

DRAGON-BLOODED

WHAT FIRE HAS WROUGHT



KICKSTARTER

MANUSCRIPT PREVIEW #1

Ry 718

The last wagon trundled away, bearing with it the daiklave of River's former commander. The blade would return to House Peleps accompanied by a letter describing Peleps Lazurin's brave last deeds, and conveying River's sincerest condolences at the lack of a body. A short train of carts, wagons, and sledges wended away down the road, leaving their Wyld Hunt's once-bustling camp little more than an empty stretch of road just north of the River Province. Birdsong was already replacing the ring of weapons on the air, and the last cookfire had dwindled down to embers.

The carts contained the weapons and armor of the slain — at least what River, Eshuvar, and Kingfisher Swift had been able to recover. A scant handful of monks' and soldiers' bodies were being shipped home, but the Anathema had reduced most of them to splintered bones and stinking offal. Far too many families were receiving only letters.

River's hands ached from writing them, but she'd taken on the responsibility while the servants and retainers she'd dismissed packed their dead masters' things. It was the least she could do.

There wasn't *time* to be writing missives — every hour's delay let the two Anathema who'd laid waste to their Wyld Hunt slip farther away. But the survivors who hadn't fled needed time to regroup, to tend to their wounds, to figure out what came next.

All three survivors.

Sesus Eshuvar stood in the middle of the road, watching the wagons go. He'd been only a few months out of the Heptagram when they first set out on the Hunt. River had noticed how young he'd seemed, then: tall and gangly, practiced but not yet polished, trying to find the proper line between self-assured hauteur and polite deference. Now there was a slump to his shoulders, as though he'd aged twenty years overnight. *We all have.*

Next to Eshuvar, Kingfisher Swift leaned heavily on her mace, her unit's standard propped beside her. Her legion's talon had made up the bulk of the Hunt's forces, and now she was all that remained. Swift was a lost egg who'd taken the coin; she couldn't be more than a dozen years into her service. River might have asked if Swift wished she'd taken the razor instead, but, well. That wouldn't necessarily have kept her away from this disaster. River herself was proof of that.

The Immaculate Order had arranged this Wyld Hunt, mustered the might of the Realm and sent them on the trail of two Anathema who were preying on the people north of the River Province. The Order had provided the intelligence and placed one of their most promising monks in charge of the expedition. He'd been a solid leader, brave and competent, right up until the Wretched slew him.

Now River was the last Immaculate still breathing, and it fell to her to finish the Hunt.

She straightened her robes, thankful that if she'd gotten ink on her sleeves it didn't show against the black fabric, and joined the others. "We have to find them."

Eshuvar and Swift turned toward her as one. "We three?" asked Eshuvar. "You don't think we should wait for reinforcements?"

"They won't come in time," said River.

“If we wait,” said Swift, “the Anathema have time to recover from their wounds. We can’t waste the opportunity our companions died to give us.”

For a moment River thought Eshuvar might argue — it was in the way his jaw settled into a stubborn line, how his chin lifted just a hair — but he closed his eyes and breathed deep, and merely nodded.

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Two figures approached, one on horseback, the other keeping up on foot with the steed’s steady trot. The mounted one wore steel armor and a horned kabuto helmet, and had the air of Lookshy about him. A splash of red at his shoulder broke up the armor’s grays. When they drew closer, River realized the red was a robin, perched and alert on its master’s plate.

His companion, a heavysset woman, was dressed plainly, her clothing neat but threadbare from travel. Two flamepieces were tucked into her belt, a daiklave strapped to her back. She kept her hands well away from the weapons, as if attempting to reassure the Dynasts she meant no harm.

“We’re looking for Righteous River Overflows Its Banks,” said the Lookshyan. “One of the cart-bearers said she was in charge.” He wore an easy smile, taking in all three of the survivors. Beside River, Eshuvar straightened up and smiled back wanly.

“I’m River,” she said.

“Ah, perfect,” he said, and slipped from his saddle to come take her hand. “I am Yushoto Mathar, and my friend is Left Hand Chalima. Word reached us of a Wyld Hunt and we came to offer our services.” He paused and looked back the way they’d come, then back to River, the smile faltering. “Are they still needed?”

River glanced at Eshuvar, who already seemed heartened by the newcomers’ presence. Swift gave her a short nod. “The Anathema are wounded, but not dead. What you passed just now were our own casualties. If you’re still willing, in the face of that—”

“We are.” Chalima stepped forward, grim but eager. “They need to be dealt with.”

“I’ve been tracking them,” said Mathar. “Until recently they’d roamed far enough from the River Province’s borders, and I had more immediate threats to worry about. But now....” He gestured toward the dwindling train of the dead. “If they’re allowed to recover, they’ll be looking for retaliation. Or *liberation* for our smaller territories, if what they preach can be believed. I have some ideas where they might have fled. If you have maps, I can show you.”

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The command tent had been packed up and sent home with the wagons, but River had kept the table covered with Peleps Lazurin’s maps and markers to study. The place where they’d planned to draw out the Anathema and overwhelm them with a show of Terrestrial

might still held its formation on the largest of the maps. It seemed wrong, somehow, like the markers ought to have at least all fallen over when the Dragons they represented died.

Mathar waited for her nod of permission before removing the markers from the map. One by one, he laid them down in their lacquered case. In the end, all that remained were the two representing the Anathema. “There are settlements here and here,” he said, pointing at spots deeper in the forest. “They might seek shelter there, but it would put the people at risk.”

On the journey there, River had read report after report from the Wyld Hunt’s informants, discussing the number of mortals under the Anathema’s thrall, how many believed their promises to protect them from the ambitions of Lookshy and the Realm, how the two had ambushed trade caravans and traveling dignitaries and laid claim to their goods and valuables. “Would they hurt the people they’ve been rallying to their cause all this time?”

“They’re not in danger from the Anathema,” said Chalima. “It’s from you. From us.”

River bristled, but it wasn’t a point she could argue too fiercely. If a village were destroyed in the pursuit and elimination of an Anathema, many would consider it an acceptable loss.

“They won’t hide there.” Swift came over to study the map. “When we fought, they were leading us *away* from the village we’d tracked them to. Could’ve run back to it, made the people stand between us and them. They didn’t. Where else?”

Mathar pointed at a third spot, half a day’s ride away: a low valley whose only good entrance was a narrow road between two steep rock ledges. “Here, then. If I were going to make a last stand, it’s where I’d go.”

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“We should swear an oath,” said Swift. They were by the side of the road, finishing a meal scraped together from what the retainers had left behind. For Chalima, who grew up in poverty in the Scavenger Lands, it was a feast. Eshuvar made comments about missing this or that side dish, or wishing for a glass of some expensive wine to wash it down, but subsided at a glance from River. Mathar lifted the young sorcerer’s spirits when he shared out a packet of seasoning he’d brought from Lookshy. Swift had finished her plate quickly, a habit formed in the Legion. It meant she missed out on Mathar’s spices, but she’d had time to think while the others ate.

During the planning, River and Chalima shaped the strategy while Mathar and Eshuvar chimed in with recommendations. Swift had remained quiet, trying to figure out what had gone so terribly wrong on the Hunt. Now she stood, meeting each of their gazes, ready to defend her declaration. She wasn’t one for pretty words and inspiring speeches, but River had listened this morning when Swift suggested they push on. She might listen now. “The bond will strengthen us. It’s what we should have done before.”

To Swift’s surprise, it wasn’t River who rose first in support, but Chalima. The hand she held out was already warm with Essence. “I swear,” she said, “by Earth, by Wood, by Fire, by Air, by Water....”

The other three were standing before Chalima reached the last element, their animas flaring to life as they recited their oaths. The words differed — the Realm and Lookshyan versions were more intricate, more poetic, than Chalima’s short declaration — but the *intent* was the same. Their banners flared as their voices rose, the five elements twining together and climbing toward the sky. As they stated their purpose to hunt down the two Anathema, all five stood straighter, resolve swelling in their hearts. They recited one another’s names, each one a promise to the others.

Then it was done, and the oath settled deep, coming to rest in their very bones. Swift felt it not like a restraint, but an expansion. Her companions’ vitality sang with her own, and she felt, for the first time in days, like they might survive what was to come.

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The Kinship passed through the place where the Hunt had failed with little comment. The survivors grew solemn, and River uttered prayers for the dead as they passed, but otherwise they pressed straight on. The fleeing Anathema had followed the route Mathar predicted. The ranger picked up the trail quickly. His robin flew ahead a little ways, returning now and then to chirp at them and take off again. “We’ll catch up to them by daybreak,” he said. No one wanted to stop and rest. No one even had to ask.

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Later, River would recall the battle in flashes.

She remembered the woman towering above them, the blazing silver circle on her forehead terrible to behold. Her voice was a roar in River’s ears. River might have given into instinct and fled, if it weren’t for Swift at her side and the knowledge of her companions behind. Then came the brittle flapping of obsidian wings and the sharp acrid smell of a flamepiece, and that awful need to *run, go, get out* stopped buzzing in her head.

She remembered the thrum of Mathar’s bow. The steady rhythm of his arrows kept the howling Wretched from reaching Chalima. Gave River and Swift the opportunity to get within striking distance.

She remembered losing the Anathema in a swirl of darkness. He’d reappear, strike, then fade again. Swift’s mace passed through where he’d been only a moment before, and River thought *we’re done*.

She remembered Swift’s gritted teeth; Eshuvar’s clear, certain voice as he cast his spell; the dry, reassuring *k-chak!* of Chalima reloading her flamepieces; and Mathar’s laughter ringing out over it all. She remembered how her heart lightened as they made their final push.

She remembered how they stood together after, one Anathema dead, the other their captive. Chalima propped up a wounded Swift. Mathar slung an arm around Eshuvar’s shoulders. Though their Kinship had fulfilled its purpose, no one spoke the words to disband it.

River prayed no one ever would.

Introduction

“The peach trees in the orchard behind the house are just in full flower. Tomorrow we will institute a sacrifice there and solemnly declare our intention before Heaven and Earth, and we three will swear brotherhood and unity of aims and sentiments: Thus will we enter upon our great task.”

Luo Guanzhong, Romance of the Three Kingdoms

Though the sun and moon and stars have their champions, though little gods call upon the Exigence and deathknights stride forth from the Underworld, the people of the Realm and the Threshold know but one sort of Exalted. These are the Dragon-Blooded, Chosen of the Five Elemental Dragons, and by divine mandate the Princes of the Earth.

Kindled from a single ancient bloodline spread throughout Creation, the Dragon-Blooded trace their descent back to the Elemental Dragons. That lineage marks them with elemental power. Moreover, in a world where other Exalted have been driven to the ends of the world, it anoints them as Princes of the Earth, rightful rulers of all Creation.

In the wake of the Great Contagion, the Scarlet Empress gathered the surviving disparate Dragon-Blooded and forged from them a sprawling dynasty. As their immortal god-matriarch, she ruled the world from the Blessed Isle at Creation’s heart. Legions marched at her command; queens and despots bent the knee, sending rivers of silver and jade to fill her treasury. Her descendants, thronging in their bejeweled thousands, served as her generals and her ministers, her spymasters and her chaplains.

Now the Empress is gone, and her descendants turn away from the Threshold to battle for the vacant throne. But as the Scarlet Dynasty stokes the fires of civil war, outcaste Dragon-Blooded burn brighter in the shadows of the Threshold, taking advantage of the chaos to hammer out their own destinies upon the anvil of the world.

This Book at a Glance

Chapter One: The Dragon-Blooded touches on the history of the Dragon-Blooded, how they experience Exaltation, and the furious elemental nature of their Essence.

Chapter Two: The Great Houses details the Ten Great Houses of the Scarlet Dynasty — and one fallen house that lives on in its shadow.

Chapter Three: Life in the Scarlet Dynasty elaborates on the society and culture of the Realm’s ruling Dragon-Blooded families.

Chapter Four: Beyond the Realm covers Dragon-Blooded living outside the Scarlet Realm, from the Shogunate successor state of Lookshy and various lesser groups to the thousands of individual Dragon-Blooded heroes scattered across the Threshold.

Chapter Five: Character Creation lays out the rules for creating a Dragon-Blooded player character.

Chapter Six: Traits presents the five elemental Aspects, as well as anima powers, unique Merits, and other traits important to Dragon-Blooded characters.

Chapter Seven: Charms catalogues the innate elemental and martial magics of the Dragon-Blooded Host.

Chapter Eight: Martial Arts and Sorcery introduces several new Martial Arts styles, including the puissant Immaculate Dragon styles, as well as elemental spells wielded by Dragon-Blooded sorcerers.

Chapter Nine: Heirlooms of Power offers a selection of artifact weapons available to champions of the Scarlet Dynasty.

Chapter Ten: Princes of the Earth depicts an array of noteworthy Dragon-Blooded NPCs for use in your chronicle.

Lexicon

All-Seeing Eye, the: The *Scarlet Empress*' secret police and intelligence agency.

Blessed Isle, the: The island-continent at the center of Creation, which the *Scarlet Empress* governed directly.

cadet house: A self-perpetuating Threshold clan of *Dragon-Blooded* tied to the *Scarlet Dynasty* by marriage, but not a part of or beholden to a *Great House*.

dominie: Headmaster of a *primary school* or *secondary school*.

dominion: One of three especially large *prefectures*, carved from the lands of the old Shoguns.

Deliberative, the: The *Realm*'s legislative body, made up of the *Dynast* senators of the Greater Chamber and mortal delegates of the Lesser Chamber.

Dragon-Blooded, the: Exalted who've inherited the divine power of the Elemental Dragons and reign across Creation as Princes of the Earth.

Dynast: A *Dragon-Blood* who belongs to one of the *Great Houses* of the *Scarlet Dynasty*.

gentes (singular: gens): The aristocratic *Dragon-Blooded* families that rule Lookshy, after the fashion of — and in many cases tracing their origins back to — the ruling *Shogunate* clans of the same name. Includes five leading Gentes Major, and many lesser Gentes Minor.

Great House: A *Dragon-Blooded* lineage, typically descended from the *Scarlet Empress*, who've been elevated to a paramount position within the *Realm* by Imperial decree. There are currently ten Great Houses, although others have risen and fallen over the centuries — and one fallen house still haunts the *Scarlet Dynasty*.

Immaculate Order, the: The religious institution of the *Realm*, which enforces and spreads the teachings of the *Immaculate Philosophy* throughout its territory.

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

Imperial Service, the: A collective term for the *Realm*'s executive, administrative, and judicial arms, comprised of the Imperial legions, Imperial Navy, Merchant Fleet, *magistrates*, the *Thousand Scales*, and *All-Seeing Eye*.

Lookshy: Fortress-city of the *Seventh Legion*, built upon the *Shogunate* city of Deheleshen. The *gentes* of Lookshy form the Scavenger Lands' bastion against the *Realm*.

lost egg: An *outcaste*, particularly one from the *Blessed Isle*'s lower classes, who has yet to be brought into the service of the *Realm*. Lost eggs who enter the *Realm*'s service are sometimes called "found eggs."

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

outcaste: Within the *Realm*, any *Dragon-Blood* who isn't part of the *Scarlet Dynasty*.

patrician: A member of the class of gentry who oversee the peasantry of the *Blessed Isle* on behalf of the *Scarlet Dynasty*.

prefecture: A province of the *Blessed Isle*, administered by a prefect appointed by one of the *Great Houses* at the behest of the *Scarlet Empress*.

primary school: One of hundreds of boarding schools on the *Blessed Isle* attended by young *patricians* and *Dynasts* from ages 9 to 14.

Realm, the: The greatest empire in all Creation, encompassing both the *Blessed Isle* and the conquered *satrapies* of the Threshold.

Realm Year (RY): The Imperial dating system of the *Realm*, starting from the coronation of the *Scarlet Empress*.

satrapy: A province in the Threshold that has pledged fealty to the *Scarlet Empress*, sending her tribute. Overseen by a satrap chosen from one of the *Great Houses*.

Scarlet Dynasty, the: The *Dragon-Blooded* of the *Great Houses*, the ruling elite of the *Realm*.

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

secondary school: One of the *Realm*'s rigorous academies of higher learning, attended from ages 15 to 21. *Dynasts* typically attend either the Cloister of Wisdom, the Heptagram, the House of Bells, or the Spiral Academy, while *outcastes* attend either the Cloister of Wisdom or Pasiap's Stair. *Patricians* go to other, lesser schools.

Seventh Legion, the: The *Dragon-Blooded* military of *Lookshy*, which traces its lineage and authority back to the *Shogunate*.

shikari: A *Dragon-Blooded* participant in a *Wyld Hunt* officially sanctioned by the *Realm*.

Shogunate, the: A world-spanning *Dragon-Blooded* empire predating the Great Contagion and the rise of the *Scarlet Empress*.

Sworn Kinship: A group of *Dragon-Blooded* bound together by a mystical oath of camaraderie. Also called a Hearth.

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

Wyld Hunt, the: A group of *Dragon-Blooded* gathered to destroy one of the Anathema. This ancient tradition, rooted in the *Immaculate Philosophy*, is followed by *Dynasts* and *outcastes* alike.

Suggested Resources

Classics

***Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, by Luo Guanzhong:** Three heroes swear the Oath of the Peach Garden — a key inspiration for Sworn Kinships — in their efforts to stave off the collapse of a decaying empire.

***Water Margin*, by Shi Nai'an:** An excellent primer for iconoclast Dragon-Blooded, the preternatural rebel heroes of *Water Margin* are caught in a web of destiny as they take up arms against a corrupt imperial government.

***Mahabharata*:** This epic tale follows the Pandavas, a Kinship of royal brothers blessed with supernatural might, and their struggle against their likewise supernaturally potent cousins, the Kauravas, who seek to destroy them and seize the crown.

Fiction

***Amber*, by Roger Zelazny:** Though the supernatural protagonists use their power to tread worlds beneath their feet, ultimately their contests and struggles are driven by family strife as they battle to claim their father's throne.

***Codex Alera*, by Jim Butcher:** An element-bending Romanesque fantasy empire whose adepts don't merely control the elements literally, but also conceptually, such as enhancing strength with Earth or stoking passions with Fire.

***The Kouga Ninja Scrolls*, by Futaro Yamada:** Against the backdrop of an imperial succession crisis, the Iga and the Kouga — two ninja clans who've mastered deadly supernatural arts — pursue a generations-long vendetta to its bitter end. Adapted to manga and anime under the title *Basilisk*.

***A Song of Ice and Fire*, by George R.R. Martin:** The continent of Westeros spirals into civil war after its monarch's demise. The various aristocratic protagonists engage in power plays worthy of Dynastic scions, while largely ignoring supernatural threats from beyond their borders.

Television

***Avatar: the Last Airbender*, created by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko:** Although the magic on display draws less on the metaphorical qualities of the elements than do Dragon-Blooded Charms, it's still an incredible source of inspiration. The Fire Nation shares the Scarlet Realm's propensity for world domination, while its royal family is Dynastic politics writ small.

***Avatar: the Legend of Korra*, created by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko:** While it may not be quite as strong as the original series, *Korra* still has some great examples of the elemental power the Dragon-Blood wield. The third season in particular has fight scenes that inspired numerous Dragon-Blooded Charms.

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Swaddled in the silks and cloth-of-jade of her darkened bedchamber, she stares at the stone that has defined much of her life, that orb of smoky quartz sparkling with golden light. The light dances across the ceiling, warm in her hand, and even after seven centuries it entralls her like a mere child. Is it dimmer than yesterday, she wonders?

The sun rises, though she cannot see it. She will not rest where the sun's light can touch her. She stands, more perfect than any statue, leaving her soldier bedmate snoring softly in the resplendent nest of a true Dragon. The woman is ageless, ancient, but in truth she has never grown beyond the flame of her youth, and immortality has taught her to properly bank the embers of humanity. Her bedmate is a Tepet, all hard curves and scars and queer innocence. The woman idly ponders making her a magistrate. The Tepet has the temperament, and did her duty with loyalty and zeal.

Padding across the chamber, the woman passes through heavy doors of perfect construction, walks unseeing past the wealth of nations, past murals of herself and her deeds wrought in jade and orichalcum, with moonsilver designs twisting slowly through them. The light of the stone catches the murals, making the orichalcum sun shine on her reign, making the jade of her skin and crown and blade seem purer and stronger, making the moonsilver of her greatest enemies, Anathema all, dance in malevolence.

Her servants await her in the next room, as does the Realm. Here, alone and naked before her deeds, a single sob escapes her lips. She pauses before the stone doors that separate her from them. For a moment, her bland perfection falters, her perfect vision clouded by salt and sorrow. She presses the stone to her forehead, hoping it will cool, but it never has — it burns her hands, her forehead, her Essence, and she can never let this burden go. Her Essence is stone and flame, and the fire is ever upon her within her depths. Yet embers can grow cold, she fears, and even mountains can fall to the inexorable sea.

It is a moment, though. The seas recede, salt and water vanishing into air.

The woman straightens and pushes past the next row of doors, into a room ever-lit, full of fragrant incense and waiting attendants. They swarm about her, careful to never touch the stone nor even glance upon it for long. Her robes wrap around her, perfectly tied, the scarlet mantle of rulership lowered over her shoulders. She steps forward as the attendants prostrate themselves and avert their eyes, for she is not to be seen grasping her heavy crown. She slides the stone into the central socket, a priceless treasure nestled between two other stones that her kin would otherwise kill and maim for.

The throne isn't far from her chambers. She sees her children and grandchildren awaiting her, knows all of their names, knows their hearts and their dreams and their petty schemes in her shadow. They stand behind the soldiers guarding them from the dread prize in the center of court, two of the heroes of the hour standing sentinel beside it. This room, too, dances with golden light, and it plays uncomfortably across the faces of the Dynast and the outcaste presenting their fallen foe to her

Five sculpted dragons of jade curl around her as she sits, resting comfortably in authority. She examines the Anathema's grand golden axe, but her eyes flit over to Sesus Eshuvar, making sure that he notices her focusing more on him than the orichalcum. A small part of her derives great satisfaction in seeing him redden almost imperceptibly. Behind him,

the Anathema's Essence strains against the poison coursing in his veins. His head lolls to the side, a chalky line of toxic saliva hanging from his lips. Needles of white jade pierce all his chakras, guttering and grounding his power in the elements of the world.

She smiles a perfect smile, the merest sliding door into the desperate joy she feels. "Your Hearth has done their duty to the Realm and to me," she says. "You will be rewarded."

Chapter One

The Dragon-Blooded

A Brief History of the Dragon-Blooded

Ten thousand dragons rule the world. But it was not always so.

In the Time Before, when the Incarnae raised up champions to wage war against their creators, the Five Elemental Dragons likewise shared their power with mortals, creating a great host of elemental heroes to serve as officers and champions in the armies that battled the enemies of the gods. These were called Dragon-Blooded because their power was borne in their blood and passed on to the next generation, and those who survived the Divine Revolution begat lineages of power that grew and spread across Creation.

The Dragon-Blooded served many roles in the Exalted courts of the First Age. Often they were courted by the Celestial Exalted and other great powers to serve as generals, adjutants, bannerets, governors, and emissaries. But the world was wide and filled with places where the blood of the Dragons could take root unchallenged. Some joined together as oligarchs; others began their rule alone, only to become matriarchs or patriarchs to extended broods of Exalted offspring.

Fragments of that era still linger in hidden corners of the world. The art of the Zebremani people of the South traditionally depicts their heroes as crowned with fire or mantled with storms. The vast undersea palace ruled by the storm mother Konobala was once home to the Water Aspect princes of the Nine-Eyed Throne. The Sliver-of-a-Dream Pagoda, perched high upon the sheer southern face of Wujun Mountain, is still accessible only by the handholds that the hermit Love-is-Lightning carved into the living rock with his bare hands.

As the Celestial Exalted warred against one another, especially amid the Great Interregnum of the First Age, so too did the Dragon-Blooded first do battle with their own kin. But this was nothing compared to the Usurpation, when — heeding the prophecies of the Sidereal Exalted — thousands of Dragon-Blooded gathered to strike down their corrupted Solar masters, even those who'd been as mothers and fathers to them. Many who remained loyal to the Solars fought to the death, and much of the Dragons' blood was spilled.

With the Sidereals withdrawn to Heaven, the Lunars fled to world's edge, and the Solars buried, the Dragon-Blooded became Princes of the Earth, and Creation was theirs to command — insofar as their strength and will allowed. They raised cities and nations, tamed jungles and watered deserts, and raised jade swords against monsters and Fair Folk that would molest the world they ruled. This was the Dragon-Blooded Shogunate.

Their power might have sufficed to protect the world, had not their struggles torn it apart. Gentes that had fought at each others' sides were soon enough at each others' throats. Only one Prince of the Earth could be Shogun — a role some sought out of principle, others for ambition, and still others for fear of what harm might come to them and theirs should a rival take the throne. The glass towers of Chiaroscuro toppled; the island cities of Karai sank into the sea; the flying fortress Godswatch fell from the sky.

But for all their feuding, the daimyos and Shogunate gentes came together to face true threats to the world. And when decades of escalating Fair Folk assaults culminated in an overwhelming tide on the eve of the Great Contagion, the surviving Dragon-Blooded gathered en masse to oppose them. They died and they died, but while their defense may have seemed hopeless, it wasn't fruitless, for they bought time. With that time, a Sworn Kinship of Dragon-Blooded infiltrated the sealed manse controlling the Sword of Creation — which would come to be known as the Realm Defense Grid — and that Kinship's sole survivor wielded its powers to shatter the Fair Folk invasion.

With that power in her hands, she never let go.

Styling herself the Scarlet Empress, she built a Creation-spanning empire in the ruins of the old world. She had many children; through careful marriage, she brought the surviving gentes of the Blessed Isle into her sprawling dynasty. Outcastes of less certain lineage she gathered into her legions and the Immaculate Order.

