seen as a great loss of face for Toyoyasu, and for a man so deeply committed to the order of the Dragon Emperor, for a bandit to “steal from his own bloodline” was unforgivable. Within a month, Toyoyasu amassed a great force within Shan Ti, over two-hundred soldiers, and prepared to lay siege to the mountain fortress of the *Surudoi-kaze* bandits. By his hand, they would be purged from the ridge, his niece’s marriage would be annulled, and order would be restored.

It never happened. Two days before the march came the Darkfall.

In the sea of nightmares that befell the city, and the hundreds of amanojaku sprung to life from the brief flash of utter dark, Toyoyasu’s gathered force was broken in two. The nearest hillside itself rose to life as a living demon. The entire city would have been lost had Toyoyasu not gathered his forces as he had. In the days afterward, in the eyes of the lords beyond his realm, it was as if Toyoyasu had predicted the event somehow. When the dust settled, and order was finally restored, Toyoyasu looked to the mountains and saw smoke rising from the woods. He knew these were the farming villages that had venerated Sanada, that the Darkfall now ravaged them, and that with his gathered armies, he might be able to help them. He did nothing. If misfortune befell the farmers, well... that’s just what they get for throwing their lot in with outlaws.

When it became obvious that the governor would not lend his aid, Sanada went instead. There was only so much the bandits could do, but every life they saved was another life that praised his name. When the last nightmare was felled in the mountain, only a handful of villages remained. But they lived only due to Sanada and his bandits. To them, he was more lord than Toyoyasu had ever been.

Shortly after, with the harvests ruined and the threat of starvation lingering over the farmers, Sanada appeared before Toyoyasu’s gates. He was turning himself in for the reward, so he said. Sanada endured interrogations for five days before Toyoyasu sentenced him to death by boiling.

However, word had spread of Sanada’s bandits defending people from the Darkfall. The day of his execution, a letter came from Tanto. The Dragon Emperor had pardoned Sanada for banditry, and had downgraded his punishment to “tattooing” (so he could always be identified) and banishment. Toyoyasu could not disobey the Emperor, and so Sanada was tattooed and released with escort to live the rest of his life as a monk in contemplation of Fox’s teachings. Despite this, Toyoyasu still got the last laugh. In twelve hours, Sanada suddenly went into seizures and died. The ink for his tattoos had been poisoned.

Some legends say that Sanada did not perish, that he faked his death and that he is living his days in a secluded place. While this is only a fanciful end to exaggerated tales, it is true that shortly after his death, twenty gold bars went missing from Toyoyasu’s treasury... the reward for Sanada’s capture, finally claimed.

The Bandits Today

For their part, the *Surudoi-kaze* bandits continue to live in defiance of the Vanoran lords. Their numbers are diminished, but they are still plenty, and in some cases entire bandit families are hidden in the keeps of the wild mountains. While the *Surudoi-kaze* continue to operate in the mountains north of Shan Ti, the age of their more outlandish exploits appears to have ended. Caravans passing through are at great risk of being raided (some without ever realizing they’ve been robbed), but enough make it through untouched for merchants to still consider the path.

Nearly all of the bandits are ferrans, most commonly cat, badger, otter, red panda, and fox ferrans. Those few who are not ferran are elven instead, including Sanada’s widow. The bandits are devout followers of Fox, embracing the “wits over brawn” mentality wholly. From their hidden palace in near the peak, they train themselves, study Fox’s teachings, and live wild, untamed lives.

The current leadership of the *Surudoi-kaze* is divided between three ferrans, the adopted children of Sanada himself. He had discovered them abandoned, three tanuki ferrans, who he took in and raised as his own children. The three siblings decide all matters for the bandits, accepting council from their mother, who knew their father well, and the doctrine of Fox. Takko and Chiyosei, brother and sister, lead the bandits in raids and in military matters, while the youngest brother Dorei takes after his mother, leading with the wisdom of Fox.

