

DRAGON-BLOODED

WHAT FIRE HAS WROUGHT



KICKSTARTER

MANUSCRIPT PREVIEW #2

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Rainwater ran in torrents down the elaborate stonework and made glittering trails along the ivy-covered trellis. Thunder pealed; Eshuvar felt its resonance in his bones. If not for the heaviness of his heart and the uncomfortable cling of his soaked clothing, he would have found it invigorating. Above him, the lamps in his lover's room flickered invitingly.

Eshuvar had been seeing him for several months now, each time after a disagreement with his own wife. Her status increased since marrying him, as she'd carried children with the Dragons' blood. Thanks to him, of course — she'd not been so blessed. He did as he pleased to spite her; he was Exalted and she was not. A few more yards and he'd be in his lover's arms. He'd make sure she knew the next morning, too. What could she do about it? The deed would already be done, and she'd have to shoulder the embarrassment that her husband was a disobedient, philandering playboy. There was little her powerful mother could do about that, either. That thought brought a bitter smile to his face.

He paused on the trellis, slicked his saturated hair from his face, and stared at the distance stretching below him. It seemed an apt metaphor for his life: climbing upwards out of pettiness and spite with darkness yawning beneath, all to avoid a fall. That's all any Dynast did — climb, fight, spite each other, and avoid a fall. He'd done all these things, as his mother had taught him: Reach for every advantage, edge out those who could outdo you.

How had he reached this point, driven onwards by the corrosive bite of bitterness, envy, and displeasure? Compared to those of lesser wealth and status, was his Dynastic life not perfect — free of pain, illness, and hunger? He enjoyed wealth and privilege and all the power afforded to him as a Prince of the Earth. He'd invested wisely and made valuable connections. His bureaucratic peers spoke highly of him at all their meetings. He could have any woman or man he desired and enough drugs to threaten even his Exalted health. Yet he remained unsatisfied.

Why?, he thought, and turned his face upwards to the storm. Was he not respected by his Hearth's leader, River, a fierce woman and an Immaculate besides? Was he not like a brother to Kingfisher, a warrior of unquestionable skill? Was he not worthy of them, or their love? Eshuvar slammed his fist against the trellis and spit into the rain. He hadn't asked the Dragons to be born a man and his mother's only son!

The sound brought his lover's silhouette to the window. Against the warm light, the youthful mortal's slender, half-naked form cast a pleasing shadow downwards. Eshuvar thought he heard his lover's voice above the wind, asking if Eshuvar was there. They'd planned this encounter at the last fête Eshuvar had attended, slipping each other covert notes on scraps of paper and sharing longing looks — while in sight of his wife, of course — over the dining table. The youth was unmarried, on the cusp of maturing without Exaltation, and so beautiful. Eshuvar knew the young man would consent to lie with a Prince of the Earth.

Climb. Fight. Spite each other. Avoid a fall.

“Eshuvar?” His lover's warm basso voice breached the roar of the wind and the hiss of rain on stones.

Eshuvar's breath caught and his heart fluttered. All things aside, he cared for the man. The Dragon-Blood pulled himself up another rung, then another, then another, ignoring the coldness of the rainwater on his hands. He swallowed the weight of his dissatisfaction and climbed upwards again, into his lover's waiting arms.

Chapter Three

Life in the Scarlet Dynasty

Childhood

The Scarlet Dynasty's matriarchs teach that the strong mother raises her child to excel. The weak mother raises her child to be happy; this makes the child weak, and is self-indulgent and cruel. Few would disparage a Dynast for taking no personal hand in her child's rearing so long as the parents still diligently choose the child's tutors. To love one's child is neither expected nor frowned upon, but is considered irrelevant to the responsibility of raising capable young prospects for Exaltation.

Most Dynastic childhoods are marked by absent or cold parents. Instead, the child comes to self-awareness in a world where she's surrounded by inferiors. She witnesses her parents disciplining the servants in accordance with their inadequacies, from gentle verbal admonishments to breaking on the wheel of correction. Initially, the child must submit to household servants' commands, for those servants follow the parents' instructions and are thus vessels for Dynastic will. Over time, she's taught to command those selfsame servants. This power is initially tightly circumscribed — and is temporarily revoked if used foolishly or abused — but expands as she matures.

A good nanny is obedient, quiet, and caters to the child's needs. The nanny is the child's first teacher and provider, and if affection enters the average Dynastic childhood at all, it's likely to come from here. Many love their nannies dearly, and remember them fondly even after Exalting. Others treat them cruelly, though such behavior is considered uncouth in Dynastic society, and likely to incur punishment from parents who have no desire for a reputation as a household where awful things happen to their staff.

Tutors are the rod to the nanny's soft embrace. For the very young, tutelage often takes the form of regimented play until they're capable of more advanced study. As the child matures, the areas of tutelage increase steadily — coordination, combat, command, history, politics, geography, the Immaculate Philosophy, and more. For the very young, tutelage often takes the form of regimented play until they're capable of more advanced study.

A Dynastic child typically has young slaves as playmates who participate in his lessons and play with him. Favored childhood playmates sometimes follow a young Dynast as she grows up, becoming her most trusted servants. Siblings are rarely close enough to the child in age to play with her. When they are — whether in the form of twins, leftover children (p. XX), or adoptees — the relationship often plays out in hierarchies, with one sibling asserting status and authority. Children from other Dynastic families, such as cousins, neighbors, or the offspring of a parent's Hearthmates, are usually introduced to the child's play as she matures, to ensure she's properly socialized in how to treat fellow

Dynasts. Her parents also make sure she encounters plenty of Dragon-Blooded, for inspiration and education.

Dynastic Orphans

A young Dynast whose mother dies — or who's otherwise unable or unwilling to rear her — is typically taken in by a relative on his mother's side, even if her father survives. Same-sex couples or those otherwise infertile frequently adopt their house's orphans, providing the child with parents and the couple's marriage with greater legitimacy. An orphan's childhood is often indistinguishable from that of her peers, as few Dynastic children spend much time with their parents.

Education

The Realm's educational system is second to none, endowed both by the Scarlet Empress and through generous donations that frequently accompany applications for Dynastic children to study at specific institutions. The system aims to inculcate selected virtues in successive generations of Dynastic scions who'll one day hold the levers of power themselves. The four secondary schools that predominate today exemplify these qualities best — moral leadership and piety; occult insight and the wisdom to use it appropriately; courage and military excellence; and understanding of the mechanisms of rulership itself. The Cloister of Wisdom, Heptagram, House of Bells, and Spiral Academy exist to train the scions of the Dynasty, those enlightened few who will go on to do great things in the Realm's name.

Tutoring

Education begins early in life — typically between ages two and three — when the house matriarch, in concert with the scion's mother, chooses an appropriate series of tutors for early schooling. These are typically patricians, though young Dragon-Blooded fresh from secondary school occasionally spend time on sabbatical tutoring younger relatives. Here, the basics are taught — proper speech, literacy, arithmetic, moral education, and other topics that vary by house. House Tepet begins martial education early; many of their scions enter primary school with significant advantages over their peers in roughhousing. House Cynis prefers a more sybaritic education, focused on inculcating appreciation for fine art and music, as well as a keen eye for gathering lackeys. House Mnemon favors tutelage in mathematics, Immaculate doctrine, and the Realm's history, beginning with the life of the house's founder. All houses teach basic medical treatment, as well as how to recognize the odors and flavors of common poisons — a regrettably necessary precaution.

The goal of this intensive early education is to instill the child with discipline, obedience, respect for superiors, and the ability to be quiet and to learn quickly. They know from a very early age that they're only the latest in a long and honorable line, and that the dignity of the house is in their hands. Should the dominie of the young Dynast's primary school demand anything of her, the child must be ready to respond accordingly — and this capacity is tested at salons and galas throughout her childhood.

Home Schooling

Infrequently, rather than sending a child to primary school, the mother and house matriarch elect to continue the child's education at home. The advantage to this is the continued and personalized attention of numerous tutors and savants. In rare cases, this continues through secondary education, though it robs the student of the opportunity to establish lasting friendships and connections, something that no amount of adult socialization can ever compensate for. If a young Dynast's mother and house matriarch do so, it's almost always because they have a specific role planned for her, and either don't trust educators to properly mold the child, or because they don't want her forming connections that will only trouble her when the time comes to do what she was born to do.

Primary School

Patricians and Dynasts are sent off to primary school at the age of nine, already having been through an intense, high-pressure learning environment. Once there, they must cope with no longer being the sole focus of attention for multiple servants and compete with their fellows for their instructors' attention. Class sizes are small, but it's still a ratio of students to teacher rather than tutors to student, and this transition is stressful.

The small minority of Dynastic students are quick to establish hierarchies among their classmates. Staff — from administrators to teachers, from servants to guards — are accustomed to dealing not only with mortal scions of privilege but with fledgling Dragon-Blooded as well. They're polite but firm, and don't allow Exaltation to go a student's head (at least, no more than is appropriate).

As the years mount and pressure grows to prove oneself worthy by taking the Second Breath, the simple friendships and grudges of childhood often give way to ambition and cold cunning. Primary school is likened to a sieve in the Realm, separating chaff from wheat — though in this case, both are children below the age of fourteen, and the wheat is Exaltation separated from the chaff of mortality. It's impossible for the young students to be unaware of the importance of the next few years, especially as classmates Exalt and come to dominate the student body.

Mortal fourth- and fifth-years in particular obsess over Exaltation. Every primary school has strange, secret traditions and rituals intended to ignite the Dragon's blood, handed down from student to desperate student since time immemorial. Some are dangerous, and students sometimes die trying to force Exaltation. In truth, Exaltation cannot be forced in those lacking it — but the peril and stress faced in such foolhardy rituals triggers the actual moment of Exaltation just often enough to keep the legends alive. Teachers and parents alike do all they can to dissuade it, but the stakes are simply too high — immortality and greatness, or a short life of mediocrity.

When students Exalt in primary school, their lives change fundamentally — young Dragon-Blooded are separated from the student body until they can learn to control their newfound abilities, and when they return, they find themselves an ill fit with un-Exalted friends. Some become bullies, tormenting those who'd picked on them before; others

drift away, forming new friendships with older students who understand what it's like to be Exalted. Others retain mortal friends as sycophants, sidekicks, or dependents.

There are hundreds of primary schools located around the Blessed Isle, plus a few of lesser quality in satrapies with sizable Dynastic populations or cadet houses. These boarding schools are where children of privilege and power are sent to experience their first taste of the world outside their family's compound. Depending upon the primary school and the family in question, this may be a significant step down in standard of living, but is still suitable for the student's high social rank. Uniforms are laundered each night and ready each morning, filling and nutritious food is served thrice a day, and school grounds are guarded by professionals, typically mustered-out legion veterans.

Even the least prestigious primary schools are walled compounds with courtyards used for exercises; dormitories; a dining hall large enough to accommodate the entire student body; classrooms; and a small temple, usually with a resident priest. Wealthier schools boast elaborate gardens, menageries, pools, and the like. The more prestigious the school, the greater the proportion of the student body are Dynasts. Primary schools in isolated backwaters may have only patrician children enrolled — and may be inadequately prepared when one of those children Exalts.

The core curriculum at primary school — mandated by the Illustrious Compilers of the Perfected Curriculum — ranges from geography and culture to hand-to-hand combat. Every student is required to complete at least one advanced course in political or religious studies. This syllabus has scarcely changed over the past few centuries. Tradition is the bedrock of empire, and for all that the Dynasty and the patriciate crave novelty and respect innovation, they maintain a firm view on the importance of the classics. The eldest minister and the most fresh-faced graduate share the same worldview, founded on the same intellectual canon.

In addition to this core curriculum, primary schools often specialize in fields ranging from architecture to naval strategy to poetry to make themselves more attractive to parents and houses of prospective students. A school might specialize in the finer points of the satrapy system, including the economic and spiritual reasons for the Realm's foreign policies, and even organize field trips to satrapies to give students a closer look at their inner workings. On rare occasions, the most prestigious schools may find a Dragon-Blood taking time from her sabbatical to teach a course or two.

The school day begins with devotions, led by the resident monk (if any) or the dominie. Following breakfast, the morning is consumed with intensive study in the core curriculum: history, religion, mathematics, strategy, and the like. The afternoon classes, smaller and more individually focused, are segregated between Exalted and un-Exalted Dynasts (as is dining hall seating for all three meals). Afternoon classes cover practical knowledge, including music, public speaking, riding, martial training, and so on, based on individual students' talents and predilections. Exalted students typically begin their training in mastery of their power here. After dinner, tutelage continues with metaphysical and natural studies, including astrology and geography, until curfew is called. Studying past curfew may be lauded as a sign of diligence, or derided as a mark of poor time-management skills, depending on the student's performance the next day.

When All Else Fails

Some students are simply uncontrollable, even with Dynastic discipline and the know-how of primary-school educators. In such cases, when parents admit that their children are beyond the help of the usual system, two options remain: the House of Ancient Stone and the Palace of the Tamed Storm. These institutions resemble prisons more than schools, and the harsh punishments they employ will either mold the student into a stern martinet who will excel in positions of rigid authority, break them such that they cannot serve in any but the most restricted of tasks, or kill them. If a child is so unruly as to be fit to attend these institutions, it's a risk their mother and house must be willing to take.

Secondary School

As those fortunate few who Exalt approach their fifth year in primary school, the house matriarch meets each scion's mother personally, this time to decide the future course of the child's life. At their disposal are reports from servants, teachers, and spies, detailing every moment of the young Dragon-Blood's life — the choices she's made, her proclivities and talents, and what deficiencies remain to be corrected. Together, they arrange for the child to attend one of the Realm's four great secondary schools: the Cloister of Wisdom, the House of Bells, the Heptagram, and the Spiral Academy. The choice they make is for the good of the house, the Dynasty, and the child, in that order.

Acceptance to a secondary school isn't guaranteed, though matriarch and mother take great pains to ensure that the child stands out. Secondary schools don't charge tuition, but rely on "generous donations" provided by the prospective student's house and family. While this largesse may not influence admissions on paper, in practice, the best way to ensure one's child is accepted is to promise the largest donation.

Each of the four schools has a specialized curriculum, focusing on a specific approach to power and rule. But each nonetheless provides tutelage outside its primary focus, for every Dynast must be well rounded. A great general must be able to charm and mingle, both for diplomacy and marriageability; sorcerers and bureaucrats alike require training in self-defense; even abbots need to know how to manage a budget.

In addition to the skills and knowledge needed to rule, secondary schools also provide fertile ground for the development of social networks. Young Dragon-Blooded who meet in secondary school often become fast friends. The connections they make here and now will serve them throughout their careers, wherever they may take them; decisions are far more often made among old school friends at salons and galas than amid bureaucratic offices and legislative chambers.

Mortal Students

While most students who attend these four august institutions are Dragon-Blooded, each school does, with some regularity, admit highly exceptional mortal students. To even be competitive, such a prospective student must demonstrate excellence throughout her primary school career and have a motivated mother and house matriarch able to work back channels to

ensure their scion isn't dismissed out of hand. As a result, almost every mortal secondary school student is an un-Exalted Dynast — only the most influential Thousand Scales patrician families have the resources and connections necessary to manage such a feat.

Even after being accepted, the mortal student must continue to excel. Unlike primary school, there's no separate mortal standard to meet — she must hold her own against Exalted students or be dismissed, a great shame that forever tars her with the stench of hubris. Dragon-Blooded students are rarely accepting of mortals who dare to compete with them, and so the mortal will endure a double measure of hazing from fellow first-years as well as senior students. If she runs this gauntlet and graduates successfully, she's proven she can keep up even with her spiritual deficit, and her house is certain to make good use of her.

Alternatives

Not all Dragon-Blooded are destined for these august institutions. Some lack the advantages of birth or wealth; some are considered uneducable by decent institutions; some are simply guided to such ends by the whim of the house matriarch. For these scions, a handful of lesser institutions exist to serve their educational needs.

Most of these lesser secondary schools educate students destined for the legions, the navy, or the Imperial Service — several ministerial schools cluster around the Spiral Academy in a conglomeration called the “Outer Coil” — and most of their students are mortal Dynasts or patricians. One or two instructors at the most prestigious of these schools will be Dragon-Blooded, but the vast majority are mortal. Dragon-Blooded Dynasts who attend such schools — either by design or because they washed out of somewhere more prestigious — may be preeminent among their peers during their education, but after graduation, they often lack many of the high-society connections enjoyed by attendees of the major schools. On the other hand, the connections they've formed with their less-distinguished classmates are assets that their Great House can lean on for decades.

Below these less-than-august institutions is a third tier of schools scattered throughout the Threshold. These are attended by members of cadet houses and the children of satrapial advisors, alongside scions of the province's wealthy and powerful mortal families. Dynasts rarely attend such schools, and those who do are loath to admit it.

Aside from all these alternatives stands Pasiap's Stair, the military academy for lost eggs (p. XX) who take the coin. Its highly focused curriculum is extremely challenging, and a rare few Dynasts enroll to test the limits of their stamina.