Today, her Scarlet Dynasty is divided into ten Great Houses: extended families each comprised of hundreds of Dragon-Blooded, all tangled in a web of alliances and feuds based on marriages, friendships, contracts, grudges, vendettas, and ambitions both familial and personal. Mortal patrician families carry enough of the blood of the Dragons that their children occasionally Exalt; cadet houses in the Threshold marry into the Great Houses and swear allegiance to the Scarlet Throne; and peasant outcastes swear fealty to the throne and join the Imperial legions, or set worldly things aside to enter the Immaculate Order. From their seat on the Blessed Isle, ten thousand dragons rule the world.

But the Dynasty is only half the story.

Thousands of Princes of the Earth hold sway in distant Prasad, in name a Realm satrapy, in effect an independent empire encroaching on the shores of the Dreaming Sea. Thousands more command the battlements of Lookshy, settled after the Great Contagion by a Shogunate legion. Lookshy's ancient gentes protect the Scavenger Lands from the Realm's territorial ambitions, and fan the embers of a dream of a Shogunate reborn.

Here and there amidst the Threshold, beyond the Realm's reach, smaller cabals of Dragon-Blooded hold sway. In the East, the poisoner-assassins of the Grass Spider clan spread terror beneath the aegis of the Three Elite Fiends. In the South, the rogue Imperial legion of Saloy Hin gathers outcastes to its banner. In the West, the heretical Sisterhood of Pearls offers community to those willing to accept its austerities. In the North, the blood of the Dragons mingles with that of the fae in the Cult of the Violet Fang.

And everywhere there are outcastes born to mortal families, sparks fallen far from the great Dragon-Blooded flame. Discovering their Essence and their might in isolation, each is a lone hero, making her mark on her own small corner of the world.

A Terrestrial Census

No one knows the exact number of Dragon-Blooded in Creation today. Approximate numbers follow:

Dynasts: 10,000

Dynastic outcastes: 4,000

Cadet house members: 750

Patricians: 250

Prasadi: 2,000

Lookshyans: 3,000

Foreign outcastes: 5,000

Dragon-Blooded Exaltation

Unlike the Solar Exalted, who inherit the legacy and memories of past heroes with their Exaltation, the Chosen of the Five Elemental Dragons have no previous incarnations nor memories of past lives. But the Dragon's blood can pass to their offspring, a wellspring of elemental power that grows with each new generation of Exalted. Within the blood of their first Chosen, the Elemental Dragons created an inexhaustible lineage of Dragon-Blooded, a potentially infinite host of Princes of the Earth.

Awaiting Exaltation

Not every mortal who carries the blood of the Dragons will Exalt. There's no reliable method to tell whether or not a child will, but the strength of her parents' pedigree will increase or decrease her chances, as will their accumulated procreative Essence (p. XX) and myriad other factors, including simple luck.

Terrestrial Exaltation typically occurs during childhood or adolescence. A scion of an exceptional family might Exalt as young as nine, though the early teen years are far more common. No one on record older than twenty has ever Exalted as a Chosen of the Dragons, and past the age of seventeen the odds worsen with every passing year.

Dynastic children spend their childhoods anticipating the moment that will change their future, or dreading the day they become too old for their chance. Their Exaltations are expected — maybe not with confidence, but certainly with passion. They know well that they have two possible futures ahead: one marked by Exaltation and success, another by the limitations of mortality — albeit adorned with wealth and power to beggar the imagination of most in Creation.

Outcastes are a different story. Some may have dreamed about becoming Dragon-Blooded, but in the same way they might wish to find a lost treasure in the field, or catch a visiting merchant's eye and marry rich. It's the stuff of childish fantasies. But for a rare few, those fantasies come true.

The Immaculate Texts

Though it traces its intellectual roots back to the works of First Age philosophers, metaphysicians, and priests, Immaculate doctrine as we know it was constructed by the Sidereal Exalted as a tool to support

Dragon-Blooded hegemony under the Shogunate. A few texts in the Immaculate canon were wholly fabricated. Most, however, originated from a variety of ancient creeds, being subsumed into Immaculate doctrine after being subtly altered where necessary by Bronze Faction savants. Still, the Dynasty and Lookshy sincerely believe in the veracity of the Immaculate Texts and regard them as a valuable resource in understanding their history.

The Moment of Exaltation

As a Dragon-Blood Exalts, her Essence and nature become unmistakable. Her anima flares to life as the power within her bloodline becomes more than mere potential. Within her body, Exaltation awakens as she takes her Second Breath. Peril cannot coax Terrestrial Exaltation out of blood without potential, nor can a life of leisure keep someone with the right blood from attaining her birthright, but Exaltation does tend to find the Dragon-Blooded while they're facing adversity, challenge, or change. This is often quick, the catalyst of disaster igniting Exaltation in an instant, but can occur gradually, building over hours before culmination.

Pushed to the ground one too many times by the city guard, a street urchin finds unexpected strength within his blood. He stands up as tall as he can manage and feels as though a great pillar has grown within him; the hard ground below is no longer uninviting. When the guard strikes again, the boy cannot be moved.

Faced with expulsion for anything less than a perfect grade, a patrician's lazy daughter is finally afraid enough of losing her family's respect to study long into the night. The swirling winds that keep her company grow stronger with every passing hour, and her mind seems to expand into something new and infinite. The gathering storm breaks at dawn, and with it comes a sudden flash of insight and power.

The Elemental Dragons don't speak to their Chosen during Exaltation, but the Dragon-Blooded experience a great connection to their elemental Aspect, pulling them out of themselves and into something greater.

Running away from home in a fit of defiance, a child of Lookshy soon realizes her folly. But something beckons her forward, deep within the Eastern woods, calling her name in a way she cannot explain. She'd always been a city girl, fond of tidiness and wary of dirt, but she comes back with flowers in her hair and wildness in her veins.

He never believed his mother's wild claims about his heritage. A secret affair with a Dynast? Surely that only happened in stories. But when the merchant caravan turns the corner and he sees the base of the Imperial Mountain for the first time, his heart leaps and he understands. The pole is pulling him home, has always been pulling him back to a family he never knew. The caravan jerks to a stop under his sudden, certain weight.

Raw and uncontrolled, a Dragon-Blood's Essence at the moment of Exaltation can be dangerous. Deaths from the fallout of Terrestrial Exaltation are uncommon — most people have the sense to leave the area as soon as a child begins to glow with power — but property damage and injuries are almost guaranteed.

At first he takes the news of his sister's death well, but she was always the strong one. He sinks deeper and deeper into depression, until one night his parents find him, half-drowned, in his third-floor bedroom. Water drips down through the floorboards, drenching the manor in his endless tears.

Tied for top marks in swordplay, she will stop at nothing to defeat her rival. The mock battle has already lasted twenty minutes, but the other girl is just as relentless. Their wooden practice swords catch fire at the same instant, burning hot with their wielders' ferocity. Panicked teachers start clearing the building, hoping that both girls survive their Exaltations so their respective families might split the cost of repairs.

Elemental Aspects

Just as Creation is anchored by the five Elemental Poles, when a Dragon-Blood Exalts, her strength is anchored by a single element. Although all five elements are part of every Dragon-Blood's power, her Aspect's element is the most important, its powers the most natural. It lives within her, awakening new potential and influencing every moment of the rest of her life.

A Dragon-Blood's Aspect isn't a reflection of past deeds, secret strengths, or personality, but rather a product of her blood alone. Like Terrestrial Exaltation itself, Aspects run along bloodlines. The child of two Water Aspects is likely to be the same, and the child of an Air Aspect and an Earth Aspect will probably be one of the two. Through this tendency, the Great Houses of the Realm have maintained their elemental lineages over the centuries. But the elements aren't completely disparate. Every Dragon-Blood contains the potential for all five Aspects, ready to be passed down to future offspring. Especially in places where Dragon-Blooded are common, society loves to gossip when one Exalts out of Aspect — looking back at her childhood for “proof” her Aspect was always the most fitting, or even suggesting that her parentage might not be as claimed — but the difference is a matter of chance.

Each Aspect is only part of a whole, with its own strengths and failings. A Dragon-Blood's Aspect influences not only what skills come most naturally to her, but also how she approaches life. A young Terrestrial might develop new interests and new ways of thinking and speaking in the months after her Exaltation, impelled by her elemental Aspect. Her body changes even more profoundly, gradually coming into alignment with the power inside her.

Elemental Temperament

A Dragon-Blood's Aspect influences her personality, but doesn't override or control her mind. Its effects could be compared to making a new group of friends: A gang of eager peers might make certain courses of action more tempting and easy, and others harder or less interesting, but they can't turn her into a completely different person. A quiet and meek young man who Exalts as a Fire Aspect might become more passionate and confident, but he wouldn't become a hotheaded zealot if that wasn't in his nature.

In Dragon-Blooded cultures, the heritable nature of Aspects reinforces their importance, as the influence of someone's Exaltation is coupled with the influence her relatives have on childhood. Stereotypes about the Aspects, built upon the

deeds of past Terrestrials, offer further encouragement to conform to the expected niche. Outcasts, orphans, and those who Exalt out of Aspect with their households often stray further from their Aspect's leanings.

The Five Elements

Air is subtle, invisible, and impossible to pin down or contain. It steers its Chosen towards seeing the big picture from a bird's-eye view, constructing plans and solutions that are as complex as they are grand. The Children of Mela often become great scholars, incredible spies, and masterminds who plan ahead for centuries — or head-in-the-clouds elitists who detach themselves from the repercussions of their actions in the world below.

Earth is sturdy, patient, and unchanging. It grants certainty, centeredness, and a fondness for strong foundations in tradition. Very little can deter the Children of Pasiap from getting where they want to be; rather than giving way or changing course, they'll simply endure all obstacles and challenges. The strength of their convictions and the patience of their thought make them calm and stable generals, talented artificers, and pious monks. They can also become entombed by old ideas, unable to see the need for change and growth.

Fire is passionate, bold, and temperamental. It makes its Chosen impossible to ignore, whether they're the life of the party or the decorated general who's leading the charge. The Children of Hesiesh are driven by larger-than-life passions, experiencing ecstatic joy and furious rage in equal measure. They make charming socialites, and excel at armed combat. They also make fearsome monsters, prone to fits of destruction and rage when things don't go their way.

Water is flowing, unpredictable, and unrelenting. It grants its Chosen a terrible patience, like the crashing of tides that tear apart a shoreline piece by piece over centuries. The Children of Daana'd are nonetheless adaptable, fitting their skills to a wide variety of roles. As bureaucrats and social problem-solvers, they strike a careful balance between respectful diligence and the flow of new ideas, carrying things forward on a gentle current of progress. Their natural grace also makes them well-suited to martial arts, and they make exceptional sailors. At their worst, they can be fickle and underhanded, hiding treachery beneath a mirror-calm surface.

Wood is growing, nurturing, and vivaciously alive. It makes its Chosen an integral part of Creation's living world, pushing them to spread and reach and grow into their complete selves. Poison, disease, and predation are as much a part of the natural world as healing and rebirth, and the Children of Sextes Jylis learn to master both. They excel as doctors and animal handlers, and thrive in wild places. Some become hedonists, living only for pleasure without regard for others, while others form complex webs of social interconnections.

Essence Fever

The blood of the Dragons doesn't course idly through the veins as mundane blood does. It *rages*, every drop alive with the vitality of Creation itself. The rush of elemental power within a Dragon-Blood feels as though she's just woken from the sleep of the dead,

brimming with raw, untamed power. Like all Essence, it yearns to be used, and it drives the Dragon-Blooded to greatness.

Essence drives the Chosen to powerful, reckless deeds. A young Terrestrial Exalt not only has to contend with the unfurling power within her, but also the mundane changes she's undergoing. The Essence of the Dragons is volatile, capable of passionate love and tempestuous rage. A newly Exalted Dragon-Blooded is encouraged to spar and roughhouse to vent these passions. Her Aspect shapes not just her body, but her mind and emotions. She is a tempest, a bonfire, a tsunami, *a force of nature* given flesh and walking among mortals. Essence seethes and thrashes within her, driving her to be as aloof, passionate, or nurturing as her Aspect dictates.

Ten Thousand Dragons Fight as One

The Dragons' Essence urges its possessors to band together and form families and clans. In this regard, most Dragon-Blooded have an advantage over many other Exalted. A newly fledged Solar struggles alone to master her towering, heroic might. A neophyte Dragon-Blood of the Realm, however, has her family to consult about the radical changes she undergoes — not to mention the close friends she'll make in primary and secondary school. Though she may choose to seek solitude, she's never alone.

Beyond family, a Dragon-Blood seeks the mutual bond of elemental Essence among her peers. Comrades formed in battle may then undertake the rite of Sworn Kinship (p. XX). At a smaller, more intimate level, she also forms close relationships with Dragon-Blooded friends and lovers — partnerships kindled by the mutual Essence of the Dragons within them.

On a grander scale, the Dragon-Blooded band together to establish societies. Almost any native of Creation knows of the Scarlet Dynasty and many have heard tales of Lookshy. These are the largest, most prominent examples of Dragon-Blooded societies, but they're not the only ones.

[THE FOLLOWING FIVE SECTIONS ARE “PRESTIGE SPREADS” IN THE MANNER OF THE EXALTED 3RD EDITION COREBOOK PAGES 40 THROUGH 53]

[BEGIN THE SCARLET DYNASTY TWO-PAGE SPREAD]

The Scarlet Dynasty

Ten Thousand Dragons Rule Creation

Civilization springs up in their wake. Monarchs kneel before them. The Anathema flee their might, or face judgment in reincarnation. All glory to the Princes of the Earth.

The children of the Scarlet Empress embody nobility in the Second Age. Born into affluence and raised to command, Dynasts lead lives of grand adventure and intrigue. Generations of Dynasts have built the greatest military machine in all of Creation.

The Heart of Civilization

All bounty flows from the Blessed Isle, and to it all wealth returns. This is the Realm of the Scarlet Empress: a beautiful, temperate continent blessed with abundance and kept by

the Princes of the Earth. Here the Dragon-Blooded have created a stable home with unparalleled standards of living and education, where even mortals may labor in safety and comfort.

The Realm also commands the fealty of a vast empire of Threshold nations. These satrapies seek to appease the Scarlet Dynasty with tributes of wealth and piety, seeking protection in turn. The Dragon-Blooded tame Creation, kingdom by kingdom, crushing any who stand against their progress.

Houses of the Dragons

Dynasts draw their identity from the tangled bloodlines of the Great Houses. These sprawling noble families jockey against each other for advantage, wielding nations as cat's-paws. Thick with the blood of the Five Elemental Dragons, each house boasts a multigenerational legend of heroism and nobility. The Exalted Dynast carries all the weight and promise of this inheritance.

Since the Scarlet Empress' disappearance, the Great Houses have turned their attentions toward succession. Each house champions one or more would-be heirs to better control the future of the Realm. They hoard power, cannibalizing the empire to prepare for a war over the throne.

Due All Wealth and Glory

Centuries of Dragon-Blooded plunder, trade, and tribute from across the Inland Sea have brought the Realm immeasurable wealth. Though young Dynasts grow under impossible pressure, those who Exalt may claim all of Creation's wonders as their own. The Princes of the Earth live in opulent splendor, and claim servants, jade, and priceless artifact heirlooms as a matter of course. This standard of living is the Dynast's just reward for her holy responsibilities.

A Perfected Philosophy

The Immaculate Order is the official religion of the Realm and all its satrapies. Monks of the Order enforce a strict social and spiritual hierarchy, with the Dragon-Blooded at its apex. The Princes of the Earth command lesser beings as a holy duty, and worship as they wish. Dragon-Blooded monks wipe out heresy and humble recalcitrant gods through potent martial arts. When Anathema threaten the security of the empire, Dynasts work together in a deadly Wyld Hunt.

Play a Dynast if you want

- to wield influence in Creation's mightiest empire.
- to champion your house through heroism and intrigue.
- to live in affluence, and wield heirlooms of elemental might.
- to spread the Immaculate Philosophy through word and deed.
- to hunt the Anathema to the edge of Creation.

[END THE SCARLET DYNASTY TWO-PAGE SPREAD]

[BEGIN THE SEVENTH LEGION TWO-PAGE SPREAD]

The Seventh Legion of Lookshy

The Shogunate Still Stands

One army defines martial excellence in the Second Age. One city binds together the disparate cultures of the Scavenger Lands. One enemy thwarts the might of the Realm, again and again. The Seventh Legion of Lookshy endures.

The Exalted soldiers of the Seventh Legion seek mastery of warfare and of themselves. They deny the Realm's sovereignty and defend the freedom of the Scavenger Lands. The long-lost Dragon-Blooded Shogunate lives on through the Seventh Legion, until the day it rises anew.

Defenders of the Scavenger Lands

The Seventh Legion honors and obeys its final order, given centuries ago: to preserve Shogunate governance in the River Province. Forever honing its warrior heritage, Lookshy has built a system of defense contracts throughout Creation's melting pot. The soldiers of the Seventh Legion are hard-nosed, scrupulous protectors to neighbors who pay their dues.

To maintain order in the Scavenger Lands, the Seventh Legion maintains constant vigilance. Lifelong discipline shapes Dragon-Blooded soldiers capable of waging war at any time, against any foe. Lookshy fields forces across the Scavenger Lands, forging alliances against aggressive invaders and Anathema insurgents.

Blood of the Daimyos

Lookshy's most honored bloodlines trace descent back to the ancient Shogunate. These gentes build heroic legends through centuries of military excellence. Dragon-Blooded soldiers uphold the worth and resourcefulness of their bloodlines through service to the Seventh Legion. Pedigree may provide opportunities, but cannot purchase victory.

The Seventh Legion derives authority from dedication to the fallen Shogunate, and views the Scarlet Empress as a usurper. Lookshy's gentes believe a worthy Shogun will one day appear, and restore the Shogunate's full glory across Creation. The soldiers of the Seventh Legion faithfully prepare for that day.

Wonders of a Lost Age

The Shogunate spanned all of Creation, using weapons and infrastructure preserved from the First Age. Many such wonders are lost or broken, but a precious sliver of First Age weaponry remains active in Lookshy's stockpile. The Seventh Legion uses these wonders sparingly, for many are fragile or limited in use, and all are irreplaceable. Highly prized sorcerer-engineers maintain this stockpile and strive to restore lost wonders.

War Without End

As constant warfare tempered the Shogunate, so does it refine the righteous warrior. Lookshyans view martial readiness and service as lifelong spiritual duties. Dragon-Blooded and mortals cultivate spiritual perfection together through military excellence, shared dedication, and personal responsibility. Lookshy's Immaculate sohei forgo evangelism and forced conversion in favor of individual guidance. They often serve in

the military, to address spiritual challenges in the field and lead soldiers toward righteousness by example.

Play a member of the Seventh Legion if you want

- to serve in Creation's most renowned warrior culture.
- to embrace the ancient legacy of the Dragon-Blooded Shogunate.
- to claim the Scavenger Lands as your home and your charge.
- to discover and explore lost secrets of First Age artifice.
- to explore spiritual self-refinement through duty.

[END THE SEVENTH LEGION TWO-PAGE SPREAD]

[BEGIN PRASAD TWO-PAGE SPREAD]

The Empire of Prasad

All Things Bend To Divinity

Living gods carry the blood of dragons. Forgotten empires tremble at their ambition. Their lives trace an intricate dance of caste and clan, of body and soul, across lifetimes. All hail the Dragon Caste of Prasad.

The Dragon Caste were once Dynasts who embraced new life in the distant Southeast. Now they live as gods, worshiped by mortals under the philosophy of the Pure Way. Prasad expands aggressively, claiming ever more of the bountiful Dreaming Sea.

Jewel of the Frontier

So storied was the wealth of Prasad and its capital Kamthahar, enriched by trade along the Jade Road, that word of its treasures soon reached the Imperial City. Two Great Houses once competed to pacify Prasad in the name of the Scarlet Empress, then conspired to claim it themselves. They installed themselves as Prasad's highest caste, then expanded outward with Kamthahar as their new capital.

The Empire of Prasad remains a satrapy in name and sends yearly tribute, but it doesn't serve the Realm. The Dragon Caste treats with Dynasts as distant cousins. Dynasts occasionally visit Prasad for an "exotic, yet civilized" getaway, or to experience the thrill of conquest in a younger empire. Prasadi Dragon-Blooded sometimes travel to the Blessed Isle for education, trade, or diplomacy.

By Caste and Clan

Prasadi citizens belong to discrete groups with complex, overlapping relationships. Castes define Prasad's hierarchy, from the meanest laborers to the holy Dragon-Blooded. Prasadi clans determine lineage and inheritance, while a person's tribe informs their talents and purpose in society. Social groups live in specific, traditional neighborhoods and enclaves, leaving casteless untouchables on the edges of society.

Twin Dragon-Blooded clans control Prasad: Burano, traditional and wise; and Ophris, sensual and clever. The ruler of the empire invariably descends from one of the two

clans, while her elected heir descends from the other. Would-be heirs run lavish campaigns to win votes from upper-caste citizens.

Manifest Destiny

The Dreaming Sea offers immense wealth and ancient mysteries to any with the strength to claim them. With abundance comparable to the Blessed Isle, and the confidence of a young empire, Prasad grows by leaps and bounds. Beyond the edges of known civilization, the Dragon Caste leads a holy war of expansion against primal monsters, Fair Folk, and the sorcerous prodigies of older nations.

Spirit And Flesh Made One

The Empire of Prasad follows a syncretic Immaculate heresy, the Pure Way, which views Dragon-Blooded as gods and encourages their direct worship. According to the Pure Way, gods and elementals fall within the cycle of reincarnation, and even Anathema may earn a place in the cycle. Prasadi Dragon-Blooded seek out reincarnated comrades, forming Sworn Kinships said to persist across lifetimes.

Play a member of the Dragon Caste if you want

- to be worshiped as an elemental god.
- to politick with gods and their offspring.
- to explore exotic locales, and conquer them.
- to live in splendor beyond the reach of the Great Houses.
- to champion a philosophy of purifying reincarnation.

[END PRASAD TWO-PAGE SPREAD]

[BEGIN FOREST WITCHES TWO-PAGE SPREAD]

The Forest Witches

One Does Not Claim A Place By Conquest

They carry beauty in their hearts and eyes. They know no fear of death. They are criminals, gurus, and revolutionaries. The Forest Witches rule without name.

In an Eastern wood where outsiders dare not tread, a commune of Dragon-Blooded have built for themselves a paradise. Free of conventional mortality, the Forest Witches expand their influence both subtly and brutally. They are beyond doubt, beyond fear, and beyond understanding by lesser minds.

Beyond Memories of Hardship

The woods contain many wonders, all laid at the feet of the Forest Witches. Oreithyia, the soul of the living forest, serves the Witches' needs, and all its creatures obey them. Homes grow from flora as needed; game seeks out the hunter; babes entrusted to the woods return as hardy adolescents. With their earthly needs cared for, the Forest Witches focus on grander things.

Deep in the forest, a pool gives new eyes to those who peer within. This pool contains the Sea of Mind, a beautiful reflection of true Creation. Here, the dead live on in the

paradisiacal city of Atsiluth Eternal. Living Forest Witches partake of this utopia at the sufferance of the dead, and walk through the Sea of Mind wherever they travel.

In Defense of Atsiluth Eternal

Oreithyia and the Sea of Mind satisfy worldly needs, but these wonders have limits. The Forest Witches forage beyond their home for beauty to appease the woods and for occult power to feed the pool. Many Forest Witches engage in banditry, or proselytize to draw wealthy pilgrims to the Sea of Mind. Others infiltrate and influence far-flung communities.

Regardless of method, the Forest Witches practice caution. They know that neighboring nations would covet the wonders of the forest, and that the Immaculate Order would punish their transgressions against mortality. They expand their power anonymously, ruling without name.

Beyond Life and Death

The Forest Witches aren't immortal, yet they do not fear death. Those who die while connected to the Sea of Mind may retire to a rewarding afterlife in Atsiluth Eternal, or continue to explore Creation through the Sea of Mind. They may even inhabit specially made armors to affect true Creation. Some Forest Witches use unique magics to direct their own reincarnations, or cut away their humanity to become mist-born spirits called numina.

A World More Beautiful

Forest Witches who've seen the Sea of Mind need never leave it, unless exiled by the dead. No matter where a Witch roams, she sees a world of glorious wonder and thrilling shadows. Frustrating details fade from awareness, providing a continually satisfying experience, free of the inconsequential. To a Forest Witch, dangers seem more exciting, tragedies more heart-wrenching, and opponents more sinister.

Play a Forest Witch if you want

- to wield the keys to paradise.
- to stride like a giant in the Sea of Mind.
- to adventure beyond death as a living memory.
- to infiltrate other societies across successive reincarnations.
- to sacrifice form and join the numina.

[END FOREST WITCHES TWO-PAGE SPREAD]

[BEGIN OUTCASTES TWO-PAGE SPREAD]

The Outcastes

Embrace Your Birthright

They are the face of heroism across Creation. They are kin to dragons, beholden to none. Compelled by blood, they rise from obscurity. Each outcaste is unique, and each is connected.

The blood of the Dragons awakens unexpectedly in slaves and princes across Creation. Outcastes derive their power from this blood alone, rather than from any nation's authority. They wield elemental might without fear of persecution, sought by all and answering to none.

Heroes of the Threshold

Outcastes arise from every nation and from the uncharted spaces between. Though few outcastes have the resources or training afforded to Dynasts, their potential is the same. Each is a warrior born, driven to seek out their peers, to define themselves in love and war, in service and command.

For all the advantages that other Dragon-Blooded may claim, outcastes enjoy unprecedented freedom among the Exalted. They need not fear the Wyld Hunt, and may expect good treatment by civilized mortals. As well, outcastes may forego these privileges and explore beyond civilization's reach. For every lost egg that journeys to the Blessed Isle looking for a place to belong, another adventures across the Threshold, guided by her own philosophy.