Life in the mountains is especially hard in the wake of the Darkfall. The *Surudoi-kaze* try to hold back the darkness, but while the mountains are relatively free of the nightmares that haunt the lands, their grip on peace is slowly failing. Their way of life cannot be sustained, not while keeping the mountains safe for the surviving villages. Lately, learning that the rest of Vanora also struggles in the shadow of the Darkfall, Takko has considered offering to join forces with the Sons of the Dragon, offering the bandits fealty in exchange for legal claim to the mountains as their realm. Chiyosei vehemently disagrees. Her honor cannot allow any alliance with lords she sees as oppressors, and deep in her heart she cannot forgive Toyoyasu for his role in her father’s death. In the middle is Dorei, who is pulled in both directions by his beloved siblings. Time will tell if the three will find a path that unites them, or if their disagreement will tear the *Surudoi-kaze* apart.

Relations

The few remaining villages of the area regard the bandits as their lords. Exploits of the “Bakemono Bandits,” most of which are exaggerated and retold to the embarrassment of local lords, have raised the bandits to folk heroes in the eyes of the commoners. With the constant threat of the Darkfall hanging over their heads, most villagers welcome the image of an unbeatable, unflappable force of gallant thieves, who stole from fat lords and gave that wealth to the starving and desperate. Of course, the villagers still bow to their true lords, and they still follow the laws laid before them. But in their hearts, their true lords are the tricksters of the mountains.

The lords of Vanora have great distain for the bandits. They are a blight on the lands, and their very existence is a mockery of the law. But there is little to be done about them, especially when there are pressing matters elsewhere, and the Darkfall’s effects still echo throughout the kingdom. For now, it is easier to tolerate the bandits and avoid the mountains altogether. After all, how long can they really last up there?



LANDS OF VANORA

The Dragon Empire is a verdant land, with a number of different biomes, all of which have valuable resources to offer the people who make their home within the nation. The people of Vanora recognize this, and have ever since the days of the Beast tribes that predate the nation's founding. It is perhaps this awareness that led to Vanora's initial xenophobia, a trait that has largely disappeared over time but to which many outsiders still unknowingly ascribe them. In particular the people of the neighboring nation Rhanate have a reasonable amount of animosity toward Vanora, due to the scarcity of resources in their homeland and the difficulty in successfully trading with Vanorans. Ironically, this is largely a result of the excessive raiding by bandits from the Rhanate that Vanora has endured over the years, resulting in a sharp cultural divide and mistrust between the two nations that is unlikely to be easily overcome anytime soon.

MAJOR GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES

♦ **DEAD FOREST** – The so-called Dead Forest is very aptly named due to the large number of undead that are spawned within it. This phenomenon predates the Darkfall by centuries, although it has worsened since that cataclysm occurred, and is presumed to be linked in some way to the campaign of the Silent Lord in the north, who similarly blighted portions of Carraway with a similar curse. Why this curse affected a large woodland section of Vanora far to the south, a region where the Silent Lord's campaign never reached, is unknown, but speculation has it that the necromancer bore particular hatred for the Dragon Empress of that era, as she was one of the High Theocrat's greatest allies and personally thwarted their hated enemy on the battlefield on more than one occasion. The Dead Forest is a study in contrast, however, for while the undead spawn there with great frequency, it is also demonstrably true that the trees and other vegetation of the forest grow at a rate almost double that of other forests. Adherents of the Church of All Saints believe that this is a blessing from Ilovich, the Patron Saint of Sacrifice, who in life was the High Theocrat who fought alongside the Dragon Empress and who gave his life to finally defeat the Silent One all those years ago. Vanorans and followers of the Way of the Ten Beasts have doubts about this claim, but having little other explanation, they do not challenge it and use it as an opportunity to maintain friendly ties between the two faiths, both within Vanora's borders and beyond. Regardless, the accelerated growth within the forest makes it an incredible natural resource for the harvesting of lumber. Until fairly recently, the lumber harvesting in this region was limited because of the presence of the goyan tree, a highly specialized tree found in only limited quantities elsewhere and requiring magic to aid in the collection thereof. The past few years has seen the industry in Shang pushing deeper into the forest's interior in search of more traditional lumber, however; this was done initially to aid the city in its construction of an unofficial Thunder