The Cloister of Wisdom

Clarity, tranquility, and purpose. Master yourself, master your Essence — from this, all else flows. This is the first lesson students at the Cloister of Wisdom receive, and it may take some time for it to settle in, but the faculty here is nothing if not patient. First-year students spend much of their time in meditation. Other aspects of the curriculum aren't neglected — as they advance, students will study the Immaculate Texts and commentaries thereon, ethics, rhetoric, oratory, and a host of other subjects both

mundane and esoteric. But first priority is given to ensuring that students cultivate a proper meditative state and master their Essence, which the Cloister holds as fundamental to all education.

The Cloister of Wisdom is an unassuming-looking monastic compound in Incas Prefecture, located near the Palace Sublime. Here, the students — fewer than at the Spiral Academy or House of Bells, many of them lost eggs who've taken the razor — live as monks do, sleeping on bamboo mats and eating only rice and vegetables, rising with the sun for prayer before spending day and evening in study and meditation. The faculty are nearly all Immaculate monks. It's the greatest honor for a lay expert to be invited to a teaching position here.

Monks enforce the same discipline that they themselves follow. When young Dragon-Blooded arrive at the Cloister, they're fresh from the dizzying heights of Exaltation and often drunk on their own power. Here, they're treated as the lowest novices, even by mortal monks who — though eminently respectful — don't hesitate to inform their spiritual betters of how the students err. It's not uncommon for unruly students to be set to hours upon hours of meditation to calm their furious Essence; if their disposition doesn't improve, this vigil stretches into days or even weeks. The monks are practiced at taming prideful young Dragon-Blooded. Woe betide the young Prince who responds to discipline by lashing out, for though she is mighty, her instructors are mightier still, capable of martial feats she can scarcely imagine.

Exposure to such prowess is one of the benefits of the Cloister's monastic education. All students receive combat training alongside their mental and spiritual curriculum, instructed in martial arts — both the Immaculate Dragon styles (p. XX) and secular alternatives — by the finest the Realm has to offer. Studying the martial arts cultivates mental and physical discipline, serves as a means of self-defense, and helps young Dragon-Blooded master the inner mysteries of their Essence.

When they graduate, students of the Cloister of Wisdom carry with them — more than the knowledge and skill they gained in study — a serenity unseen outside the most remote Immaculate monasteries. Though the world around her may rage and the storm may lash at her, a Cloister graduate's innermost Essence is calm, centered, and aware. She's ready for anything — even the quiet work in the shadows that a few graduates of this hallowed institution are earmarked for. An Immaculate monk is visible at a glance, but one who carries out the Order's work without taking monastic vows can walk unseen even by the most impious and wicked of eyes, passing on what they learn to their superiors. Less than half of all Cloister graduates take vows and join the Immaculate Order, but those who graduate to a secular life frequently remain sympathetic to the Order's aims. The Order prides itself on being well informed, and those students they've taken on to mold in their own image are many individual streams that feed a great river.

The Heptagram

Wisdom, fortitude, and drive. All these are necessary to become a sorcerer, for the way of pure Essence isn't easily trod, nor is it for the faint of heart. For those with the aptitude, and whose families allow them to study such arts, the Heptagram beckons. Those accepted journey to the Isle of Voices for seven years of personal tutelage from what the Dynasty deems the finest sorcerers of not only the Realm, but all Creation, and when they

emerge, they're never quite the same. Sorcery occupies a curious place in the Realm's estimation, being both a questionable practice and a great boon that none can truly ignore. Only at the Heptagram is it wholeheartedly celebrated.

Cold, windswept, and isolated, the Heptagram occupies the majority of the Isle of Voices, a craggy outcropping of rock off the Blessed Isle's northern coast. Approach is impossible save by a preordained path and with the appropriate mystical seals — bound demons, elementals, and other occult wards drive away any who come to the Isle under false pretenses. The school itself consists of six towers encircling a seventh in perfect geomantic harmony. Outer towers are filled with laboratories, summoning circles, and rare equipment and materials necessary for magical practice. The central tower contains faculty and student lodgings and the Heptagram's only lecture hall, wherein each student holds an assigned seat. Food is prepared and the lands maintained by bound elementals and demons, weighted down with wards and geasa to ensure their obedience.

No more than a few dozen students are accepted at a time at the Heptagram, while more than half as many sorcerers and savants make up the faculty — among them a few Sidereal Exalted, their identities concealed from all but a handful of other residents. Study is at once carefully guided and autodidactic, with students pursuing their own chosen course of study once the basics have been impressed upon them. No sorcerer truly treads the same path as any other, despite the unified design of the Heptagram's curriculum; the faculty allows students to find their own way, advising them individually as needed. Classes aren't kept to a fixed schedule — lectures on specific subjects are announced well in advance, and frequently the entire student body attends them. Practical courses follow the same routine, convening when the master sorcerer teaching it chooses to. Vast libraries of approved material, organized into tiers based on utility and danger, are at the disposal of students who've qualified to read them — one entire tower is occupied by nothing but books, scrolls, and ancient tablets, each floor a new series of mysteries, each tome a lifetime's study rendered in ink.

This autodidactic tendency doesn't mean that study at the Heptagram is easy or lackadaisical. Students have seven years to master the art of sorcery — seven years, no more, for what many spend a mortal lifetime attempting. Despite the high teacher-to-student ratio, professors find themselves swamped with requests for notes on a thesis, assistance in a summoning ritual, or any number of other tasks. Independent study and experimentation must be carefully balanced with lecture and practical course attendance, and there's never enough time in the day.

Graduation from the Heptagram isn't assured. Not all have the ephemeral natural potential to initiate into sorcery's mysteries, and not all who do possess the self-discipline or desire to meet their teachers' high expectations. While most students drive themselves to successfully complete their course of study, a handful return home in disgrace — or don't return home at all. The graveyard beyond the school's walls, carefully tended by spirits, serves only to drive the others ever harder.

The Quiet Art

Sorcery occupies a curious place in the popular imagination of the Realm. Dynasts find sorcerers off-putting, wary of their strange powers and frequent congress with demons and other spirits. Sorcerers have powers

that others simply cannot understand or predict, especially as much of the Realm's body of sorcerous knowledge is carefully concealed. Sorcerers, therefore, aren't trusted. Patricians follow the lead of their social betters, while peasants harbor any number of suspicions regarding sorcerers and their unnatural servants.

But by the same token, sorcery is such a valuable asset that no house will willingly forsake it. Sorcerers can expect to have all their needs provided for, but they'll never be popular. Much of society is highly inconvenient for a known sorcerer to navigate. The stereotype of the sorcerer locked in her high tower, conducting the-Dragons-only-know-what rituals, isn't always an artifact of a sorcerer's natural studiousness, but often of her peers ostracizing her. Visitors invariably come wanting something from the sorcerer, and leave as soon as they've secured it. The life of a Dynastic sorcerer is almost always a lonely one.

The House of Bells

Courage, strength, and discipline. These are the watchwords of the legions, and so too are they the watchwords of the House of Bells, the premier military academy in the Realm, dedicated to training the next generation of Dynastic officers who'll rise through the ranks to command troops in the Empress' name. The curriculum isn't easy, but the end product is a well-rounded commander who'll earn the respect of soldiers beneath her even as she obeys her superiors' dictates.

Sprawling over hundreds of acres in the countryside near Arjuf city, the House of Bells has by far the largest campus of the four schools, consisting of massive fields, forests, marshes, and other arenas of warfare, all carefully managed to replicate potential battle conditions. At the heart of the grounds are the barracks, communal mess hall, classrooms, and faculty residence. To the south, along the coastline, is an artificial bay used to train students in naval maneuvers and boarding in combat. Nearby villages offer environments for urban warfare training, housing for the school's staff, and limited recreation opportunities for students. The school's grounds are encircled by a low wall that serves only to mark the boundary — students aren't permitted to leave the grounds without special permission from the dominie, and requesting permission usually earns a student her fellows' disdain.

Hundreds of students, spread out over seven years, attend this institution, divided into fangs of five who sleep in the same barracks and are graded as a unit. This promotes communal responsibility, and ensures that candidates not ideally suited for the House of Bells usually make it through alive. Accidents happen even in the safest of places, though, and it's a rare year without at least one cadet suffering serious injury or even dying — those who do so are given a reverent memorial ceremony and summarily listed as graduating with honors. Failing out is much more common, for the House of Bells doesn't wish to have a reputation as an abattoir. Traditionally, the Imperial legions rejected House of Bells dropouts from ever holding any officer's post. The new house legions, desperate for loyal officers, are less picky, but still much prefer a proper graduate, even to the extent of promoting them above those whose mothers paid

handsomely for their position. Graduation from the House of Bells remains a mark of distinction and merit, and anyone who can claim that honor will be welcome in any army.

Study at the House of Bells is grueling, taking its toll on body, mind, and spirit all at once. Cadets rise before the sun for physical training, including calisthenics, stretches, and a three-mile run, the older and more seasoned often driving the younger before them lest they fall behind and the faculty catch them flagging. The remainder of the day is spent either in intense and unforgiving study or on maneuvers.

Cadets must prove themselves capable in such subjects as small-unit tactics, strategy, military history, logistics, and command ethics. Older cadets specialize, training closely under faculty whose experience matches their ambitions. A budding naval commander may train under Peleps Nalani, whose belt is notched seven times, once for the head of each Lintha captain she personally took on a pirate-hunting campaign in the West; a would-be cavalry commander might study with Iruga Nagor, an outcaste who literally wrote the book on countering Marukani tactics and who, it's whispered in the barracks, hides a shrine to Hiparkes in his study. The academic day ends well after sundown. Students collapse into bed exhausted, only to be driven from their beds a few hours later to begin the cycle once more.

Two days out of seven, the classroom is left behind and cadets take the field. They're typically divided into two armies, with older cadets taking command positions and squads of younger cadets filling out the rank and file. (Other field trials include free-for-all, naval and shipboard combat, and hunting condemned criminals offered their freedom if they can escape the school grounds.) While these armies have no official name, squads often have a preferred title for their ersatz legion, and should the commanding officer come from that squad she'll make damned certain her subordinates know under what banner they fight. These titles have a habit of following squads even after they graduate, occasionally serving as a name for a Sworn Kinship.

The Spiral Academy

Knowledge, subtlety, and precision. The Spiral Academy teaches one lesson, and teaches it well: One cannot rule without understanding what one rules. The Realm is as complex as any living entity — flows of commerce, information, and power stand in for blood and Essence, and the myriad ministries of the Thousand Scales form its heart and mind. The Spiral Academy, largest of the four great secondary schools by student enrollment, trains its students in the Imperial Service's workings not because they'll inevitably serve as functionaries within its endless, winding corridors, but because if they wish to rule, they must understand this beast whose reins they hold.

Seated in the heart of the Imperial City, the Spiral Academy is surrounded by tall walls — though the campus isn't closed, students are frequently so besieged with work they find little time to take advantage of this. Students are put through the scholastic wringer, studying culture, forms of government, moral theory, and — most importantly of all — the mechanics of rulership. What time isn't spent in study is spent processing paperwork for “apprenticeships,” usually that of the Thousand Scales or local mercantile concerns. The Spiral Academy takes a modest commission for the labor, making it by far the wealthiest of the four great secondary schools — it uses this wealth to secure the very

best faculty available, who might otherwise enrich themselves by following their own careers. Even a few years on the staff of the Spiral Academy can make a teacher wealthy.

Many students believe they're being trained to push paper and nothing more, and a few in every graduating year find themselves doing that, but most graduates from this august institution find themselves moving not into the ministries of the Thousand Scales, but into satrapial governance, prefectural and gubernatorial posts, or administrative roles within their houses. For the finest, it meant elevation into the Empress' personal circle of ministers, who had the duty of translating her edicts into law and passing it down to the rest of the government.

The Spiral Academy serves one additional purpose — a finishing school for spies. All students learn the basics of cryptography, observation, and other essential forms of tradecraft as part of basic diplomacy courses. Ostensibly these skills are meant to be used against native governments in satrapies, but even the dullest student by now understands that every Great House spies upon every other as a matter of course. In addition, a secret curriculum of advanced classes in espionage and subterfuge known as the Garden of Unheard Whispers exists within the school, to which students are only admitted if they discover that it exists.

Secret Societies

While every secondary institution has some form of secret society culture that's passed on from elder students to younger, the Spiral Academy has the most extensive such social network, with no fewer than seven active, major secret societies. The Sorority of Dutiful Beheaders is pledged to uncovering corrupt judges and officials, while members of the Jewel-Strung Web coordinate to ensure each other's mutual benefit and prosperity. Secret codes, handshakes, even entire languages are used, all of which contribute to a society's mystique and camaraderie.

After the social meat grinder that is primary school, most Spiral Academy attendees are ready to see others, even fellow Dragon-Blooded, as stepping-stones to personal power and prestige, and these secret societies are perfect vehicles for their ongoing ambitions. To their elders, who maintain ties through faculty and staff at the Spiral Academy, these youngsters are extra bodies in their personal struggles, and students frequently find themselves caught up in various officials' schemes, skulking through the vast imperial archives or attending exclusive tea houses in those elders' names for reasons the students can only guess at.

Pasiap's Stair

Outcastes destined for service in the Imperial legions train at the specialized secondary school called Pasiap's Stair. Like the House of Bells, it's known for its grueling, even torturous curriculum. Unlike the House of Bells, however, the Stair cares not for the largesse of the Great Houses. Pasiap's Stair occupies an ancient fortress-manse in the Mhaltin range northeast of the Dragonswrath Desert, atop the jagged slopes of Gray Mask Mountain.

The Stair announces its nature the moment it appears on the horizon: You will find no comfort here. The eponymous stairs of the academy wend their way up the mountain's face, just wide enough for two to walk abreast, and both storerooms and barracks are hewn deep into the cold, dark stone itself. For classes and field exercises, the cadets descend the stairs to the desert's edge. Life at the Stair is unpleasant at the best of times, intolerable at the worst, but such is the ten-year crucible that refines rough and diverse outcastes into a disciplined, unified fighting force that has held the world in thrall for seven centuries.

A few hundred students reside in the Stair at a time, with a like number of faculty and support staff — other services for the institution are based in the nearby town of On-Sha. Students are grouped into fangs of five, and all punishments are collective. They drill morning and night, and spend the intervening hours studying tactics, mathematics, the Immaculate philosophy, and other subjects intended to compensate for their lack of Dynastic upbringing. Older students pair with their juniors as advisors and trainers, passing along valuable skills and inculcating them with the Stair's esprit-de-corps.

Studies at Pasiap's Stair revolve mainly around strategy, tactics, and the logistical realities of warfare. Entire courses exist to drill students on the proper way to swing a sword or negotiate unfriendly terrain in combat. More advanced students move on to drilling green cadets, the better to prepare for training the enlisted once assigned to a legion, which they almost certainly will be. One either graduates Pasiap's Stair or dies in the process — occasionally, murdered by one's comrades for holding them back and thrown from the edge of the fortress. Such deaths, generally put down as sleepwalking accidents, are known by the euphemism "walking off the mountain."

Outcastes at the Stair with a talent for sorcery receive training in battle magic. The school has no sorcerers permanently on staff, instead borrowing faculty from the Heptagram, or sorcerers on sabbatical or retired from the legions.

The end of each term is marked by the Feast of Spears, a final exam where students are pitted against one another in an enormous battle, serving as officers in armies staffed with slaves or soldiers on loan from legions stationed nearby — tenth-year students serve as generals, with younger students occupying suitably lower officer ranks. A grand feast follows the battle, and graduating students are finally allowed to relax for a moment — the next day, they leave for the Imperial City to be sponsored into the legions.

But the legions aren't what they were. Now owned by the Great Houses, the quality of leadership in the legions has plummeted as unqualified scions of privilege are promoted over time-tested officers, and the purge of outcastes from the ranks of house legions bodes poorly for graduates. Where the commissioning of graduates was once a formality, it's now a bureaucratic and social nightmare as representatives from the house legions find excuses to reject every outcaste who passes through the Stair.

Dropping Out and Sabbaticals

Failing to complete secondary education limits a Dynast's options, restricting her from holding important offices in the Thousand Scales and staining her reputation. If she pursues further education and a career, her family won't entirely ignore her, but she'll still miss out on important

social functions — no one wants to show off the daughter who didn't quite make it.

More often, a better path is to eschew the main track of Dynastic life entirely, traveling and socializing not simply within the Realm but throughout the Threshold. A Dynastic dropout who does well for herself on her own terms can win acceptance from her family and peers, and once she settles down will find a great many more doors open to her.

Similarly, though most Dynasts have a position within the family and possibly within the Thousand Scales lined up for them upon their coming of age, many choose instead to delay entry into these careers, enjoying life after a childhood of grueling training and study. This is practically expected of all young Dragon-Blooded, and no shame is attached to doing so — no one offers a post to a recent graduate without understanding that it might be a few seasons before they turn up.

While most families lean on young Dynasts to end a sabbatical after a year or two, those who travel far and wide as part of their sabbatical are given a much longer leash. Dynastic families believe that broad experiences are healthy and important for the young, and may be willing to hold off for a decade or even several decades, knowing that when their scion returns, she'll be far more capable than if she'd simply toed the line all the while.

Of course, with the threat of civil war looming, a great many messengers have been dispatched across the Threshold and the Realm — healthy experiences mean nothing next to the approaching struggle for the throne.

Coming of Age

When they graduate at the age of twenty-one, Dynasts (both Exalted and un-Exalted) are considered adults and full members of their respective houses. This both grants privileges and imposes responsibilities — far more of the latter, most Dynastic youths would say.