Soldiers of Fortune

The Princes of the Earth are legendary warriors, lovers, and monarch-makers. Rulers, merchants, and generals offer exorbitant wealth for a Dragon-Blood's loyal service. Wealthy families pay grand dowries to infuse the blood of the Dragons into their own. Even other Exalted may seek the support and protection of a Prince of the Earth. Opportunity abounds for an open-minded outcaste.

The Realm hungers for outcastes most of all. Dragon-Blooded born to wealthy patrician families may expect offers of adoption or fosterage from the Great Houses. To common- or foreign-born outcastes, the Realm offers position and purpose in the Imperial legions and Immaculate Order.

No Lords, No Masters

Not all lost eggs were born in obscurity. Inevitably, some who are born to greatness scorn their place or disgrace it. Monks lose faith; scions of the Great Houses turn away from rulership; Lookshyan soldiers desert, and forsake their names in shame. Creation holds vast spaces for those who've lost their homes. Ronin, retirees, and atoners seek freedom and anonymity in the Threshold, and often find new purpose, identity, and allies.

A Legacy in the Making

Outcastes don't always know how the blood of the Dragons entered their family line, but each may pass that blood on. Every outcaste carries the potential for a new heroic legacy, unique in all Creation. Prominent bloodlines draw more Dragon-Blooded, eager to build a brood that may one day rival the Great Houses.

Play an outcaste if you want

- to be your own elemental hero.
- to explore the length and breadth of Creation.
- to bring an outsider's perspective to Dragon-Blooded society.

- to stand apart from what you once stood for.
- to build a legacy all your own.

[END OUTCASTES TWO-PAGE SPREAD]

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“Filthy merchants, profiting off the risks others take.”

Nellens Leferi turned to see who'd tossed the comment her way, her waiting horse forgotten. Sesus Daral fixed her with a cruel smirk, all muscle and chiseled features and swooning entourage. Leferi's bodyguards bristled, but she waved them back with her free hand, her prized drinking horn in the other.

She didn't have to look up to know the entire guest list of the gala she'd just left would be watching how this little drama played out. House Peleps was playing host tonight, which meant short of preventing a death neither side would be getting any favors.

“You've correctly identified my profession,” she said, casually sipping her drink. “Yet it seems your tutors were remiss in properly explaining how it works.” She tilted her head to the side. “Probably several tutors. Speaking slowly.”

“You thin-blooded Nellens cur!” The young talonlord punctuated his remark with a dazzling and textbook-perfect spinning roundhouse. That's the problem with textbooks, though — anyone can read them. Leferi had.

She caught his foot neatly with her free hand and jerked it skyward, then delivered a swift kick to his other knee that sent him sprawling. Laughter came from the terrace above, though Daral silenced most of it with a glare.

“Merchants understand three things above all else,” Leferi continued, unperturbed. “The first is to read the market.” She hopped back over a foot sweep and sidestepped a punch, still not spilling a drop of wine. “Fortunately, it doesn't always take very long.”

“You dishonor yourself and your house with this clowning,” Daral hissed, and Leferi felt the rush of Essence as his skin shifted to match the stones beneath their feet, his anima flaring. “I won't brook such an insult to the name of Sesus' father.”

“It seems the House of Bells regrettably neglected the theatrical arts,” Leferi mused, letting her eyes drift skyward in mock contemplation. “Or am I mistaken in remembering that the clown is generally the one being laughed at?”

“We'll see who's laughing in a moment,” Daral spat. This time he chose his strikes cautiously, fists and feet chipping stones when they missed her, but Leferi was patient. She ducked and weaved, then slid around a savage punch and boxed his ear. Daral staggered back, dizzy, while Leferi took yet another sip.

“The second thing a merchant learns is risk,” she continued, as if chatting over drinks and not brawling in the street. Perhaps she was, even if he wasn't. “You? Pretty, perhaps, but rash. Definitely low risk.”

“For the honor of my house!” Daral yelled, flaring anima and rushing at her like a boulder crashing down a mountainside. The crowd gasped, but Leferi just sighed and leaned into the charge. He glanced off her hip, and as he fell she came down on top of him, neatly locking his wrist into a painful hold. She took another sip of her drink.

“You, on the other hand, calculated poorly.” She shifted her weight, getting a pained yelp, and tightened the hold further to discourage his struggles. “To open trade routes, I've killed monsters that would send you screaming back to your wet nurse. I've

swallowed poison to seal bargains with barbarian chieftains. I've explored ruins where past expeditions vanished without a trace, and held parties on their stones."

Leferi twisted his hand even tighter, drawing a cry of pain. "Now, last lesson, so listen well. A good merchant learns to find profit in anything." She released him and rose smoothly to her feet, stepping away as he groaned and clutched his injured hand. "For example, by showing mercy to an unworthy opponent, I've raised my status among the esteemed worthies watching. Which in turn means more lucrative contracts for my house."

She finished her drink and saluted the assembled guests on the terrace, to polite applause from the gathering above. As she mounted up, Leferi at last permitted herself a small smile. "Thank you, Sesus Daral. It's been a pleasure doing business with you."

Chapter Two

The Great Houses

Ten Great Houses form the Scarlet Dynasty, each bearing the name of the legendary ancestor who founded its lineage. In the earliest days of the Realm, the Empress adopted powerful and influential Dragon-Blooded as her daughters, elevating their families to Great Houses. As she consolidated her rule, she rewarded those of her own children who proved their worth and won her favor with the right to found a Great House. The ten that stand today aren't the only houses ever raised — the Realm's history is littered with the bones of fallen houses, struck from the Imperial ledgers as punishment for failure or treachery.

The houses are more than mere families. Each has spent centuries amassing not just glory and jade, but also relationships, traditions, and vendettas. Likewise, their numbers have grown; even the smallest house counts hundreds of Dragon-Blooded in its ranks, and most have well over a thousand. Each house's scions fight side by side in house legions and garrisons, join forces in the intrigues of the Thousand Scales and the Deliberative, and cooperate in business ventures throughout the Blessed Isle and across the Threshold. Each Great House forms a nation unto itself, embedded into the Realm's body politic. And while many deem themselves patriots, others — perhaps most — are members of a Great House first and Dynasts second.

While the Great Houses have ever vied against each other for power, influence, and wealth, the stern hand of the Scarlet Empress bent their conflicts to serve her will. With her disappearance, their ambition is unchecked, and all eyes turn to the empty throne.

Major Bloodlines

When a Dynastic household produces multiple Dragon-Blooded offspring and garners significant wealth and prestige, its renown rubs off on its scions. A house matriarch may recognize such a lineage once it's grown sufficiently prominent by elevating it to one of the major bloodlines of the house. Members of a major bloodline take the name of its original matriarch after their house's name. For instance, Mnemon Rulinsei Ghova takes his name from his great-grandmother Mnemon Rulinsei.

A house bloodline might have its own particular propensities distinct from the parent house — dedication to a particular branch of the Imperial Service, perhaps, or a different elemental Aspect. By and large, however, they're as much a part of the parent house as any other scions.

Fading Bloodlines

A household's bloodline can grow so thin through intermarriage with mortal lineages and leftover children (p. XX) that it largely stops producing Dragon-Blooded scions. Such households live in fear of being stricken from the house's ledgers. They make wild efforts to find better marriage prospects for their children, often putting themselves deep in debt to House Ragara or other lenders in order to offer sufficient sums at the marriage table.

The House Matriarch

A Great House matriarch commands enormous wealth, power, and respect. But she has little opportunity to exercise it on her own behalf, for her responsibilities to the house are numerous and onerous. She arranges scions' schooling and marriages; manages businesses, properties, and other assets; oversees the house treasury; and gives marching orders to the house's loyal senators, ministers, and the like. She's also responsible for mediating conflicts within the house and with other houses — while meeting with generals, admirals and strategists to orchestrate military operations.

To accomplish these goals, the matriarch has access to the house's treasury, legions, fleets, and its greatest asset — the scions themselves. These tools can twist in her hand should the house's loyalties shift. Struggles for dominance rarely escalate to open conflict, lest the matriarch strike traitorous family members from the house rolls. But in this time of turmoil, that might not suffice to protect a hated or incompetent matriarch.

Some houses have multiple leaders, wherein the matriarch shares power and responsibility with other family members, whether out of need or tradition. The Imperial Service looks only for the matriarch's seal in official matters, but in other affairs, the balance of power varies by house.

A Dynastic household's matriarch has similar powers and responsibilities. She is a Great House matriarch writ small.

Dynastic Names

The Shogunate gentes named their children in the tongue of the Old Realm, a language of alternating consonants and vowels. Dynastic names typically follow that pattern — C-V-C-V-C or C-V-C-V-C-V — though most names are chosen for euphony rather than meaning. Patrician and cadet house scions often follow the same pattern, whether from parallel Shogunate origins or in emulation of the Great Houses, but this isn't universal.

House Property

The Great Houses leased their lands from the Empress, who owned all real estate on the Blessed Isle. While the house matriarch holds onto most of the house's land-lease deeds, she may transfer individual leases — such as those for manses — to specific scions or households for a time. Similarly, the matriarch commands the house's treasury, whose revenues she allocates as she sees fit.

The house's hearthstones and artifacts are likewise the matriarch's to apportion. However, bonding with artifacts takes time and a compatible disposition. Once a loyal scion awakens an heirloom's Evocations, the matriarch typically allows him to retain it for as long as it's of use to him.

[THE FOLLOWING SIDEBAR CAN GO ANYWHERE IN THE FIRST HALF OF THIS CHAPTER.]

House Symbolology

Each of the Great Houses is signified by a mon — a heraldic emblem within a circle. These are borne aloft on war banners, blazoned on garments and household gates, and embossed on wax to seal a house matriarch's official correspondence. Some trace back to less aniconic periods in Realm artistic history, but are too entrenched for the Immaculate Order to uproot. There are also other mons, from the Empress' Imperial mon to the mons of prestigious patrician families.

Every Great House also has a set of emblematic colors. Sometimes in vogue, their use is currently out of fashion. Today, wearing one's house colors — especially on a regular basis — is a sign of a traditionalist, though it's also a useful way to curry favor with elder Dynasts who might be a bit set in their ways.

Cathak: Red and gold

Cynis: Green and gold

Iselsi: Black and silver

Ledaal: Blue and gray

Mnemon: White and purple

Nellens: Brown and silver

Peleps: Blue and black

Ragara: White and gold

Sesus: Red and black

Tepet: Blue and white

V'neef: Green and purple

Cathak — Fire That Marches Against the Tide

The Cathaks are possessed of a fire that drives them forward. Generals, soldiers, leaders, and strategists par excellence, the house boasts many of the Dynasty's greatest military icons. Only the falling Tepets rival them for martial prowess. But there's more to Cathak's children than warfare alone — the legions are the spine that holds them

together, but few scions of this Great House are content to be only one thing. Passion and discipline defines them, and military service provides unique opportunities for adventure and learning.

Social Standing

The legions come first for this house, and rare is the Cathak scion with no tours of duty behind her. But their military focus doesn't mean they're uncultured. Many Cathaks can debate art and relate anecdotes from the most exotic places Creation has to offer, and few lack for invitations to social gatherings.

Cathak scions devote themselves to all manner of competition — team sports used to drill legionnaires; dueling; and strategy games such as Gateway, which a Cathak scion invented. Once pragmatic in matters of religion, House Cathak has grown more devout since command of the house fell to Cathak Cainan. His personal piety has bled over onto the house's policies and attitudes, such that younger members feel it's always been this way.

The house takes a military approach to politics as well, applying battlefield stratagems and tactics to intrigue. This makes the house something of a blunt instrument, politically speaking — the Cathak manual of political maneuvers, the *Silken Blade Codex*, is taught to children of the house as a companion volume to *The Thousand Correct Actions of the Upright Soldier*. Still, predictability doesn't make the Cathak political machine any less formidable.

House Cathak strongly encourages daughters to join the military. This creates a need for husbands skilled in finance, administration, and the like. Cathak marriage negotiations are tense affairs, but because they value skill over status and pedigree, they offer lowborn sons of Dynastic families fallen on hard times the hope of improving their station. Such marriages are thought to be warmer and more passionate than most, contributing to the starry-eyed way in which many young male Dynasts dream of marrying into this house. Poetry and romances about the impoverished son of a falling branch being swept off his feet by a Cathak officer of wide experience and taken off to a life of luxury and adventure are popular.

By contrast, military husbands find little welcome. Many Cathaks look down on other houses' soldiers as unrefined, undisciplined brutes. As such, a soldier who marries into House Cathak, if he wishes to kindle respect, must carefully tend its sparks, and he can expect his new wife to put him through an unforgiving regimen of tests and training until he passes muster. If he's from a house that doesn't enjoy a sturdy military reputation in Cathak eyes, such as Cynis or Nellens, the tests are harder still. He must be twice the soldier as a Tepet to earn a place beside his wife in the Cathak legions.

House Economics

Like the other houses, Cathak engages in diverse business ventures, from salt pans to jade mines to grain shipping, but the bulk of the house's income centers on its legions. Before the Empress vanished, the right to keep house legions was restricted to the military houses: Tepet, Sesus, and Cathak. Any other house requiring soldiers beyond their allowance of guards and paramilitary forces needed to either call in the Imperial legions

and face heavy censure for their failure to handle things themselves, or hire the services of one of the military houses.

The services of House Cathak's legions have never been restricted to the Dynasty, however — anyone with resources to spare and a cause that doesn't oppose the Realm may hire Cathak soldiers for wars and ventures. When it suited the Empress, she deployed the Imperial legions alongside the Cathak forces in unstoppable conquest. While the house couldn't keep the lands it conquered, such conquest was still lucrative. Cathak usually got the dragon's share of the new satrapy's resources — establishing businesses to exploit them, then selling those businesses to the incoming satrap's house at a premium.

The legions also fatten House Cathak's coffers by providing escort services for goods and personnel throughout the Threshold, exacting fees that, while far smaller than what House V'neef earns from escorting tribute shipments, are nevertheless significant. The house usually has a few such assignments in progress at any time, and they provide an excellent excuse for a young Cathak to see Creation. The Cathak legions also survey all terrain they traverse, recording valuable natural resources and military concerns.

The house has committed much of its formidable military to securing its most valuable satrapies, letting less profitable ones slide from its grasp while still maintaining much of its satrapial income. While this strategy earns less than the desperately thrashing Peleps behemoth, it's more controlled and sustainable, for a certain value of "sustainable" — the house's grip on its satrapies is more like a grape press than a vise, but it still squeezes the lifeblood from the unfortunate tributaries. It simply isn't as fast.

House Cathak has recently tapped a new vein of revenue. When the Imperial legions devolved to the Great Houses' control, Cathak Cainan arranged a gala to honor the new Cathak legions, and invited some of the Dynasty's most notorious gossips and rumormongers were present. There, he hinted that he'd support the first claimant for the throne who seemed likely to win, to ensure that the Empress' absence wouldn't tear the Realm apart. The next month, Cathak bureaucrats noted total income twice that of the month before, stemming from bribes, dowries, gifts, trade agreements, concessions, and promotions.

Altogether, it's enough to ensure Cathak's economic stability and independence for the time being. It's deeply in debt to House Ragara, but the gifts and bribes it's received from its newfound position as queenmaker currently suffices to handle the interest, and the family's other income, while diminished, suffices to maintain the Cathak legions and lifestyle with only modest cutbacks.

House Military

The Cathak military juggernaut stands ready to erupt like a volcano and consume whatever stands in its way. Once, its four mighty legions were surpassed only by the Imperial legions and matched only by the Tepet forces. Now, House Tepet is a ghost of its old glory, and the Empress is gone, her legions picked apart and scattered like so many dried bones in the desert sun. House Cathak itself received four of the Imperial legions. With eight full legions, trained and led by the martial paragons the house produces so reliably, it's a force to be reckoned with for the other Great Houses.

House Cathak's military doctrine emulates Hesiesh, focusing on discipline and careful management of resources, while Cathak legionnaires learn to revere the Fire Dragon. Each dragon of troops has an Immaculate monk attached who, on each inspection, expounds upon the virtues and vices a recent battle or exercise has revealed. These passionate sermons teach the value of restraint, the joy of well-timed action, and the rewards of being part of a greater whole, but also that life is a parable, and the lesson is always to know right from wrong. Hesiesh provides the mold, a mythical archetype, and the soldiers must aspire to mythical status themselves — the warrior always falls before the soldier, and individual heroism is no match for the coordination of armies. The legion, the dragon, the scale: Each of these must be a hero in their own right, and worthy of legend.

Military service of any kind is considered admirable. Cathaks earn their family's acclaim as soldiers or generals, by training or arming troops, or by working a bureaucratic position in a military organization. House orthodoxy favors direct confrontation under carefully chosen circumstances, ending in glorious combat against the Empress' enemies. Clever tactics and strategies are valued, but Cathak generals view the overwhelming deployment of their forces at the perfectly chosen moment both as a means to win the immediate conflict and as a long-term plan to make their legions seem invincible to other foes. Thus, today's victory forestalls countless future conflicts.

Enemies and Alliances

House Cathak's military power and financial stability allow it to play queenmaker, a formidable neutral party that controls the path to the Scarlet Throne without having the wherewithal to seize it wholesale — which is more than satisfactory to the house, and its leader. Either House Cathak will stand unbowed until a credible claimant appears; or someone will finally attack them to remove the greatest obstacle to claiming the throne, giving House Cathak their excuse to join the fray.

As a military house, the Cathaks are natural rivals of House Sesus and House Tepet. Sesus sees Cainan's house as a major threat; the Cathaks see Sesus as an inferior house, focused on dishonorable espionage and harebrained schemes instead of shoring up their seemingly ramshackle legions. The grave danger of Sesus spies and saboteurs is often overlooked.

The Cathaks view House Tepet as a tragic house, fallen but still struggling in a poetic way. But practicality outweighs sentiment, and Tepet's political position is dangerous, so Cathak waits and watches, ready to extend the hand of friendship if the smaller house can ever regain lost ground.

House Cathak doesn't trust House Ragara, wary of the rumors of occult impropriety that cling to its reputation, but its debts to Ragara are nonetheless substantial. Consequently, House Cathak makes intermittent noises of support for House Ragara's bid for the throne to placate its lenders, but commits few resources to aid it.

Major Holdings

Myion Prefecture, on the Blessed Isle's southwestern coast, is an ancient and sacred site. In the First Age, the city of Myion was dedicated to the Unconquered Sun, and reconsecrated to the Immaculate Dragons after the Usurpation. It's a sweeping vista of

flying buttresses and light, airy structures, transcending the stone it's carved from. Here sits the Fortress of the Greatest General, an ancient manse and one of the Blessed Isle's mightiest redoubts, which has served as House Cathak's prime bastion for centuries. The breathtaking beauty of its architecture inspires a reverent silence in many visitors, and the house boasts that more than one unbeliever has repented their sins and returned to the Immaculate Philosophy on the spot.

The house maintains other fortresses throughout and beyond the Blessed Isle, and has extensive satrapial holdings in the South. These include **Harborhead**, the seat of Ahlat — Southern god of war and cattle — and source of fine auxiliaries and legionnaires. Cathak satrapies are typically run with strict discipline for both satrap and populace, but Ahlat's presence requires a delicate touch. As such, Harborhead is where the house's finest administrators are sent, to maintain the house's strict and unmistakable grip on the nation and discourage rebellion, while also keeping Ahlat placated.

Once the gateway to the Realm's trade with the West, **Fajad** has fallen in importance since House Peleps navigated the Western sea routes, and become a troublesome territory for House Cathak to manage. To keep the Fajadi people placated in the face of ever-increasing demands for tribute, House Cathak allows them to practice their indigenous faith. This arrangement has drawn no small consternation from the Immaculate Order, and even Fajad's Cathak satrap considers giving the monks free reign to suppress the heresy. And above them all, the ancient sorcerer Aqadar sits atop his tower, where no Dynast has set foot and survived.

Scions of Note

Cathak, a great swordswoman and general adopted by the Empress, founded the house that bears her name. Cathak was also a famed ascetic plagued by doubt and dark thoughts, spending months in seclusion writing military treatises and contemplating spiritual matters, then emerging for days of wild debauchery. Many annotations to *The Thousand Correct Actions* were Cathak's, and many areas solidly under the Realm's control today were counted its greatest enemies before her time. She didn't allow her private troubles to seep into her public demeanor. Commanding armies and administering her house, she was strict and disciplined — preferring planning to improvisation, always maintaining a calm air of confidence. To her, this was no more than a Fire Aspect's duty, in Hesiesh's image. When she died, she was interred beneath the Fortress of the Greatest General.

The house's current matriarch is a man, **Cathak Cainan** (p. XX), a veteran shikari and officer educated in the Cloister of Wisdom. He secured a relatively unprestigious match with Cathak Urima — a sterling but unproven young Cathak officer — thereby remaining a Cathak after marrying. In the legion, he proved himself an inspirational leader, and caught the jaundiced eye of his ancestor Cathak. As she was dying of Yozi venom, she summoned him to her deathbed. There she listed his many and varied flaws before naming him heir, as the only scion she deemed to share her temperament. Ever since, he's striven to live up to that legacy, hoping to prove Cathak's faith in him wasn't misplaced. Now he sees the Realm fall to pieces around him, and has committed his house to holding the old empire together, no matter the cost. His virtues are well respected in the Dynasty, and many might hold him as a candidate for the throne but for his declining years; no one

wants a new ruler whose imminent death from old age would touch off another succession crisis.

Cathak Garel is Cainan's younger sister and commander of the Cathak legions, a position to which her brother appointed her nearly a century ago. She's an accomplished strategist and tactician, but her true passion and genius lies in logistics. She spends most days poring over legion records with the indefatigable intensity of someone who loves her work, while her husband, **Peleps Kozurin**, debates economic policy with her. She has a talent for estimating the long-term effects of specific losses on the legions, and applies her soldiers with frugality and good judgment, to conserve them and their resources as much as possible. When engaged in politics, she's unwaveringly honest, seemingly unable to tell a lie even out of politeness. In person, she's honorable and disciplined, keeping herself to the highest standards. She is Cainan's expected heir, a situation she's less than comfortable with. Though younger than her brother, she's also entering old age, and privately wonders how long she has left until her aching spine forces her into retirement.

Cathak Elanda is used to adversity. Cursed with a malady that caused her body to grow out of control, her health started failing in her teenage years. Combined with abuse from her peers, she became quiet and soft-spoken, hiding a keen intellect behind awkwardness. But the Dragons' Essence is strong — her Exaltation saved her life and allowed her to adapt to her illness, and while she's slow and clumsy, she's strong beyond belief. She graduated from the House of Bells and joined the legions, happy to escape social events and erstwhile classmates. There, she proved adept at war's physical and intellectual aspects alike, and over the course of several campaigns, rose through the ranks to the station of general. She learned resilience from her ordeals, but she also learned one thing she keeps very quiet: Dynasts are cruel, and the Realm is a broken society. She's thoroughly disillusioned with the Dynasty, but knows of no serious alternatives — those she's seen turned out worse than the Realm in the end.

House Cynis — Wood Nourished On Tears of The Fallen

While House Cynis may not be known for martial triumphs or scholarly achievements, being glamorous among the Scarlet Dynasty is no easy feat. Knowing which color to wear can be a matter of dishonor or death. Comfort and humor, even in the face of scandal, isn't an exceptional trait — it's essential. Style isn't just about being primped by slaves, it's about knowing which slaves are fit for the job, where to find them, and how to get them. Using blackmail, rumor, and poison to achieve ends others consider impossible is a basic skill. The scions of House Cynis have mastered all these and more.

Social Standing

Of all the Great Houses, Cynis may be the most popular — and may have the most notorious reputation. Cynises don't just throw parties, they host decadent galas that last for days. They don't just sell slaves, they offer trained majordomos, odalisques, musicians, acrobats, and chefs. They don't just grow food, they produce the finest crops and most exotic drugs from their mother prefecture of Pangu, their satrapies and prefectures across the Realm, and from trade with faraway nations such as Gem and

Halta. They don't just bathe, they construct elaborate, ornate bathhouses wherein they relax, gossip, and even conduct business meetings. Their standards are high, at least so far as their own happiness and well-being is concerned. For a Cynis to take many lovers, even after marriage, is common. Marriage is for procreation. Love is for pleasure. So long as the Cynis is happy with her lot, the rest of the house is pleased for her. Cynis respects perfection in all shapes, be it aesthetic, sensual, military, physical, or otherwise.

Perfection doesn't necessarily mean saintliness. House Cynis is the Realm's foremost purveyor of slaves and intoxicants. Its scions tend to be lax or leisurely in their adherence to the Immaculate Philosophy. Though their Dragon-Blooded status makes them holy by definition, few expect a Cynis to act like it. They've built their reputation on scandal, to the point where hearing of their debauches, salacious affairs, or ill-conceived experiments is unsurprising. While Cynis' scions are neither atheists nor overtly blasphemous, few make a point of righteousness, if they give the Immaculate Philosophy much thought at all. While it's not unusual to see a Cynis paying tribute at a shrine, it's often as much a lavish show of piety as a matter of genuine devotion. This irreverence is a major obstacle for House Cynis. The Immaculate Order has no small voice in the choice of the next ruler of the Realm, and their disdain for the house prevents them from backing any Cynis candidate while there are much more pious houses in the running.

The other houses underestimate Cynis. They buy their wines and drugs and slaves, feast at their tables, and relax at their bathhouses. Cynis smiles, plays along, and holds out both hands for the wealth of jade and information that falls into their grasp as a result.

House Economics

House Cynis is the Realm's largest purveyor of luxury goods. Narcotics from An-Teng, sealskins from Fair Isle, beautiful and strange crafts from Nexus — all of these are within Cynis' grasp. All can be attained — for those who can pay the price.