Station, but it has also opened up previously inaccessible regions of mundane lumber to be harvested as well, and this has single-handedly reduced the extent to which Vanora depends upon lumber imports from Carraway. Fortunately, the Emperor has directed his merchant houses to switch their trade with their neighbors in the north to stone, both to limit the mining done in Vanora's sacred mountains and to avoid any rising tensions with the Church of All Saints that reigns in that nation.

♦ **SLEEPING RIVER** – The most significant waterway in Vanora originates from Great Moss Lake in Aramyst, but strangely has never suffered from the strangling moss-weed that infests that massive body of water despite the calm nature of the river in general. Indeed, the river takes its name from its gentle nature and serenity, rarely rising to become a problem despite the frequent, almost daily rainfall that takes place throughout much of the Dragon Empire. This rain does cause the plains surrounding the valley to remain under a small amount of water on a regular basis, however, and has proven ideal for the farming of rice, a staple in the diet of almost every Vanoran. The placid nature of the river ensures that traveling up and down its length is a simple matter, and the quick distribution of food has aided in the harvest surplus that the nation has enjoyed throughout much of its history.

♦ **THE EMPRESS'S GIFT** – The large island off the southeastern shore of the Vanoran coastline has had numerous names over the course of recorded history. Since its annexation with Vanora proper, an event that is never politely referred to as annexation but rather a merger or union or other courteous term, is generally referred to as the Empress's Gift. The island was originally home to a large population of individuals who did not unite with the first Dragon Emperor when the nation was formed, and regarded both themselves and the island on which they lived as sovereign. The first Emperor's son did not see things the same way, and launched a long, bitter campaign to annex the island. To his enormous frustration and anger, the natives successfully resisted for decades until the military effort to claim the island began to weaken Vanora's borders elsewhere and led to bandit incursions from the Rhanate. Grudgingly, the island was left to its own devices, which suited the population just fine. It would not be until much later, when the Empress Daihime would approach the leader of the island's people, an elven warrior of great skill, and offered her hand in marriage so that their children would rule the whole of Vanora and the island forever. The warrior agreed, and the island became part of Vanora, albeit a largely self-sufficient one, much like the self-governing province of Phoros the nation of Kyan in the west.

♦ **MOUNTAINS** – There are numerous mountains in Vanora, but none of them truly form a range, at least not as such things are regarded elsewhere in the Known Lands. Geomancers and others who study the ways of earth and stone find the presence of these peaks most peculiar, and in the peaceful time before the Darkfall, it was not uncommon for such experts to come from other portions of the continent to study the mountains. The general consensus is that these peaks were somehow created via magic, because otherwise their presence seems largely inexplicable given the current understanding of geology and geography. The Vanorans believe that they were created by the True Dragons to serve as homes, although most of those godlike creatures have since moved on

to other portions of the continent. It is alleged, however, that the great dragon Shosa, believed to be the physical embodiment of fire by some, still makes its home somewhere amid the snow-capped peaks, and that alone is enough to make the people of Vanora reluctant to engage in extensive mining for fear of disturbing the great beast's solitude. While some mining in the mountains has always taken place, it has recently been greatly reduced by the changes in trade with Carraway stemming from the increased lumber production at the Dead Forest, described above.