A young Dynast's coming of age is always marked with a gala, though galas for the un-Exalted are less lavish and well-attended than those for Dragon-Blooded. The latter are grand displays, celebrating the addition of a new Prince of the Earth to the house's rolls. Indeed, part of the ritual of this celebration is the public amendment of the family register to formally signify the new Dynast's status. All eyes will be on her — secondary school was but an introductory course for the pressure that starts to weigh on the young Dynast.

Part of the attention she receives is from Dynastic parents sizing her up as a potential fiancée for their children. The coming-of-age gala marks the opening of marriage negotiations between the Dynast's family and other houses, which typically go on for a decade. Arranged marriages are complicated bargains between the parents' houses, not to be embarked on lightly, and certainly not without a clear sense of how each affianced partner's career will progress.

Following the gala, young Dynasts are often given leave to truly relax for the first time in their lives. During this time, consultations take place regarding the future of the newly minted Dynast, with her mother and the matriarch weighing every factor, every report

from every member of faculty from primary school on up. Sometimes, the Dynast herself will even be allowed input — a sign of great trust, but also of great expectations.

A Dynast graduating from the House of Bells has traditionally been all but assured a commission in the legions or her house's paramilitary forces. This post would usually be as a scalelord, but the mother and house matriarch would pull what strings they could, and the children of the well-connected were occasionally promoted beyond their level of experience — such are referred to by their more experienced subordinates as “unhatched eggs.” A martially inclined Dynast unable to secure a satisfactory position in the legions and uninterested in a less-prestigious post in the house's private forces would often take a sabbatical and travel, either for pleasure or as part of a Wyld Hunt, until either an appropriate post opened up or she impressed an officer with sufficient pull to bring her on as a staff officer.

The situation has changed much in the last five years. A Dynast with military training will almost always have a post secured by her mother waiting for her in one of their houses' legions. Once given leave to improve themselves, Dragon-Blooded with even a sliver of military experience are now being jealously hoarded by the Great Houses, for while each knows that swords will inevitably be drawn, none can say when.

Those without military training, and particularly those with business acumen, are often put to work overseeing the house's commercial interests. This may or may not correspond with the individual Dynast's interests, and it's unlikely that said Dynast's mother consulted her about the post ahead of time. Those who display a particularly astute sense of social and political matters are often guided towards the Deliberative or the Thousand Scales.

A Dynast who masters sorcery receives from her house everything she needs to practice her art. She's unlikely to be called upon save when the family has need of her services, or when she's about to be married — rare is the Dynast who can shake the Realm's distrust of sorcerers, even relatives beholden to the same house.

The Grand Tour

It's a common practice for young Dynasts fresh from secondary school to tour the satrapies, the better to understand the world they command — and to taste its pleasures. There are many traditional routes; the most oft-followed leads Dragon-Blooded youths down the Caracal to the cosmopolitan port of Arjuf, and thence to the wealthy, storied city-states of the South and to the worshipful lands of the Southwest. Travelers wonder at the cryptic orreries of Varangia, admire the glass towers of Chiaroscuro and the sand-worn stelae of Zephyr, delight in the aromatic cuisine and obedient youths of An-Teng, and hunt the weird jungle beasts of the Silent Crescent. This is both a time for recreation and a chance for Dragon-Blooded to test their Exalted prowess outside of an academic setting. They return home more experienced and cosmopolitan, bearing mementos plundered from exotic lands and trophies of daring adventures — often along with a supply of foreign luxuries they've grown accustomed to.

Marking Time

The Great Houses bide their time assessing marriage options for their scions, taking years to press for the best possible match. In the interim, many young graduates (or dropouts, for that matter) spend their time adventuring in the Threshold. Others move immediately into careers in the Imperial Service, or find roles in the house's business interests or other familial projects.

When an unmarried Dynast stays in one place, she's rarely on her own. Instead, it's normal for her to attach herself to an existing household run by an older relative. There she lives as a member of the household, attending social events and making her particular talents available to the house matriarch as needed, whether by tutoring younger relatives, training the household guard, or spying on a rival household.

Dueling

Formalized combat over matters of pride is an ancient, albeit somewhat informal, tradition of the Scarlet Dynasty. However, the Empress forbade duels to the death between Dynasts, preferring that her children shed their blood against her enemies rather than against one another; she personally tasked violators with difficult, prolonged, and humiliating responsibilities as punishment. However, since her disappearance, violators with powerful family or friends have been able to secure pardons the Empress would've never permitted, leading to a resurgence of lethal duels.

Income and Spending

Dynasts need not labor for their coin. The Great Houses are astonishingly wealthy, a fortune dwarfed only by the Empress' own.

Every Dynast, when she comes of age, receives a stipend from her house that would boggle the average patrician, let alone a peasant — though for her, it's just enough for her to live on in a manner that isn't a total embarrassment to her and her family. It might buy a small manor in the country, or a modest townhouse in a city (or a yet more modest one, more akin to a sizable apartment, in the Imperial City, where costs are far higher). This stipend increases for married daughters, who are expected to support their husbands, and increases further for every child the daughter bears, Exalted or un-Exalted, until they come of age. The stipend may also be increased after the Dynast performs a particularly noteworthy task or service, or for spending a decade or more handling house business, so elder Dragon-Blooded frequently draw a significant income from their house alone.

Dynasts who find work — either independently or in the Imperial Service — can supplement their stipend with an income, giving them breathing room and allowing them to spend far more lavishly than their peers. Dynasts almost never carry cash; when they take what they will from a shop or teahouse, their stewards and seneschals arrange financial compensation. This is rarely as much as shopkeepers normally charge — they should be honored to receive the patronage of a Prince of the Earth. (And the prestige of a Dynast's repeat custom can be worth its weight in jade.)

And what wonders they can afford! Shops in the Imperial City and prefectural capitals carry handwoven silks dyed in Southern cochineal or tyrian purple from the West; exotic

drugs such as peyote from the South, salvia from the far East, and kava root from the Wavecrest Archipelago; and intricate clockwork timepieces and trifles of Varangian make. Food stalls offer the cuisine of countless satrapies — fried yucca from the Lap, Prasadi curries, candied hawthorn from Goldenseal, Saltbreak caviar — as street food for shopping Dynasts.

In addition, a Dynast rarely travels alone. She's accompanied by aides, bodyguards, valets, and other flunkies, and often gathers an entourage of cronies and hangers-on, stretching her stipend to cover their various needs and entertainments in exchange for their service, talents, and company. These are typically patricians, although a peasant or foreigner who catches a Dynast's eye can easily become a favorite. Even the most sycophantic of these generally has some combat training or practical experience; one never knows when they'll have to fend off an assassin or join an impromptu Wyld Hunt.

Dynasts who travel or adventure can survive on their stipend quite easily, assuming they live relatively modestly. Many supplement this income through service to others, though no self-respecting Dragon-Blooded will take on menial labor — carving the pillars that will hold up a temple's roof is one thing, but tiling that roof is quite another.

Of course, even with their house's stipend, and even with supplementary income, Dynasts often outspend their means. No house wants a debtor on their hands — it's an easy way for an unscrupulous third party to pressure Dynasts to pull strings, take direct action, and even work against house interests. House Ragara in particular thrives on the debt of their cousins, but they're far from the only financial actors in the Realm to do so; Imperial courts are known to place heavily indebted Dragon-Blooded at the disposal of the state, assigning duties to them that they might work off their debt. Houses therefore curtail the stipends of spendthrift scions, assigning them seneschals who control their finances to ensure that while they maintain Dynastic standards, they're unable to continue spending themselves into a hole. For truly legendary cases of indebtedness, a debtor might be encouraged to spend a few years "traveling" in the Threshold while their house settles accounts and smooths over frayed relationships.

Imperial and House Patents

The Scarlet Empress rewarded businesses in the Imperial City whose proprietors she wished to raise to prominence or whose goods earned her favor by issuing them Imperial patents. These businesses are permitted to display the Empress' personal mon beside their door, proclaiming to their customers that they're doing business with the same merchants as the Empress herself. Matriarchs of the Great Houses and the heads of major bloodlines (p. XX) have followed her example, issuing house patents to businesses both in the Imperial City and in prefectural capitals. Everyone in the Realm knows that the number of house mons displayed by a business' door is a sure indicator of quality — and the owners of such stores know they can afford high markups on prices. The penalty for using the Imperial or a house mon for business without a patent is death.

Society

In any city on the Blessed Isle, there's always a party going on somewhere. High society is the glue that holds the Dynasty together. The Realm even has its own taxonomy for different types of party, though these are descriptive rather than prescriptive.

Salons are informal private gatherings — at least, informal for Dynastic high society; attendees are often dressed to the nines and doing everything they can to show off. Typically arranged by a single Dynast, a salon may run for days on end, and can be for any purpose: recounting war stories, Gateway tournaments, gossiping about the current workings of the Deliberative, poetry-writing competitions, and so on, almost always with ample time for attendees to relax and overindulge in food, drink, narcotics, and each other. Business is sometimes transacted at salons, but it's almost always informal backroom deals. Salons are, by and large, for cutting loose, away from the prying eyes of the peasantry and patricians, away from the demands of house and family — at least, on the surface. Few can ever *truly* forget what their house's interests are, or what's required of them, but they dearly love to pretend that they can.

Galas, by contrast, are *very* formal, typically arranged either by a house or by a group of Dynasts. They tend to begin early and end very, very late — sometimes days later. No one ever brings less than her best to a gala (and never the same best twice!), unless it's to flaunt her provocative disregard for what her peers think or the product of hopeless social ineptitude. The hosts likewise spare no expense; these parties are the epitome of conspicuous consumption. A gala is such a massive social occasion that politeness dictates inviting every Dynast in the region, whether one wants to or not — the best means of avoiding an undesirable acquaintance is to arrange the affair for a date they're unavailable, and lament the misfortune loudly when it's "discovered."

The smallest galas, for personal events such as birthday celebrations, are somewhat more private. In such cases, the guest list can be restricted to family and confidants, and invitations to such events are usually reserved for those the host is trying to build connections with.

Some Great Houses (particularly House Nellens) make a habit of inviting the occasional patrician to galas, while others (particularly House Mnemon) are loath to do so. It's unthinkable to refuse such an invitation — for a patrician, the chance to rub shoulders with Dynasts can change the course of her career.

Galas aren't typically a venue to openly transact business. However, they may celebrate transactions that have already taken place, especially in the case of the wedding gala. These highly ritualized galas, wherein an Imperial judge registers two betrothed Dynasts as a married couple, are perhaps the height of Dynastic conspicuous consumption, with both Great Houses (or households, if the marriage is within the house) competing to outdo the other. A priest is traditionally a part of this ceremony, but her presence isn't legally required. The presiding Imperial judge has little opportunity to enjoy the wedding gala at leisure, as attendees throng her in hopes of persuading (or bribing) her to favor them in upcoming cases.

Celebrations are public festivals, open even to the peasantry. For this reason, Dragon-Blooded rarely spend much effort on them, and they're often instead planned by patricians or un-Exalted Dynasts. Celebrations are less lavish than other parties, and Dynasts follow suit, wearing less ostentatious fashions. Dynasts mind their behavior at a

celebration — the peasants are watching, and no Dynast's parent wants to be called up in front of their matriarch to explain how they failed to instill a sufficient amount of decorum in their offspring. Assassinations are rare at these events; when they do happen, they're usually disguised as an accident or rely on slow-acting poison.

Visits cover all the various circumstances where Dynasts play host to others. This may concern intimate business between Dynasts, which may be financial, political, or personal in nature. At other times, visitors are simply in the area on other business — such as a hunting trip, negotiating with foreign merchants, or investigating corruption in a ministerial office — and visiting fellow Dynasts is the most suitable option for lodgings.

Always arranged in advance, a visit begins with leisure: hunting, enjoying a private performance or a collection of art, and the like. If there's any prosaic business at the heart of the visit, the day goes by without a word of it, and only after the last meal of the day do negotiations begin. If the visit stretches for several days, the formula repeats itself. A day of leisure ends with dinner before negotiations resume; only the most gauche or desperate of Dynasts will discuss business before dinner. This doesn't mean the day is wasted — coded language, oblique references, and the like are often used to set the stage for open negotiation, and frequently both partners come to the table fully aware of what's about to be discussed.

Sometimes, of course, Dynasts just visit each other without any political or financial purpose — to spend time with an old friend or distant cousin, for instance, or to court a potential lover. If there's no business to be discussed, a visit is more akin to a small, exclusive salon — the two Dynasts (and their families, if present) will simply enjoy themselves, or at least pretend to do so.

Traditionally, a host must accept a guest without complaint, and provide for her every need. To fail in this charge is a considerable mark of shame not only on the host but upon her house. There's no question of restitution, but the visitor will commonly make some manner of gift to the host. Only if he *greatly* overstays his welcome, egregiously violates rules of hospitality, or refuses to provide an appropriate visitor's gift, may the host withdraw her hospitality, and even then an appropriate excuse for the house being unlivable must be found. Conversely, those who abuse the rules of hospitality surrounding visits may well find their house finding reasons to keep them at home full-time to avoid embarrassment.

Gateway

The game of Gateway is the favorite pastime of the Scarlet Dynasty. It's a complex, strategy-based board game played on a tiered board with a variety of distinct pieces — animals carved from gemstones or ivory in most Dynastic households, or abstractions of wood and metal for lesser sets. Gateway has between two and five players; depending on the number of players, their level of skill, and the depth of their tactics, a single game can last hours, days, or even weeks. Students in secondary school, especially the House of Bells and Pasiap's Stair, will play prolonged games a few moves at a time, honing their strategic thinking, while it's a mainstay of Dynastic social events.

Legionnaires, children, and foreigners often use Gateway sets to play other, less intricate games. These include quick, aggressive Hunting Cat; Guardian Gate, geared for alliance-building and treachery; and the allegorical solitaire game Spirit-Frog.

Marriage & Children

The blood of the Dragons is the most sacred trust given to the Princes of the Earth, more precious than artifacts or titles. Only the preservation of Creation itself weighs as heavily on the Dragon-Blooded host as the duty to pass on this gift. It's a religious and moral obligation to Realm, house, and all living beings to ensure that the blessing of Exaltation doesn't die with the individual Dragon-Blood. Furthermore, it forms webs of political connections and personal obligations between fractious Dragon-Blooded families, reinforcing the stability of the Realm (and incidentally benefiting the households and houses involved). As such, marriage was traditionally a duty matched only in solemnity by the Wyld Hunt, and in these fallen days, the Great Houses value it far above hunting Anathema.

A young Dynast can expect years to pass between graduation from secondary school and marriage. During this time, the scion's family negotiates and schemes to find the best possible match for her, often of a similar age. Each family attempts to get the better end of the deal, looking for matches above their station for sons, and for husbands who can bring in strong blood for daughters.

Both families gain political connections they can draw upon, but only the wife's house will gain Dragon-Blooded children. In exchange, the bride's house pays the husband's stipend for the duration of the marriage. This is generally considered a poor trade, however, so a bride's family must typically find a groom of slightly lower status to compensate. Extremely prominent sons of the Great Houses often have problems finding suitable matches, as nobody wants their daughter overshadowed by her husband. These sons often end up marrying women of significantly lesser status, for whom the alliance involved is a great boon, and from whose family a sizable dowry is required.

The vast majority of Dynasts accept these arranged marriages, never considering alternative matches outside of idle daydreams of what might have been. Even those few who seek to marry for love are rarely able to convince their elders to accept the love match over their carefully planned and negotiation selection. A handful succeed, either through clever negotiation with both families or because they're too insignificant or stubborn to be worth pressing the issue. In these cases, the young couple must usually make do with the explicit and exasperated withdrawal of their families' protests.

Especially reckless Dynasts sometimes elect to marry without their family's permission. Dynastic marriages must always be overseen by an Imperial judge — or by three judges if the other partner is a peasant. This is normally inconsequential, but without familial permission, one faces the difficult task of finding judges willing to risk retaliation from one or more Great Houses. Marriage between a Dynast and a slave or one of the dispossessed is wholly illegal, short of an edict from the Deliberative or the Empress.

Dynastic Dragon-Blooded marriages usually last until one partner dies, but they can be ended by agreement of both parties' house matriarchs or an Imperial judge if the couple

has failed to produce offspring after two decades, or if one partner is found guilty of a serious crime, such as attempting to harm or kill their spouse or children, murdering a Dragon-Blood, or committing treason. Beyond that, the only end to marriage is the death of one partner.

Sexuality and Marriage

Same-sex couples face stigma over matters of reproduction, but little else. If a same-sex marriage does produce a child — whether through adopting a patrician outcaste (p. XX) or an undesirable or orphaned child of a Dynastic relative, employing a surrogate parent, or turning to sorcery — then their duty to house and Realm is fulfilled, and they become as socially acceptable as any other couple, the circumstance of their genders no more than a trifling quirk.

The Dynasty accepts these marriages because it understands that the passions of the Terrestrial Exalted run hot. History records many tales of Dragon-Blooded who, when pushed, chose their beloved over house and tradition — quite a few of these tales are bloody affairs. Sometimes, it's better to keep one Prince of the Earth and hope for children against the odds than to demand more than she'll bear and lose the one the house already has. Even so, failure to follow the house's expectations isn't something the family forgives, any more than disobeying the matriarch in another matter affecting the future of the house, and a Dynast seeking a same-sex marriage must fight for the privilege every bit as hard as any other Dynast seeking a love match. Many are unwilling or unable to risk this conflict, or simply uninterested.