The house is most famous for its monopoly on the slave trade within the Realm, awarded by the Empress at the house's founding to put it on a solid financial footing. Cynis takes pride in finding and selling slaves specialized in difficult trades and practices. Merchant or artisan families give up young children who show promise in some skill in exchange for cancellation of debts. Other slaves expert in that field train the child until he's ready to sell. Unskilled labor, conversely, is easy to find, and Cynis buys or takes as much of it as can be packed into a ship's hold, whether prisoners seized by military adventure, dissidents from Threshold satrapies, or dream-eaten victims of the Fair Folk.

House Cynis' Imperial monopoly also extends to slave rental. Extremely skilled or specialized slaves are often only needed for a specific task; the house draws up extensive contracts to protect their interests in such agreements. More often, large groups of unskilled slaves are rented for construction projects.

While Cynis buys a significant number of its slaves from the Guild, indebted families, or other traders on the Blessed Isle, the house isn't above launching raids into "uncivilized" territories beyond the Realm's borders. Since the Empress' disappearance, Cynis grows more willing to extend this to other houses' ill-defended satrapies.

House Cynis also does a brisk trade in drugs and intoxicants, from simple opiates to more exotic hallucinogens and narcotics. Cynis has a standing agreement with the Guild

regarding drug trade, and extraordinary quantities of jade pass through the house each year for purchasing and selling addictive substances. Many hard drugs can only be purchased legally with jade, which nominally limits access to the Dynasty. This doesn't stop the Cynises from engaging in illegal enterprise. While they cannot control the entire Realm's black market — they'd like to, but there are far too many pressing issues demanding their attention — they have enormous influence within the Blessed Isle's criminal underworld.

Cynis physicians and surgeons are among the finest on the Blessed Isle. These tend to be the wealthiest, commanding steep fees for their services. The house sells medicinal tinctures and concoctions — many of them proprietary, the results of Cynis experimentation — but never the recipes, and always for an exorbitant cost, either monetary or political. Other houses are both resentful and grateful for this service.

House Military

Cynis' military is unimpressive at best. Troops posted at public affairs and assigned to guard duty are selected for their pleasing appearance as much as their skill, while their traditional paramilitary forces in the Threshold are brutes and slave-takers first, imperial garrisons second. Slaves taken by the house as children may be conscripted as adults into procuring more slaves. Mutiny is common, though usually put down quickly. Discipline isn't a strong suit among the house's troops.

During the parceling-out of the Imperial legions, Cynis laid claim to three. They're also secretly negotiating with certain Guild members to exchange appointments to the Deliberative's Lesser Chamber and influence over Cynis ministers' policy decisions for a massive discount on Nexus mercenaries.

War By Other Means

The danger of House Cynis lies not in armies, but in pervasiveness. Everyone who's anyone attends Cynis parties. Every Dragon-Blooded household worth mention buys slaves. Everyone needs to eat. House Cynis has inroads everywhere on the Blessed Isle and places beyond, and the amount of knowledge it possesses on the activities Dragon-Blooded great and small would have caused the Empress herself to pale.

House Cynis is under no illusions that it can take the throne through force. The Cathak legions alone could wipe out its entire army, plus any mercenaries it hires. Instead, the house has decided to fight for the throne on its own terms. It offers friendship in one hand while holding a dagger in the other. Those who've accepted Cynis hospitality — and there are few who haven't — know that the Cynis reputation for discretion is well earned. No matter how great the improprieties committed at a Cynis gala, a Dynast may rest easy knowing that her reputation is safe. Of course, House Cynis, watches, reports, and records. There's no piece of information too small to be used.

Using this information, however, is an option of last resort. Release news of a scandal too publicly and no one will ever let loose at a Cynis celebration again. There's no way to tell how the information will spread once released, so most play their cards close to their chest and work through insinuation. But if a particular political rival needs to be burned, a Cynis scion might mention something to an Immaculate monk, who'll discreetly

censure the blackmailed party while leaving House Cynis blameless of any breach of hospitality.

Some Cynises keep ciphered dossiers or sorcerously sealed ledgers; others train themselves to memorize decades' worth of indiscretions with eidetic clarity. The house maintains no central register of blackmail material, but trading juicy facts with one's kin is a common pastime, while providing an elder with especially scandalous information can greatly enhance a scion's prospects.

Experimenting with Creation's flora and fauna in search of the next high or cure has given House Cynis an unparalleled knowledge of toxins, venoms, and other deadly substances. Many compounds in the house vaults cannot be replicated without their massive trade network, nor can their antidotes. House Cynis discreetly offers these poisons to Dynasts and criminals willing to pay, and uses its extensive information-gathering network to ascertain the victim's identity to determine their next step. If it's someone the house wants gone, nothing further needs doing, and they've been paid for the privilege of having an enemy assassinated. If they'd rather see him live, they arrange for him to meet a Cynis physician, who'll cluck her tongue and talk of summer fevers or winter chills while administering antidotes made from ingredients plucked from gardens and grottoes thousands of miles away. The value of the patient's gratitude is equaled only by the steep cost charged for the service.

Allies and Enemies

House Cynis enjoys good-natured, if shallow, relationships with many other houses. House V'neef buys slaves for its vineyards, while Cynis buys V'neef wines for salons and galas. House Mnemon requires large amounts of slave labor for construction projects. And households and individuals from every house have financial arrangements with Cynis, or simply enjoy attending Cynis social events.

House Cynis' biggest obstacle to the throne is Mnemon herself. The eldest daughter of the Scarlet Empress believes it's her divine right to take her mother's throne, and the idea of anyone else challenging her is laughable. The idea of House Cynis contesting her claim, however, is an insult. They may have a bloodline worthy of marrying her daughters to, but as Mnemon sees it, no Cynis hedonist, whoremonger, or slavetaker is fit to sit upon the throne. House Cynis fears that she'd seize their lands, ships, slaves, and legions in the name of piety and virtue. Should she come close to taking the throne, the house might be compelled to move directly before they lose everything.

House Ragara has become an issue for Cynis of late. Cynises have always spent lavishly on their lifestyles and their galas, and all too many have gone deeply in debt to the so-called Imperial Bank. With civil war in the offing, Ragara is calling its debts due, and threatens to suborn a whole swath of Cynis scions. The house is faced with the need to employ blackmail more directly than is their wont as a counter to Ragara extortion.

House Sesus is closely related to House Cynis through marriage and dalliance. Sesus provides Cynis with information gathered by its extensive intelligence network. Cynis provides Sesus with the highest-quality goods, both legal and otherwise, and information gathered by its blackmailers. Many children of Sesus are addicted to some Cynis-procured substance or other, their continued supply only ensured by their loyalty. This

loyalty is often fully secured through intermarriages between the two houses. Which house has a stronger hold on the other is difficult to ascertain.

Major Holdings

While Cynis' nominal stronghold is the House of Trees, a beautiful castle woven from living wood atop their founder's crypt, their heart is in **Pangu** city. This city, the prefecture's namesake, houses Cynis scions of all ranks, their courts, their lovers, and their slaves. There's always some party or another going on in Pangu's grand houses, and tribute flows through the city like a river. Pangu's palaces have pleasantly open, airy layouts with rich carpets and sensuous baths, reflecting this love of pleasure and luxury.

At the other end of Pangu Prefecture is the **Tourmaline Monastery**. So called for veins of semiprecious stones running through its walls, it's the single largest Immaculate stronghold in the prefecture. For many years, abbot Cloud Lotus has given sanctuary to the few escaped slaves who've found their way here, allowing them to remain as lay worshipers and shielding them from their Cynis owners. Should war come to Pangu, the monastery's neutrality and political immunity may cease to protect it.

The satrapy of **Greyfalls** is the Realm's easternmost bastion in the Scavenger Lands, named for the tremendous waterfall that cascades down the cliff side. A recent Cynis acquisition, it's the site of one of the war mansas that channels Creation's geomantic Essence into the Realm Defense Grid, and as such an invaluable strategic holding. It also serves as the Realm's gateway to Eastern trade with Ixcoatli, spider-ridden Kubal, the Jaguar Principalities, and other nations along the Golden Road trade route. It's a lucrative satrapy, but the sheer distance between it and the Blessed Isle poses a substantial obstacle to collecting tribute and maintaining control. As House Cynis prepares for the prospect of civil war, some within it wonder whether they'd be best served by simply cutting Greyfalls loose, leaving its satrap to fend for herself.

Scions of Note

A trailblazing explorer, master merchant, and inveterate hedonist, **Cynis** herself died centuries ago of an overdose of heroin laced with dreamstone dust. The house takes great pains to keep her crypt beneath the House of Trees decorated with fresh-cut flowers and beautiful works of art.

A triumvirate of Cynis' daughters leads the house. The eldest, **Cynis Belar**, is the matriarch. She's a renowned socialite, with a reputation for worldly sophistication and rapier wit. She's also a celebrated painter and sculptor, her pieces taking center stage at family galas and celebrations. Behind the scenes, Belar is secretive and ruthless. Dedicated to House Cynis' welfare and her descendants' future, she deploys the house's connections and espionage resources to ruin potential threats. Though she makes a great show of her sisters being her peers, they ultimately defer to her, to the point where other Cynises presume that she holds unshakeable blackmail material on them both.

The second sister, **Cynis Falen**, is the financial mastermind controlling the family's purse strings and the slave trade. Though personable and easygoing, she's also the most unabashedly cold-blooded of the sisters, finding great satisfaction in maximizing house profits with little consideration for morality. She's also the best-traveled, spending

months at a time on business in the Threshold. Once as hedonistic as her siblings, she's lost much of her taste for wine and debauchery over the centuries.

The youngest sister, **Cynis Wisel**, is a talented poet. Her frail, orchid-like appearance and wide brown eyes hide a master poisoner who craves the stability and safety that power affords. The drug trade is her bailiwick, and she has many contacts in the Blessed Isle's criminal underworld. Her husband is a Sesus, more often than not found in his cups at some wineshop or another.

Cynis Petalin, Wisel's lover and second cousin, is well over six feet tall and musclebound, with a laugh as loud and sharp as any Imperial firework. Petalin commands the house legions, who love her for her sense of humor and dedication to both tactics and morale. Wisel intends to place Petalin on the throne and set herself up as the trusted vizier, ascending to prominence within the triumvirate.

Directly under Petalin is **Cynis Laseral**. She has a reputation as a brilliantly successful soldier and teacher, adored by her Dynastic kin but feared by her soldiers. She's lectured at the House of Bells and the Spiral Academy, and her seminars on how to best profit from a conflict are well attended. She treats her soldiers like Gateway pieces, winning against overwhelming odds at the cost of significant casualties. The only thing that could undermine her ruthless reputation for triumph at any cost is the deep romantic love that she and her husband, **Mnemon Oroth Takor**, share, and she goes to great lengths to conceal it publicly. She's a master of realpolitik and a favorite of many younger Cynis scions, who believe her worthy of the throne for her ruthlessness and her tactical skill — if her own soldiers don't kill her first.

Cynis Umara and **Cynis Cerise** are twin daughters of a famous Cynis procurer by one of his Haslanti bed slaves. Umara is one of the house's best physicians, rumored to be able to replace a missing soul — for the right price. Umara never takes payment in jade, only in replacement of her medicinal stock, which can sometimes only be found in remote corners of Creation. Cerise was much less lucky. Her growth stunted by an accident in her youth, she stands only four feet in height. Still, she makes the best of it. Dressed in a dozen pounds of jewels and a pair of moonsilver-heeled shoes, she continues her father's procuring business, selling only the finest in imported jewelry, slaves, wine, and more illicit substances.

Once an ambitious captain in the Merchant Fleet, **Cynis Falen Parda** now commands his own squadron of the house navy, escorting Cynis merchant ships across the Inland Sea. A brilliant naval tactician and shrewd judge of character, Parda prefers words to blades, and more than once has persuaded a pirate captain to yield without coming to blows. His persuasive talents come into their full flower in salon and gala, where his good looks and rakish air have made him many friends and many lovers — and made no few enemies of his lovers' spouses.

House Ledaal — Air that Raised the Bones of Giants

With a murky history rooted in a terrible betrayal, and a steadfast vigil that spans centuries, House Ledaal is the icy fang of the Realm's shadow-hunting wolf. Its scions scent the signs of impending disaster on the wind and know the time for action is nigh,

but with the Empress' children positioning daggers at each other's backs, it must fight a war on two fronts.

Ledaal herself passed away centuries ago, leaving the Flashing Tempest Council — a clique of worthy elders — to guide the house's path. Its members include figures such as the house matriarch, Ledaal Yasmet; Ledaal Sivarin Vanek, scarred veteran of a dozen successful Wyld Hunts; and Ledaal Zenitar, the daring sorcerer who plumbed the depths of Hell. Historically a tight-knit team, the elders now differ on urgent issues, each taking steps toward the means they think best for the Realm's stability and what they see as the house's rightful authority. As they work at cross-purposes, spreading resources too thin, even the youngest Ledaal can sense the disagreements within their house's leadership. The council juggles politics, inquisition, and planning for war. Whether it can keep its balls in the air long enough to see the Realm — and itself — through the Time of Tumult remains to be seen.

Social Standing

No one questions House Ledaal's loyalty, brilliance, or peerless vigilance. Dynasts and patricians alike do business with Ledaal, and trust its spears at their backs against what lies beyond the Realm's borders. At the same time, its relentless obsession with hunting in dark places leaves a sour taste in others' mouths. Delving fearlessly into forbidden texts and mentored by enigmatic mystics from far-off shores, Ledaal scions often seem to care more for distant threats than home-grown politics. While others trust in Ledaal's competence, marrying one sounds like someone else's job.

Despite the stereotypes, Ledaal's brood has as much eye for strategic marriage as anyone — perhaps more. They're raised to believe that falling in love is something barbarians, fools, and Cynises do. If you dally, the house should get something out of it, whether a potential Dragon-Blood, political relationship, or First Age tome. Ledaal sons are married off to wives with interests and talents aligned with the house's goals. Ledaal daughters take husbands whose areas of expertise complement their own. But since the Empress' disappearance, household mothers can't afford to be choosy, obliged to cement the house's standing whenever possible.

However, the elders have no plans to put a Ledaal on the throne. They claim their authority as a Great House by their self-described role as Realm watchdogs and view themselves as invaluable through it. They would only seek to orchestrate a Ledaal Empress if they thought it necessary to secure the empire against a tide of darkness.

Shadow Crusaders

The Realm protects Creation from the Wyld's ravages, the depredations of Anathema, and the hunger of the walking dead. But who protects the Realm? The house has taken that mantle for itself, quenching its blade of zeal in the icy wind of knowledge. This is the Shadow Crusade to which Ledaal's descendants devote their lives.

The founder Ledaal was the Empress' granddaughter, scion of House Jurul and daughter to Jurul herself. Ledaal exposed a conspiracy led by her own mother within the house, whose traitors forged pacts with a Lunar Anathema and lords of Hell to fuel their ambitions. She personally led the Wyld Hunt that destroyed the Anathema and brought her evidence directly to the Empress. For her loyalty and vigilance, the Empress

rewarded Ledaal by adopting her as daughter and founder of a new Great House, while striking House Jurul from the Imperial ledgers.

Ill-content to simply distance themselves from the debacle, Ledaal and her descendants took up the banner of foe to Anathema and other fiends, that such betrayal might never again threaten the Realm that safeguards the world. A long line of demon-hunters, scholars of forbidden lore and ancient history, and crusaders has followed. Ledaal encourages its scions to train as Anathema-hunting shikari, and contributes jade and supplies to support Wyld Hunts.

In recent years, devotion to duty has become a desperate struggle. The turning seasons and threat of civil war have rendered Thorns' fall a mere footnote in the Dynasty's power-play saga. So far, Ledaal's horrified warnings and numerous proposals to rally other houses in reclaiming Thorns and other Anathema-tainted kingdoms have gone unheeded in the face of each house's immediate troubles. But the council can't bury its nose too deeply in its Shadow Crusade, lest other houses rip it to shreds while it's not looking. Thus, it dedicates resources to playing the game, while watching the shadow loom nearer.

House Economics

Arjuf Dominion is the house's ancestral home, and holds one of the most important ports on the Blessed Isle. The Ledaals are painfully aware that a Peleps or V'neef blockade would spell disaster — they have a modest private navy for shipping cargo and soldiers, but nothing approaching an effective maritime force.

In Arjuf city, the house's un-Exalted members keep fingers in every pie so the dragon's share of incoming foreign revenue enters Ledaal coffers. The house benefits from a healthy cut of every tariff and docking fee that merchant ships bring in, and owns or sponsors businesses along every pier.

Ledaal ships home significant wealth from its satrapies, taking an active hand in their rulership. The house sees knowledge as key to strategy, in peace as in war. Many households reside in the Threshold, soaking up local culture and bringing back wealth and craftsmanship. It doesn't endear them to the locals, though — tributaries under Ledaal's thumb know they represent nothing more than a resource and a staging ground for the Shadow Crusade. Constant vigilance against the rising dark makes Ledaal satrapies among the safest places for citizens of the Threshold to live, but in exchange they sacrifice privacy and autonomy. The yoke of Imperial oversight grows heavier as the house scours its holdings for Anathema sympathies, and demands increasing resources to shore up its grip on Arjuf and fund Wyld Hunts.

A smaller portion of the house's assets take the form of unearthed relics and volumes of First Age lore, which it acquires voraciously, seeking weapons against Creation's unnatural threats. Many of the Realm's foremost experts on ancient history, Anathema magics, and stranger things are Ledaal; the house hires them out as translators and archaeologists for a hefty fee. Lately, however, other houses keep finds secret in anticipation of turning them against their rivals.

House Military

Before the Empress' disappearance, Ledaal kept a sizable force of paramilitary troops, trained to root out Threshold cults, battle creatures of darkness, and supplement the Wyld Hunt. Ledaal's specialized military tradition was never meant to defend its homeland from invaders.

Now, though, Arjuf Dominion — with its substantial trade ports, prominent land routes, and easy access to the Realm's most prestigious academy of war — is ripe for plucking by other Great Houses, and Ledaal feels exposed. It claimed three legions, but every member of the Flashing Tempest Council has their own opinion of where to deploy them. The generals have sent soldiers to Faxai, hoping to help take back the Caul — a longtime Ledaal obsession — and have trained more strike teams for the Hunt. They bicker over whether to shore up the satrapies' defenses against the Anathema, since heavier tribute demands have weakened satrapial militias. The elders worry that without their full strength at home, Arjuf's defenses are paper dolls compared to Cathak's legions and Peleps' warships.

Thorns is a popular rallying cry for the house, following the total destruction of its garrison and the deaths of several scions when the Mask of Winters took the satrapy. Ledaal generals lack a suitable staging ground, though, and can't convince other houses to provide one. The Flashing Tempest Council made overtures to Peleps after Thorns fell, proposing a joint venture to rout the Mask with a sea approach from Ledaal's holdings in Incas Prefecture, but the naval house refused. Now, fearing Peleps will take any excuse to get its hooks into Arjuf, the elders hesitate to try a meatier proposal.

Enemies and Alliances

Though Ledaal has no particular enemies among the Dynasty, its reputation for zealotry and close proximity to the unnatural has earned it no long-standing allies. With Nellens territory just across the river, some think Ledaal would be best served crushing it under its heel and absorbing its resources — and Ledaal would like nothing better than to show those weak-blooded upstarts what a true Great House can do — but most agree it would leave the house vulnerable.

Ledaal scions with their ears to the ground at home harbor a deep suspicion of House Ragara. In their vigilance, they see patterns in Ragara's commercial dealings, archaeological expeditions, and military maneuvers that seem designed to cover something more sinister. They quietly gather evidence of the financial titan's misuse of occult secrets and relics from Anathema history to build a case against them, hoping to one day soon have enough proof to expose treason and take down the debt collectors before civil war makes them too valuable to die. Some Ledaals seek allies in their investigation from the All-Seeing Eye or magistrates with the gift of subtlety.

Mnemon is Ledaal's top choice for a strong alliance and for the Scarlet Throne. Her bold move against Jiara earned the house's grudging respect, and the elders think the devout sorcerer would have the power and willingness to support the Shadow Crusade. They've made gestures to gain her goodwill, but with her military forces on the other side of the Imperial Mountain, some question the potential return on investment for such an open admission of need.

Major Holdings

Arjuf Dominion is Ledaal's largest and most crucial holding. Encompassing the west bank of the Caracal River down to the Inland Sea, it's a rich region with fertile soil and a tradition of skilled artisanship, and its coastal region holds multiple ports that trade with the wealthy city-states of the South. The greatest of those ports, the city of Arjuf, may be the richest and most cosmopolitan metropolis on the Blessed Isle after the Imperial City. The dominion is the center of Ledaal wealth and power, and the house jealously guards its authority there.

Howling Heart Prefecture in the northwest is a sprawling mountainous region. Jade mining towns use Ledaal artifacts and innovations to mitigate danger to workers. The prefecture is named for the sound the high-altitude winds make passing through the region's many mine shafts and tunnels, but peasants and patricians quietly use the name to evoke dark experiments the Dragon-Blooded run in remote Howling Heart city.

The city's elite shikari training ground is built on a puissant demesne. Ledaal expects its shikari to study at Howling Heart, learning Anathema magic's devious ways and spectral armies' fell tactics from house scholars and retired hunters. But the city's underside hosts cabals of occultists who've been running experiments for centuries, pushing the limits of Terrestrial power however they can. They aim to produce shikari capable of standing toe-to-toe with Solar demon-queens and Lunar warlords; ever since the Tepet legions' disastrous failure, they've picked up the pace. Through sorcery and reverse-engineering ancient artifacts of Anathema make, they've developed a still-theoretical protocol to dramatically amplify a Dragon-Blood's Essence for a short period, at the cost of major decreases in lifespan and blood purity. They haven't deployed it yet, for it carries the risk of inciting Essence fever nigh unto madness, but the resurgence of the Solar Anathema may force their hand.

Incas Prefecture, House Iselsi's erstwhile seat, came under Ledaal control when the Empress snatched it from the dying house. Ledaal holds Iselsi in contempt for its treachery, and does its best to further marginalize its remnants. The council hoped to gain a freer hand to call and direct the Wyld Hunt by taking over the home of the Palace Sublime and Cloister of Wisdom. Unfortunately, between the remaining Iselsi households and Mnemon's maneuvering to relocate the Order's heart, Ledaal has done little more than gain more bills to pay. Still, some elders are glad to control a prefecture so close to Thorns.

The city-state **Perch**, in the Southern land of Zephyr, sprawls along the east bank of the Elidad River, whose rich soil yields fine harvests. But the west bank hosts only the Twilight Grove, Perch's shadowland necropolis. There, the dead keep their hearts close at hand to better recall the passions of life, and spectral princes called aeons ride sphinxes that are their own hungry ghosts. The satrap, Ledaal Yasmets Imara, treats as an equal with the seven archaeons that rule the dead city, bargaining for occult secrets and Underworld gossip. Other than burial rites, she forbids intercourse between the two cities, but turns a blind eye to the many little flowerings of Perch's ancestor cult. Though she'd love to extirpate the cult root and branch, Perch has seen too many uprisings in the past, and Imara does not dare tempt another at this delicate time.

Scions of Note

Ledaal herself is gone, but she wrote her legacy in bold strokes across her descendants' lives. The house extols her as a hero to emulate in courage and integrity. Elders remember her as a stalwart, inquisitive woman who would stop at nothing to uncover the truth, and a decisive leader who brooked no compromise. Her ravenous curiosity about all things mystical paired with her steel backbone led her to keep many secrets, not all of which she passed down; many Ledaal scions dream of being the one to discover hidden journals or messages she left as tests for future house prodigies.

Ledaal Yasmnet, a powerful sorcerer and house matriarch, spends enormous sums of house money on ruins-delving expeditions far afield. She believes the Realm's only hope for survival lies in occult might, and wants Ledaal at the forefront of whatever ancient power she finds. She hires Liminal and Exigent mercenaries and secretly reads tomes on the art of necromancy. The other members of the Flashing Tempest Council have noticed a recent marked pessimistic streak in her and blame her second husband, the reclusive philosopher **Ragara Gaiban**, for her odd behavior.

Ledaal Rae, a longtime diplomat who stayed within House Ledaal by marrying a patrician, argues that the house must put aside its grievances with the Scavenger Lands and forge an alliance against the Mask of Winters. His daughters both perished in the Thorns garrison's destruction; those who oppose his call to action whisper that his thirst for vengeance and masculine intemperance interfere with his judgment. With the Empress gone, Rae insists, the Seventh Legion could be persuaded to sign a treaty. Meeting resistance, he's sent his own grandson to the Realm embassy in Lookshy for preliminary talks with the General Staff, unbeknownst to the other elders.

Ledaal Kebok Coren is young and untested in the field, but her swordsmanship is beyond reproach and her uncanny command over the weather makes would-be rivals nervous about questioning her prowess. Uncharacteristically passionate for a Ledaal, Coren has trouble reining in her strange powers, which wreak havoc with the skies according to her mood. Her great-grandmother Sulco has confided that they originate from Coren's great-grandfather, the storm-demon Yan. Coren is wary of her inheritance and keeps the secret desperately, terrified that her family's Shadow Crusade might turn on her if she revealed it.

Mnemon — Earth Carved in the Image of One

Priests. Poets. Lovers. Builders. Of the Great Houses, the Mnemons are deemed most devout and closest to the Immaculate Order. Their eponymous founder — alive and well, scarcely aging despite her 398 years — established the house three and a half centuries ago, relying heavily on devotion to the Order, and strong public emulation of Pasiap through construction of some of the Realm's greatest temples. Since then they've sheltered the Order, offering it protection and support amid dire straits, and used their pious reputation to rise almost as far above reproach as the Order itself. House Mnemon hopes these advantages will carry it through the Time of Tumult.