CITIES & SETTLEMENTS

Tanto, Venerable Capitol of the Dragon Empire

The largest and oldest city in the nation of Vanora, Tanto was born when the ten tribes of the Beasts united under the banner of the first Dragon Emperor. Dyus promptly stuck his dagger into the earth and proclaimed it to be the site of his new throne, where all those under his banner could come together in peace and brotherhood. Tanto was named for that moment, and the word means "dagger" in the old Vanoran tongue, a language still often spoken between Vanoran citizens today even if it is rarely spoken outside the nation's borders.

Tanto serves primarily as a headquarters for the imperial bureaucracy that serves the Dragon Emperor in his rule of Vanora, but it is also a massive marketplace that primarily serves those within the nation. There is a port, although it is smaller than that of neighboring Shan Ti, as the latter handles almost all international trade while Tanto is limited mostly to domestic. The port also serves as the headquarters of the Vanoran navy, which is the only reason it can even be compared to Shan Ti in the first place, and also the reason that very, very little piracy takes place in this portion of the Southern Seas; crossing the vessels of another nation may result in a manhunt or a bounty placed on one's head, but pirating the people of Vanora is an insult to their honor and their families, and results in a lifelong blood feud that will never be forgotten as long as the pirate lives. Most do not consider it worth the effort to prey upon Vanoran vessels because the price is looking over one's shoulder for the rest of their days, always on the lookout for a samurai tasked with avenging the Dragon Empire's honor in the most final way possible.

Tanto is also notable as the home of the Ten Great Temples, each of which venerates one of the Ten Beasts around which much of Vanoran society is based. Each of the temples is a center of philosophy, history, and education in a way that might surprise outsiders, most of whom automatically assume that they are more like the churches found in Carraway or Arasteen. Each temple is uniquely devoted to the primary interests of its patron totem. The Temple of Wolf, for example, serves as a training ground for warriors who wish to develop group tactics in addition to its common purposes described above. Its library contains one of the largest and most extensive libraries of military texts and tactical treatises still intact in Aden after the Darkfall. The Temple of Basilisk is a significant repository of arcane lore and a school for young men and women with a talent for spellcasting who seek to venerate Basilisk in their practices. The Temple of Dragon is unique in that it is located within the Imperial Palace and is open exclusively to the Emperor, his family, members of the Sons of the Dragon, and members of the Imperial bureaucracy.

By far the most exceptional of the temples, however, is the Temple of Fox. When the Young Dragon first decreed that he wished for a cabal of mechemages to be introducing their craft to Vanora, his first choice for the position was a follower of Fox. Rather than construct a new facility, this cunning goreaux established his new endeavors within the Temple of Fox, as he knew several other appropriately cunning Fox

adherents that could quickly adapt to studying mechemagic and provide appropriate support within the Emperor's circle of advisors. When the Emperor created the position of Imperial Golemancer a short time later, this goreaux humbly requested that he not be considered for the position so that he could continue to oversee the Emperor's work within the Temple of Fox. For the past decade, the Temple of Fox has remained the largest, most prestigious, and (within the confines of Tanto, at least) the only significant academy of mechemagic. Those mechemages who serve the Emperor directly are either foreigners recruited to his cause, Vanorans educated abroad, or products of the academy at the Temple of Fox.

Major Cities

❖ **SHAN TI** is the second largest city in Vanora and its largest and busiest port. While Tanto handles all domestic traffic, making its port strangely centered around rivers rather than the bay itself, Shan Ti is where all foreign vessels and merchants are expected to conduct their business. Many outsiders view this as a peculiar arrangement, but it allows the Imperial bureaucracy to track different tariffs and tax rates easily. It has also allowed merchants to diversify easily, with some who ply their trade in Shan Ti, purchasing goods from foreign vessels, then sailing the relatively short distance to Tanto and reselling the goods to other merchants for distribution throughout Vanora. It is an unconventional practice but one that has served Vanora well for centuries, and the bureaucracy sees no reason to alter what is working properly. In addition to its value to the nation's mercantile pursuits, Shan Ti is a massive center of military strength. While Tanto houses the Imperial bureaucracy and the military efforts of both the southern portion of the nation and the large island called the Empress's Gift, Shan Ti is home to the military leadership that oversees the larger, northern portion of the nation. The Dairini in command of Shan Ti, Miwauk, is ostensibly in command of all military forces stationed in Shan Ti, but she tends to defer to a council of senior officers responsible for the military exercises in the north, and focuses exclusively on military matters within the city proper.