In a same-sex marriage, the younger partner usually marries into the elder's family, and carries the masculine role in the religious and legal capacity, although a mortal marrying a Dragon-Blood assumes the masculine role regardless of age.

Matrilineality

The Realm is primarily a matrilineal society. The child belongs to the mother, partaking of her social class and family name. When a man marries a woman, he becomes a part of her family, and is expected to show respect and obedience to his mother-in-law, or “second mother.”

Husbands normally retain their family name when they marry. However, since peasants and outcastes largely lack family names, one who marries a patrician or Dynast takes on their spouse's family name. When people of different social classes marry, the lower-class spouse is elevated to the higher-ranking spouse's social class — at least officially. Some snubbing can be expected.

A husband who outlives his wife returns to his birth house after a suitable mourning period. Any children the couple had remain with the wife's house, typically to be adopted by her kin. A widower may remain in his wife's house with her matriarch's consent — a common practice for patrician and peasant husbands — but a Dynastic man who does so incurs the opprobrium of his own family.

Sometimes, a talented Dragon-Blooded man is married off to a mortal so that he returns to his house after a mortal lifetime, ready to assume important house responsibilities. Others are married to members of their own house — or to Dragon-Blooded from client cadet houses or patrician families — to avoid questions of divided loyalties.

Pregnancy and Childbirth

Pregnancy has little effect on an Exalt's day-to-day life. Signs of pregnancy typically first appear within the third or fourth month, but only become especially obvious after seven months. Pregnant Exalted usually remain physically active up until several weeks before giving birth in the ninth month.

Due to their superhuman vitality and healing, it's all but unheard of for an Exalt to die in childbirth. Stillbirths and miscarriages are rarer than among mortals, but they do happen.

The Loyalty of Husbands

When a man marries, he's expected to transfer his personal loyalties to his wife, her household, and her Great House. But a man is raised in his mother's house and bears that house's stamp on his psyche. Now, in this time of tumult, a Dynast might find himself pressed to oppose his birth house directly, whether on the floor of the Deliberative or on the battlefield.

Some husbands go to great lengths to prove their loyalty to their wife's house or to their mother's house. Others prefer not to make waves, avoiding situations where their loyalties are tested. And historically, many husbands in the Imperial Service made a point of placing their devotion to the Empress above their loyalties to either house — an approach that's causing them difficulties since the Empress' disappearance.

Social expectation still demands that, say, a Cathak officer with a Sesus wife will serve in the Sesus legions. But now, such an officer might find himself cashiered from the Sesus legions lest he side against them in a crisis. Conversely, if he serves in the Cathak legions, he could someday find himself facing his wife across the battlefield.

Marriage and Player Characters

Marriage is a fundamental part of Dynastic society, but not always a comfortable one. While some players may be interested in roleplaying the stresses and perils of an unwanted marriage, others won't want to for any number of valid reasons. The Storyteller should never force marriage or betrothal on a character whose player doesn't want to take part in it. Instead, give the player an out, and let the fallout of their refusal drive the narrative of the game forward.

Bloodline & Potency

The Dragon's blood is not a physical trait but a spiritual quality of its bearer's Essence, a part of the miracle of Exaltation. One who lacks it cannot gain or pass it on by any means, not even shapeshifting or Solar Circle sorcery.

The Dragons' blood doesn't pass on casually. In Dragon-Blooded, its progenitive potential builds up slowly over time and, once expended, takes years to attain its peak once more. No child's Exaltation is guaranteed, but the more potent the parents' blood, the more likely their offspring will receive the Dragons' gift.

If it's only been a few years since the Exalt last lent her vitality to conception, then the child is exceedingly unlikely to become Exalted. Such a child will also face prejudice from classmates, who call these Dynasts "leftover children" — that is, made from their older sibling's leftovers. Even if she Exalts, the stigma remains to a lesser extent, with her bloodline considered inferior to that of her more esteemed kin. The parents also face social consequences for wasting their precious Essence — this is a mark of irresponsibility, and a juicy subject for gossip. Un-Exalted parents suffer no such stigma; progenitive potential remains constant in mortals, neither waxing nor waning.

Progenitive potency passes on at conception, not birth or Exaltation. This exhausts the parents' potency entirely; it must renew itself from nothing. Potency accrues slowly at first — the first few years after conception accumulating almost none — and accelerates as the Dragon-Blood's potency approaches its maximum. The gathering and expenditure of progenitive potency is a mystical process applying as much to a magically created child as to one formed in the usual manner.

Because male Dragon-Blooded can sire children often and easily compared to women, a promiscuous or unfaithful man draws more censure from the Dynasty than a woman who partakes in the same actions. Taking lovers is all but expected from the Dragon-Blooded, so for a man to do so isn't particularly remarkable — indeed, even the most faithful man will find that women assume him incapable of fidelity. A woman can less easily hide a pregnancy, so female Dynasts are generally considered above reproach in this matter — after all, if she wasted her Essence, everyone would know.

Because same-sex or sterile paramours usually can't sire or conceive, they're considered a natural, beneficial part of Dynastic society. While having an opposite-sex paramour is shameful — albeit politely ignored if discreet or in barbarian lands — same-sex activity only earns remark in exceptional indiscretion. Preferring the same sex mostly or exclusively is unworthy of comment unless the Dragon-Blood's marriage fails to produce children, in which case tongues begin to wag. A fresh couple can expect a grace period of twenty years before their lack of children becomes remarkable.

The Dragon's blood is not a physical trait but a spiritual quality of its bearer's Essence, a part of the miracle of Exaltation. One who lacks it cannot gain or pass it on by any means, not even shapeshifting or Solar Circle sorcery.

Transgender Dynasts

Within the Scarlet Dynasty and other Dragon-Blooded cultures that adhere to the Immaculate Texts, it's axiomatic that a transgender individual's self-identified gender is her true gender. The Immaculate Dragon Danaa'd was a transgender woman, and to be such is proper and holy. Thus, transgender Dynasts marry according to their gender identity. Although such marriages are often incapable of producing heirs through procreation, the expectation that they'll have children is by no means diminished.

Adoption and surrogate parents are commonly used by such couples, as well as others unable to have children conventionally. Additionally, while the Realm regards the use of sorcery to beget children warily, the Empress carved out a notable exception when she employed sorcery to bear children — including Mnemon and Ragara — with her first husband, Rawar of Arjuf, a transgender man. Since then, transgender Dynasts have held Imperial sanction, called the Precedent of Rawar, to make use of sorcery or stranger magics to have children — summoning neomah, conceiving within enchanted dreams, growing heirs from plants watered with the couples' blood, and the like.

Leftover Children

Any child born within a decade of his nearest older sibling is considered a leftover child and faces all the prejudice and discrimination the title implies. If it's been less than a decade since the last child's birth, the parents are considered to be reckless with their Essence, and if more than twenty have passed, they'll start getting hints that maybe it's about time again. The ideal Dragon-Blooded marriage produces five children before the parents reach one hundred years of age, if they live that long. (Twelve to twenty years is widely regarded as how long it takes for the procreative Essence to peak.) Beyond the fifth, more children aren't necessary, but are always welcome.

Twins, triplets, and so on occupy an unusual position. Only one receives the parents' progenitive potential, but there's no way to discern which. If one child Exalts, any others born at the same time are treated as leftover children; but it's not unheard of for more than one of them to Exalt, especially if born to parents of outstanding pedigrees.

Legitimacy & Consorts

When a woman bears a child, there's no question as to its parentage. It doesn't matter who the father is, even if that's clearly someone other than her husband — or if she's unmarried, for that matter. Her child is always legitimate, and belongs to her and no other. Likewise, a man has no claim on any child he might sire outside of marriage.

On occasion, a female Dynast will publicly acknowledge a man she hasn't married as her officially recognized lover. Such a lover, or consort, is legally acknowledged as the father of children he sires and may establish as much of a relationship with the child as Dynastic society permits. Unmarried men may take patrician or peasant consorts, but outside House Cynis, it's seen as a sordid and desperate affair, a reminder of masculine intemperance. They're expected to cut ties with these consorts before marriage and avoid siring children by them.

Should a Dragon-Blooded man father a child on a patrician or peasant woman, this complicates matters. Thus originates the practice of an extended fictitious pregnancy — complete with padding intended to simulate a belly swollen with child — or a visit to the Threshold away from prying Dynastic eyes. Most often, the father informs the matriarch of his birth house, who'll choose a female scion of the house — often one in a wedding incapable of procreation — to wear the pillow. This adds another potential Dragon-Blood to the ranks of his house, and, if the father is married, lets him evade the wrath of his wife and her family as long as the deceit isn't found out.

It's less common for a dallying husband to inform his wife of his infidelity, but in such cases, she or another member of her house wears the pillow. In these cases, the foolish husband bears the brunt of his wife's displeasure. For the duration of the fictitious pregnancy, he has every menial task of household management thrust upon him, while carefully watched over by a family seneschal; this is punishment, not opportunity. His travel and social engagements are heavily restricted, not just for the duration of the pregnancy but for years thereafter, and whenever he's permitted to participate in wider society he's watched like a hawk. Some wives — unwilling to be burned twice — assign a valet to accompany him indefinitely, carrying a quantity of maiden tea, so that in the future he will have no excuses.

Parenthood

Dragon-Blooded parents are typically cold, distant, and rarely there. Many children grow up knowing their tutors and servants better than their own parents. This is normal in the Realm, but it doesn't mean that the Dragon-Blooded don't love their children. The greatest gifts a loving mother can pass on to her daughter are a strong house and a respected lineage — the memory of a mother's voice simply cannot outweigh pragmatic concerns.

To sacrifice relationships with children is considered a solemn and melancholy duty in the Dynasty, and is most commendable. It's a common topic of poems and songs, often ending with the satisfied parent realizing it was all worth it when she sees her child benefit from her hard work in adulthood. Most Dragon-Blooded parents make this sacrifice, but not all. Those who don't are considered lazy or self-indulgent. That said, Exalted parents — having passed along the Dragon's blood — have no further responsibility to their children beyond necessities and tutelage.

Generations in the Dynasty

While Dragon-Blooded can live for centuries, few Dynasts actually reach this advanced age. Most of the Realm's Exalted die on the battlefield, in accidents, or of misadventure before their hundredth year. At any given time, the majority of Dynastic Dragon-Blooded are young members of the current generation, outnumbering a smaller population of middle-aged Exalted and a handful of elders.

Outcastes: Exalting Outside the Dynasty

Not every Dragon-Blood can trace her ancestry back to the Scarlet Empress. A significant population of Dragon-Blooded, even inside the Realm, cannot call themselves Dynasts (at least, not without marrying into a Great House). The Scarlet Empress called them “lost eggs” — prodigal daughters and sons, found by the grace of the Dragons that they might be brought “inside the nest” of the Realm and guided rightly by the wisest of all living Dragon-Blooded, the Empress herself.

Outcastes are, by Imperial law, considered distant kin of the Empress, and thus wards of the state, which represents the Empress' interests and authority over them. They occupy a curious niche in the Realm's society, above mortals but below their Dynastic fellows.

The Realm recognizes three vastly different categories of outcastes: Exalted patricians; lost eggs born into the peasant, slave, and dispossessed classes; and foreign Dragon-Blooded arising outside the Blessed Isle. Each category receives different treatment by the Scarlet Dynasty.

Exalted Patricians

Dragon-Blooded patricians occupy an unusual place among the Realm's Dragon-Blooded. Educated in the same primary school system as Great House scions, they're capable of making the jump from their own class into the Scarlet Dynasty. Two profitable paths are open to them: adoption and fosterage.

Patricians and the Order

On rare occasions, a devout patrician family will donate an Exalted child to the Immaculate Order. Such an extraordinary show of piety doesn't go unrecognized. While the Order won't show overt favoritism, should the family ever be in placed at a disadvantage through no fault of its own, the local abbots and archimandrites will take a keen interest in the situation. A child thus donated to the Order is treated exactly as any outcaste who takes the razor (p. XX).

Adoption

Adoption, the more common option, is a slow and deliberate process. The newly Exalted youngster's family negotiates a sponsorship agreement with a Great House — often a long-term patron of the patrician family — wherein the family receives some combination of wealth, immediate favors, and assurance of future favor in exchange for a nascent Prince of the Earth. The Exalt is sent to secondary school, and there faces the challenge of outdoing her Dynastic peers, who are better prepared, receive better treatment, and look down on patrician children. Only after graduating from a prestigious academy will her sponsor house accept her into the fold.

If the Dragon-Blood graduates from her chosen secondary school, the house adopts her with no fuss. Whatever her personal circumstances may be, such a protégée never quite shakes the stigma of her less-illustrious background, and can expect to spend the rest of her life suffering the brunt of minor snubs and deliberate faux pas. She has to work twice as hard as other family members, and is given half as much leeway, though few would throw her past in her face directly — such a crude display would cause the offending party to lose face. Her marriage prospects are more difficult due to her non-Dynastic bloodline.

A young Terrestrial who fails to attend or graduate from such a school will find herself accepted into the house as a client, rather than as a family member. (Only extraordinary incompetence or rebelliousness will cause a sponsor house to pass up the boon an additional Dragon-Blood represents.) A client Dragon-Blood must earn adoption instead, though in most cases barely adequate behavior is enough to achieve a place in some Empress-forsaken minor branch-of-a-dying-branch of the house within a couple of decades. If she does impress the house, she's welcomed into it as any other adoptee would be, with only minor additional stigma as “a practical sort with no head for books.”

On the rare occasion that a client Dragon-Blood proves utterly undesirable, the sponsorship agreement is rescinded and her family reclaims her, with the expectation that they'll repay the adopting house for everything they offered in the sponsorship negotiations, and more. Even if they can make good on these payments, such a failure is a massive disgrace for both the patrician family and the outcaste Dragon-Blood, and poses a major obstacle to both any subsequent adoption sponsorships the family seeks and the Dragon-Blood's own marriage prospects.

Fostering

Fostering is the sister to the client system, occurring when a patrician family is powerful enough to hold its own in negotiations with a Great House. The cost the young Dragon-Blood's family incurs to arrange such an agreement is great, matching the expected value of a lifetime of service. Depending on the patrician family's finances and business interests, they might pay steep fosterage fees, contract to supply the Great House with goods or commodities, promise political favors, cede land leases, or arrange marriages between desirable men of the patrician family and un-Exalted daughters of the Great House. If a family can't afford these, they can always promise the fostered Dragon-Blood's services to their patron house for several decades. Nearly any agreement will include at least a few years of service to the house — incidentally providing additional education in the rights and responsibilities of the Exalted.

In return, the young Dragon-Blood obtains sponsorship and funding to attend one of the Realm's four great secondary schools. This offers her both an education equal to that of any Dynast, and the opportunity to share in the web of personal and political contacts that Great House scions develop in school and leverage to their advantage throughout their lives.

In addition, the patrician family gains the loyalty of one of the Exalted, and — just as importantly — the blood of the Dragons. Many patrician families dream of strengthening their blood to such potency that their whole lineage is adopted into the Dynasty. This is rare, but not unheard-of, so many of the mightiest patrician clans aim towards this goal. However, with the Empress' disappearance and the consolidation of power under the Great Houses, the fostering system is in sharp decline; few patrician families have sufficient clout to arrange it.

Fostering and Cadet Houses

Fostering is also an option for cadet house members, who are commonly able to foster with a parent or sponsor Great House. The costs are much the same, as are the benefits — the privilege and distinction of a full Dynastic upbringing, which is superior to what the cadet house scion's own family could likely offer, and eases the stigma of belonging to an inferior family.

Lost Eggs Among the Common Folk

As Dragon-Blooded, lost eggs have a number of privileges not afforded to mortals in the Realm. In many ways, they're treated as equal to Dynasts, at least on paper. Each is considered, by decree, to be the adopted daughter or son of the Empress herself,

legitimizing them within the Realm. This status doesn't come without a price, however — a found egg must obey his foster mother, and in her wisdom she's decreed that all such children of hers must make a choice: take the razor, or take the coin.

When a lowborn outcaste — peasant, slave, or dispossessed — makes herself known on the Blessed Isle, the Splendid and Just Arbiters of Purpose take charge of her, willing or not. They hold authority over the new recruit until she moves on to either the Cloister of Wisdom or Pasiap's Stair. They send a delegation to bring her in; the ministry maintains offices across the Isle for this purpose, and only in remote corners of the Blessed Isle does this take more than a week from her Exaltation. They take her back to their headquarters, the Obsidian Mirror, in Juche Prefecture.

There she's schooled in the fundamentals of Dynastic society and discusses her two options for the future with fellow Exalted: Take the razor and join the Immaculate Order, or take the coin and serve in the legions. By forcing this choice, the Empress guides them to two of her most powerful organs of control, both at home and abroad.

At the end of this year, the grandest feast of their young life takes place, the Feast of the Elect. It's here that the Humble and Munificent Master of Orphans offers each child in turn two silver platters. One holds an elaborately filigreed razor of jade, symbolizing the bald head of an Immaculate monk; the other, an ornamental jade obol, stamped on one side with the image of the Empress to symbolize personal loyalty to the throne — representing payment for military service. In the morning, they leave for their destinations, and the future that awaits.