Mnemons pursue construction, religion, and sorcery under the family business' umbrella. A slim majority of scions receive Immaculate training at the Cloister of Wisdom. But while some grow rigid in their piety, others study at far-flung Threshold temples and cities, exposing them to many of Creation's most outlandish and enthralling aesthetics, cultures, and spiritual paths. As a result, they have a distinct flair of exoticism bordering

on salacious, and a wisdom bordering on heretical. Yet they renew their dedication to Pasiap through their works.

Social Standing

House Mnemon swings wildly in popularity with other Great Houses. Truly religious and deeply spiritual, its elders drive a hard line when the Philosophy is flouted — particularly Mnemon herself, who strides like a colossus over the perilous waters of Dynastic politics. Junior Mnemons are charismatic, full of dreams and artistic vision. Young and old are renowned for erudition — from knowledge of dead languages to mastery of erotic arts — and devotion to family, whether spouses, offspring, or Mnemon kin. Some Mnemons court notoriety by practicing the uncouth art of sorcery.

Above all, Mnemons are known for pride. Their progenitor is among the greatest scions the Dynasty has ever produced, and she continues to tutor her descendants in secret techniques of architecture, construction, artifice, and sorcery. Through her, they know themselves to be the preeminent bearers of the Empress' lineage, and they've kept their blood strong through numerous favorable marriages. Driving a hard bargain at the marriage table, the Mnemons have a history of snubbing other Great Houses to keep the bloodline pure.

House Economics

House Mnemon's Imperial remit is construction, a skill that Mnemon developed in her youth, taking refuge in the hinterlands while evading her brother Ragara's assassins. Today, the house has right of first refusal on all of the throne's building contracts. Architecture is the foundation of the house's fame and wealth, and the most visible, enduring proof of their closeness to the Dragons.

Mnemon architects designed many of the Isle's grandest structures, particularly manses — the house has spent centuries mastering geomancy. Mnemon overseers direct work crews constructing and repairing buildings, roads, tunnels, bridges, levees, wells, reservoirs, and aqueducts. A fraction of the funds invested in these projects — by landholders, governors, prefects, and the Throne itself — flows into the house's coffers.

House Ragara is a necessary business partner; major construction projects demand sizable outlays of funds, and unforeseen delays require loans to complete an undertaking. Mnemon has always resented her house's dependence on Ragara credit, and she doesn't trust the honor of a family whose founder tried to murder her in her youth. Today, this relationship is complicated by several Mnemon satrapies withholding tribute, without which the house is in danger of defaulting and coming further under Ragara's power — a nightmare scenario for the house and its founder.

House Military

Before the Empress' disappearance, Mnemon had no house legions and employed only a small paramilitary as a security force. During the military reformation of the Imperial legions, House Mnemon took control of five, providing ample proof that it had generals to lead them and money to maintain them, and vowing that the Realm's interests would be defended abroad against incursions by the Anathema.

Predictably, several satrapies openly rebelled after the Great Houses recalled most of the legions from the Threshold. One was Jiara, an Eastern satrapy under House Mnemon, which yielded food, textiles, and sorcerous antiquities. Jiara was particularly troubling as the stronghold of a circle of Solar Anathema who raised the countryside in revolt against the Mnemon garrison. This wasn't the distant threat of the Bull of the North, but a full-fledged Anathema outbreak on the Realm's doorstep.

After much deliberation, Mnemon moved the bulk of her forces away from defensive positions in Dejis Prefecture and other house strongholds to personally reclaim Jiara from the Anathema. In doing so, she delivered a blistering condemnation of the other houses for their indolence in such matters elsewhere in the Threshold, a valedictory that drew many unaffiliated Dragon-Blooded to her cause.

Mnemon left approximately one and a half legions to protect her home interests. She invited the Immaculate Order to use many of her family's homes, temples, and manses for festivals in the coming months, in hopes the Immaculate presence would cause predatory houses to hesitate in launching an attack.

Enemies and Alliances

House elders favor a Peleps alliance. In addition to naval might, Peleps' reputation as exemplars of Dynastic virtue dovetails with the Mnemons' pious magnanimity to guarantee popularity with the Realm's mortal populace, which Mnemon's inner circle believes will decide the war. But stable alliances demand intermarriage, and while Mnemon herself respects their houses' shared values — sophistication, ambition, resolve — she disdains the Peleps' pedigree. She also undervalues the peasantry's love because they've never loved her. Mnemon would rather wield Peleps against V'neef in the coming war, though not at the cost of promising them the Merchant Fleet.

House Mnemon also favors alliance with Cathak, a devout house commanding the Realm's most formidable army. Mnemon knows gaining the throne requires treating with the Cathaks eventually. But she hopes for an angle allowing her to present herself as the only legitimate contender, or else delay a falling-out with Cathak long enough to deal with the other houses.

Unexpectedly, Ledaal has come forward as a potential ally. The Ledaals respect Mnemon as a powerful, adroit leader, and admire her taking the fight to the Anathema despite risk to herself and her house. As candidate for Empress, they deem her sympathetic to their intent to eradicate Threshold threats to the Realm. But their major holdings and militaries are on opposite sides of the Isle, limiting their ability to cooperate in the coming war.

The house's most abiding support comes from the Immaculate Order. Mnemon famously committed one-third of her own children to the Order, a tradition her house follows — though not all to the same extent. Donating public works to the Immaculate Order's care, and repairing temple structures for little to no cost, has further cultivated the Order's affections. Though the Order maintains studious neutrality in conflict between Great Houses, its hierarchs privately consider her one of the few candidates spiritually fit to take the throne, and pay vast sums for ecclesiastical construction projects with the quiet understanding that the money will, for the moment, be used elsewhere.

The remaining houses are rivals to House Mnemon at best, enemies at worst.

Mnemon sees House Sesus as the greatest threat. Though intermarried with her own house, she has no illusions about their loyalties, and knows better than to try goading them into fighting her battles. House Mnemon is willing to retain the alliance as long as possible, but Mnemon knows she must humble the mighty Sesus family at some point. Conversely, House Cynis has Sesus wrapped around its finger and is using that house to fulfill its own ambitions, bringing Cynis and Mnemon into conflict.

Mnemon hates V'neef — the woman, not the house — for embodying all of the Scarlet Empress' beauty, charm, and joie de vivre, undercutting Mnemon's public reputation as the very image of the Empress. However, Mnemon has largely restricted this grudge to the political arena, acting against V'neef interests in the Deliberative and sabotaging the careers of promising V'neef ministers.

Mnemon's main grudge is against House Ragara. Though Ragara himself is ailing and retired, Mnemon never forgot how many times he tried to kill her. Mnemon also rankles against her house's centuries of accrued debt. Younger scions are in particularly dire straits. While House Ragara eagerly extended them credit with good terms while the Empress lived, now creditors squeeze them financially and try to suborn them. No matter the circumstances, Mnemon won't seek alliances in the coming war that align her with the Ragaras. She intends on decimating their house, and forcing them to pay war reparations and cancel her family's debts.

Major Holdings

The Mnemons have settled thickly in **Dejis Prefecture**. Dejis encompasses the mountains immediately northeast of the Imperial Mountain, whose foothills form the prefecture's southwestern border. Once it was rife with weak demesnes, but the Mnemons carefully transformed the region's geography to cultivate stronger demesnes, and thus built greater manses throughout the hills and cliffs. The mountains of Dejis are known for temples, manses, and other scenic and majestic holy structures raised by House Mnemon.

Dejis Prefecture's capital is **Mnemon-Darjilis**. Mnemon restored the city of Darjilis from the ruins of the First Age, and it began accepting residents and generating taxes under its savior's name. Other Dejis cities include breathtaking **Chainbright**, its buildings carved deep into cliff faces between cascading waterfalls, and museum-riddled **Ajakai of the Jewels**, where Mnemon raised tombs for siblings Ragara slew centuries ago.

Vacationing Dynasts and patricians flock to the beautiful beaches and villas of **Halcyon Prefecture**. In the hills, shepherds driving flocks through picturesque First Age ruins exchange gossip of nightly bacchanals in such fashionable resort towns as Iru-by-the-Sea, hosted by Mnemon husbands and widowers — that passionate, less-disciplined gender — of Houses Cynis and Sesus. Painters and poets look out across blue waters, where fishing boats make way for Dynastic yachts sailing to the nearby island Aura. House Mnemon tamed the island's spirits and dragon lines, constructing a Wood manse — the House of Violet Pergolas — that bathes the entire island in salubrious energies. A magnificent spa and baths complex encircles the manse, accessible only to Mnemons and their personal guests.

Groves of almonds and olives grow near the confluence of two rivers in the satrapy of **Paragon**. Merchants ply their trade without fear of thieves or dishonest customers;

magisters in robes of bright reds, deep blues, and exotic greens walk the city streets alongside citizens in dull and muted colors; visiting Dynasts sup on dates and coffee. Its buildings are of greenish-black basalt and white marble, laid out in a grid centered on the mosaic-adorned palace of the aging Perfect of Paragon. Once a scavenger prince and wandering archaeologist, he rose to power after unearthing a relic of the First Age that prolongs his lifespan and binds the satrapy's citizenry to its ironclad laws. His rule over the city-state's people is absolute, but he's shown no sign of disobedience to its Mnemon satrap, knowing that for all his excavated power, he has no hope of standing against the Realm's legions.

Mnemon's Inner Circle

The house founder only trusts a handful of people sufficiently to value their counsel and to grant them responsibility over the house's business and military interests. These are almost always at least a century old — Mnemon gives little heed to the young and inexperienced — and are usually blood relatives, though a lover or a descendant's spouse occasionally earns her respect. Moreover, each is bound to her by ties of fear or obligation; Mnemon knows better than to trust anyone who could entertain thoughts of betraying her without suffering immediate and devastating reprisal.

Mnemon's inner circle isn't an official body. Its members don't have formal meetings, but they're aware of one another's identities, often gathering informally at family galas or corresponding to discuss matters of import. Rarely do they overtly work at cross purposes; Mnemon has little patience for such feuds.

Notable members of the inner circle include the sour-faced senator Mnemon Oroth, who conceals beneath her balding pate a litany of scandalous facts concerning almost every member of the Greater Chamber; Cynis Solado, master physician and poisoner, who fathered one of Mnemon's daughters; and the sagacious monk Mnemon Caras Farim, who watches for signs of Iselsi subversion within the Order and keeps a close eye on a particular assistant to the Mouth of Peace.

Scions of Note

Mnemon (p. XX) is often regarded as the very image of the Empress. She is brilliant, determined, and ruthless, and her sorcerous skills are unmatched within the Dynasty. For centuries she's labored to build the prestige and wealth of her Great House, and now she stands ready to step into her mother's place. If only the rest of the Dynasty wanted another Scarlet Empress, she'd sit upon the throne right now.

Despite her age, Mnemon looks scarcely older than thirty. She attributes her extraordinary vitality to the practice of Immaculate martial arts and attunement to specially cultivated Earth manses, though deeper secrets of sorcery are doubtless involved. Dressing richly but severely, she favors a spartan lifestyle, having grown accustomed to austerity in her years with the Immaculates. She disdains flattery, deeming actions significant where words are empty air.

Withered and wry, **Mnemon Rulinsei** looks older than Mnemon, but is actually her younger sister. Having lost a hand and eye to Ragara's assassins centuries ago, Rulinsei joined Mnemon's household under her protection as an adopted daughter. After outliving two Cynis husbands, she's retired to Mnemon-Darjilis as matriarch to her sprawling household, and a member of the house founder's inner circle. A master geomancer and middling sorcerer, she's walked strange realms, debating heterodox philosophies with ghosts of Shogunate savants and studying sorcerous architecture with princesses of Hell. Ultramarine glyphs shine upon her black jade hand, Demon Strangler. A patch covers her starmetal eye, its power to see the unseen magnifying her own second sight. Rulinsei is placing her affairs in order; utterly loyal to the sister who shielded her, she's ready to sacrifice anything — including her own all-but-spent life — to place Mnemon on the throne and ensure the supremacy of their mutual brood.

Though a skilled officer and effective swordsman, dragonlord **Mnemon Pallan** of the Sesus legions is best known as a poet. His verses — compiled and published by his wife, Sesus Elissa, earning him fame among Realm literati — laud the legions' might and honor, the majesty of the Realm they guard, and the glory of death in the cause of victory. Sung at military banquets or chanted by troops on the march, they inspire officers and soldiers alike to heroic effort. He likewise cuts a swath off the battlefield, where his good looks, eloquent manner, and generous nature have won him many lovers — even one night with the Empress herself, though he doesn't speak of it. Pallan's longest-running affair, with Ragara Sarisan, has lasted well over a decade. His blood-kin hide their disapproval lest they break the fiction of fidelity. Real trouble looms from another quarter; Sarisan's firstborn may be Pallan's — a grave offense to his wife's house, squandering potency belonging to Sesus.

Mnemon Rulinsei Ghova is among the Realm's most gifted armorers, but few desire his wares. He adorns his work with phantasmagorical imagery — storms riddled with eyes, beasts with flames instead of heads, vines whose flowers are human hands. Some reject his work's heretical iconism; others simply find it bizarre. He draws inspiration from opium dreams and traumatic memories of the bordermarches, where he and his Hearth quested for the unreal Noumenon and battled the raksha prince Llirian-Llai, She Who Drinks the Wine of Light. Only the Wyld Hunt draws him away from salon, temple, and forge. Ghova wears a veil, an affectation tied to a private heresy; he believes the Immaculate Dragons have withdrawn beyond time's veil as bodhisattvas, still living, ready to return in the Realm's time of need. In doctrinal debates with aunts and uncles, he supports his position with scripture and the apocryphal *Hollow Codex*; they disagree, but respect his views so long as he raises no awkward questions through proselytization. Recently, he's seen the Immaculate Dragons in an opium stupor, instructing him to seek their glory-crowned reincarnations amid the Threshold.

Nellens — Dragons of the Blood Resurgent

In a tavern in Juche, just outside Nellens' sprawling ancestral home, the story of the house's august ancestor is told once a year on the date of his birth. Like most epic songs, it's full of flowery verses, spinning the tale of a pious warrior and the queen who captured his heart, of love that transcended social distinction only to end in tragedy. The

best renditions include war, assassins, and selfless sacrifice. Like most epic songs, it's almost entirely fictitious.

The Scarlet Empress had many lovers and consorts over the long centuries of her reign, and few were as controversial as Nellens. A politician instead of a warrior, Nellens' time as a mortal delegate to the Deliberative's Lesser Chamber was marked by his advocacy for un-Exalted Dynasts under the Empress' rule. He insisted that the blood of the Dragons in their veins marked them as more spiritually advanced than peasants and patricians. As such, they should be valued for more than their role in birthing future generations of Dragon-Blooded, and elevated above the patriciate in the Realm's laws and administration commensurate with their Dragon-proven enlightenment. It was a wildly unpopular stance amongst Dragon-Blooded senators. Though Nellens crafted every speech on the subject carefully, he enraged and offended many, and it was assumed that one of his political rivals — or perhaps the Empress herself — would have him assassinated in due course.

Instead, the Empress took him to her bed. Centuries after his death, she founded a Great House in his name, uniting several patrician houses and outcaste Dragon-Blooded families under the new aegis. Whether this was intended as an honor for his siring Sesus, or a political move intended to throw the more powerful Great Houses off balance, only the Empress knew.

The house is overseen not by a single leader, but by an assembly collectively known as the Most August Conclave. Three of the Conclave are Dragon-Blooded, including the house matriarch, the ever-calculating Nellens Gazal; four are mortal. Other members include the famed orator and rare mortal senator of the Deliberative's Greater Chamber Nellens Odem; the Dragon-Blooded merchant Nellens Ikona, beloved by patrician and peasant businesswomen across the Blessed Isle; and Nellens Sabine, a young mortal sorcerer who oversees the house's matchmaking efforts. So far as the rest of the Realm is concerned, the three Dragon-Blooded are the house's leaders, but Nellens is in fact ruled by all seven.

Social Standing

Thin-blooded. Dilettante. Mongrel. Dynasts have a thousand and one epithets for House Nellens' scions, and those scions have heard them all a thousand times. As early as primary school, the house's children must learn to cope with disdain and condescension from ignorant Dynastic peers. Hailing from Nellens presents a significant social handicap, but canny Dragon-Blooded learn to take advantage of such dismissal and outmaneuver their detractors.

Nellens is unique among Great Houses in that it's comprised mostly of mortal members and formerly outcaste Dragon-Blooded permitted to marry into the house. Seeking to improve the rate of Exaltation within the house, the Most August Conclave designed and implemented an aggressive matchmaking campaign for its members. This program is considered so vital to Nellens' interests, the Conclave will occasionally reject marriage proposals from outcaste Dragon-Blooded — or even thin-blooded scions of other Great Houses — in favor of stronger blood matches from un-Exalted Dynasts. The house has no strong elemental expression, preferring matches that strengthen the puissance of the Dragon's blood over attempts at cultivating a singular elemental Aspect.

Nellens is heavily invested in the Blessed Isle's bureaucracy and commerce, with the bulk of their mortal members groomed from birth to fill positions in the ministries, offices, and trading houses that keep the Realm running smoothly. A Nellens child is tested at the age of five for her aptitudes, and a three-year program devised to strengthen those raw talents before she enters primary school. By the time she graduates from secondary school, the scion is well prepared to become a merchant, bureaucrat, historian, artisan, or other professional.

A child blessed with Exaltation is expected to perform above and beyond examples set by other houses. Though some achieve high-ranking positions in the Thousand Scales, most Dragon-Blooded scions are expected to serve the Realm as heroes and exemplars. Many find honorable service in the legions or amongst the ranks of the Immaculates. Others serve within their house, acting as surrogates for un-Exalted elders or providing the public face of House Nellens in the Realm's galas and salons.

House Economics

Nellens is wealthy. It's one of the only houses to avoid heavy debt with House Ragara, and among the few whose wealth continues to grow, despite the tumultuous times currently afflicting the Threshold and the Blessed Isle. Its success is aided by the many Nellens positioned within the ranks of the Thousand Scales, making it infinitely easier to push permits, applications, and financing agreements through on the family's behalf.

Every house diversifies its investments, but Nellens redefines the term "diversify." No single venture serves to make Nellens rich; most of Nellens' investments are in the minor industries of the Blessed Isle. It's the sheer *number* of those investments that fill the vaults. Their portfolio is spread across virtually every enterprise and community on the Blessed Isle. Farming and mining communities, Northern whaling fleets, fish-processing plants, salt mines, textile operations, fruit groves, shipping routes, and trading houses all fall under the Nellens umbrella. Their foreign portfolios are no less varied. Nellens scions roam every direction except the West, buying and trading in almost every major metropolis and many minor settlements.

Nellens' greatest strength, however, is their unparalleled ability to trade in favors from other Dynasts, patrician families, foreign nobles, and mercantile consortiums. Using their influence in the financial, commercial, and political sectors, Nellens can make life very easy for their allies. Less flaunted is the Nellens ability to hinder and, sometimes, ruin their enemies.

House Military

Nellens has never been a military-oriented house. Despite prolific success in politics and business, Nellens has always felt the lack of house legions to be a deficiency needing correction. The house appealed frequently to the Scarlet Empress for a grant to raise a house legion, going so far as to build an entire garrison complex and outlying barracks near the city of Juche, but such appeals proved futile.

The Empress is gone, and her legions divvied up amongst the houses. Through judicious favor-trading, well-placed bribes, promises to forgive debt owed to the house, and generous private donations, Nellens has acquired two legions, housed in the Juche garrison.

Both legions are shoddily equipped, understrength, and without adequate command staff, no doubt a driving reason Nellens could acquire them at all. But Nellens plays the long game, seeing its purchase of the legions as an investment for the future, and a foundation upon which to build more forces. Nellens is currently engaged in negotiations with several other houses, attempting to secure the release of their scions serving in other legions. Intolerant commanders within other house legions have seized the opportunity to arrange transfers for outcaste subordinates into Nellens' ranks, and Nellens is happy to accept. Nellens even approaches disgraced outcaste officers, discharged or dismissed from other legions, to fill their command staff, enticing their loyalty and service with offers of money, support, and marriage.

Enemies & Alliances

There's a philosophy every Nellens child is taught as soon as they learn to talk: If a woman is your enemy, you haven't found the proper leverage. It's this philosophy that drives Nellens ambition, allowing them to bear social slights and veiled insults without flinching. Though Nellens considers every Great House a rival, that's never deemed an acceptable reason to shun a profitable alliance.

Only a few houses are worthy of Nellens' official enmity. House Sesus is notoriously antagonistic towards the house. The children of Sesus consider the fact the house named for her father has so many mortal members an insult, and view its matchmaking program as an attempt to usurp House Sesus' lofty pedigree. Since the earliest days of the house's existence, Sesus has waged political, economic, and social warfare against the Nellens, sending spies, infiltrators, and occasionally assassins into their territories to disrupt, upset, and stymie the Nellens' agenda.

Though the Nellens have done nothing to outright earn the enmity of House Ledaal, their neighbors across the river nonetheless resent them for their closeness and for Juche's wealth, which they believe has grown at the expense of Arjuf Dominion's northern reaches. The Most August Conclave has made overtures to Ledaal's leadership, but negotiations are delicate and often temperamental.

Nellens wealth is a constant thorn in House Ragara's side. Ragara financiers resent their inability to indebt Nellens' scions, while more entrepreneurial Ragara chafe at the ease with which Nellens scions challenge their dominance in business and trade. Individual Ragaras seek solutions to this vexation, whether proposing partnerships and alliances in business opportunities; undermining Nellens trade ventures in the Threshold; or seeking to suborn a disaffected or disinherited scion, purchasing his loyalty with Ragara coin.

When the Empress elevated House V'neef, she awarded it assets stripped from House Nellens, sowing the seeds of rivalry between the two youngest houses of the Scarlet Dynasty. Over the decades, each house has sabotaged and undermined mercantile ventures of the other, repaying slight for slight in a cycle of feuding that has so far gone unbroken. While an alliance might prove advantageous, the Most August Conclave is fiercely split on their opinion of V'neef.

Nellens has made recent overtures to House Tepet. Knowing the vexations of being a scorned family, the Most August Conclave believe Tepet's leadership might appreciate their gestures of empathy and alliance. The enticement of the Nellens legions is no small

temptation; Nellens might be able to finance and supply their military forces, but the family strength isn't in military command. Out-of-work and disgraced Tepet commanders, on the other hand, might be amenable to lending their expertise to the Nellens, if only to regain some of the respect lost with their failures in the North — though they'd prefer more respectable patrons.

Nellens has befriended numerous patrician families and wealthy mortal households, cultivating relationships much closer than those between other Great Houses and patricians by funding projects, doling out financial assistance to struggling merchants, and smoothing permits and authorizations through the labyrinthine channels of the Thousand Scales. Nellens may not be able to compete with the strength of blood and influential positioning of other Great Houses in the war for the throne, but with the weight of millions of un-Exalted citizens behind them, the Most August Conclave believes they might achieve a position of influence and importance with whoever succeeds the Empress.

Major Holdings

Nellens calls **Juche Prefecture** home, and most family members maintain townhouses within Juche city's walls. The Most August Conclave dwell within the Villa of Seven Doorways, a palatial manse housing the Nellens libraries, treasuries, and private offices, and much of the family's Isle-based business is conducted within the city. Nellens invests heavily in the infrastructure and financial stability of both prefecture and city. The centuries-long cold war with House Sesus has left the prefecture's borders lined with fortresses and backroads known only to the units that patrol them. The city of Juche, sprawling at the head of the Caracal River, has become one of the Isle's prominent centers for trade and religious pilgrimage. Many of Juche prefecture's teahouses, libraries, farmsteads, artisans, and merchant houses boast a Nellens partner, and Juche city's many shrines are tended by Nellens monks.

Despite its ambitions and wealth, Nellens controls few holdings. While rival houses perceive this as a sign of weakness, it's how Nellens prefers it. Nellens agents excel in locating troubled satrapies, to which they quietly offer assistance in meeting their tithes. The house's deep coffers have helped pay many tributes over the years. As a result, they have eyes and ears in every direction except the West, and are well informed on the workings of the other Great Houses in the Threshold.

Scions of Note

Centuries after his death, **Nellens** himself remains a controversial figure with the power to inspire or inflame his descendants. His advocacy for the un-Exalted children of the Dynasty earned him the enmity of many, but he was also a key figure in advancing significant pieces of legislation through the Deliberative, such as the yearly limit on emancipating slaves — a compromise that stemmed the threat of a short-lived abolitionist movement. Fiery, forthright, and a cunning broker of compromises, it's easy to see how he caught the Empress' eye.

At the age of 28, **Nellens Sabine** became the youngest sitting member of the Most August Conclave in Nellens history. Born with an intuitive grasp of complex occult concepts and ingrained with ambition and perfectionism by her parents, Sabine's

sorcerous skills opened a door often closed to the Nellens. Now in her sixties, Sabine has taken charge of Nellens' matchmaking program, and works tirelessly to improve the rate of Exaltation amongst her relatives. Privately, she also seeks methods to awaken the dragonfire within her own blood. Though her lineage is impeccable and her blood amongst the purest Nellens has produced, the Second Breath didn't come for her, and she finds this a deficiency within herself. Though her quest is quixotic and borderline heretical, she persists — if not for her own sake, then for her nineteen-year-old daughter's.

Nellens Leferi has carried out business transactions with petty Threshold despots, barbarian warlords, and the subterranean artificers of the Mountain Folk. When she's not adventuring throughout the Threshold and beyond in search of profitable ventures and trading partners, she acts as a proxy for the Conclave's commercial interests, putting both her business acumen and her formidable martial arts prowess to use bargaining with those too proud to palaver with mortals. Recently, she's set out for Great Forks, seeking to recruit Exigent mercenaries to reinforce the Nellens legions.

