

I've a soft spot for fellow soldiers, and I suppose you did come all this way. Fine. I'll tell you about killing Anathema. Not Jochim — I'll wager that copy of the *Thousand Correct Actions of the Upright Soldier* in your pack is dog-eared on that section. Wipe that look off your face, Swift. I don't need Mela's wisdom to know your type.

Fear-Eater was a Deceiver. He didn't have the talent Jochim or the Bull had, of training men to be fierce and fearless in weeks, so he took a more literal view of things. Fear-Eater was a shaman before he was Anathema, well-versed in the language of spirits. They taught him some of their tricks, including one he showed off to me during a parlay, where he reached into a man's head and heart and actually drew out the fears in bunches of spiked purple fruits on twisted vines. Take a guess as to what he did then. When he smiled, his teeth were lacquered a dark purple.

The Anathema's real skill as a general lay in building coalitions. Fear-Eater cut deals with forest gods, spirits of disease and murder, and the Mammoth Avatar. He was damn subtle about it — we didn't know about the Bull's alliances until a hundred-foot mammoth god charged our lines. We'd have days of hit-and-runs from hostile spirits before Dragon-Blooded could respond and fight them equally. Our quartermasters spouted wounds in their sleep and our supply trains fell to improbable sickness, rotting in the sun. I pulled the Tepet yamabushi together, told them to show the Deceiver we could play that game better.

The year after Fear-Eater loosed his allies on us, we knew the campaign was lost. We'd smashed the Bull's van at Fallen Lapis, led him and that witch through that city (which we then burned to the ground), took her arm and broke the back of their supply lines. It was a bloody nose to save face, and we all knew it. After that the Bull relied on the spirit alliances to harass us while we withdrew. Fear-Eater pinned down our rear guard at Futile Blood. The moment I was on the scene, the Bull slammed our front and flanks with a fresh van.

I saw Fear-Eater, eclipse-mark flaring on his brow and body lit by a corona, fetishes orbiting him in a whirl, throwing his facial scar-tattoos into sharp relief. He relied on sheer power to fight, but he'd never faced the hurricane before. He saw me, ducked past the fire-wreathed blade of my Hearthmate, and smiled that sly purple smile of his. "Doesn't matter what happens now," he said. "Yurgen will snap your soldiers like dead branches." He pinned Tepet Nezurin with subtle magics, punched through jade armor like water and consumed her heart with a fiery mandala of sunlight. "Maybe," I answered through the sorrow of losing a Hearthmate, "Jochim said that before I took his head, and he was twice the fucking soldier you are. How will you fare?"

My other Hearthmate was on the scene then, whispering Essence and giving me back the strength of the Dragons I'd lost twisting Fear-Eater's words to his army. He tried to catch the blade, but Jochim tried the same trick once, and it didn't work then either — they both had spent too much killing my Hearthmates and I made them pay for it. Air finds a gap, and my grandfather's daiklave found the one between tendon and bone. I buried the blade in his clavicle, wrenched it free easy as a summer's breeze, then ruined the lovely view of his surprised face with my fist. Then I took his head, stopped to savor the look of fear in his eyes after his flaring anima guttered and winked out in death.

Then I heard the roar from the front, turned to see our lines shattering in the light of three suns, and truly I wish I'd had his damned fruit trick then.

## Chapter Two

### The Great Houses

#### 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 warred 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 — considering it little more than a ghost. 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 their 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. 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. 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 put considerable effort into securing their child an officer's rank in the house legions or the Imperial legions when a position opens.

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 minority seek other vocations — bureaucrats, artisans, philosophers, 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 or 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.

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 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.

**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 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 Orino**, 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. Orino 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, trading his daiklave for a gourd of rice wine, 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's 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, for their warrior code 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 Tepet kin would never question their adherence to their code.

**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.