Taking the Razor

Lost eggs who take the razor are sent to the Cloister of Wisdom (p. XX), where they're treated like any other initiate. They dine alongside daughters and sons of the Dynasty, and though their fare may be simple, this first meal is often among the most elevating and energizing of their lives, for they've been accepted as equals of Princes of the Earth. Unlike these Dynasts, however, they cannot withdraw from the school, nor can they direct their education toward secular ends. Each is destined for a life of service in the Immaculate Order, exemplifying the enlightenment displayed by their Exaltation.

Lost eggs typically receive specialized instruction beyond that of other students, and in their final year are officially admitted as acolytes (as are Dynastic scions who wish to join the Order directly after graduation). Unless they fail their tests and require more training, they become monks of the First Coil immediately upon graduation.

Only the Razor

In the rising chaos since the Empress' disappearance, Immaculate monks who encounter newly Exalted youths have been quietly sending them directly to the Cloister after preliminary training at a local temple or monastery, rather than reporting them to the Arbiters. The Order's leadership deems this justified; the work of the Arbiters is the law of the land, but as law gives way to anarchy, the Order will need all its strength to stem the tide.

Taking the Coin

For lost eggs who take the coin, a symbol of their commission as a legionnaire, a less subtle, more brutal life awaits. Pasiap's Stair (p. XX) looms over the Dragonswrath Desert, a hall of pain and misery that will forge the lost egg into a weapon in what was once the finest fighting force in the world. Once, each surviving graduate was assigned to a legion — usually as a scalelord, though a particularly promising greenhorn might be commissioned as talonlord as a favor — then shipped out to whatever miserable satrapy her legion was assigned to, there to slog and toil and crush the Empress' enemies. But all too many promising officers were summarily dismissed from their posts in the wake of the Great Houses' partition of the legions, and now the legions have little room for outcaste officers whose loyalties are to the throne rather than to the Dynasty.

Unlike mortals, lost eggs must give fifty years of service rather than twenty, their long span of life (to say nothing of their power) obliging a greater commitment to the Empress' service. But, though they suffer more than lost eggs who took the razor, those who take the coin have one great advantage. Once their fifty-year term of service is up, they may elect to retire from the legions rather than making a career of it.

Entering the Dynasty

Outcastes who do well for themselves in the legions may find marriage opportunities among the Great Houses. Their weak bloodlines make for poor marriage prospects, and when such a wedding does occur, it's often because the Dynastic partner is either disgraced or in love. However, senior officers and rising stars alike can leverage their abilities and status to earn a place at the marriage table — though the latter will wring out fewer concessions from Dynastic matchmakers. Once the ceremonies are concluded, the lost egg is a lost egg no longer, but a Dynast in every sense of the word, with all the attendant privileges and responsibilities — some of which may be unexpected for foreign lost eggs from cultures without the Realm's strong matriarchal bent.

Education, training, marriage, and every other facet of Dynastic life come under the control of the outcaste's adoptive mother and the house matriarch, just as if the outcaste were born into the family. This is complicated by the necessity of adapting to Dynastic rules and mores as quickly as possible without a lifetime's preparation, lest she disappoint her new family.

Outcaste Marriages

Without a matriarch, there's no one to tell a lost egg who to marry. This is one of the few advantages of being an outcaste in the Realm. She still needs to find an Imperial judge to approve the marriage — or three if she marries a peasant — which may prove inconvenient, and marrying into a Great House is especially difficult due to her lack of political leverage.

Patrician families have traditionally been more eager than the Great Houses to gather outcastes into their ranks by marriage. Patricians have so few Dragon-Blooded in their ranks that each is precious, and they're typically less concerned with purity of bloodline than the Dynasty. An outcaste who marries a patrician is a big fish in a small pond; she doesn't gain the status she'd obtain from marrying into a Great House, but can expect to be lauded by her new kin and to hold high rank in the family.

Alternatively, an outcaste can be formally adopted by a Great House. This has always been rare. Power over adoptions was vested in the Empress, who used the Deliberative to rubber-stamp her decisions, whether gifting Great Houses with promising heirs to provide an edge or saddling them with goldbricks and the dissolute. In the Empress' absence, the power has devolved upon the Deliberative alone — a squabbling collection of arrogant Dynasts and prickly patricians, largely serving the interests of Great Houses that would adopt every lost egg in the Realm as expendable soldiers for the oncoming civil war.

Today, adoption requests are subject to much intrigue and political maneuvering. New Dragon-Blooded become bargaining chips in the struggle between houses, offered up to one house or another to sweeten the pot on a compromise bill, or left unclaimed because senators refuse to allow other houses to claim more Princes of the Earth in the run-up to war. Even in the case of a deadlock, dangling the prospect of adoption before a lost egg may well influence their loyalties in the coming conflict.

Paper Daughters

Adoption is a lengthy and politics-laden process, and some Dynastic households seek swifter ways of bringing lost eggs. Formerly a rare curiosity — and even today a desperate measure — the trade and exploitation of Dynastic identities involves forgery, subterfuge, cunning, and an almost pathological courage, for Dynastic birth and death records are the foundation of inheritance and legacy in the Realm, and falsifying these important documents is grounds for entire households being stricken from the Imperial ledgers. With the Empress gone, however, and with her the sole authority to enact such punishments, the trade has begun to flourish.

The first step in the process of unofficially “adopting” a lost egg is to have an identity for them to occupy — a scion who died in infancy or youthful misadventure, left unmourned. Once the name is free, and a lost egg fitting the rough description of its previous owner secured, all that remains is to train up the new Dragon-Blood until she can pass herself off as a Dynast from birth — and as the specific Dynast whose name she's taking up.

Outcaste Households

Outcastes who conclude their service in the legions without marrying into the Realm's aristocracy must make their own way. Such outcastes often take peasant or foreign spouses. Such spouses become patricians, as do their children. Thus, over time, the number of households led by lost eggs steadily increases, until a major event clears the ranks somehow. The most recent of these was the formation of House V'neef, which swept up a great swath of the Realm's outcastes and blessed them with Dynastic status.

Since then, the population of outcaste households has been slowly rebounding, as outcaste legion officers muster out and take their pension, and now form a potent wild card that every Great House seeks to control. Most were unbound by the patronage of the Great Houses until very recently — when it became clear that the Empress wasn't returning from her unannounced sabbatical, the Great Houses began frantically trying to enlist every Dragon-Blooded they could to their cause, even those who were previously

beneath their notice — so long as the outcastes' loyalty to the house could be guaranteed to supersede all other allegiances.

Foreign Outcastes

A foreign outcaste is said to have “fallen outside the nest,” and her lot in the Realm is often worse than the Blessed Isle's lost eggs. She may be fêted and celebrated in lavish style, but when she presses what she thinks are mutual connections, she'll find that she's little more than an exotic prop to her peers. Joining the Immaculate Order in the same manner as any other postulant, joining the Imperial legions by serving as a scout or auxiliary for a few years until found fit to serve as an officer, or marriage into a Great House or cadet house are the only paths by which a foreign outcaste may find a place in the Realm.

Dragon-Blooded from Lookshy or other foreign lineages rarely defect to the Realm. Though viewed as more cultured and capable than a foreign-born lost egg, they're also less trustworthy, and must pursue the same opportunities as any other foreign outcaste.

Foreign outcastes are barred from both adoption into the Great Houses and cadet houses, and from adoption or marriage into patrician families. A quick marriage to a less prestigious Dynast is the most common method for inducting an Exalted foreigner. If an outcaste wishes to join the Realm but is unwilling or unable to find a Dynastic spouse, her only remaining options are entering the Imperial legions or the Immaculate Order.

Sworn Kinships

Central to adventuring and relationships among the Dragon-Blooded stands the Sworn Kinship. It's at the heart of Dragon-Blooded heroism, a completed state that brings the strength of many heroes together into a perfect union, the whole elevated beyond its individual members in the Perfected Hierarchy. No single Elemental Dragon sustains Creation, but rather the five of them acting in harmony, and the Essence of their champions reflects this truth.

A Sworn Kinship is family, above and beyond house and blood. The blood of the Dragons and the spiritual fulfillment of the oath transcend other familial connections, placing one's Sworn Kin as close as one born of the same mother, if not closer. Sworn Kin are invited into the innermost sanctums, to share repast with their sworn siblings' parents and children.

Hospitality is both expected and demanded, and to throw Sworn Kin out of one's house is akin to throwing them out of their own. It's for this reason a Sworn Kinship is also called a Hearth. The Hearth is warm, a place where familial love and closeness are expected and not discouraged. Hearthmates may fight and disagree, but it's a rare Sworn Kinship where true acrimony exists without affection.

The Hearth is often named for the place it was sworn, such as the Hearth of Eastern Faxai, or the Shrine of the Gardener's Grace Hearth. But a variety of other names mark the pages of Realm history, such as the Three Winters' Hearth, the Hearth That Slew Roaring Mantis, or the Blood-Stained Lotus Hearth.

Hearths form bonds of camaraderie that transcend the lines between houses, dividing a scion's loyalties between the family of her blood and the family of her oath. The Empress

found this a useful source of conflict for her to wield, and so helped enshrine the tradition in the Realm's culture. To betray one's house in service of one's Hearth is a tragedy, not a treasonous disgrace.

The oath of kinship is mystical, a bond born from Terrestrial blood and elemental Essence. It's a sacred birthright of the Dragon-Blooded, and the greatest boon the Dragons bestowed upon their children, that they might fight as one. It's a grave responsibility, undertaken only with the most serious of minds.

An oath sworn properly, with the right concepts and intent in the right order, is binding when the circle is sealed with anima and a statement of finality. In the Realm, an oath of kinship is legally binding as well, and oathbreakers face censure from their own house as surely as from the throne. As Hearthmates are sworn to be kin, a house considers betraying a Kinship to be a sign of a treacherous and untrustworthy personality, one that might turn against the house if it hasn't already.

The Life of a Kinship

Most Sworn Kinships are formed early in life, often while adventuring after graduation. A Hearth arises when friends become allies, forged in battle or hardship. This is rarely a hasty decision, though history is littered with notable exceptions, especially among the very young. Dynastic parents treat the matter in different ways, but central to it all is the knowledge that the Hearth is a sacred and solemn thing. To swear into one rashly is to accept a heavy obligation without truly knowing one's new sisters and brothers. To renounce the oath is a grave decision — to lose the connection to the others' souls is to lose a part of oneself.

Sworn Kinships may spend years or decades together, facing peril with none but their Hearthmates at their backs. They travel, fight, and seek glory together. They often roam the Realm or the Threshold promoting a specific cause, whether searching for Anathema, hunting occult secrets, protecting villages from ravaging monsters, or sampling dinner tables of various eminences.

Later in life, Hearthmates often see very little of each other, drawn apart as they are by careers and obligations, remaining connected only by correspondence and the occasional visit. They regard active Hearths with wistful eyes, looking back longingly to their days of carelessness and freedom.

Breaking a Sworn Kinship is uncommon, though it happens often in plays and literature, where it serves as an appropriately tragic element of the tale's climax. More commonly, Hearthmates drift apart over time as they become tied down, one by one, by duty and honor and the various connections that accumulate with age, coming together every so often to fight in a client-state's minor war, join the Wyld Hunt, or reminisce about glory days. In everyday life, this sort of Hearth provides a refuge — someone with whom to relax and chat, play Gateway and discuss poetry and warfare, or spend a few months in An-Teng.

But retirement can come to the Realm's Exalted while they're still physically able, and it's a fairly common and oft-celebrated occurrence when retired Hearthmates reunite to partake in travel and adventure. When the Sworn Kinship so reforged is especially well remembered, it's not uncommon for a heartfelt oath of rededication (whose significance

is personal rather than mystical) to be witnessed by joyful crowds, even moving spectators to tears.

Swearing the Oath

The oath of kinship can take many forms, but always involves a recitation of the names of those forming it, a statement of intent, and a vow of dedication, spoken as the participants' animas flare. When the ritual is complete, the newly sworn companions know it deep in their bones. Hearths typically cannot have more than five members; the Storyteller may make an exception for games with more than five Dragon-Blooded PCs. A Dragon-Blood may join an existing Hearth by swearing loyalty in the presence of all its members.

A Dragon-Blood can sense the presence of her Sworn Kin (p. XX), and some Dragon-Blooded Charms confer additional benefits when used with one's Hearthmates. The death of a Hearthmate is felt as a sharp shock to the soul, sure and unmistakable.

A Dragon-Blood may rescind her oath by informing every other member of her Sworn Kinship, whether singly or in a group, that the oath is no longer valid. "The Hearth is shattered" is the most common way to phrase it in the Realm. Her bonds to her former Hearth are severed, giving her an instinctive sense of finality, and leaving nothing where her Sworn Kin could once sense her presence.

If a Dragon-Blooded deliberately betrays one of her Sworn Kin or her entire Hearth, her treachery shatters her tie. She loses all temporary Willpower. Unlike formal renunciations, the members of a traitor's Hearth don't automatically realize the bond has been broken, and can sense the traitor's presence until the story's end.

Retirement

A Dragon-Blood's life is full of danger. For most, unexpected death — whether through battle, misadventure, or murder — concludes a lifetime of service. Indeed, most Dragon-Blooded perish before their hundredth year, long before they grow old. Still, for those Princes of the Earth who live to see it, retirement can be quite rewarding.

Generally, before a Dynast starts thinking about retirement, she should have accomplished enough to distinguish herself and bring some measure of fame or prosperity to her house. Most will have established enough personal wealth to support themselves long after they've stopped earning a salary, especially since the stipend they receive from their house is drastically reduced once they retire.

Most Dynasts who live long enough to retire choose to do so while they're fit enough to enjoy it. Travel is a popular pastime, and many retirees use the opportunity to see Creation and spend time with relatives and friends they've lost touch with over the years. Those who enjoyed a more active life may try to recapture more exciting times and set out with old comrades in search of new adventure. They might hunt the many-headed

boars of the unearthly Forest That Marches, sightsee in the phantasmal ruins of Yrn, or dare the subterranean cities of the Mountain Folk.

Still, many Dynasts prefer a quieter, more leisurely retirement. They find ample opportunities to focus on hobbies or projects they haven't been able to pursue for lack of time — or because of the watchful eyes of their houses and rivals. Those who can afford it may relocate to remote areas where they can continue their work undisturbed.

For others, projects take the form of protégées. These retirees seek out promising young Exalted pupils to offer their wisdom and to shape the next powerful member of their house — or occasionally another house, tutoring a Hearthmate's descendant or a young stranger with exceptional talent. A pupil's successes are also his mentor's, and it's a matter of friendly competition among certain retirees to see whose protégée goes the farthest. For young Dynasts, this can be an excellent opportunity to benefit from a successful elder's wisdom and resources, and the desire to snatch up the most respected mentor has led to fierce competition among up-and-comers looking to get ahead.

Some Dynasts delay retirement as long as possible, either because they still believe themselves capable enough to handle their jobs, or because they've been reckless with their savings and can't afford to maintain their lifestyle without a salary and full stipend. This is accepted for a time — few would presume to tell a Dragon-Blood how to live her life. However, if increased age or diminished mental sharpness makes them more risk than boon to their house, certain measures exist to encourage retirement. Such Dynasts who cling to diplomatic positions find their workload increasing exponentially, while those still serving the military may be sent on increasingly dangerous assignments. An aging Dynast usually chooses to retire, or perishes — either way, they're relieved of their obligations. Occasionally, Great Houses offer financial incentives to retire, and many Dynasts hold out as long as possible in hopes of a big payout. This is risky, lest a callous house matriarch decide that assassination is the more cost-effective solution.

Inheritance and Wills

Imperial law governs inheritance among Dynasts. Half the decedent's wealth and assets are passed to her spouse, if he survives her, or to her eldest Dragon-Blooded child otherwise. The remaining half is portioned into shares that are divided among the decedent's children — Exalted children receive four, while mortals get only one. Few Dynasts rely on inheritances in planning their finances — with long-lived Dragon-Blooded parents, it may be centuries before they receive it, while the size of Dynastic families means the amount inherited is typically insignificant.

A Dynast may instead draw up a will to allocate her assets however she pleases after her death, though the practice isn't customary. Typically, if the division of assets specified in a will denies any heir a substantial portion of the inheritance that would otherwise be hers, she'll either conspire with other heirs to forge the will and bribe any witnesses to it, or contrive to have it conveniently lost, and have an Imperial judge pronounce it invalid.

Funerary Rites

The body ages. The body grows frail. The body dies. The soul moves on, either for rebirth or union with the Immaculate Dragons. As with so many things, the theory is simple, but the practice is complex.

Most peasant, slave, and dispossessed funeral rites are perfunctory affairs, short ceremonies ending in cremating the deceased on a simple wooden pyre and erecting a small monument atop the bones and ashes to placate her lower soul. Hesiash is said, for a brief moment, to be incarnate in the flames, and to take the higher soul on to its next life.

Dynastic funerals, by contrast, are truly grand, often lasting for weeks before the body is disposed of to allow the soul to move on. The skills of Dragon-Blooded physicians or sorcerous measures prevent decomposition, but, with one exception, embalming is eschewed as a disruption of the natural cycle. Commemorative heros' plaques carved from jade are reverently displayed, later to be enshrined after a solemn procession, and the youngest Chosen in the house are often called forth to recite the lineage of the deceased. Patricians and wealthy peasants emulate Dynastic funeral practices, though their efforts are plainer and less well-attended.