Nellens Uliya holds a modest position within the Righteous and Accountable Ministry of Weights and Measures, the bureau tasked with enforcing standardized measures of distance and weights. Though un-Exalted, her ingenuity is matched only by her audacity, and she wields her position as a weapon against the other Great Houses — rooting out Cynis drug peddlers who weight their scales, surveying satrapial boundaries to bleed House Sesus of territory inch by inch, and levying fines against Mnemon architects for the slightest discrepancies in their blueprints. She's a marked woman, of course, and more than one assassination attempt has come too close. She's survived this far with the help of her God-Blooded bodyguard and lover, Seventh Winter.

Peleps — Water That Wreaths the Crown of Centuries

The dashing captain astride a ship's deck in a storm, calmly shouting orders as the vessel heaves and rolls; the incorruptible judge, refusing to pass judgment until her investigation finds the truth; the daring adventurer who always arrives just in time — these archetypes represent House Peleps in the Blessed Isle's hearts and minds. An ancient house, Peleps carries an air of romanticism, danger, and adventure in distant lands, returning home to honor and respect from the rest of the Dynasty.

Theirs is a nautical family, sailors and admirals with few peers, and the Peleps mon decorates more sails than any other symbol in Creation. The Blessed Isle, encircled by the Inland Sea, is a maritime power; the ships that ply its harbors, its lifeblood. The Imperial Navy is a military behemoth, an unmatched fighting force, and it belongs to House Peleps. Peleps scions travel Creation's oceans and waterways, bringing back tales and artifacts that excite and intrigue.

Worldliness and virtue define the house in the eyes of polite society. Unshakable beacons of imperial glory and honor, they also carry the thrilling touch of adventure. Reliable, steadfast, and honorable, most other houses cannot help but look up to them, even if grudgingly.

The truth is more complicated. For every dashing, daring hero, there's a disgraced scion whose family stuck her somewhere out of sight. Peleps is a romantic house, but it's also ruthless — even to its own children, even by Dynastic standards. Success is everything, and what members of other houses expect as their birthright is parceled out to Peleps scions only when earned. Those who succeed have opulence showered upon them, and find the house more than willing to throw its weight behind their schemes.

Success cannot be bought in House Peleps. Merit conquers all; even the most inauspicious child can climb high with sufficient skill, connections, and conviction — and a bit of luck. “The trade winds” is a Peleps idiom for the vagaries of fate, and it's commonly accepted that the results of luck are well-earned — to be foiled by the trade winds is a sign of unworthiness, while taking unexpected advantage of them is lauded. It makes for a cold, lonely, and often hostile upbringing, but the rewards for those who thrive are the stuff of legend.

The house's main concerns are the Navy and the judiciary; careers in these fields are the fastest way to win accolades. House Peleps, with its focus on merit over nepotism, produces particularly competent judges. Peleps judges command dread and respect, and less scrupulous ones take full advantage of it.

The Rightly Guided Admiralty Board

Governing body of both the Imperial Navy and House Peleps, the Rightly Guided Admiralty Board comprises fifteen high admirals elected for 25-year terms. Its current roster includes house matriarch Peleps Lai, the self-proclaimed judge of pirates Peleps Orimu, and the firebrand senator Peleps Mulat Kai. Every Peleps who's either Dragon-Blooded or holds the rank of captain or higher in the Imperial Navy can vote. In theory, any Peleps is eligible to sit on the Admiralty Board, but in practice, only Dragon-Blooded women are elected. To guide House Peleps within the treacherous waters of Realm politics, only the shrewdest minds will do — the vote isn't so much to ensure the house's scions have a say, as to prove that the winner has the scheming prowess to outwit rival houses.

The Admiralty Board has been logjammed regarding the matter of the throne, but spurred on by the house's declining fortunes, it's seeking potential Peleps candidates for the throne — whether the Scarlet Throne or a new throne in the West.

House Economics

Tribute comes across the Inland Sea escorted by the Realm's Merchant Fleet, which is repaid with a fraction of the wealth it guards. This was always House Peleps' main source of wealth, defraying the costs of constructing, supplying, and maintaining the gargantuan Imperial Navy. Peleps' wealth was an accepted fact, and few stopped to think that the giant might starve. That certainty is giving way.

In RY 754, the Scarlet Empress stripped the Merchant Fleet and the lucrative duty of escorting tribute ships from House Peleps and granted them to the nascent House V'neef.

The dragon's share of Peleps' income vanished, and to make matters worse, went into the pockets of upstarts.

Now, the house must rely on other sources of wealth to meet the mammoth cost of funding the world's largest navy. It retains a substantial stipend from the Imperial Treasury, despite constant maneuvers in the Deliberative to reduce this. It's also cracked down heavily on its satrapies, reasoning that it's better to strip those bare than cut the military budget — after all, once fighting starts, it can conquer V'neef satrapies to replace its own failing ones. Now House Peleps rakes in more tribute than ever, but at a devastating cost to its holdings. It's encouraged scions to increase their personal financial ventures, while reserving the right to tax them. This has met with some success, and spurred many scions to greater focus on business. Lastly, the house has aggressively stepped up its fight against piracy, selling seized captured contraband and ships to bolster its finances. With house coffers at an all-time low, the Admiralty Board's definition of a pirate vessel grows more lenient.

Ultimately, it's not enough. Tuition for Peleps children is harder to find, and other houses are both disappointed and gleeful to see the famed Peleps galas — with their intricate marvels of Southern craftsmanship, rare Western spices, and Haltan acrobats — decline in number and opulence. Donations from Dynastic admirers hoping to earn the house's favor still flow in, but that's only a trickle compared to the river of Imperial Navy expenditures. The house bleeds money, and the Admiralty Board is considering desperate measures, from raiding other houses' satrapies to demanding tribute from every merchant ship they come across. In the most desperate case, they may have to sell off pieces of the Imperial Navy to stay solvent.

The main measure House Peleps plans to employ is conquest. It's aware that control of the Imperial Navy draws scrutiny, and open aggression will rally the Dynasty against it. So it moves slowly, establishing a trading post here and a hidden naval base there, while looking for any legitimate pretext under which to expand its power in the West without drawing the Dynasty's suspicion. With enough time, it could establish a Western Empire, more true to the Empress' legacy and the Immaculate Philosophy than the increasingly corrupt one that presently exists.

House Military

When the legions were divided among the houses, Peleps claimed four by dint of its high standing in the Dynasty and plethora of Deliberative seats. Since then, these legions have seen their officer ranks seeded with Peleps scions, bolstering loyalty to the house, but at great cost to morale and effectiveness. Many junior officers, or even would-be officers, now find themselves in prestigious command positions. Though the house's more traditional members are repulsed by this nepotism, the Admiralty Board has — with some distaste — approved the process. Three legions drill at the Isle of Wrack, while the fourth has been trickling to the West a few hundred soldiers at a time over the last year.

But House Peleps' true military power is the Imperial Navy, a behemoth without compare, consisting of thousands of triremes, biremes, carracks, and support vessels, divided into five fleets named for the elements. While sailors and marines are largely peasant volunteers, the officer class consists of patricians and Dynasts, who attend prestigious military academies and then apprentice to an officer for a few years. Most

Dragon-Blooded Peleps officers graduate from the House of Bells, with the occasional outcaste alumnus of Pasiap's Stair marrying into the family and earning a commission. Almost all admirals are Peleps women. Dragon-Blooded rise higher and faster than anyone else, and they enjoy more leeway than their mortal colleagues, but when they do fall, they fall harder and faster. A disgraced Dragon-Blooded officer is often shunted none-too-gently into some other profession where he can be useful without being seen.

House Peleps' fighting force is massive, with naval manpower alone possibly equaling all the legions combined. The other houses are acutely aware of this, casting a wary eye at Peleps maneuvers near their coastal or island holdings. Should the house employ its ships unwisely, or its reputation for upright dealings falter, the Imperial Navy is one of the few things in Creation that can unify the Realm again — against House Peleps. The Admiralty Board knows this, and it discourages brash young scions from bluster and idle threats of naval intervention. The Navy must be wielded delicately, because the house is already in uncertain waters.

But there's a third aspect of Peleps military power, often overlooked. It's a prestigious house, admired and respected — feared, even — by many in the Dynasty. Many young Dynasts see the nautical house as the pinnacle of the Realm's glory. War against House Peleps must be carefully orchestrated, because an attack could easily resemble a direct assault on Imperial virtue and ideals. That could provoke idealistic Dragon-Blooded to flock to the Peleps banner, defending the venerable house against those who'd destroy it. However, the house's dreams of a Western Empire risk compromising its admirable reputation if exposed, which has been a source of internal conflict and debate within the Admiralty Board.

Enemies and Alliances

House Peleps has no end of admirers among the Dynasty, but few firm allies. House Mnemon is its closest ally, more out of convenience than true conviction, but each shares a warm, if distant, regard for the other's virtues. Like all houses, Peleps is indebted to House Ragara. Houses Nellens and Cynis are held in quiet contempt, but where Peleps does brisk business with Cynis, preferring it over Ragara, it's disgusted by Nellens. House Tepet once had House Peleps' deepest respect; now, the opinion among Peleps scions is that Tepet has shown weakness and should have the decency to die quickly. Then they can eulogize the fallen house, remembering its greatness, instead of having it hang onto the Realm like a lamprey.

House Cathak is the other preeminent juggernaut of Imperial military might; both houses are keenly aware that together, they could seize the throne — and thereby unite the rest of the Dynasty against them, a prospect Peleps savors but Cathak fears. As Cathak Cainan has announced neutrality for the nonce, relations between the two houses are marked by careful, cordial distance, each aware that if war comes, they may find themselves standing on opposite ends of the battlefield. With each stationing forces to watch the other, both are aware that a simple misunderstanding could start a war neither side wants.

Two houses are already arrayed against House Peleps. House Sesus fears that Peleps will cut off its passage to their wealthy Northern satrapies, while Peleps is tired of peeling Sesus spies and saboteurs out of the Imperial Navy's ranks.

House Peleps' main enemy is the upstart House V'neef, which fills many Peleps scions with humiliated fury. V'neef herself is young, daring, ambitious, and competes directly within House Peleps' spheres of advantage and expertise. While V'neef lacks the sea power to contest the Imperial Navy in battle, an open war would risk destroying Peleps' finances and reputation even in victory. Instead, the two houses engage in brinkmanship in the West, sailing circles around one another while scooping up valuable resources and strategic locations, and trying to find legal excuses for sinking the other house's vessels. Eventually, one side will slip or find itself sufficiently threatened to leave pretenses behind. Then there will be war.

Major Holdings

Voice-of-the-Tides Prefecture is the house's primary holding on the Blessed Isle, a craggy, storm-scarred coastal province on the far western shore. Here lies the Isle of Wrack, where the ancient Peleps estate sprawls, perched precariously among broken cliffs, overlooking massive drydocks on the Blessed Isle's shore on one side, and open sea on the other. Here, the Admiralty Board holds court, entertaining envoys from Dynastic families seeking their favor, along with Peleps scions.

Sarkarn has been a Peleps satrapy for centuries. A wealthy island of pearl divers and fishermen west of Thorns, Sarkarn supplies exotic fish and fine pink pearls. With the Thorns trade failing, though, and Peleps extorting ever-greater tribute, this sleepy, respectable community is sliding into poverty and despair. As livelihoods vanish and sickness sets in, Sarkarn's queen, in desperation, entertains envoys from Red Iron Rebuke, autocrat of Thorns, offering the Mask of Winters' protection.

The Wavecrest Archipelago in the West is the jewel of House Peleps' holdings. The islands' rich black volcanic soil supports harvests of breadfruit, mangos, guavas, taro root, and bananas, exotic luxuries in high demand at Dynastic dinner tables. Shipyards house efforts to replace aging and damaged vessels of the Imperial Navy's Water Fleet and expand its deep-water contingent, but recent sabotage suggests that V'neef agents may have compromised this secret. Increased tributes leave poorer residents malnourished as the harvest is hauled back to the Blessed Isle. The archipelago's royal families pressure their leader, the Feathered One, to abate this by raiding neighboring islands, while some whisper of outright rebellion. And the fiery hero-priestess Kamach Aki, self-proclaimed Chosen of Hamoji, sermonizes against the Immaculate Order, enjoining her people to return to their old worship of the volcano-god.

Scions of Note

Peleps was the Empress' second daughter. Perhaps the most widely traveled of all her siblings, she visited the farthest reaches of every Direction, and walked Lookshy's streets and the Imperial Mountain's slopes. Everywhere she went she left behind admirers and enemies, for her spirit was adventurous, righteous, and rapacious, but her greatest rival and lover was the ocean. When she died, she was interred in her beloved ship, the *Spear of Daana'd*, which was scuttled in a trench off the Isle of Wrack to be one with the seas. Peleps scions still pay homage at her tomb on the first day of Ascending Water. The tomb's seals are tended by Dragon-Blooded monks of a dedicated Immaculate shrine on a nearby islet. Some say they hear banging noises from the sunken ship during Calibration.

The house matriarch and unofficial head of the Admiralty Board is the ancient, legendary Admiral **Peleps Lai**, daughter of Peleps herself, whose exploits are recounted in plays and books across Creation. She's now mostly retired, only speaking up from her sour reverie when she feels the need to correct younger colleagues. She still believes the Empress will return, and won't entertain the notion of another monarch until convinced otherwise — and while she's not as spry as she once was, her martial skills remain sufficient to trounce the occasional upstart who'd defy her. She supports the notion of a Western Empire, though, and dreams of personally presenting this new conquest to the Empress.

Peleps Aramida, an admiral of the Realm's Water Fleet, is a deeply spiritual woman with a knack for bringing lofty concepts down to earth for her sailors to appreciate. Her sermons for the dead are heartfelt, and she loves her crew like a mother — stern, distant, never stingy with the lashes, but caring — and they repay her in kind. A brilliant tactician, well-known for outwitting enemies of superior power, her victories against Fair Folk and sea-demons have made her the very image of the dashing Peleps officer — a darling of the courts, admired for gall and cleverness. She supports alliance with House Tepet, deeming it more fallen on hard times than defeated, and potentially a strong right hand for a Peleps Empress — a role she's not averse to claiming if she can obtain sufficient support.

Peleps Sepeta Zurin is among the most celebrated of the Immaculate Order's missionaries. He crossed the Glassblack Wastes to bring the Immaculate Texts to the tribes of distant Porphyry; discovered the lost temple-city of Azal-Mog and toppled its blasphemous altar to make way for an Immaculate shrine; and overthrew the tyranny of the maize-god Hundredth Harvest. He rarely stays on the Blessed Isle for long before setting off on his next expedition — much to the chagrin of Peleps elders who believe he could help rally the Order and peasantry to the house's side in the event of civil war. He's recently set out for Thorns in hopes of converting its dark lord.

Ragara — Earth Slaked on the Blood of Dragons

The Imperial Mountain towers majestically on Corin Prefecture's horizon, a revered symbol of the Realm's power, implacable and eternal. But its roots go deep indeed, and beneath it are hidden wonders and horrors of surpassing power and mind-searing blasphemy, stretching back to the eldest of times and before. Long has House Ragara viewed the mountain as the symbol of everything they try to be. Few recognize how apt that comparison is.

“The Imperial Bank” is the nickname that the other Great Houses bestowed upon the Ragara family, as much in resentment as in genuine recognition of the house's financial might. House Ragara owns a piece of every other house, has scions from each so indebted that they're lifelong servants of the Ragaras, and has a finger in every major line of business in Creation. Nearly all Dynasts are rich beyond a mortal's wildest dreams of avarice, but House Ragara is the very richest — an opulence bordering on vulgarity that would make a Guild factor turn to stone with envy. Within this wealth nest the house's members, and at the center sits Ragara Banoba and his scheming inner circle. House Ragara will see one of its own claim the Scarlet Throne, but their hunger goes beyond simply controlling the Realm. House Ragara wants everything.

Craving more than simple wealth, the house hoards power in whatever form it may take, and its network of sorcerers and artifact-thieves ranges through the Threshold, taking whatever they can find. “Everything belongs to the Empress, and House Ragara is her vault,” they say, using this as pretext to seize anything worthwhile, caring little for the Threshold’s stability or prosperity. The Realm Before is a favored subject of study, and many of the Dynasty’s most distinguished scholars of Anathema artifice bear the name Ragara. But this fascination goes beyond the bounds of acceptability or health, often delving into outright forbidden subjects.

Entire households have been cast off and sacrificed for heresy and diabolism, but these were scapegoats — the rot goes deeper. The inner circle of occultists and politicians, though they see nothing wrong in their activities, nevertheless realize that the tragic fate of House Jurul is possible for their own house. To sacrifice oneself and one’s family is sad, but if it protects the house entire, it’s something most Ragara matriarchs would gladly accept. To reclaim the power of the Realm Before and its Solar devil-queens would secure House Ragara’s future, and the Realm’s with it. So some sacrifices are required. In this interest, they delve into the secrets of Hell and the Underworld, bind raksha and stranger spirits to their souls to infuse their lineages with unhale power, and compete with the Wyld Hunt for Anathema to experiment upon — or recruit.

Banoba’s Inner Circle

Ragara Banoba keeps half a dozen other Ragaras as his advisors, and they have as much power over him as he has over them. This group isn’t chosen by prominence or position, but by pure talent. Here, some ancient and mighty Dragon-Blooded mingle with fresh-faced youths who possess the appropriate level of callous genius. Members include Ragara Falik Udonai, who made her fortune combing the chaos of the Wyld for lost relics and alien treasures; the young Ragara Vena, a Spiral Academy graduate whose talent for mesmerism has suborned several Thousand Scales bureaucrats and low-ranking delegates of the Deliberative; and the blind physician Ragara Madoq, whose laboratory holds strains of diseases that have not blighted Creation since the First Age. These people are responsible for managing House Ragara’s darker, illicit projects — the ones that nobody else can be trusted with, such as Anathema sorceries, blasphemous studies of Exaltation itself, and the search for the Final Realm-Controlling Utterance.

Social Standing

To most of Creation, House Ragara is a family of investment bankers and jade moguls. Few suspect otherwise — not even its younger scions. Those who do are brushed off as harmless conspiracy theorists, obsessed with this or that Ragara censured for blasphemies against the Immaculate Philosophy.

While the house itself has an artfully stodgy and conservative reputation, individual Ragaras tend to be urbane, well educated, and familiar with most vices and virtues. They’re charismatic natural leaders, possessed of easy professionalism that many members of wilder houses quietly envy.

House Economics

Ragara grew his financial empire by locating and seizing undiscovered jade mines, using pre-Contagion documents as clues. He also established the Learned Bastion, a small school in Corin Prefecture that provides adult Dragon-Blooded an education in geology and geomancy to rival even the Heptagram. Each graduate consents to five years of service with House Ragara's Unclouded Stone Savants, locating further deposits of valuable minerals, especially jade. The Bastion has enjoyed five centuries of distinguished — albeit highly specialized and low-profile — service, educating some of the Realm's finest geologists.

Using these methods, Ragara claimed many of Creation's deepest, oldest jade and silver deposits, establishing his house as an economic juggernaut. While the jade mines still provide one-fourth of the house's income, the bulk comes from loan and investment interest — including from other houses' coffers, courtesy of Dynasts whose debt has grown insurmountable. Under Banoba, the house spends this wealth to acquire artifacts and finance occult studies, ranging from public to blasphemous.

The Empress condoned House Ragara's predatory lending practices. The house was closely tied to her, and so long as they didn't stray into military pursuits, little regulation was enacted. The Empress personally entered into business with the house time and again — most notoriously, in the interest of conquest. The house would offer loans to nations in desperate need, then exact extravagant interest, selling the loan to the Empress when it clearly wouldn't be repaid. The Empress then used non-payment as a pretext for invasion.

Every house owes Ragara money, ranging from significant but ultimately minor loans to extravagant, potentially crippling sums. Interest on these loans is sufficiently lucrative that the Ragaras are hardly eager to see the principal repaid. Few care to find out what would happen to a house that defaulted on its loans.

House Military

When the Imperial legions were parceled out, House Ragara focused on the most poorly trained, underequipped, and short-handed legions, and gained control over three without needing to write off much debt in return. Since then, large sums of jade have been poured into improving these legions, leaving them fully staffed and stocked with all the equipment a soldier can dream of. But they've also been stripped of experienced officers, leaving troops demoralized and disgruntled. Ragara Banoba is aware of their weakness, but hopes a few years' deployment to the Threshold will forge them into strong fighting forces. Results are mixed thus far, and if war breaks out, the new Ragara legions will be punching below their weight.

Ragara scions of poor business acumen have traditionally been pushed into military service to recoup the investment their house has made in them — a practice that's led many to high rank and distinguished service throughout the centuries, and now feeds the house legions.

Enemies and Alliances

A house standing alone, Ragara has no true allies or friends among its ostensible peers. Other houses may preen and brag and look down on the "Imperial Bank" — but

eventually, all roads lead up the dread stairs to Ragara Banoba's office, and all the other houses debase themselves in the end and come to him for money. Thus, House Ragara finds it difficult to view fellow Great Houses as equals. This grates on other houses, especially prouder ones such as Peleps or Cathak.

Two exceptions remain: Houses Nellens and V'neef have labored to remain out of Ragara's debt, and for that, they're the closest thing the house of bankers has to equals — making them its enemies by default.

House Cathak shows support for House Ragara's ascent to the throne, but this is a polite fiction born out of debt and convenience. The Cathaks won't be Ragara puppets, and House Ragara has no intention of canceling House Cathak's debts.

House Ragara's greatest enemies are Houses Mnemon and Ledaal. Mnemon has a personal death-grudge against Ragara himself, and wants nothing more than to provide his house's eulogy. In turn, Banoba works to prevent her ascent to the Throne.

Only House Ledaal nourishes serious suspicions towards House Ragara. They're aware of the Ragaras' accumulation of ancient relics, and while they wish to prevent damage to the old sorcerous defensive structure of the Realm Before, they're also concerned with House Ragara's motivations; they know well the temptation that power can bring. The fate of House Jurul reminds them that heresy and worse can spring up even among Exalted.

But to stand completely alone is unworkable. Ragara Banoba makes overtures towards House Sesus and House Cynis, plying them with rare and expensive luxury items and favorable loan terms. Cynis debts are quietly slashed, and Ragara scions attend more Cynis parties than ever, while Sesus finds itself lauded by Ragara speechmakers in the Deliberative. Banoba also takes care not to offend Houses Peleps, seeing it as a potential ally.

The current crisis is a time of opportunity that House Ragara has wholeheartedly embraced. The house is more excited by the prospect of civil war than it lets on, eager to expand its power, and it's currently in a political struggle to take as many of House Tepet's old holdings as possible under the pretext of reinforcing them and filling in for Tepet's decimated administrative structure. This is completely illegal, but the other Great Houses have allowed it because Ragara is theoretically taking on debts that House Tepet can no longer repay.

In this endeavor, House Sesus is a powerful rival, likewise seizing satrapies under the pretext of fulfilling Tepet responsibilities and debts. Banoba is doing his best to call in favors from House Peleps and other allies to swing the Deliberative in his favor, while being careful not to undermine the house's economic ties with Sesus. If he gets his way, House Ragara's newfound troops will be spread thin, and they may have to illegally hire mercenaries to hold territory in their stead.

Major Holdings

House Ragara is seated in **Corin Prefecture**, a coastal province in the southern Blessed Isle noted for its barren, rocky landscape and rich jade, silver, and tin deposits. Here, Ragara Banoba and the family council reign in the Stepped Palace, a massive structure

handling jade and silver smelting as well as banking, storage, and administration. It lies just outside the city of Riven Quay, where other Ragaras keep townhouses. At the top of the Stepped Palace sits Banoba's audience hall, where the council meets and hears requests for perilous or extravagant loans. "To walk the long stairs" is a saying among the Dynasty for taking out a loan from House Ragara.

From here, Banoba presides over the house's extensive holdings, which stretch throughout the Threshold. Ragara administers these satrapies with a fairly light hand, tribute exacted and minimum standards of loyalty enforced but little more. The house has a knack for snapping up the leases of minor, undesirable satrapies and then unearthing mineral wealth or First Age ruins.

Across the strait from Arjuf, northwest of the Lap, sits **Jau Dei**, a land underneath the mountains producing marble in many unusual colors; a little white jade; and the tartelian, a small crustacean whose powdered shell is prized by sorcerers as a component for alchemical suspensions. The main cavern is lit by an ingenious network of sunlight refraction crystals — once, these relayed daylight into the deeps, but they've cracked and dimmed with age, providing now a full moon's light when the sun is at zenith.

Jau Deians are accustomed to the deeps, moreso than House Ragara's garrison. As such, Realm rule has always been tumultuous; rebellion spreads like cockroaches, hiding in natural caves or mining tunnels. While this tendency has been kept to a simmer by diligent Ragara measures in the past, the Empress' disappearance has led to a resurgence of firebombings, mass poisonings, and other insurgent tactics. It's a thorn in the house's side, a literal hole into which they can pour as many resources as they want yet never kill the rot. At present, Banoba only bothers to fight the rebellion instead of making a gift of a troublesome satrapy because it serves to hide the darkest conspiracies of the Ragara inner circle. Even jaded Ragara scions shudder at rumors of a laboratory experimenting on captive outcastes somewhere in Jau Dei's depths.

Scions of Note

The Empress' oldest living child, **Ragara**, was always ambitious. Early on, he learned to hate his mother and siblings with passionate fury, hidden like magma beneath the earth, and began a campaign of assassination against his siblings while amassing his fortune. His intent was to become the only possible heir to the empire. The Empress saw through the stratagem. When she gave birth to Sesus, she charged Ragara with the child's protection, informing him that if the younger sister died, his life would be forfeit. Ragara had no choice but to keep Sesus safe from harm. Ragara is an old man, sustained beyond his years by his daiklave Blood Zenith, as it feeds him the last stolen dregs of a Solar Anathema's soul. Even so, his days are running out. He's retired to Pneuma, attended by his well-worn Hearth and a few favorite descendants. He left his house in the hands of his second son, Ragara Banoba. While publicly offering heartfelt praise for his successor's wisdom, Ragara's true reasons for choosing Banoba had more to do with the stewardship of the house's occult enterprises.