❖ **YALEK** is Vanora's third largest city and the only one of its major urban areas to see significant damage as a result of the Darkfall. Despite that the city is well defended and fortified, as all Vanoran cities are and always have been, the inscrutable tactics of the nocturnals led them to attack it in vast waves during the days immediately following the cataclysm, and more insidious entities among their ranks manifested within the city itself and struck out at the defenders during key moments, weakening the defense and making the siege that much more difficult to resist. The slaving beasts attacking the city seemed intent on carnage rather than destruction, killing as many people as possible with every advance, while the creatures inside struck out at commanders and key installations. It was a coordinated assault unlike anything the people of Yalek had ever endured, and it exacted a very heavy toll. The cause was likely the city's rapid expansion. For twenty years prior to the Darkfall, Yalek had grown at a fast pace, and while the original city had been protected by a wall, the city had grown up beyond the wall and fully four tenths of it was unprotected from outside threats. Like so many settlements without proper defense throughout Vanora and the Known Lands beyond, there was no way to keep the nocturnals from these portions of the city when the apocalypse occurred. Despite the very best efforts of the city's finest defenders, the entirety of the sections outside the walls fell during the Darkfall or immediately thereafter, with the majority of the citizens who called those portions of the city home dying in the onslaught. The influx of survivors from those regions had few places to go, and often were rehomed into the vacated homes of those who died in the attempt to save the city. The end result is that the people of Yalek are closer than might be expected, with some families having forged an incredibly tight bond with one another over loss and sacrifice during the Darkfall. The decade since then has seen the city gradually attempt to extend its defensive perimeter to enclose the lost parts of the city. When this has been successful, a massive effort is made to purge any remaining nocturnals from a reclaimed portion before it is rebuilt and added back to the tapestry of Yalek.



Other Major Settlements

✧ **TARA** – Tara has the distinction of being one of the largest settlements in Vanora outside of the major cities, something that has resulted in it being a sort of “poor man’s capital,” where rural citizens prefer to travel to conduct their trade rather than being overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of cities like Tanto and Shan Ti. Its relatively centralized location has contributed significantly to this status, with one of the largest open-air markets in a city of its size anywhere in the Known Lands. Tara is also situated on a large freshwater lake from which a major tributary of the Sleeping River springs, and as such has a shockingly robust fishing industry. Nearly a third of the Tara market is devoted to fish of all manner and sizes, some of which are not found in freshwater anywhere else in the Known Lands.

✧ **SHANG** – Larger by far than Tara, Shang is the only other settlement in Vanora to which the title of city can accurately be applied. Because of its distance from the capitol, Shang is generally regarded by many as a sort of rural backwater with regard to the Imperial bureaucracy and the courts of the nation as a whole, and this is not an altogether inaccurate description. As described under the Dead Forest above, Shang has always been one of the only production centers of goyan tree wood anywhere in the world, and in the past few years has become a major producer of more conventional lumber for Vanora at large. The people of Shang are strongly devoted to, some might say obsessed with, the idea that they are the closest major urban center in Vanora to the currently existing Thunder Trail followed by the Thunder Trains of Urbana. They are convinced that it will be possible to convince Lord Urbane to declare Shang a new stop along the trail if they can but convince him that it is profitable to do so. Toward that end, for the

past three years they have worked tirelessly to create their own Thunder Station, reasoning that without the expense of creating a new station himself, Urbane will divert a train there for trade. Thus far, the people of Shang have seen nothing to indicate their gamble will pay off, but they have no intention of giving up easily.