Mourners come from across the Blessed Isle, and even across Creation, to pay their respects, and the house commissions grand works of art and poetry to commemorate their fallen sister's deeds — and to embellish them. Aside from purely political considerations, there's a persistent but not entirely orthodox belief among the Dynasty that the Immaculate Dragons observe funerals of the fallen, and may be swayed by such accounts to bring the deceased into union with them rather than guide them to reincarnation. Flattery also helps to mollify the lower soul, a wise precaution when it's swollen with an Exalt's power.

Vigils are commonly held over the body, some lasting days at a time. An especially bereaved family member or Hearthmate may exert herself to the limit, staying by her fallen kin's side for days until she passes out from fatigue — a dramatic show of lamentation. Fasting is another common show of grief and respect.

Once the vigils have been completed and the quiet political deals found at many Dynastic gatherings made, the body is readied for its final disposition. Most Dynastic funerals follow the common cremation rite, though much more lavish and elaborate, with a cenotaph naming the deceased — and frequently, her greatest accomplishments in life — erected in her honor. The remains are often interred within a cinerary urn, but some Dragon-Blooded prefer that their ashes be scattered in a place that was important to them.

Unlike most peasants and patricians, Dynasts don't commonly enjoy the privilege of dying from advanced age. Rather, they fall in battle, or in some intrigue or adventure, before their allotted span. For those unfortunates whose bodies cannot be transported home for the ceremonies described above, it falls to their Hearth, legion, shipmates, or other available comrades to care for the body. A field burial is most commonly a cremation, as it disposes of the body quickly, though a sky burial can be conducted nearly as swiftly, the bones collected for transport back to the Realm for a proper funeral. In any event, a funeral is held in the Realm when word arrives of their demise, which follows

many of the same forms even without the body, including the erection of a cenotaph bearing the deceased's name.

Devoted Farewells

A few Dynasts prefer other means of shedding their mortal form and passing on, especially if they're devoted to one Immaculate Dragon in particular (other than Hesiesh, of course). Such practices are much less common than cremation, except among Immaculate monks, but virtually every Dynast knows of someone who departed for her next life in a ceremony honoring a specific Immaculate Dragon.

Devotees of Pasiap elect for mummification, the only Realm funereal practice that relies on embalming — the body is seen as the final great work, a physical monument that their soul leaves behind in Creation. The body is prepared by experts, usually Sijanese, in a process that can take weeks. Ultimately, it's entombed within a grand mausoleum, whether a personal one or, in the case of House Mnemon, a sprawling complex in Mnemon-Darjilis.

Danaa'dists prefer burial at sea, sewn into a canvas (for mortals) or silk (for Dragon-Blooded) shroud that's weighted and lowered into the water with great reverence. House Peleps in particular maintains a long-held tradition of naval burials, even for those who die on land.

Great, vibrant gardens are cultivated for those who emulate Sextes Jylis. The body is prepared and laid to rest within a mound of fine composting mulch, always harmoniously placed according to geomantic calculations. When the funeral is complete the mourners depart, leaving only an honor guard. After some months the mound is gently and reverently dispersed, revealing only fresh soil — of the body, not even bones remain, the process of decomposition hastened by the suffusion of Essence. This soil is scattered across the garden, joining it in celebration of the Essence of life itself.

Rarest of all Realm funereal practices is the Melaist sky burial. The deceased is left to the scavengers of the air, which descend and pick her bones clean. Special towers are preferred, but any space open to the sky will serve. The skeleton is then collected, broken up, and ground into dust, which is mixed with wheat meal before being scattered for smaller birds.

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Yushoto Mathar's kabuto helmet sat beside him on the bench. It felt good to take it off after a long day's ride, to let the sounds of teahouse gossip surround him and the warm mug ease fingers cramped from holding his reins. In better times, he'd be inclined to retrieve his biwa and pluck out a bawdy tune to amuse himself and his fellow patrons — "The Satrap's Lockbox," perhaps, or "Never In Nexus." The latter had once even drawn a chuckle out of somber Kingfisher Swift. But the wary looks on the other guests' faces made him decide against it. Too many haunted pairs of eyes in the crowd; too many refugees from villages that had been sacked and burned.

There'd been more and more skirmishes out here on the borders of the River Province since the Realm had recalled its legions to the Blessed Isle, and it worried him. Bandits grew braver by the month, attacking caravans along their trade routes, while river pirates ventured farther along the waters than ever before. Mathar received reports of assassinations and coups daily from all across the Scavenger Lands. As satrapies fell apart, their soldiers came to the River Province and harried the people. Political factions in Lookshy disagreed — vehemently if not yet violently — on how foreign policy should shift in response to the Blessed Isle's misfortune. Murmurs of sorcerers at Valkhawsen Academy poring over tomes of battle magic had reached Mathar's ears, and he suspected someone was confirming the inventory of First Age weapons beneath the Lookshy Manse, just in case.

A woman joined him at the table. She was dark-haired and slight, reminding him of Sesus Eshuvar. How much easier this all would be if he could send a letter to Eshuvar and ask for his help! But Eshuvar was no fool: he'd know Mathar was asking for information the Realm wouldn't want divulged, and Mathar had long ago decided — to his cost — that using his Hearthmates to spy on the Realm was akin to betraying them. Besides, from what his eyes and ears on the Blessed Isle suggested, Eshuvar, Swift, and River had plenty of their own troubles to attend to.

"Well?" asked his companion, helping herself to a cup of tea. The silver raiton pinned to her shoulder declared her part of the Bonepickers, a local mercenary company.

"I need a favor," said Mathar.

"I don't deal in favors." She grinned at him over the lip of her cup. They'd spoken these words before, whenever Mathar hired her for a job.

Mathar laughed and tapped a pattern on the table: his opening offer. "I'm looking for a contact of mine. She went missing when Ragara withdrew its garrison." He might not use his friends to gather intelligence on the Realm, but Mathar had other agents in place. If his Realm-based Hearthmates knew about his spies, they politely didn't mention them. He needed to know if this one had simply gone to ground, or had been caught trying to confirm rumors of Ragara Kiel's correspondence with Berit.

"Even without their garrison, it's still Realm territory you're asking me to sniff around in." The mercenary's mouth twisted. "Anyone you talk to nowadays, from slaves to satraps, seems they think even their teacups are listening."

"If you don't think you can do it..."

“I said harder, not impossible.” She tapped out a new number, three times her usual rate.

The ripples from the Empress’ disappearance could be felt even here, Mathar thought, destabilizing power structures, affecting trade... and driving up mercenaries’ prices. He signaled for a fresh teapot as he settled in to negotiate.

Chapter Four

Beyond the Realm

Lookshy

Once, humanity stood upon the edge of annihilation.

It began when the Dragon-Blooded Shogunate, weakened by decades of internecine warfare, was dealt a killing stroke by the Great Contagion: a civilization-ending disaster from which it had no hope of recovery. Upon its heels, untold numbers of the Fair Folk poured into Creation past the unmanned defenses at its borders, to finish what the plague had begun. The denizens of the Wyld wrought widespread havoc before an ancient Anathema god-weapon turned the tide to send them back to the chaos that had spawned them.

Although the Shogunate lay in ruins, it wasn’t destroyed so utterly as the world had assumed. The Seventh Legion under Taimyo Nefvarin Gilshalos, beleaguered and vastly outnumbered, made its way westward while gathering together as many survivors as it could find within the husks of once-great cities across the River Province. From the far East, this patchwork army made its way towards the ancient city of Deheleshen, counting the days and the steps between the burning corpses of entire villages and the crystalline blades of fae skirmishers. When they reached the city, they found the daimyo long dead and Deheleshen itself ruined almost beyond hope of repair. Nefvarin had his orders, however, which he intended to follow to the letter: Until the day came when the Seventh Legion was utterly destroyed and its ranks broken, it would act as a provisional governing body in the shogun’s stead.

This, the gentes teach their descendants, is the tale of Lookshy’s founding.

In the centuries since, Lookshy has risen from the ashes of a bygone age to become one of the most influential and powerful city-states in the River Province. Although change has come to Lookshy over the years due to outside influence (and the obsolescence of the city’s remaining First Age wonders), its Dragon-Blooded masters have maintained its reputation as stewards of ancient tradition and a fighting force with which to be reckoned.

Lookshy, the City

Built on a rocky headland jutting from the mouth of the Yanaze, Lookshy is as much fortress as city. Massive walls, patrolled by garrison forces commanded by Dragon-Blooded officers, guard against intrusion from both land and sea. Deep wells and granary-vaults can hold out against prolonged siege.

A secure harbor at the base of the promontory boasts the Lower City, home to Lookshy’s navy, and where foreign merchants and sailors ply

their trades. From here, one can climb via lift tubes and guarded posterns to the city's numerous other districts. These are divided into four major quarters, each at a higher altitude — and less amicable to outsiders — than the last:

The Fourth Ring, whose outer gates open inland on Lookshy's farms and pastures, is a center for crafters, mercenaries, and caravaners.

The Third Ring hosts the city's more refined artisans, its academies, and heavy industry.

The Second Ring supports residences, military barracks and warehouses, and administration buildings.

The First Ring — also called **the Old City** — at the headland's peak contains most of Deheleshen's remaining First Age structures, including the ancient and seemingly unbreachable Lookshy Manse. Here the city's leadership and the relict Shogunate Bureaucracy (p. XX) maintain their offices and domiciles.

The Gentes of Lookshy

Outside the Realm, Lookshy is the largest Dragon-Blooded enclave in Creation, with an unusually high ratio of Exalted among the general populace. Where it comes to children, the General Staff's incentives targeting the city's families are as aggressive as its recruitment — above all, Lookshyans are pragmatists, and large numbers of Exalted are greatly preferred to a smaller number of Dragon-Blooded scions with pristine bloodlines. Unlike the lengthy marriage negotiations in the Realm, Lookshy encourages its Dragon-Blooded to marry and begin having children at as young as eighteen.

The most influential of Lookshy's Dragon-Blooded are descended from old, highly respected military families with a great deal of political clout. These families are known collectively as gentes. In theory, all trace their lineages back to the Shogunate's aristocratic families, although several don't. Some are of modest means; others are quite wealthy, especially by the region's standards. Some are relatively recent additions to the city's rolls, while others can be traced well before the days of Lookshy's founding.

Members of Lookshy's gentes are all citizens, and while their status only confers some small additional privileges — for instance, should a citizen with no immediate kin pass away without a will naming an executor of their estate, their property reverts to their gens should they belong to one; otherwise the Seventh Legion claims it — their status alone is prestigious. Officially, Lookshy is a meritocracy, and the Legion works to curtail the most blatant forms of nepotism, but members of the gentes undeniably benefit from the influence their family's standing confers upon them.

Whether a given family might be considered a gens is ultimately determined by the General Staff. A group of Dragon-Blooded immigrants might be offered such status as a bargaining chip, or a household of minor citizens might be awarded this acknowledgement in recognition of some great service performed to the city, producing significant numbers of Dragon-Blooded heirs, or accumulating enough wealth and influence to attract the Legion's notice. It's not legally required for Dragon-Blooded to formally join a gens, but in practice almost all do.

The General Staff

Lookshy's governing body, the General Staff directs military strategy, oversees and implements policy, and enforces Shogunate law. The General Staff proper consists of the chumyo — the general of the Seventh Legion — and six of the most senior officers. It's supplemented by the Administrative Staff, a fluctuating group comprised of roughly two dozen respected officers, Directorate heads, and other noteworthy Lookshyan personages. While this is an advisory body, a sensible chumyo weighs their advice carefully — and recognizes that the General Staff has the authority, with a majority vote, to remove him from his post.

The current chumyo is Maheka Dazan, a brilliant strategist and inveterately traditionalist Mercenary. Since the fall of Thorns, he's faced increasing opposition from Interventionists on the General Staff and Administrative Staff, and fears that they may oust him to advance their agenda.

The Gentes Major

The gentes are further divided into the unofficial but well-established categories of Gentes Major and Gentes Minor. While there are currently five families that enjoy Gens Major status, there have been in the city's history as many as eight and as few as three, and they haven't always been the same families throughout the years. Gentes are patrilineal, but this doesn't impede women in any meaningful way; Lookshy is generally egalitarian in its treatment of the sexes, including the most senior military posts. The most prominent elder of each gens is known as its imperator, a position similar to the Realm's house matriarchs, though not limited by sex.

Major gentes are deeply entrenched in Lookshy's hierarchies. Dragon-Blooded senior officers from the Gentes Major account for the overwhelming majority of the General Staff, and the gentes use the positions held by their members to advance their political agendas. Should the administrative head of the Intelligence Directorate, for example, hail from a gens with a strongly Interventionist outlook, she's more likely to allot discretionary budgets that encourage covert operations with that outlook in mind, even if she doesn't make her personal opinions a matter of public knowledge.

This state of affairs creates a perpetual power imbalance, in that once a gens obtains a seat on the General Staff, the family has a tendency to leverage that position for its own advantage. Conversely, it finds itself at a disadvantage should it lose that seat. Most legal adoptions on the rolls are disproportionately funneled into the Gentes Major.

The Five Factions of Lookshyan Politics

Mercenaries — the most conservative and currently the most politically powerful faction in the Legion — are largely content with the current state of affairs and consider it the optimal path forward for the city as a whole. While they desire the return of the Shogunate as much as anyone, they're willing to wait until a proper heir appears to take action. In the meantime, they rely upon the strength of the field forces and short-term contracts

with other nations, and feel that the best means of protecting the River Province is to stay the course.

Interventionists feel that Lookshy should take a more active role in regional politics, interpreting Nefvarin's Directive to mean that the Seventh Legion's role isn't merely to protect the River Province, but to use its power to establish a hegemonic role, strengthening the Seventh Legion's position both politically and militarily. They're considered to be slightly radical, but less so than the Isolationists, Imperialists, or Purists — in many cases their policy decisions overlap with those of the Mercenary faction, and seem at most times to be a natural extension of the army's existing structure. It's certainly true enough that Lookshy's doctrine allows the Legion to proactively intervene in foreign affairs if it believes that there will be consequences for the River Province as a whole, and it has never been shy about the fact that it trains the armies of other nations in the region.

Isolationists believe the intent of the founders of Lookshy was misconstrued, deliberately expanded to include all of the River Province as part of the Shogunate, or misguided. They contend that Lookshy cannot effectively police the entirety of the region, and in fact shouldn't be expected to do so; the General Staff have enough issues to contend with behind the city walls. Many of their number would take it even farther, shifting the Seventh Legion away from a hyper-vigilant standing army on a wartime footing in favor of a peacetime economy, as they feel Lookshy would be better off in the long run if it focused more on commerce and other pursuits. Most support for this stance comes from merchant families within the various gentes, as they have a vested interest in increased trade and normalized relations with traditional enemies such as the Realm.

Imperialists see opportunities for Lookshy in the extended absence of the Scarlet Empress and the turmoil she's left behind, and would use the chaos to their own ends in order to advance Lookshy and its ideals via expansion and annexation. A few have even put forward the notion of alliance with amenable Dynastic houses to seize Realm lands for the Legion. Simply put, they wish to transform the Seventh Legion into an empire, founding a new Shogunate. However, they currently have little support for their ideas.

Purists are primarily religious zealots. They believe that Lookshy has stagnated due to the General Staff's pragmatic willingness to overlook moral corruption in the name of survival, and that the River Province can only truly be protected if it's saved from itself. To that end, they seek to cleanse what they see as rank depravity, such as spirits openly ruling humans in cities like Great Forks, and the hive of scum and villainy that is Nexus. Currently a fringe group, they're gaining ground with the sudden resurgence of the Solar Anathema.

Gens Amilar — Air That Rushes Towards Tomorrow

Amilar is a relatively recent addition to the ranks of the Gentes Major. The bloodline's founder, Vondy Beulen, was a former general of the Scarlet Realm who denounced his commission and defected to Lookshy with the bulk of his forces during one of the Realm's long-ago attempts at invading the River Province. His descendants to this day remain the preeminent scholars of the Seventh Legion, and Amilar has produced numerous renowned strategists, engineers, Immaculate theologians, and teachers.

Gens Amilar's intellectual curiosity and penchant for careful planning have been vital to upholding Lookshy's legacy and ensuring its continued growth, providing its scions valuable insight into peril and opportunity alike. While Amilars are often brilliant, analytical thinkers willing to approach old problems in new ways, they have a reputation for eschewing tradition simply because they find it restrictive, and for compromising their morals in pursuit of knowledge. Amilar strategists sometimes propose tactical application of poison and disease, both to achieve military goals and to further the gens' studies in toxicology and epidemiology, and tactical demon-summoning is a forte of Amilar sorcerer-engineers.

The gens has also produced numerous savants and occultists willing to venture into the field. These scions can be found exploring the ruins scattered across the River Province, seeking First Age weapons and ordnance to replenish the Seventh Legion's stockpile. Equally valuable in their estimation are rare tomes and other lesser wonders they collect for continued study and, perhaps, to gain insight useful in the modern age.