Ragara Banoba is a fit, handsome man in his middle years, immaculately groomed and charismatic. He keeps his hair short and his small moustache impeccably trimmed. He's rarely seen without his paramour, his distant nephew Ragara Heral, who is Banoba's

greatest weakness. He truly loves the man and would do anything to protect him, a fact that Banoba is painfully aware leaves him vulnerable.

A talented battle sorcerer and a resourceful merchant, **Ragara Szaya** is a consummate chance-taker with a history of dangerous risks and wild behavior falling just short of completely acceptable. No one would expect someone like her to be an agent of the All-Seeing Eye, which is only part of what makes her such an effective one. Her hard-won commercial contacts span the Threshold, feeding her information from across the Realm. She's married to **Ledaal Kes** (p. XX), a fellow agent of the Eye, and though both are homosexual, their decades-spanning friendship is unshakable.

A mediocre sorcerer with a knack for ancient lore, **Ragara Iuna** is one of the house's most talented archaeologists, which has bought her a great deal of autonomy. She's an idealist and adventurer, traveling the Threshold alone, recovering everything from artifacts to scraps of art and writing for her house. She wants to preserve and study them so future generations may benefit. She returned from one such adventure accompanied by her new sifu, Red-Gloved Master, who has taught her sorcerous martial arts thought lost in the Second Age.

Sesus — Fire That Makes The Shadow Strong

Armies can be starved or defeated. Strongholds can be sieged. Money can be stolen. Land can be conquered. Knowledge, though — knowledge cannot be defeated. Knowledge will always exist, as long as there as someone to know it. That's what makes it House Sesus' greatest weapon. A family of spymasters, assassins, and saboteurs, Sesus hides its strength in shadows until the time comes to burn bright.

Social Standing

The founder Sesus, child of the Scarlet Empress and her mortal consort Nellens, took quickly to the dangerous life of the courtier. House Chanos owes its destruction to Sesus' own hand, and she claimed that fallen house's ancestral seat as her own. Her children are as skilled as their progenitor — perhaps more so.

Sesus has the most elaborate spy network in the Realm next to the All-Seeing Eye, headed by the secret cabal of house elders called the Masked Council. By the time a child learns to walk, she's started training in the games of Dynastic intrigue. Before entering primary school, she's studied the fundamentals of subterfuge and tradecraft. By the time she enters secondary school, once she's been sorted from the house's chaff — those too slow-witted, guileless, weak-willed, soft-hearted, or principled for the espionage game — she's begun reporting on the activities of her fellow classmates to a Dragon-Blooded handler working for the Masked Council.

The other Great Houses have little idea of the extent of Sesus' intrigues, though it has never enjoyed a pristine reputation. Rumors of blasphemy, deceit, and vice follow all but the most upright Sesus scions, whether justified or not, and they're seen as honorless and thuggish by the Realm's other military houses. On the other hand, such is the charm of a gifted Sesus socialite or artist that her peers often disregard the rumors in her case, esteeming her all the higher for seeming to rise above her house's disrepute.

The Masked Council

The Masked Council coordinates and controls House Sesus' espionage network through layers upon layers of misdirection. Sesus scions at the lowest level don't receive instructions directly from the council; some don't even know that it exists until they've been serving it for years. Instead, they report to handlers, seasoned Sesus spies and intelligencers who provide assignments and ensure that success is well-coordinated. The handlers, in turn, report to the house's nine spymasters, each of whom is the trusted and handpicked agent of a single member of the Masked Council.

The Masked Council itself is made up of nine Sesus elders — at least, presumably. The council meets in namesake anonymity, allowing them to coordinate the house's intelligence network while ensuring that no one member knows the activities or identities of all of its spies. Gossip concerning the identities of the Masked Councilors is a frequent pastime within the network; most agree that at least one member is the assassin responsible for a spree of poisonings among the Deliberative and the ministries of the Thousand Scales, while signs point to the presence of at least one demonologist on the council.

The only way to join the council is to accept the mask of a member who wishes to retire. With it comes that elder's personal spymaster and the portion of the Sesus intelligence network under the elder's control.

House Economics

House Sesus' military might and mastery of espionage enables it to claim the dragon's share of trade opportunities in newly conquered satrapies, snatching opportunities out from under the claws of other houses. Centuries of intermarriage with House Cynis have brought many gifted merchants and financiers into the house, offering commercial acumen that Sesus has made its own. This has made Sesus a fiscal powerhouse competitive with its rival House Nellens, but the prodigious sums expended in funding covert operations — and in pursuit of its scions' vices — keep it from equaling the likes of House Ragara.

House Sesus makes a useful knife in the back of interests opposed to the Realm's in the Threshold, and profits nicely thereby. The Guild finds itself confronted with an army of commercial spies and saboteurs, and Sesus continually blocks their intrusion into Realm affairs. Its house legions serve as mercenaries for Threshold warlords and petty despots, and occasionally compete with Guild mercenaries to offer their services in brushfire wars.

House Military

House Sesus controls one of the largest militaries in the Realm. They were among the three houses permitted to maintain legions before the Empress vanished, and managed to bring four Imperial legions under their control, bringing their total to seven.

Even at their best, the Sesus house legions were never as well-honed as those of Tepet and Cathak, and their new once-Imperial legions are no better. But Sesus officers are best

known not for discipline nor for compendious knowledge of *The Thousand Correct Actions*, but for dirty tricks — assassination, false intelligence, subversion, and the like.

House Sesus can't quite match House Cathak's army in sheer numbers, and it doesn't like its odds against Cathak's better-trained legions in a head-on fight. Instead, it seeks protection and alliance with Cynis, and plays other houses against each other, hoping to whittle down the other Great Houses' militaries while building up its own.

Allies and Enemies

The Blood of the Dragons is exceptionally strong in House Sesus, rivaling even Mnemon and Cynis, with whom the house's bloodline becomes more and more entwined through marriage. Other houses, though they don't like or trust Sesus, will marry their sons and daughters into the line in hopes of securing more Dragon-Blooded children.

House Cynis is Sesus' strongest tie, bound by debts as well as blood. Members of the two houses frequently take each other as companions, lovers, and spouses, and the result is a blissful (if debauched) relationship. Cynis provides the exotic delicacies, intoxicants, and companions that Sesus scions so crave. In exchange, Sesus military forces protect Cynis interests. However, when it comes to their covert pursuits, the relationship between Sesus spymasters and Cynis blackmailers is complex, manipulative, and distrustful.

Sesus is likewise entangled with House Mnemon by blood, marrying into that house as often as Cynis. Politically, however, their relationship is strained at best. While the more romantic or iconoclastic Mnemons find the Sesuses alluring, the upright Immaculate streak in House Mnemon causes most to look down on the spymaster house. Moreover, Mnemon herself has her gaze set on the Scarlet Throne, and the Sesus elders know she sees them as a potential obstacle to her accession.

Sesus' greatest enemy was House Tepet. House Sesus helped engineer the Tepet legions' downfall and profited from claiming satrapies Tepet could no longer control. Sesus hasn't moved against Tepet since; what more is left to do?

The house now focuses its ire on House Cathak and House Nellens. House Cathak is a military rival. Sesus resents the Cathaks for their military might and would like nothing more than to ruin them as thoroughly as Tepet. House Sesus despises House Nellens as thin-blooded upstarts whose very name — taken from Sesus' father — insults the Sesus lineage.

House Sesus is one of the few Great Houses aware that House Iselsi is still active. They keep close tabs on any Iselsi agents they can identify.

Major Holdings

House Sesus' seat is the Palace of Burning Wind in **Chanos Prefecture**. The chill, rainswept city of Chanos is among the northern Blessed Isle's most important ports, and home to the oceangoing Air Fleet of the Imperial Navy. Relations with House Peleps are prickly; the Sesuses maintain a military presence against the threat of a decapitating strike against their house by the ever-present Imperial marines.

Ventus Prefecture, to the west of Chanos, is even more rugged and wild. Ventus winters are fierce, and travelers without adequate protection risk dying of exposure. The

prefecture's saving graces include lumber, furs, and herbs gathered from the wooded highlands of the Skyhewn Mountains, and ores extracted from mines among the icy peaks. Among those peaks stands the mountaintop gaol Ice-Above-the-Water, used to house dangerous criminals, political prisoners, rebellious mortal nobles, and other undesirables.

At the far end of the Skyhewn Mountains from Ice-Above-the-Water stands the lavish palace-manse **Silken Diamond**. Here, Sesus scions can let their hair down in luxury, safety, and privacy. But the manse also doubles as the house's spy-training academy. In hidden chambers deep within the mountain, vacationing Sesuses meet as master and student to practice every aspect of tradecraft and to master devious schools of martial arts.

Off the western coast of the Blessed Isle, amid the Tongma Archipelago, rises **the Isle of Smoke**. Not actually a single island, but a series of smaller ones divided by shallow channels of ocean water, the atoll is constantly shrouded in a thick white fog that smells vaguely of charred cedar. It's here that House Sesus trains its best legionary officers and naval captains. Mock battlegrounds, obstacle courses, and target ranges dominate the Isle of Smoke. A small village sits on the largest islet, with housing for trainees, visiting Dynasts, and the crew of slaves and laborers that maintain this vital training facility.

Saltbreak is a Tepet satrapy on paper, but it all but belongs to House Sesus. The coastal Northern nation thrives off the White Sea whaling trade, paying its tribute to the Realm in meat, oil, scrimshaw, and ambergris, along with mined diamonds, silver, and copper. Since the downfall of the Tepet legions, the house has been forced to withdraw most of its Saltbreak garrison back to the Blessed Isle, and Sesus has been more than glad to "reinforce" the satrapy in exchange for an inordinate share of its tributes. Saltbreak's satrap has sent furious missives to the Deliberative over this illegal practice, but the other Great Houses have been willing to turn a blind eye in exchange for Sesus shouldering debts that House Tepet can no longer repay. However, Sesus shows signs of renegeing on these debts, which may ignite a firestorm of Dynastic power plays.

Scions of Note

Sesus, the founder, died a glorious death in battle a long time ago. She was a master general, but also a genius at spycraft and mind games, and the creator of her house's intelligence network. She's buried in a hidden crypt beneath the Palace of Burning Wind; discovering the crypt's location and paying her respect is a rite of passage for many Sesus scions.

The matriarch is Sesus' youngest daughter, retired general **Sesus Raenyah**. She focuses on the house's military and mercantile interests, and it was her influence as much as the Masked Council's espionage that tipped the scales in favor of Sesus obtaining four additional legions. While aware of her house's shadier activities, she chooses not to engage in them, instead occasionally teaching at the House of Bells and Pasiap's Stair, and sponsoring the Immaculate Order. Sesus has put her forward as a candidate for the throne, but as she refuses to rely on spycraft and subterfuge, much of her support comes from outside the house proper. Some believe she can be easily controlled; others are partisans of her husband **Oban**, a charismatic son of the Empress.

One of the major powers in the shadows is **Sesus Agelin**, also known as Lady Smoke. If someone says they've spoken to Sesus Agelin, they're probably lying. Her own children don't know for certain what she actually looks like. Lady Smoke is perhaps the single most accomplished student of Silken Diamond, which is both boon and bane for her house. She both aids and terrifies those who actually lead House Sesus, and several have unsubtly made it known that they'd like her dead. The trouble is that Agelin is a mistress of disguise and mimicry. There's no telling how old she actually is. Her kin presume that she sits on the Masked Council, but how would they ever know for sure?

Sesus Rafara is a major problem for her house. When she was twelve, her mother slaughtered her beloved nursemaids and tutors in a fit of rage while Rafara watched — the trauma provoked her Exaltation. The house then sent her to Silken Diamond and put her through rigorous training to become one of Sesus' deadly weapons. Rafara still plays the role of the loyal Sesus spy, but she works only for herself, and trusts no one. She's since warned the Roseblack of an assassination attempt and covertly thwarted military operations by her house in the Threshold. She's still useful to Sesus — but she might be more useful to the Realm instead.

Sesus Raenyah Terel is a graduate of the House of Bells, and a clever swordsman and duelist. Extremely popular among his classmates, he has a great deal of hangers-on and many lovers — to say nothing of those he keeps dangling on a thin string of hope — and he reports back on all of them to his house. A bit of a libertine, he enjoys indulging in all that his house and his sycophants' houses have to offer. He's also a bully, however, and while he excels with the sword, he's never given himself the chance to test against someone who might be his equal. He's witty and charming, but his smile is bladed and his jokes are cruel. Terel is noted for taunting those who annoy him into fights where he knows he has the upper hand. His friends and lovers all cheer when he inevitably wins, and he goes back to celebrating with them.

House Tepet — Air Stained By the Blood of Legions

House Tepet is a house of heroes, born from the Scarlet Empress' blood, but named for her consort Tepet. He was her enemy before he was her lover, a warrior-poet and heir to a fallen Shogunate kingdom that took up arms against her early in her reign. He sought to prove his claim as shogun through conquest of the Imperial City, and asked only that the Scarlet Empress spare his soldiers after he failed. Impressed by Tepet's bravery, strategic insight, and unshakable honor, she took him as her consort instead, and adopted his kin into the Realm. In time, she elevated his family line into a Great House with him at its head.

The house's martial triumphs stand testament to the Empress' wisdom. Its Melaist traditions and spiritual practices were passed down from their founder, teaching that the warrior's path is the road to enlightenment. The house's scions strive not only for strength, but excellence, distinguishing themselves from Dynastic peers through military leadership. The Tepet legions were deemed mightiest in the Realm, rivaling even House Cathak's and the Imperial legions themselves, and celebrated for defeating many of the Empress' greatest foes. When they marched against the Anathema called the Bull of the North three years ago, they expected another shining victory. Instead they suffered a

devastating defeat, losing many of their greatest heroes and a full quarter of their Dragon-Blooded scions.

Any respect owed House Tepet died with its legions. Now, the idiot Tepet Fokuf sits as regent, a cruel reminder of the house's chances at the throne. Defeat has left them weak; that weakness hangs over the house like a curse. Many await the house's fall, like Manosque or Akiyo before it. Others sympathize with House Tepet, but sympathy begets no alliances. Taking a Tepet husband is akin to taking in a mangy stray; marrying into the house incites wild rumors of covered-up scandals or hidden depravities.

Raised from childhood expecting to attain positions of power and martial glory, House Tepet's scions now belong to a house that might not exist tomorrow. They face this perpetual doomsday as their bloodline always has: as warriors.

Ancient Ways

House Tepet follows a martial tradition older than the Realm, preserving spiritual disciplines of the Shogunate lost in other histories. The two most prominent of these are the sublime armigers and the yamabushi. Its sublime armigers draw power from the history and legacy of House Tepet's heirlooms, taking up a revered ancestor's legendary artifact in emulation of her virtues. Yamabushi scout ahead of legions on the march, striking pacts with local gods to secure strategic advantages. Most armigers and yamabushi served within the Tepet legions, leaving few surviving practitioners.

House Economics

The Tepet legions were the house's greatest source of wealth. The Empress rewarded House Tepet for imposing peace on unruly satrapies and securing the Realm's Northern holdings with a sizable stipend, the dragon's share of which was invested in the legions' upkeep and expansion.

House Tepet never fielded its legions as mercenaries, but their prowess was famed across Creation. Tepet generals and strategists charged hinterland nations heavily to train, arm, and advise their armies. The ghost-faced warriors of Ithen marched with the Imperial legions against the Weeping Princes; the traitorous Five Thrones Hearth was brought down by Tepet-trained resistance fighters within their own capital; Mogg the Devourer and her crocodilefolk brood were turned back by the Devil Quag marsh tribes before they reached the Empress' soil.

Now, House Tepet's economy is in ruin. Their stipend has been slashed to a pittance. The Great Houses divided Tepet's most valuable satrapies up amongst themselves in exchange for debts forgiven or under the pretense of compensating for Tepet's military absence. While House Tepet still administers these satrapies on paper, their tributes are reaped by other houses, chiefly Sesus and Ragara. Of Tepet's holdings, only Medo still pays their tribute of janissaries, largely because of satrap Tepet Niruz's bloody-minded persistence. The rest have fallen to other houses, who mistakenly believe the mighty warriors subdued by the Tepet legions have lost their will to resist.

House Tepet made few investments in non-military ventures. When the cost of maintaining its legions rose higher than its stipend could support, it resorted to taking sizable loans and conceding lucrative enterprises to other houses. The few it still controls include metal-works, silk farms, and almost-exhausted mines of marble, gems, and jade. House Tepet clings desperately to these, knowing that if they're lost, so is the house.

House Military

Tepet scions strive to emulate the mythical warrior-hero Mela in their earliest childhood sparring bouts. They're trained in weaponry from an early age, often by mortal veterans who served under their mother or an aunt. A Tepet learns to read from the pages of *The Thousand Correct Actions*, and trains for command through conducting war games and riding alongside older relatives. A Tepet formally concludes her childhood study of war when she chooses a code of honor exemplifying her warrior's path — whether an extant code or one of her own devising. Many aspire to the house's valor and selflessness, but a warrior's code is ultimately hers to choose.

Once a Tepet chooses her code, it's not enough to simply fight — she must *lead*. She's expected to epitomize her code through martial attainments, inspiring her soldiers with her virtue just as Mela illustrates the nature of the ideal warrior to the Dragon-Blooded. Tepet parents once put considerable effort into securing their child an officer's rank in the house legions or the Imperial legions when a position opened.

The Battle of Futile Blood left House Tepet only half a legion's worth of rank and file soldiers, and fewer officers. When the Great Houses partitioned the legions, they salted the wound by burdening Tepet with the Vermilion (or "Red-Piss") Legion, an army of bandits, criminals, and drunkards. Only House Cathak objected, respecting the prowess of Tepet's leaders enough to recognize the threat posed by even a single legion.

Command of the Red-Piss Legion was given to Tepet Ejava, the Roseblack. Once an Imperial legion officer, she resigned that commission to serve her house. Under the Roseblack's leadership and training, the Red-Piss Legion has hunted pirates, subdued rebellions in the few remaining Tepet satrapies, and fought the mindless puppets of Kejiza the Centipede Witch. Outmatched by the other houses' sheer numbers, it may yet be House Tepet's salvation.

Many Paths to Honor

Tepet children are raised as warriors, but aren't forced into military service. A sizable minority seek other vocations — bureaucrats, artisans, savants, sorcerers. There's no shame in this, so long as they aspire to preeminence, but their kin will always hold them to a warrior's standards. A poet earns acclaim if her words command the hearts of disciples, but even the most puissant sorcerer invites disdain if his triumphs come without honor and leadership. Since the fall of the Tepet legions, many of the house's most prominent scions are those who turned their talents to vocations outside the military, whose efforts to secure the house's future have won them acclaim approaching that of its fallen war heroes.

Enemies and Alliances

Each Great House played a part in the downfall of House Tepet, plotting its demise or profiting from its ruin. House Tepet knows it cannot survive if it opposes the entire Realm. Marriages have become scarce, save for the occasional outcaste and with House Nellens, whose matchmakers delight at procuring scions of refined pedigree without competition from other houses.

House Sesus profited most from House Tepet's decline, gaining lucrative access to Tepet's Northern satrapies. This is no coincidence. Sesus spymasters undermined the legions marching against the Bull. They've continued sabotaging potential alliances between Tepet and other houses to ensure Tepet remains powerless. The other houses tacitly approved of this, with the expectation that House Sesus would shoulder debts that House Tepet can no longer repay. Whatever backroom dealings secured thusly have fallen through, as House Sesus refuses to acknowledge the Tepet loans, flouting admonishments from House Ragara and other creditors in the expectation that civil war will erase the consequences.

House Cathak and House Tepet shared mutual respect based on military might, but this ended when the Cathak legions failed to march to House Tepet's aid against the Bull once the true danger of the Anathema's forces was revealed. House Sesus' scheming was expected, but for Cathak to prove honorless was a much more profound betrayal. House Cathak has refused all overtures of alliance from the Tepets and has blocked all efforts to rebuild Tepet's military forces. If a Tepet were to make a bid for the throne backed by house legions, Cathak would be the first to move against them.

House Tepet has been an ally of House V'neef since the latter's inception, owing in part to V'neef's own Tepet husband. Before the Tepet legions' downfall, House Tepet might have relied on House V'neef to support a bid for the throne, but now, only a pretense of allegiance remains.

House Tepet isn't completely alone. House Nellens has made tempting overtures of a military coalition, providing the troops and financing that House Tepet so desperately lacks. More gravely, senior military officers, house matriarchs, and other influential Tepets have received entreaties from the fallen House Iselsi, presenting a straightforward offer: Join forces against the other houses and claim bloody revenge. Such an alliance would be abhorrent to all notions of honor, but there are grudges to settle and deaths to avenge. Some Tepets may not let the chance for a final reckoning slip from their hands.

Major Holdings

House Tepet's family stronghold sits in the ancient Shogunate capital of **Lord's Crossing**. House leadership is confused and unstable after the disastrous campaign against the Bull. Tepet Usala, then commander of the Tepet legions and house matriarch, fell at the Anathema's hands. The Tepet family heads have formed a ruling council that meets in Usala's manse, the owl-haunted Pagoda of Blood and Pearls. The council's power is shared, but only because no one has risked a decisive grab for power. They play subtle games of influence through younger scions instead, maintaining their honor even as they plot each other's betrayal.

West of Lord's Crossing, **the Vale of Reverie**'s unspoiled wilderness, touched by primeval magic, is a place where the world of spirits draws closer to that of mortals.

Small gods drift through the wild as luminous, ephemeral presences, while packs of elementals flourish. Dragon-Blooded are welcome in the Vale by ancient edict of the Worm-Eaten Woman, an ancient and enigmatic spirit who claims kinship with them. Tepet children are brought here for their first lessons on spirits, and return throughout their lives to meditate, pray, and pursue spiritual cultivation.

Most of House Tepet's satrapial holdings have been lost to other houses. The fortified capital city **Dezsofi** still juts from the heart of Medo, its gates held by mixed regiments of Tepet soldiers and Medoans, but other satrapies offer meager tribute at best and outright rebellion at worst.

Faraway **Ithen** remains independent from the Realm, but agreed to treaties of non-aggression and commercial exchange after Tepet military advisors coordinated the overthrow of the Weeping Princes and restored their hereditary tyrant to power. In the Empress' absence, House Tepet hopes to secure Ithen's loyalty and might for themselves.

Scions of Note

Tepet lies buried at Lord's Crossing in a tomb of unmelting ice. His deeds are legend among his house — a warrior so noble he won the Empress' heart even in defeat; the greatest general to test the Imperial City's defenses; a pious devotee of Mela respected by god and devil alike.

Tepet Corino, a muscular, black-skinned Dynast, is the woman people go to in order to make things happen. Supreme quartermaster of the Tepet legions during their doomed campaign in the North, the devastation of the high command and the respect given her by the rank and file left her the de facto house matriarch and the best candidate to take control of the house legions' finances. They're the dregs of a fortune, but nevertheless represent one of the house's greatest assets. Corino is hell-bent on rebuilding the house legions, but can't force a majority in the council of house elders. She relies on traded favors, seeking out young Dynasts whose ambitions for glory align with her agenda.

Tepet Arada, the Wind Dancer, has gone from living legend to black sheep of the house. He rose through the Tepet legions to the rank of general, an exemplar of both ideal soldier and ideal warrior. Arada survived the Battle of Futile Blood and slew the Anathema Fear-Eater, but returned changed. Some thought he might take up leadership of the house. Instead he's grown cynical, taking up a gourd of rice wine in place of a daiklave, his belief in the Realm shattered. However, Arada's withdrawal shouldn't be mistaken for weakness. Should civil war break out, he'd tear the Realm apart to protect his family.

Satrap **Tepet Niruz** holds Medo with a cornered wolf's ferocity. House Cathak's offers to "reinforce" the satrapy and House Sesus' subterfuge would long since have wrested it away from House Tepet were it not for this tenacity. A deadly archer, Niruz openly forswears gender, neither man nor woman, and has sworn to a warrior code that emphasizes truth to one's self above conforming to the expectations of others. While scions of other houses find this strange or scandalous, Niruz's oath legitimizes their identity in the eyes of Tepet kin.

Tepet Berel Gadurin is one of the Realm's most celebrated playwrights. He won his reputation with passionate romances and cleverly crafted comedies, but since the Battle

of Futile Blood, he's turned his attention to creating works of propaganda, seeking to influence prominent figures in the Realm with a predilection for drama with heartbreaking tragedies of warriors sacrificing themselves in the name of love and honor.

V'neef — Wood That Tenders the Garden's Grace

Youngest of all the Great Houses, composed of adopted daughters of a woman only six decades old, its greatest protector vanished for five long years, beset upon on every side by elder siblings resentful of its very existence. House V'neef nevertheless endures, not with the stoicism of the earth but with the grace of the willow that bends with the storm. Despite its youth, House V'neef is well-liked, its founder a charismatic and dignified woman with all of the Empress' social savvy and beauty who charted a course to power that stepped on as few toes as possible. House V'neef maintains a diverse business portfolio, and has earned a reputation for boldness. Its members are young, dynamic, and ever seeking new horizons to plant their flag upon, literally as well as metaphorically, not least because it's the only way the house will survive the coming storm.

V'neef has only a few children of her own, and only the eldest are starting their own families. The vast majority of House V'neef consists of hundreds of lost eggs — from the newly Exalted to aging retirees — elevated to Dynastic status by the Empress' legal and spiritual fiat. For her generosity, the house's rank and file practically worship the Empress — V'neef herself commands no small amount of reverence as well, as the Empress' favored daughter (to their mind, at least).