Notable Villages

✧ **MIMURA** – A small farming village along the winding path of the Sleeping River, Mimura has very little to distinguish it from other similar villages except that it is home to a family with a long and exceptional history as shipwrights. This family, the Hikaru, are generally regarded by those who play their trade along the river as the finest barge-makers in all of Vanora. This is a strange accolade, of course, as truly wealthy merchants use different types of ships to move their goods up and down the river, but humble merchants and farmers from all over the nation come to put in orders for Hikaru river bargers, which are incredibly durable and up to 20% larger than other barges of comparable price.

✧ **THE NAMELESS VILLAGE** – Buried high in the mountains, where almost no one is capable of reaching without a specific destination in mind, there is a tiny village that is home to two dozen small families. These families are organized into two extended groups, the Koga and the Iga, and every family sends one representative to serve as part of a unique cadre of warriors who serve the Emperor directly. The warriors of the Nameless Village are the greatest ninja in Vanora, and virtually no one knows of their existence. Furthermore, only the Emperor is aware of their greater secret: all denizens of the Nameless Village are echoes.



NEW MECHANICS

WAY OF THE TEN BEASTS

Many citizens of Vanora choose to venerate one Beast more closely than the others, although there are virtually none who abandon the others in favor of a single Beast, for to do so courts disaster. Because of this, it is possible for literally anyone to follow any totem, and while it is not particularly common, one can find such oddities as a morbidly obese politician who venerates Shark, for example, despite how at odds such an individual might be with the common traits associated with that Beast.

For obvious reasons, the three warrior totems have more fighting men and women among their adherents than any of the other Beasts, and fewer arcanists or other, non-martially inclined individuals. Fighters, rangers, and paladins are common among all three of these totems. Clerics can be found in the adherents of each as well, although often in Vanora clerics are referred to as beast shamans rather than priests. With regard to the three warrior totems, some general notes on the kinds of followers they attract can be summarized as follows:

BASILISK – Of the three Totems of Power, Basilisk is considered the most esoteric. Leviathan may possess more power, and Drake the ability to use it aggressively, but Basilisk knows strange secrets the others do not possess. Outside of arcanists, very few follow the path of Basilisk, and they believe that their totem finds this suitable and considers most others unworthy. A majority of Vanora's alchemists in particular venerate Basilisk for his mysterious secrets. For those beast shamans that follow the totem, the domains of Knowledge, Magic, and Void are most frequently utilized.

DRAGON – As the greatest of the totems and lord of the Beasts, Dragon combines the qualities of power, cunning and the warrior in its most perfect form. Only the Emperor, the Sons of the Dragon, and members of the Imperial bureaucracy are permitted to bear the mark of Dragon, which limits those who can truly revere the Beast properly, for to serve the Dragon, one must be able to bear its mark. Because the Sons of the Dragon make up such a large percentage of those so permitted, Dragon tends to have a great number of warrior adherents, but there is no shortage of arcanists or other follower types. Literally any domain is suitable for Dragon, but among those most frequently encountered include Law, Good, and Scalykind.

DRAKE – If Basilisk is secretive and Leviathan powerful, then Drake is the most aggressive of the Totems of Power. A distant cousin of Dragon, Drake possesses only a fraction of its power but uses it to tremendous effect. Evokers are often adherents of Drake, and many sorcerers are as well. When rogues or slayers choose to dabble in the arcane arts, they often find Drake more to their liking than other totems because they appreciate its desire to take direct action whenever necessary. Mercenaries and bodyguards who spend their careers guarding spell-

casters also likewise find a kindred spirit in Drake. When beast shaman follows Drake's path, they often will choose Destruction, Magic, or War domains.