Amilar is the gens least politically invested in the maintenance of the Seventh Legion's status quo. Many Amilars follow the Interventionist philosophy: They have far-reaching plans for the future of the River Province as a whole, and if seeing those plans to fruition means they must sacrifice their commitment to archaic traditions in order to take a more direct role in Scavenger Lands affairs, so be it. Others are Isolationists, seeing the region's wars as a wasteful distraction from important researches.

Amilar's sohei have often been of an intellectual bent, concerned more with the ideology of the Faith than with its effects on real people. The Purist philosophy has found this attitude to be fertile ground, and many Amilar sohei have taken up the faction's banner in recent years. They wish to increase Lookshy's clout in the River Province not to benefit the city itself, but to use the Legion as a sword to enforce Immaculate doctrine and uproot perceived heretics.

Gens Karal — Fire Burning Brightest

Perhaps the most well-known of the modern Gentes Major, Gens Karal has become a symbol of Lookshy and the ideals it represents. If the city were a house, the Karals would be the hearth fire around which its inhabitants gather to seek warmth and safety. This gens traces its beginnings all the way back to the Deheleshen camp's first liaison officer, who instilled his strong sense of duty in his descendants. There are certainly wealthier and more powerful families to be found in Lookshy, but none are more respected. Even the gens' enemies speak well of them, as their conduct both on and off the battlefield is largely beyond reproach. The Karals are also known to possess quick tempers, and they're very protective of their prestige.

In a city known across Creation for its martial prowess, more of Karal's scions are career soldiers and ranking officers than in any other gens; pressure to excel is high for all, but particularly so for those who choose a military career. Karals in general are straightforward about their intentions for Lookshy's future. However, they possess a degree of political astuteness that serves them well in negotiating the politics of the Seventh Legion and the River Province. Karal officers negotiate truces with the same skill that they enact stratagems, and the Operations and Liaison Directorates are the most common vocations for scions who don't remain in the military after finishing compulsory service.

Karals are passionately dedicated to the needs of the city's inhabitants and the greater good of the River Province. But they're often the source of equally passionate debate regarding what those needs truly are and where the Seventh Legion might best address them — when and how Lookshy should intervene in Vanehan aggression against the Hundred Kingdoms, for example, or which side of a trade war between rival city-states the Seventh Legion should support.

A number of Interventionist Karals have voiced interest in extending the Legion's reach and authority throughout the region, although they're prone to disagreement when the specifics become a topic of discussion. The majority of the family remains staunchly traditionalist, satisfied enough with the status quo and the current stability of matters as they stand to remain Mercenary — but while sparks might fly within the relative privacy of family gatherings whenever various political discussions reach an impasse, Gens Karal has always been skilled at presenting a unified front to the rest of the city.

Gens Maheka — Earth Unbroken by Armies

Maheka is the rock upon which Lookshy can always depend even in the most tumultuous times. A gens of builders and makers descended from a combat engineer, its architects design the city's fortifications, its artisans earn renown throughout the River Province and beyond as crafters of elaborate mechanisms and artifacts, and scions of a more commercial bent oversee the family's foundries and smithies that produce armor and weapons for the Legion.

Mahekas approach all angles of a problem with utmost care, often taking a great deal of time to choose a course — but when they strike, they do so with the crushing certainty of a toppling mountain. On occasion, Mahekas are slow to act at inopportune moments, and if pushed on an issue beyond the limits their moral code imposes, their famous tenacity can cause them to dig in their heels and refuse to act at all. Other gentes find this tendency immensely frustrating, especially when a given situation calls for an urgent response.

Maheka is well known for its conservative outlook. Its members consider bluntly announcing their political opinions to be gauche. Instead, they let other families argue the finer points of such matters while quietly adhering to the Seventh Legion's ideology and the Immaculate Faith. Out of the five Gentes Major, they're perhaps the most respected for their unflinching loyalty and their insistence upon showing Lookshyan traditions proper respect. Many of the city's sohei and sorcerer-exorcists hail from Gens Maheka.

The gens are enthusiastic supporters of the traditional Mercenary ideology, considering it the best approach to reinforcing the ideals of the Lookshy Directive: it's worked for centuries and generations of officers have dedicated their lives to this goal, so the family sees no need to fix something they feel was never broken. Undoubtedly some Mahekas hold differing opinions as how Lookshy is best governed, but they wisely keep their own counsel lest they earn the disapproval of the gens' imperator.

Gens Teresu — Water Flowing with Jade and Silver

Gens Teresu's dominance over matters nautical was established early in the city's history; the family is descended from a Shogunate admiral who led the remnants of his command in the frozen North to the open waters of the Inland Sea to the camp at Deheleshen. The gens maintains its wealth through investments designed to expand both Lookshy's maritime trade and the Seventh Legion's influence, resulting in a family legacy vital to the city's operation. Teresu is the wealthiest and most cosmopolitan of the Gentes Major. Its shipping empire is the lifeblood of Lookshy, providing sustenance and resources to the Legion from the bounty of the Yanaze and the Inland Sea.

The Teresus are on friendly terms with the Guild and work extensively with its factors, as their elders are confident in their ability to maintain the upper hand in bargains with the mercantile empire. They're not necessarily as bothered by scruples as some of the other gentes, particularly where it comes to business matters, and perhaps not as circumspect in their dealings as might be considered prudent — but this is also reflected in the gens' tendency to obsess over its standing in the eyes of others. Indeed, the prevailing opinion of those outside the family is that Teresus can be obsessive about keeping up appearances to the point of flaunting their wealth in improper ways.

Politically, the house is split between the naval branch and the commercial branch. Career naval officers within the gens lean decidedly Mercenary in outlook, as they find themselves satisfied with the current state of things and see no need to change course. The merchant princes of Gens Teresu, however, are strong advocates for a more Isolationist approach: they wish to see Lookshy withdraw from its stance as the River Province's main peacekeeping force in favor of an increased focus upon building the city's economic power.

Gens Yushoto — Wood Whose Roots Grow Deep

Gens Yushoto, which traces its roots back to a sorcerer-engineer from the early days of the city's founding, sees itself as the roots of the city, nurturing not only its own growth but that of others wherever possible, and contributing to the welfare of the whole in ways largely unseen, and — occasionally — underappreciated. They're known amongst their peers for generosity and humility, a family of even-tempered and socially adept individuals often called in to mediate disputes, albeit inclined to be softhearted at inconvenient moments.

Yushoto elders encourage scions to seek their own paths in life and contribute to Lookshy's greater good in their own individual ways. The gens sees personal growth and self-improvement as the best means to uphold the stability and goals of the city and its rulers. This has the added benefit of ensuring that Yushoto's scions excel in all manner of professions, and thus reflects well upon the gens itself. With that in mind, Lookshy is a martial culture, and most Yushotos find that they truly shine when serving the Seventh

Legion. They can be found throughout the ranks as infantry, strategoi, justiciars, sorcerer-engineers, and other military vocations as readily as any other path. They're most predominant among the ranger corps — a role that benefits greatly from the Yushoto inclination toward a broad skillset.

Given their open and relaxed approach to most things, Yushoto as a whole has no strong political leanings. The majority support the Mercenary ideology, but others can be found in every political faction. Unlike Karal, however, Gens Yushoto is more inclined to let its members do as they will, so long as their choices aren't detrimental to the Seventh Legion.

The Gentes Minor

In addition to the well-known families of the Gentes Major, there are over a dozen minor gentes. The numbers of these families have ebbed and flowed over the centuries, some lost to history altogether, some fading in and out of prominence. In many instances, a sponsor-client relationship exists between major and minor gentes, creating a patronage system leading to a cycle of continuing obligations and further debts owed, influencing Lookshyan politics at multiple levels.

A handful of these families are discussed below.

Gens Kiriga — Earth That Upholds the Shogun's Bastion

Tracing its lineage back to a distant cousin of the Daimyo of Deheleshen, Gens Kiriga has a far-reaching ambition of empire: a new Shogunate that rules the entire River Province by steel and will, rather than a city of glorified mercenaries. Once a Gens Major influential among rank-and-file officers, the family is still recovering from heavy losses suffered in wars across the middle of the current age, which led to its being supplanted by Gens Maheka. Kiriga scions remain commonplace among the infantry, and are well respected for their loyalty and fighting spirit. They're outspoken Interventionists and Imperialists, which often pits them against their conservative rivals.

Gens Nefvarin — Air That Fills the Wings of Dragons

Descended from Lookshy's founder, this family was heavily invested in Lookshy's Sky Guard. In its golden years, Nefvarins were skyship officers and sorcerer-engineers specializing in skyship maintenance. But as the Legion's fleet of skyships dwindled over the years, the gens' prominence dwindled with it. The final blow was the loss of its highest-ranking officers in the Gunzota Incident, from which it never recovered. So far has Gens Nefvarin fallen that it's gone from being Gens Yushoto's patron to being its client.

The gens continues to produce skilled sorcerer-engineers, and is responsible for maintaining the last few decrepit, mothballed skyships against whatever emergency might send them aloft once more. Most are Interventionists who wish for a more aggressive foreign policy, while a handful entertain notions of meddling in the imminent Realm civil war to seize the Imperial Palace for the Seventh Legion. The latter faction lacks support, but Nefvarin remains a respected name; should they produce a legitimate strategy, they might find an audience.

The Gunzota Incident

In RY 615, the General Staff and other high-ranking officers met at Gunzota Redoubt, a Seventh Legion outpost near Greyfalls, only to perish at the seemingly accidental activation of a dread weapon of the First Age. The result of a conspiracy opposed to increasing nepotism and cronyism in the Legion's upper ranks, the Incident decimated the corrupt elements of the administration, incidentally decapitating those gentes most involved. Gunzota Redoubt remains abandoned, its walls and inhabitants — and anyone who's entered to investigate since — transformed to violet crystal by the still-active First Age device.

The truth of the incident remains a secret within Lookshy. The conspiracy remains active, however, and its surviving members have largely curtailed a return to the previous centuries' misconduct. But they remain cautious; it's possible that any unrelated investigation might touch upon the transfers that preceded the Incident, and even at this late date, revealing the truth would send shockwaves through Lookshyan society, placing the current General Staff's legitimacy into question, and potentially triggering a cascade of vendettas.

Gens Nerigus — Wood Whose Roots Clutch Riches

An offshoot of Gens Teresu, this merchant family considers itself the Seventh Legion's quartermasters. They devote themselves to overland trade and have strong — albeit complicated — ties to the Guild, working with its factors to supply foodstuffs, timber, and Nexus steel, while fencing with those same factors over contracts, tariffs, trade routes, exchange rates, and the like as each side tries to gain the upper hand. Its members hold important posts in the Stores Directorate; although they strive to avoid the impropriety of obvious favoritism toward Nerigus-owned businesses, they nonetheless profit from the arrangement. Generally they lean Interventionist, believing that Lookshy's increased involvement would mean greater economic leverage in the family's commercial contracts.

Gens Sirel — Water of Distant Shores

Sirel descends from a Blessed Isle gens that defected to Lookshy five centuries ago during the rise of the Realm, angered by the Empress' dismantling of the old Shogunate social structure. Distant relatives in Teresu vouched for them, and they've remained staunchly loyal ever since; in the modern day they're a client family to Gens Teresu, and back the Mercenary politics of the Teresu naval wing. Sirels are generally driven to excellence, perhaps overcompensating in their efforts to come out of Gens Teresu's shadow; some few of their number have even held the admiralty of the Lookshy Navy. Others take a different direction, rebelling against the family's excessive pressure and ending up on the fringes of society as layabouts and heretics. In rare instances, this is cover for membership in the Intelligence and Security Directorates.

The Sirels maintain ties with Realm patrician families and cadet houses with which they share descent, providing a useful entrance into diplomatic or commercial negotiations, as well as a source of vital intelligence on the Realm's internal affairs. However, many in Lookshy regard Sirel's Realm ties warily, impugning the gens' loyalty.

Gens Taroketu — Heirs of the Wandering Blade

This gens takes its name from the famous outcaste “One Cut” Taroketu, whose unexpected arrival at a key battle helped turn the tide against the last Realm invasion. The gens produces few Dragon-Blooded offspring, but has amassed considerable wealth by marrying into wealthy merchant families; between that and the legends surrounding its founder, Taroketu remains influential. Living in the shadow of the Dragon-Blooded gentes, mortal Taroketus often feel driven to keep up. For some this means grand, dramatic gestures; for others, unorthodox and creative strategies; and for some, unethical or illicit schemes. Additionally, they have a good working relationship with the Guild and have quietly served as middlemen between Guild merchants and the Realm’s Great Houses. While the gens has little interest in upending the status quo, the founder’s wife was an exiled Calinese noble, so it does maintain a distant, theoretical claim to Calin’s throne — and with the Realm in chaos, the gens’ Interventionist wing sees an opportunity to pursue that ambition through conquest.

Gens Toriki — Five Dragons Guard the City’s Walls

This family has no predominant elemental aspect, and claims descent from various Deheleshen survivors under the old city’s last garrison commander. As such, it doesn’t truly consider itself part of the Seventh Legion, concerning itself almost exclusively with the city’s defense and internal day-to-day governance. While the Torikis serve the Legion loyally, they consider the defense of the River Province to be a waste of blood and resources. They’re influential within the Shogunate Bureaucracy and the Justice and Security Directorates, and maintain the city’s temple to Tu Yu, the old god of Deheleshen. The gens is also a focal point for the Isolationist faction — hardly a surprise, given its conservative outlook.

Gens Yan Tu — Fire That Sheds a Thousand Sparks

Descended from Taimyo Nefvarin Yan Tu, this gens considers its legacy to be the art of battle. Those with sufficient talent study sorcery; otherwise, the family leans toward various military professions, especially combat engineering and cavalry roles. Yan Tu has a reputation for exuberance and for theatrics, both on the battlefield and in the salon. They like to portray themselves as direct and ingenuous, but in truth, the family often uses frontal assaults and battle sorcery — or insults and seduction, in less martial settings — as ruses to distract opponents from their true goals. Yan Tu tend to be Mercenaries and Interventionists, but politics are always secondary to a good fight, preferably as over-the-top as possible.

Social Class in Lookshy

Citizenship in Lookshy is divided into a handful of castes.

Citizens have full rights: land ownership, the power to vote in district councils, and the ability to leave Lookshy once their military service is complete. All members of the gentes are citizens, as are Seventh Legion officers and Shogunate Bureaucracy functionaries.

Helots form a hereditary underclass. They draw salaries and can own property, but can’t own land; they can attend district councils, but can’t speak or vote; and they can request work transfers, but ultimately must go

where assigned. Devoted or heroic service can earn citizenship. Most enlisted soldiers are helots.

Metics are foreign residents of the city. Their rights are circumscribed — they may only rent land, and are subject to travel restrictions in the city — but they suffer no particular social onus, and may leave at any time.

Indentured servants are those who voluntarily accept up to five years' indenture to a citizen to pay off debts or wipe away criminal charges. All such contracts are handled by the Directorate of the Adjutant General (p. XX).

Slaves are owned by the Seventh Legion rather than by individuals. They're usually prisoners of war unable or unwilling to be repatriated at war's end. They receive room and board and can own nonland property, but otherwise have few rights, undergo close supervision, and are subject to harsh punishment for disobedience. Their children are typically manumitted as metics upon adulthood.

Life Among the Gentes

The Seventh Legion of Lookshy sees the Dragon-Blooded Shogunate, and especially the Shogunate legions, as its cultural foundation. As such, while it upholds the Dragon-Blooded as its leaders in matters both mundane and spiritual, its focus is primarily military. Due to the circumstances surrounding its history and governance, it's even more martial than the Realm — for all intents and purposes, the Seventh Legion is Lookshy, and it's both a civic responsibility and a sacred duty for all Dragon-Blooded under Shogunate rule to commit themselves utterly to the charge laid upon them centuries ago by the city's founders. This charge is known in official terms as the Lookshy Directive: Maintain Lookshy as a Shogunate city under Seventh Legion authority, and hold their post until a new Shogun emerges.

Lookshyan Dragon-Blooded are thus brought up from an early age as soldiers and officers. They're taught that their utmost duty and their destiny is to work and to fight for the greater good of Lookshy and the Seventh Legion. Rather than focus on individual puissance or personal glory, emphasis is placed upon values such as honor, moderation, and consideration of others, to produce adults who can join the ranks of one of the most highly disciplined fighting forces in the world.

Education

Training starts early in life, with children as young as five beginning formal education through private tutors. At age eleven, most are enrolled in academies. There are over a hundred academies throughout the city, with a range of specialties. Academies teach fighting techniques, weapons proficiency, and battle tactics, as well as core subjects such as modern and ancient literature, the River Province's history, and mathematics. The most desirable academies consider proper decorum and social presentation as vital to one's success in life as military training and scholarship. Many elective courses aim to refine students' social graces. For example, the art of hosting tea ceremonies might be offered alongside lectures on statecraft and the complex workings of the Shogunate Bureaucracy.

Immigration and Adoption

The General Staff welcomes outcastes who wish to enlist in the field forces, compensating them generously. Lookshy allots a large portion of its budget to recruitment efforts, and bonuses granted to successful recruiters of fresh talent are attractive. This welcome isn't limited to armed combatants; Lookshy accepts any outcaste willing to labor in its defense, whether that be prodigious field cooks, powerful sorcerers, or enterprising merchant princes.