But popularity isn't enough. V'neef jealously guards the military experience of her adopted daughters, keeping them close to home rather than risking them in battle, while pursuing advantageous marriages for her adopted sons and consolidating what power she can. With her closest advisors, she lays plans for the future. Her house stands at a crossroads — one path leads to the throne, the other to her entire line's ignominious demise.

House Economics

Her initial fortune made in Eagle Prefecture's wines, V'neef has since diversified. Now, her house profits from horse-breeding, breweries, tobacco and qat plantations, and even safaris for those eager to hunt the Threshold's strange and exotic game. But House V'neef's most important source of income is the Merchant Fleet, awarded by the Empress upon the house's creation to undercut the rising power of House Peleps. House V'neef is responsible for transporting tribute from the Threshold to the Blessed Isle, and entitled to a percentage of all tribute delivered, as well as the right to claim as prizes any hostile ships taken by force of arms. As the satrapy system is the financial lifeblood of the Realm, even a tiny cut of the take is staggering, and V'neef has invested well.

For a time, this revenue stream was stable, even growing, but the Empress' disappearance and the ensuing crisis has thrown the system into disarray. As tribute dries up, the Merchant Fleet's maintenance expenses outweigh its income. House V'neef has since pushed West, relying on luxury imports and pirate-hunting outside its traditional convoy routes to make up the loss of stability. House Peleps, still furious over losing the lucrative Merchant Fleet, makes life as difficult for House V'neef's ships as it can short of outright war — every obol V'neef brings home, to House Peleps, is an obol stolen from their

coffers. The West is a firedust magazine, and these two houses put off plenty of sparks as they cross swords.

House Military

V'neef commands only two legions, one stationed full-time in Eagle Prefecture. Blessedly, her house's many outcaste veterans offer the V'neef legions uncommonly good leadership and morale, though a far cry from the well-polished machine that the Imperial legions once were.

Though its land forces are small, V'neef has a naval advantage. Less and less of its well-established Merchant Fleet continues to escort tribute fleets in the Inland Sea; today, most of its ships now jockey for position with the Peleps-controlled Imperial Navy in the West. While House Peleps overwhelmingly outnumbers V'neef on the high seas, this is in some ways a boon — the other Great Houses know that the Merchant Fleet doesn't have the ships to blockade the whole of the Realm. The Imperial Navy, however, does. While Peleps must tread carefully to avoid alarming the other houses with its fleet movements, House V'neef has a freer hand, so long as they don't run into a Peleps armada.

Enemies and Alliances

V'neef anticipated decades of support from the Empress as her nascent house gained strength. Now that the Empress is gone, the house is in troubled waters.

House V'neef's only solid support comes from the broken and dying House Tepet, from which her husband hails. Tepet respects the many graduates of Pasiap's Stair among V'neef's ranks, and V'neef had subtly expressed interested in backing Tepet for the throne before the loss of the Tepet legions. Now V'neef sees Tepet as little more than an anchor tied to her throat. But she cannot afford to alienate such a constant ally, to say nothing of the fact that it would break her husband's heart. The two houses are, on paper and to all appearances, closely tied, but V'neef hasn't finalized a single betrothal with House Tepet since the rout of their legions.

Meanwhile, House Ragara constantly undercuts House V'neef in the name of securing debt, as the prospect of a Great House that cannot be leaned on financially gives them cause for alarm. Virtually every financially significant V'neef property on the Blessed Isle has been targeted by Ragara, either through leaning on the Honest and Humble Assessors of the Imperial Tax to adjust value estimates, or through less subtle means such as arson or the careful use of various pests.

Of all her sisters and cousins, V'neef fears Mnemon most of all. Her elder-by-centuries sister is a powerful sorceress, commands a strong house, and has spent her entire life preparing to take the throne — one many other houses would prefer to see V'neef on, if only to deny it to Mnemon. V'neef knows this makes her a target, and that Mnemon isn't one to suffer a threat at her back for long — she fears her sister will crush her house, seizing her satrapies and wealth to turn them against the other houses and hunting down her children the way she still hunts the Iselsi. For this, if for no other reason, V'neef seeks the throne; it may be the only way to keep her family safe.

House Peleps, of course, has an immediate reason to stamp out House V'neef, but ironically this rivalry strengthens V'neef's position, giving Houses Ledaal, Cathak, and

Sesus (among others) reason to provide limited support to counterbalance the naval titan. Eventually, these houses must commit to a side, and a messy power struggle will doubtless ensue. V'neef strives to ingratiate herself with these houses to influence their final decision.

House Nellens has long been a mercantile rival of House V'neef, though neither side has ever escalated their commercial feuding to open conflict. Even if they could end old grudges, V'neef is wary of her house's reputation should she side with such a widely disdained house. The wealthy, debauched House Cynis maintains strong trade relations, stocking its galas with V'neef wines, but cannot be relied on for meaningful support.

More than ties of blood, V'neef seeks out ties of convenience and need — in particular, she's made Eagle Prefecture a safe haven for the Empress' magistrates, and hopes that protecting these visible symbols of the Empress' enduring power will pay off in the end.

Major Holdings

House V'neef's holdings on the Blessed Isle are concentrated on the western coast, in Eagle Prefecture. The city of **Eagle's Launch** is growing rapidly, competing in the popular imagination for the title of “gateway to the West” with Bittern, held by House Peleps. So many travelers and so much money flowing into and through the city attracts more than its fair share of smugglers and spies, to say nothing of Dynastic intrigues using this background noise for cover. Multiple magistrates live in Eagle's Launch, using the city's activity and excitement to mask their connections to their spy networks. The magistrate Seven Cardinals, an outcaste Water Aspect with a penchant for knifeplay, has made “harassing the opposition” his forté — House Sesus has lost three operatives to him in the last year alone, and are quietly putting together a larger operation designed to root him out.

The Sideshores, off the Isle's northwestern coast, hold many V'neef estates, all being quietly fortified as its people cast nervous glances at Peleps-held islets easily visible from their own shores. Those unable to afford conventional means of defense seek out alternatives. V'neef Ostoka has quietly cut a thoroughly impious deal with the court of water elementals dwelling by the Isle of Salt-Spray, and teardrop-shaped wind-chimes are appearing in the fishing villages and towns that support his estate. Should worst come to worst, he thinks, his island and its people will be safe, so long as none of them are foolish enough to reveal his plot out of misplaced religious zeal. After all, he's a Prince of the Earth; treating with spirits is his privilege, and if the Immaculate Order wouldn't approve of his amendment to the local prayer calendar, well, what they don't know won't hurt him.

The treaty port of **Nansha**, which sprawls across an entire atoll south of Wavecrest, is a key Western staging ground for the house. Here, buildings compete for each inch of dry land, while ships do the same in Nansha's warm lagoon. Tremendous wealth passes through this port, and it shows — each night, the city comes alive with music, dance, and entertainment from across the West. Satrap V'neef Savatera maintains the discipline drilled into her at Pasiap's Stair, descending into the frantic and often hedonistic streets only when she must. She acts as patron to the more refined arts, particularly the theater company imported from the Realm. Her chief difficulty, beyond overindulgent subordinates, is the urban underclass that constantly demands the Imperial garrison's

attention. Once, fishing villages occupied the surrounding cays, only occasionally feuding. Now, their descendants labor in the gargantuan port that's devoured their home whole, and gangs regularly engage in vicious running fights that the V'neef garrison is all but powerless to stop. Still, while the Nanshanese fight amongst themselves, they reserve their true loathing for the Dynasts, whose frenzied preparation against attack by the Imperial Navy offers the locals an opening to finally fight back.

Many scions of House V'neef call **Faxai-on-the-Caul** home, though most are un-Exalted. The house is in desperate need of new blood, and prizes the prospect of pilgrimage to the Last City. Most of all, they hope to prevent House Peleps from seizing the city, which would cut off access to the West through the Southwest, diminishing House V'neef's revenues and access to its Western territories at the worst possible time. The House of the Rootless Tree is its public-facing stronghold in Faxai, a dockside structure that extends out over the water on heavy pilings. The interior, a maze of blind corridors and stairways to nowhere designed to disorient intruders, is well-stocked with weapons, supplies, and armor. If necessary, the entire structure can be sorcerously decoupled from the pilings and dropped into the harbor, frozen solid by spell-wards to deny it to V'neef's enemies. V'neef Lanusa, a formerly outcaste Water Aspect, is the house's personal representative in Faxai, charged with overseeing its interests in the Caul.

Scions of Note

At the heart of her house is **V'neef** herself, her husband **Tepet Igan**, and her handful of offspring; legally siblings, the outcastes of House V'neef know full well that a great gulf remains between them and their founder's blood children. V'neef herself is still young by Exalted standards, only sixty — some of her adopted children are far older. Igan, for his part, is only a decade older than V'neef, but seems far more aged. The deaths of his cousins, sisters, and most especially his own mother has left him broken; he remains in mourning even after three years. He and V'neef dwell almost full-time in the Imperial City, where she puts charm and wit inherited from her mother to great use; even her foes respect her as a dynamic, driven leader. She's beloved by her house, and more than one of her adopted family have commissioned ballads or epic poems in her honor.

The blind swordswoman **V'neef S'thera** lost her fiancé Tepet Kedus at the Valley of Shards. S'thera wants nothing more than to meet the Bull of the North in battle and kill him, but V'neef refuses permission each time she asks to raise a Wyld Hunt. To V'neef, S'thera's blood is better spent on daughters than on the snow, and she hopes to entice House Cathak into an alliance through her daughter's marriage, so far without success. Robbed of vengeance, S'thera now drowns her sorrows with drink and attractive young women.

V'neef Dancing Boar is a former outcaste and dragonlord in the Imperial legions, adopted into House V'neef on its formation. His skill with the lance is impeccable, and he's renowned for his wing's triumph over the rebels of the Six Amethysts Coalition. He, however, finds nothing glorious about the slaughter he committed, hoping to never again raise arms in violence. Instead, he trains House V'neef's new legions and its marines in the Merchant Fleet, drilling them in the fundamentals of combat to hold their own against pirates or Peleps scions.

V'neef Agayo is a minor sorcerer and a master shipwright, entrusted with overseeing the repairs and construction of ships for the Merchant Fleet. House Peleps makes much of the demon workforces she binds to man the house's docks and her consultation of demonic savants and architects, insisting she lacks the caution necessary to treat with the forces of Hell. She takes such talk in stride as a sign that Peleps envies the ships she's raised. However, her real unwise dealings are not with demons, but with scions of House Ragara, whose pursuit of First Age artifice has led them to discover lost secrets of building wondrous ships. Agayo has been paying princely sums under the table for ancient blueprints they've unearthed, and may soon find herself crushed beneath personal debts.

Iselsi — Water That Hides the Deepest Dark

There is no House Iselsi. This remnant holds no seats in the Deliberative, claims no prefectures nor satrapies, administers not a single legion, and is only spoken of by its hale and healthy cousins to deride it. This is House Iselsi — it is nothing. But once, it was something grand.

In RY 643, House Iselsi's elders conspired to assassinate the Scarlet Empress, launching an attempt on her life that failed spectacularly. The Empress made a public example of the house, taking almost a century to carve it up bit by bit before finally striking it from the Imperial ledgers in RY 740. The other Great Houses didn't stand idly by; they fell on House Iselsi like wild dogs, tearing it apart. Only a few households remain, clinging desperately to what few scraps of wealth and privilege they can afford, little better than Threshold clans, certainly beneath even the dull, weak blood of House Nellens.

This was the Empress' will. There is no House Iselsi. All the better that their cousins should believe it, for the truth is that House Iselsi lives on, forged into a weapon that only the Empress' hand could hold back. That hand is gone now, and soon House Iselsi will pay back the blood debt, the Vendetta, in full.

There is no House Iselsi. There is only its hungry ghost.

The Vendetta

A girl is ushered into an atrium in the House of Black Waters by her mother. She has never seen this room or any of the others like it, and this occasion marks only the fifth time she has shared her mother's presence. The room is dimly lit, and as her eyes adjust she begins to make out faces on the wall — masks, eyes closed and features serene, wrinkles tracing their contours.

Her mother speaks, telling the girl of her ancestors, of their deeds and accomplishments, their honors and titles. Closer, now, the girl can tell that the wrinkles on the mask are not wrinkles, but intricately carved words, words that her mother is reciting from memory. She does not omit a single mask, and the litany takes hours, but she does not permit her daughter's attention to wander. The girl learns of her house's history piecemeal, of the greatness that once was, of the betrayal by her cousins, of the mercy of the Empress, and of the great Vendetta that each Iselsi carries forever in her heart.

When her mother is finished, she stands beside an empty stretch of wall, and turns to her daughter. “This is where your mask will rest,” she says. “What will be written upon it?” Without another word, she turns and walks away, leaving her daughter in the shadowy room.

She is six years old, the traditional age at which Iselsi children learn of the Vendetta.

Shrouded Dragons of the Scarlet Empress

The public work of dismantling House Iselsi was primarily carried out by the other Great Houses; after the first few blows, the Empress merely sat back and watched her children kill their cousins with impunity. It was the Empress’ hand that stayed the last blows, the ones that would have snuffed out the Iselsi forever, and it was her hand that gathered those she found most useful and scattered them far and wide across Realm and Threshold, gifting them new identities and esoteric training foreign to the Dynasty, turning them into her hidden eyes, ears, and daggers.

For those not so chosen, and who were fortunate enough to survive the other houses’ depredations, there were other tasks. One-fourth of the surviving Iselsi drifted into the Immaculate Order, publicly resolving to atone for the sins of their elders while in truth becoming yet another arm of the house’s gutted but once-venerable espionage machine. The rest either took on new identities of their own manufacture or carried on the charade of the broken, bankrupt, disgraced husk that was House Iselsi.

The hidden children of House Iselsi go about their false lives, laughing and fighting alongside their cousins in the other houses while desperately waiting for the order to cut their throats. It can be hard to hide such murderous intentions, but the Iselsi worry more that they’ll come to genuinely care for their targets. The bonds of Hearth and marriage are strong, and while no handler wants to kill a fellow Iselsi, better a quick death than the shame of losing sight of the Vendetta. Several Iselsis wear two masks: one for their targets, and one for their kin.

It was the Empress’ will that her other children, confident in their grasp of the dark underbelly of the Realm, would watch their daughters fall without knowing from where the dagger between their ribs came. The Empress turned an entire lineage into a hidden, bloodstained hand to match even the feared All-Seeing Eye. Then she vanished, leaving a house of living weapons to manage itself.

The Voice of Dark Water and the Daughter of Mist

Missives from Iselsi elders often indicate marching orders from these two leadership figures. However, the Voice and the Daughter don’t exist; they’re merely fabrications to distract and confuse rival agents, such as from House Sesus and the Eye, who might make inroads against Iselsi secrecy. By and large, the elders work alone, each pursuing her own approach to the Vendetta with her own resources on her own terms.

House Economics

House Iselsi is all but penniless. As patricians, the Iselsis administer no satrapies, collect little in the way of taxes, and are barred from the generous stipends their cousins receive from the Imperial Treasury. What few holdings remain under the Iselsi name are privately leased — paid for by personal business ventures, lucky strikes in the Threshold, and an Imperial grant for upkeep of shrines and temples in Incas Prefecture, the last place on the Blessed Isle that might be called House Iselsi's stronghold. Mnemon, for her part, has taken a personal interest in erasing that grant, and her allies in House Sesus are only too happy to assist her. While still blessed with wealth unimaginable to the peasantry, Iselsi's scions deem themselves impoverished, an insult they mean to repay in blood.

House Military

House Iselsi has no legions, not even in name alone. Yet House Iselsi is far from toothless. They need no armies because their hidden children sup with generals under assumed names, share beds with senators whose husbands are away on business, and perch like vultures in the heart of the Thousand Scales, watching for documents that betray the plans of others. Once, this was House Iselsi's specialty — their scions infested the Imperial Service, and pen couldn't be put to paper without their notice, or so they believed. Their web has been battered and torn, but it still clings, here and there, to things others thought unseen.

Enemies and Allies

Many houses, given the opportunity, would gladly stomp on every last ember of House Iselsi. House Sesus in particular devoted itself to destroying its traditional rival-in-espionage with gusto, and still keeps an ear to the ground for stragglers. Mnemon, for her part, would see the Immaculate Order purged of treacherous Iselsi, and has sponsored multiple bills in the Deliberative undercutting what little remains of the fallen house's influence. Every house save V'neef, though, played an immediate role in House Iselsi's destruction, and even V'neef exists at Iselsi's expense, raised up to fill the vacancy among the Great Houses. Any of them would gladly take the chance to purge one more of Iselsi's progeny from the face of Creation.

While the rank and file shuns even the idea of affiliating with their despised kin, the house's elders know that if it's to survive long enough to see the Vendetta through, it will need protection should the Empress fail to return. House Nellens thinks to turn House Iselsi into a sword of its own by dangling hope of having their name reinstated, but no Iselsi scion would take such an offer at face value. Covert overtures to House Tepet — brought nearly so low as Iselsi itself by the catastrophe in the Valley of Shards — are seen by house elders as a mere vehicle to fulfilling the Vendetta. When the others have fallen beneath Iselsi blades, House Tepet will still be there, ripe for the picking.

Where the Iselsi find allies, such as they are, it's amongst those who nurse a grudge of their own, or those whose ambition overtakes their good sense. Such assets are often found in or near positions of power, and the Iselsi rarely have difficulty ensuring that those assets' competitors are removed from consideration, one way or another. Outcastes, shunned by Great Houses, often serve as allies of convenience for the Iselsi, who — even if disgraced — are nonetheless Dynasts, and possibly a gateway to marriage into privilege, should the Vendetta achieve fruition. For Iselsi agents within the Immaculate Order, suborning gods by bribing them with subtle alterations to the prayer calendar is

standard operating procedure — a few deities, particularly gods of revenge and feuds, serve as divine patrons for the fallen house.

Major Holdings

Iselsi manses and holdings, many officially overseen by House Ledaal, still dot **Incas Prefecture**'s countryside — including the family's ancestral seat, the House of Black Waters, where Iselsi herself was laid to rest. Here the house lives openly, all the better to convince their cousins that this is all they have left. Elsewhere, in the Realm and the Threshold, they conceal themselves in boltholes and hidden fortresses, awaiting the day when their long-honed skills will be called upon by their house.

The Imperial City is thick with Iselsi agents, but their favored site for dead drops is paradoxically open — **The Last Little Sapling**, a teahouse of some repute with a riverfront view. Its proprietor Kiera, an affable middle-aged woman (and loyal Iselsi cousin), exchanges messages on notes left under teacups, or speaks in code when she calls on the table with a fresh kettle. All messages she hears, she passes along to their intended recipients. She knows much, perhaps too much, but she's earned the house elders' trust. Many speculate as to how, but she simply smiles and refills their cup.

In the mountains of Dejis Prefecture, heartland of House Mnemon, the inhabitants of tiny **Ditola Village** scratch at the earth and send cartloads of ore down to the smelters, as peasants should. But this isn't their true purpose. Deep in mines where not even the most ardent tax inspectors delve, they meet with their Iselsi masters and train, dust and darkness blinding them slowly but surely. It matters not — when the time comes, when smoke chokes the city of Mnemon-Darjilis, they'll have no more need of sight than the dead Mnemon scions they'll leave in the streets. This is their only purpose, a single decisive blow when the forgotten house calls. Until then, they train. Until then, they wait.

Scions of Note

The founder **Iselsi** was a brilliant mathematician and economist who won the Empress' favor by ruthlessly manipulating and outmaneuvering her rivals for power in the nascent Imperial Service. A woman of quiet graces and subtle genius, she died on a Wyld Hunt centuries before the fall of her house. Her name is spoken in reverent whispers by Iselsi scions as they swear themselves to a Vendetta she never imagined.

Iselsi Dileko lives under an assumed name, as do many of his family, and like them he belongs to a Sworn Kinship. This band of V'neef, Sesus, and Mnemon scions think Naret Kikela an outcaste swordsman, and have welcomed him with open arms. He reports their movements, plans, and ambitions to his house, but his standing orders are to wait for the signal to slay the lot in their sleep — standard procedure for undercover assets in such a position. Privately, he hopes the order never comes. Playing the sworn brother has cut deeper into his hate than he thought it would.

Moonless River is an Immaculate monk stationed in Pneuma, with a decades-long history of advising those who hope to emulate Pasiap as she does. She's gained such renown that she receives regular invitations to dine with Ragara himself, and the two have built an amicable relationship. She truly loves the Immaculate lifestyle, and feels personally elevated on a spiritual level by the practice. When she drives her stone-hard

fingers through Ragara's skull on her house's orders, it won't be in the name of hate, but of ridding the Realm of the greed that hangs about its neck like a millstone.

Iselsi Takora has just returned from the Threshold, having ventured there for a decade to seek magical arts unknown in the Realm. Her face, name, and even gender are new, the legacy of sorcerous alchemy she learned in the far Southeast. She's an invaluable asset to the Vendetta, supplying House Iselsi with toxins the Blessed Isle has never seen: poisons that slay passions, venoms that erase thoughts, panaceas that stop death in its tracks for a day and a night. She's risen high in the house's esteem, and none yet suspect that she serves a master other than the Iselsi.

Iselsi Shenesh, Minister of the Imperial Gardens, is the last Iselsi to retain high standing in the Imperial Service since the house's fall from grace. Old and gray, leaning on a cane, he retains an air of dignity and grandeur, though he also wields a charming smile and ingratiating wit when the occasion demands. He's a divisive figure in the family. Most assume that he's one of the house's high-ranking assets in the All-Seeing Eye, and thus crucial to the house's future. But he was also a member of the Council of the Empty Throne that sundered the Imperial legions. Suspicions that Shenesh betrayed the house's attempted coup against the Empress all those years ago are largely kept unspoken.

Cadet Houses

On occasions when a Dragon-Blooded family native to the Threshold rejected the opportunity to relocate to the Blessed Isle and join one of the Great Houses — out of love for their homeland, perhaps, or preferring an arena they could dominate to one where they'd struggle as minor newcomers — the Empress often found it expedient to bind that family into the Dynasty by marriage. On other occasions, Dynasts marrying mortal Threshold royal families proved prolific in generating Dragon-Blooded offspring. And when the Empress eliminated the Shogunate gentes' privileges five centuries ago, she encouraged them to establish Threshold colonies, especially in Northern provinces whose bitter climate impaired recovery from the Contagion.

As members of Great Houses are forbidden from ruling Threshold states, these families were kept distinct from their parent houses, retaining their own surnames and maintaining political independence. Such families are called cadet houses — descended from the Empress and thus part of the Dynasty, but not part of any Great House. Granting or removing recognition of cadet house status, as with Great House status, was the prerogative of the Empress alone.

Members of cadet houses receive all rights and privileges accorded to Dynasts, but lack the power and support networks of the Great Houses. While some can afford to send Dragon-Blooded scions to the Blessed Isle's secondary schools, they aren't immersed in Dynastic culture to the same extent as those born and raised on the Isle. Dynasts of the Great Houses see cadet Dynasts as bumpkin cousins — charmingly rustic, but lacking in sophistication, and without the influence to be useful allies. In practice, their refinement, wealth, and power vary widely. Their numbers especially so; the smallest cadet houses count Dragon-Blooded scions in the single digits, but the mightiest number over a hundred apiece.

The Empress used cadet houses as one of many checks on Great House power in the Threshold. She cultivated their independence from their parent houses' bloodlines and political ambitions — guiding them into business and marriage relationships with rival houses and outcastes, and otherwise taking steps to prevent their being wholly suborned by any one house. (Some cadet houses never had specific parent houses to begin with, having married into multiple Great Houses from the beginning, or been adopted outright by the Empress.) Compliant cadet houses received various benefits, whether additional seats in the Deliberative or lenient terms on loans from House Ragara.

Some cadet houses have fallen over the years, whether through electing to migrate to the Isle at last and join a Great House; destruction by misadventure; earning the Empress' disapproval; or thinning bloodlines depriving them of sufficient Dragon-Blooded scions to retain their status. Nonetheless, a few dozen cadet houses remain scattered throughout the Threshold. These include:

House Ferem governs the Northern coastal satrapy of Cherak, between Pneuma and Medo. Descendants of a relict Shogunate legion akin to Lookshy, their burgeoning power was broken by the sorcerer Bagrash Kōl centuries ago. They still cling to fragments of their old military culture — and to remnants of its armory. In neighboring satrapies that the Realm carved from Grand Cherak centuries ago, other cadet houses share Ferem's ancestry and maintain familial ties.

House Desai commands great wealth and influence in Gulmohar and Rook, city-states that are longstanding rivals of neighboring Jiara. Merchants and landed gentry, House Desai has traditionally eschewed involvement in the travails of government in favor of leisure and patronage of the arts. Now it find itself divided between its own ambitions, the demands of princes and satraps, and the call to the Wyld Hunt.

Clans Burano and Ophris of Prasad were once Great Houses of the Realm. Though stricken from the Imperial ledgers after their legions went rogue, the Empress eventually acknowledged their authority as lords of Prasad. Although as local rulers tied by blood to the Dynasty, they're technically cadet houses, their practical status is idiosyncratic.

House Yueh rules Nai Lei, one of several city-states of the maritime Baihu people in the island satrapy of Nandao north of Goldenseal. The Lamenting Stone Assembly, a council of oligarchs that supplanted an overthrown Yueh monarchy, draws heavily from their ranks. Descended from the marriage of a Tepet scion and a Baihu prince, the Yuehs long considered themselves devoted clients of their parent house. They also profited from the construction of a Merchant Fleet depot in Nai Lei after House V'neef's elevation. Now, fearful of being caught up in the strife between Peleps and V'neef, they stand divided between old loyalties and a pragmatic search for new patrons.