EAGLE – Of all the Beasts, only Eagle can rival Dragon for its sheer majesty and regal bearing, and it is said that the two totems have great respect for one another for this reason. Warriors who follow a Totem of Cunning favor Eagle, particularly if they have a strong heraldry and lineage. Eagle is particularly popular among those of noble bearing who favor neither strength of arms or the arcane arts, but instead rely upon social and economic power in order to achieve their ends. Paladins often choose Eagle, as do many samurai who favor one totem in addition to their dedication to Dragon. Beast shamans that choose Eagle as their patron tend to display an affinity for the Air, Glory, and Nobility domains.

FOX – Among the Totems of Cunning, Fox is the cleverest, or at least so Fox adherents would have everyone believe. Certainly, Fox has the best sense of humor, whereas Eagle is wise and Serpent is sinister. Fox is perhaps the totem with the most followers in modern Vanora, owing both to its popularity with the common people and with a common belief that the treacherous tactics of the nocturnals is best countered with cunning and trickery, the areas in which Fox is strongest. Fox is a favorite among rogues and ninja, though some eschew its tenets in favor of a more intense demeanor that they believe is suited to their work. Few warriors choose Fox, but some who are smaller and physically weaker favor it for its tactics. Beast shamans who venerate Fox favor the Charm, Luck, and Trickery domains.

LEVIATHAN – The most mysterious of the Ten Beasts and perhaps the one least venerated, Leviathan is among the Totems of Power and is alleged to possess a deep wellspring of arcane power that rivals even that of Dragon itself. Making its home deep within the ocean, Leviathan is a common totem for sailors of all sorts, save those who follow Shark because of their more aggressive demeanor. Most are simple warriors. A surprising number of Vanoran bards favor sea voyages, and many venerate Leviathan due to the amount of time they spend upon the sea. Most of its followers are arcanists, however, which is befitting a Totem of Power. Among the beast shamans who follow Leviathan, popular domains include Magic, Travel, and Water.

SERPENT – The least physically powerful of all the totems, Serpent is also the most treacherous and sinister in its application of power. It emerges victorious through deceit and what some might call villainous methods, such as poison. For Serpent, this is not a matter of good or evil, merely survival, and while the alliance of the Ten Beasts has stood now for more than a thousand years, Serpent never lets down its guard. Assassins and slayers revere Serpent, and ironically many investigators do as well, believing that knowing its tricks can help it outwit others who might attempt to use them less effectively. Beast shamans who follow Serpent's path often use the Darkness, Death, and Trickery domains.

SHARK – Shark is the most solitary of the warrior totems, even more so than Ursax, and its followers tend to follow the same path. There are more arcanists than usual among Shark's followers, including sorcerers and wizards who make extensive use of weather- or water-based magics. Barbarians are vastly more common in Shark's adherents than other totems, and there are a few rangers, rogues, and slayers who specialize in tracking and striking their enemy from the shadows with a single, devastating attack. Popular domain choices for beast shamans following Shark include Animal, Death, and Water.

URSAX – The focus on adaptability means that Ursax has a much more diverse body of followers than the other warrior tokens. Those who value strength and hardiness are its adherents, of course, including a significant number of barbarians and golemoids, but those who consider how to adapt to a different situation or combat are a varied group; warrior monks are also frequent followers of Ursax because of their belief in changing to suit the needs of a challenge rather than merely using pure brute force to overcome it. Among spellcasters who follow the warrior tokens, druids are most likely to adhere to Ursax's teachings. Popular domain choices for beast shamans following Ursax include Animal, Protection, and Strength.

WOLF – In addition to a great many traditional warriors, Wolf is the totem of choice for a surprising number of inquisitors, due primarily to their focus on teamwork and leadership among other men- and women-at-arms. Followers of Wolf are intelligent with their tactics, and many arbiters can be found among their ranks as well. Arcanists who follow Wolf tend toward enchantment as a focus in their magic, enhancing the abilities of their companions and equipment in order to better function as a whole group. Popular domain choices for beast shamans following Wolf include Animal, Community, and Glory (Heroism).

SECRETS OF KUJI-IN

The ninja of Vanora are warriors, but not ones that emphasize strength and power, instead focusing on stealth, cunning, and deception in order to eliminate opponents quickly and ideally without their presence ever becoming known. Despite their emphasis on such tactics, however, there are those among them who have mastered certain arcane secrets that allow them to focus their inner power, their ki, into external effects that can augment the ninja or allow him to interact with his environment in a clearly supernatural manner. These abilities are invoked via extremely complicated hand gestures, incredibly complex and shifting symbols that are impossible for one to replicate by accident, known as kuji-in. There are nine symbols that can be invoked in this manner, each one with a different effect. Some are more complex than others, and as a result they are often taught in a specific sequence as a ninja becomes more adept at his art. No kuji-in symbol may be attempted if a character possesses less than two ranks of Sleight of Hand. A ninja must have both hands free to perform a kuji-in secret symbol, and as such it is treated the same as a somatic component for casting a spell.

Ninja Tricks

Rin (Sp): The most basic of the kuji-in secrets, rin permits a ninja to channel his inner energy and use it to heal himself. The ninja may expend 1 ki and immediately regain 1d6 hit points.

Pyo (Su): The secret of pyo allows a ninja to channel his internal energies outward. While not a true arcanist, a ninja who can manifest such an ability can use their ki to overcome resistances in others. The ninja must expend one ki and choose an energy type (fire, electricity, etc.). The next attack the ninja makes is considered to have that type for the purposes of inflicting damage. This trick may be chosen multiple times, with different energy types chosen each time.





To: The secret of to allows a ninja to harmonize himself with his immediate surroundings, submerging his essence in hiding and concealing his natural rhythms, such as breathing and heartbeat, into other background noises. Expending a single point of ki allows the ninja to gain a +3 circumstance bonus to Disguise or Stealth checks, depending upon which one the ninja may be using at the time.

SHA (SP): Sha is an advanced form of the basic kuji-in rin, allowing for greater focus and result. The ninja may now heal himself of 2d6 hit points for a single ki expenditure, or may instead heal 1d6 in another for one ki point. A ninja must possess the trick rin to learn this trick.

KAI: The most advanced of the first tier of kuji-in, kai allows a ninja to develop a preternatural awareness of his surroundings in order to prevent being caught unawares. The ninja may perform the kai gesture and expend 1 ki. For one hour thereafter, if the ninja is part of a surprise round, he is not considered flat-footed.

Master Ninja Tricks

Master level kuji-in may not be attempted without at least 5 ranks of Sleight of Hand. A ninja must possess no less than three kuji-in tricks before he may choose to select a master trick from this list.

JIN (SP): The arcane secrets of jin allow a ninja to perceive the surface thoughts of a target, who must be kept in view during the invocation of the secret hand symbols. Spending one ki allows the ninja to generate the effect, which is identical to the spell detect thoughts.

RETSU (SP): The secret of retsu allows a ninja to move from one location to another without crossing the space in between. This can only be done if the ninja is concealed from others' view, or the energy will not flow properly. The ninja may spend 1 ki and invoke this effect, which is identical to dimension door except that he can only perform the trick if he is concealed.

ZAI (SP): A powerful secret that allows a ninja to extend his control of his own energy to other forms of energy, zai can protect him from external sources. By spending 1 ki, the ninja may protect himself against certain forms of energy by aligning his internal energy with it. This effect is identical to the spell resist energy.

ZEN: The final and most elusive secret of kuji-in is that of enlightenment. Ninja do not typically seek this gift, but some encounter it as a by-product of their ongoing quest to master their own energies. This secret may not be learned unless the ninja knows all other kuji-in secrets. The ninja no longer needs to spend ki to activate each secret the first time he does so each day.



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Vanora

The Nations of Aden - Volume 1

WELCOME TO THE ANCIENT EMPIRE OF VANORA!

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