Outcastes are strongly encouraged to undertake sponsorship and eventual adoption by a gens. This helps them acclimate to Lookshyan life and secures them proper training. In the past, groups that immigrated together sometimes leveraged their numbers to be recognized as a Gens Minor (for example, Gens Taroketu) rather than dispersing themselves among the city's various gentes. If petitioning for permanent residency status on her own, an outcaste immigrant is encouraged to join an existing gens through adoption or marriage. No official penalties exist for Dragon-Blooded who choose not to pursue these paths, but they face limited social mobility.

The Directorate of the Adjutant-General presides over adoptions, but final approvals must go through the General Staff, and they're heavily inclined to place outcaste Dragon-Blooded among the Gentes Major. This practice is intended as a screening process, filtering out potentially problematic or dangerous outcastes, because the gens into which they're placed would be held responsible for their actions.

Military Service

Lookshy's social hierarchy centers around citizenship status. Citizens hold all high offices within the Seventh Legion, which is the backbone around which the entire city-state operates. Military service is compulsory amongst citizens and helots for a minimum term of five years. Service doesn't end with a compulsory five-year tour of duty, even for those Dragon-Blooded who don't elect to pursue a dedicated military career. All Lookshyans not on active service are considered part of the reserve force, and regular training, practice drills, and war games are held throughout the year to ensure the entire city's readiness.

A plethora of opportunities await Dragon-Blooded citizens after their five-year terms end, most notably voluntary reenlistment with the Seventh Legion. Its rank and advancement structure have deviated little from its original Shogunate roots. Some changes have been made out of necessity over the years; the Sky Guard has been relegated to ceremonial status for centuries, its few remaining airships mothballed and restricted for use only in dire emergency. Otherwise, it follows a unit composition based upon multiples of five: Five soldiers make a fang, five fangs make a scale, five scales make a talon, and so on. While mortals rarely rise beyond mid-tier officer postings, an ambitious, intelligent, and particularly skilled Dragon-Blooded has every reason to expect that he could sit on the General Staff one day, if he dedicates himself to upholding the Legion's ideals and exemplifying its leadership.

Most missions and assignments are outsourced through contracts between the General Staff and various River Province polities. The type of action a legionnaire might see depends upon her posting and the field force to which she's assigned. The First Field

Force, for example, is geared toward reconnaissance and quick-response units, and tends to be dispatched to the most hazardous environments.

While citizens of Lookshy must serve their compulsory service in the field forces, metics who wish to fight for Lookshy join its foreign field forces alongside former janissaries, ex-mercenaries, runaway slaves, and criminals and bandits fleeing justice, most of whom have never seen Lookshy itself. Recruits receive a year of intensive training, a regimen which both raises them to meet the Seventh Legion's exacting standards and weeds out those unfit to serve. The foreign legions are typically neither as well-equipped nor as disciplined as Seventh Legion field forces. They operate on the outskirts of the River Province and throughout the East, occasionally posing as independent mercenary companies.

Military-minded Dragon-Blooded often remain in the Legion for many decades, and there are a number of career paths open to them. Some become strategoi — the Legion's premier tacticians — dictating the approach that must be taken to each mission. Others are invited to join the ranger corps, the Seventh Legion's special forces units who enter dangerous territory on highly classified missions — usually matters which Lookshy doesn't care to publicly acknowledge, such as assassinations, state sabotage, infiltration, and deep-cover assignments. Dragon-Blooded trained in sorcery, artifice, and First Age lore might serve as sorcerer-engineers, responsible for maintaining Lookshy's First Age weaponry and ordnance; they're vital to the continued operation of the city's army. Seasoned infantry officers often accept assignments outside Lookshy proper to train armies in other city-states within the River Province, or take command posts among the string of redoubts maintained across the Scavenger Lands.

Like the Realm, Lookshy has a long and rich magical tradition. The Valkhawsen Academy of Sorcery is among its most famous schools, teaching a Shogunate-era sorcerous discipline that employs ritualized meditation, poetry, and formal ceremonies to empty the mind and achieve unity with Creation. The city makes far more everyday use of sorcery than most places in Creation; it's second only to the Realm in numbers of Dragon-Blooded sorcerers. Sorcerers are fully integrated at all levels of command throughout the field forces, and it's common for special forces units in particular to be assigned at least one sorcerer. Summoning demons and elementals, however, is the province of the elite cadre of sohei (p. XX) known as sorcerer-exorcists. While most sorcerers are treated as battlemasters rather than pariahs, the Legion treads carefully around sorcerer-exorcists.

Seventh Legion Military Ranks

Nitei: Soldier.

Gochei: Corporal. Leads a fang.

Haichei: Military specialist or technician, including novice sorcerer-engineers.

Gunchei: Sergeants. Leads a fang, although typically only veteran nitei.

Sochei: Senior sergeants. Leads a scale.

Shonai: Specialist professional such as an artilleryist, sorcerer-engineer, shipwright, or surgeon, who oversees haichei.

Chozei: Subaltern officer who oversees the training of sochei, gunchei, gochei, and nitei. Occasionally leads scales under the supervision of a senior gunchei.

Chuzei: Lieutenants. Leads a scale or talon.

Taizei: Captains. Leads a talon or wing.

Shozei: Majors. Leads a wing or dragon.

Kazei: Colonels. Leads a dragon. Almost all kazei are Dragon-Blooded, though a handful throughout Lookshy's history have been mortal.

Taimyo: General of an entire field force or administrator of a Directorate. All taimyo are Dragon-Blooded.

Chumyo: The leader of the Seventh Legion. In the Shogunate, each legion was led by a chumyo.

Nonmilitary Service

Service to Lookshy need not fall under the auspice of the blade alone. Seven directorates form the Seventh Legion's support apparatus and ensure that the Legion and Lookshy are properly supplied. The administrators in charge of these bureaus share the title of taimyo with the field force commanders, and although their responsibilities see a degree of overlap, each is responsible for different types of support missions. Together, they form the underpinnings of much of the city's civil society.

The Directorate of the Adjutant-General handles personnel issues. This includes administrating the academies, assigning and reassigning soldiers to various units, helping retired soldiers find civilian careers, and looking after older soldiers.

The Intelligence Directorate deploys its agents to obtain information on the capabilities of potential enemies and to assess what threat they pose to Lookshy.

The Justice Directorate enforces the Seventh Legion's statutes, both in Lookshy itself and accompanying its field forces. White-robed justiciars keep the peace, while judges investigate crimes and oversee tribunals.

The Liaison Directorate negotiates with foreign governments on the Legion's behalf, from the grand political scale to the nitty-gritty of renting land for a field force's encampment.

The Operations Directorate deals with military strategy and tactics, coordinating the Legion's campaigns and analyzing the results of its engagements.

The Security Directorate handles counterintelligence and military security, from arranging guard assignments to tracking down agents of the All-Seeing Eye.

The Stores Directorate organizes the acquisition, storage, and disbursement of the Legion's resources, from field kit to grain stores to rare First Age artifact weapons.

A few find employment with the Shogunate Bureaucracy, whose functionaries make up the last remnants of the official Shogunate government. While their position is largely ceremonial, they hold enormous symbolic authority, as the Lookshy Directive invests them with the cultural weight of the lost Shogunate. Should a bureau gainsay the General Staff within its administrative sphere of influence — by refusing to sign off on a military

budget, for example — the Legion would lose face in the eyes of the Lookshyan public. On the other hand, the Legion can take direct action (such as military reassignment) against the bureaucrats should it be too hard pressed, so by and large the two organizations stay out of each other's way.

The Armory

The Seventh Legion's armory contains artifact arms and armor, arcane siege machines, and hearthstones retrieved from the city's four manses as well as from River Province demesnes and manses under Lookshy's control.

The armory also houses Creation's largest supply of the nigh-legendary gunzasha armor of the First Age. Elite mortal soldiers who've undergone ritual blessings and surgical modification can attune to these powered armors and wield their Evocations, at the cost of vastly shortened lifespans.

The contents of the Seventh Legion's armory aren't free to be requisitioned by just anyone; access must be earned through service. Rare and powerful First Age weapons, including the city's bare handful of functioning warstriders, are only available at the discretion of the General Staff.

Economics

The gentes of Lookshy aren't completely analogous to the Great Houses of the Scarlet Dynasty. For example, members of the gentes don't receive a monetary stipend from their families, although all of their essential needs are met, and scions may petition for additional resources when circumstances warrant or in exchange for a favor owed to the emperor (to be paid back at the gens' discretion). In Lookshy, one's contribution to the Legion is more important than Exaltation. Even the Dragon-Blooded are expected to make their own way for their daily bread.

The most readily available source of income in Lookshy is service to the Seventh Legion proper, the directorates, or the Shogunate Bureaucracy. One may find more profit in owning a business or plying a skilled trade; Lookshy derives almost as much revenue from commerce as it does from military contracts, while the gentes maintain a web of ongoing business enterprises and support promising new ventures. But commercial income isn't as reliable as a soldier's pay, and while basic living expenses and discretionary pay from the military aren't taxed, any monies made from trades and other sources are subject to a flat-rate tax set by the Legion's Liaison Directorate.

Retirement

Few Dragon-Blooded live long enough to reach old age, but the handful who do typically retire either to their gens' compound within the city walls or to a private estate near the city. Even then, they often remain active — involving themselves in their descendants' lives, networking with other elders, and calling in their remaining favors on behalf of their families before they pass.

The Immaculate Faith

Worship of the Five Immaculate Dragons is common amongst the Dragon-Blooded, dating back to the Shogunate. However, the Realm's Immaculate Philosophy and the old Immaculate Faith as practiced by Lookshy are very different. Some differences, such as the Philosophy's aniconism versus the vividly illustrated decks of cards common to Seventh Legion barracks, are more minor than others. Both denominations emphasize the proper role of spirits as part of the Perfected Hierarchy, although the Faith is somewhat less rigid in this matter.

The most profound difference is that the Immaculate Faith isn't a state religion. It doesn't exist to justify the Seventh Legion's rule, but to provide a guiding path for mortals and their Exalted leaders towards spiritual enlightenment. Lookshy's Dragon-Blooded consider the Faith a vital part of their spiritual lives, but one that's generally unrelated to matters of politics and governance. The Faith itself has no governing body beyond the Shogunate Bureaucracy's administration of temples and academies, and the Seventh Legion's chaplains — or sohei — exert no temporal authority.

The Immaculate Faith also states that while Exaltation can be a reward for excellence and leadership, it's not in itself deserving of respect from others. A Dragon-Blooded warrior must be judged by her own deeds rather than the blood in her veins or her soul's elevated position.

Most modern sohei explain that everyone travels the path of enlightenment at a different pace. Just as one cannot drag a recalcitrant mule to a stream to drink, so one cannot force one's beliefs upon others. Some sohei advocate a more direct approach, feeling that wider acceptance of the Faith outside Lookshyan circles would bring increased stability to the River Province and beyond, but by and large they take a pragmatic view towards their neighbors' propensity for worshiping specific gods.

However, for all that the Faith's mainline practitioners describe such tolerance as a principled stance, it's rooted in political compromises necessary for Lookshy to cooperate with the god-ridden principalities of the Scavenger Lands. The Purists reject this approach as corrupt, and would force the Faith upon the River Province at spear's point if they could.

Within the Faith

Sohei begin their training in academies owned and operated by various temples. These provide students with a classical Lookshyan education, centered on Immaculate theology, including the history and tenets of the Immaculate Faith, its Shogunate roots, and its interaction with the spirit courts. They also pursue a training regimen designed to cultivate and tame their Essence, including meditation and Immaculate martial arts. Only those who've gained basic mastery over themselves can advance their training far enough to master spirits. While this can include subduing them through combat, a sohei's job when dealing with the supernatural is to act as intercessor, which need not end in violence.

Many sohei commit themselves to the Faith's temples — found mostly within Lookshy proper, with a handful scattered elsewhere amid the Scavenger Lands — or to tending their flocks within the Legion, but there are tales aplenty of wandering monks who take to the countless roads of the Scavenger Lands with their ofuda and their texts, bringing

the Faith to civilization's outskirts and smiting demons and rogue gods that terrorize mortal villages.

Lookshy and the Wyld Hunt

Despite the numerous religious and political differences between Lookshy and the Realm, the Wyld Hunt is one of the few things on which they both agree. Lookshy views Anathema as an intolerable threat to the security of the River Province. The Seventh Legion regularly intercepts the Wyld Hunt when the Realm sends shikari into the region, but doesn't turn it back. Instead, the mortal forces of the Wyld Hunt are replaced with troops from a field force on active duty in the area. The shikari are then escorted to their destination with all due respect and the full assistance of the Legion's military might.

Before the Empress' disappearance, Lookshy and the Realm would undertake joint operations to dispatch particularly dangerous or intractable Anathema, with the All-Seeing Eye sending word ahead of the Hunt's arrival. Today, a Wyld Hunt is often formed in haste, leaving no time to contact the General Staff before it arrives, so collaborations on this scale have become rare.

The Code of the Righteous Warrior

The Code of the Righteous Warrior is an old Shogunate doctrine. The Righteous Warrior is the pinnacle of the Faith's teachings, an enlightened soul that lives his life by the five Immaculate Pillars of Honor, Loyalty, Prowess, Conviction, and Compassion. He is the ultimate warrior: one who can win any battle, but understands that drawing his blade isn't always a solution. Some believe that not even the Immaculate Dragons themselves were Righteous Warriors, but they came within arm's reach of that peak. Dragon-Blooded believers strive towards this ideal, believing that excellence will come with their efforts.

The Pillar of Honor: Impeccable actions and honest words are the hallmark of the Righteous Warrior. Honor demands a strong sense of personal dignity: the word of the Righteous Warrior should always guarantee the truth of an assertion, and for the weight it carries, should never be given cheaply. Mela demonstrated with her actions that only through honor is true victory attainable.

The Pillar of Loyalty: The Righteous Warrior's loyalty must be unwavering. His first loyalty must be to the ideals of the Shogunate, followed by loyalty to one's commander, then by filial piety. Pasiap taught that loyalty is the foundation of all things, be it a peasant family, a legion, or the Shogunate itself.

The Pillar of Prowess: The Righteous Warrior's actions must be executed with both faultless skill and faultless timing. He dispenses death upon his enemies only at the appointed hour, forgoing needless attacks. Hesiesh epitomizes this conception of prowess, his almighty power tempered by wise restraint.

The Pillar of Conviction: When the Righteous Warrior raises his blade, he cannot doubt that his cause is wholly just in the eyes of the Dragons. To

choose one's actions without conviction is to risk the stain of death in the name of an unworthy cause. Danaa'd showed that conviction can triumph over even the greatest of foes through her persistence in swimming to the sea's depths to seal away the Anathema.

The Pillar of Compassion: Brotherly affection for one's fellow man, sympathy, and noble charity — these virtues ennoble the soul of a Righteous Warrior. Sextes Jylis taught that the compassionate warrior will always triumph over a heartless foe, for she has something greater to fight for.

Politics of the Seventh Legion

As a group, Lookshyan Dragon-Blooded present a unified front to the rest of Creation; it's rare to see open political maneuvering, whether in the name of personal beliefs or the advancements of one's gens. Usually the game takes the form of favors and debts owed, and plenty of avenues exist for Dragon-Blooded who wish to support their gens or influence a given policy. A senior officer, seeing a promising Exalted youngster fresh from the academy with similar ideas and ideals, might put a good word in the right ears; a seasoned bureaucrat whose niece seeks a transfer into the Intelligence Directorate could arrange for her name to come up in discussions over a key mission. Such acts arguably fall short of outright nepotism, but the young Dragon-Blooded appointed to his new post will remember the officer who put in a good word for her, and she's likely to reciprocate when the opportunity arises.

While members of the various factions are prone to lively debates, and some will escalate differences of opinion into personal grudges, outright political violence or blood feuds are almost nonexistent. Beyond the Seventh Legion's prohibition on dueling, Lookshyans' pragmatic attitudes discourage actions — such as sabotage or assassination — that would cause unacceptable losses to the Legion.

Thus, those seeking to rid themselves of a hated rival attempt to do so through bloodless means. Bureaucratic spite — someone "losing" important documentation and causing that individual loss of face — or other methods such as spreading rumors in order to goad one's opponent into revealing their hand are common tactics. Masterful schemers can diminish or destroy their targets without doing anything remotely illegal.

Lookshy and the Realm

The Seventh Legion and the Scarlet Dynasty have been at odds for centuries. They've clashed over politics, religion, and everything in between, but only those who've witnessed firsthand some of the Realm's most egregious cruelties truly hate its rulers. Lookshy's policy towards the Realm is to avoid direct confrontation, while remaining vigilant against Realm puppets and spies.

Visitors from the Realm are allowed in the city, provided they keep to designated areas and don't try to instigate trouble. Immaculate monks find themselves restricted to the foreign quarter of the city along with merchants and tradesmen (where most Lookshyans feel they belong). The General Staff allows only one exception to this rule: Dynasts bearing diplomatic protection may travel — under strict escort — as far as the Second Ring, where their embassy is headquartered.

Realm ambassadors to Lookshy have traditionally been retired outcaste officers loyal to the throne, appointed by the Empress as a reward for decades of legionary service, and accompanied by four handpicked advisors, like a satrap's. House Ledaal recently claimed the post through trading favors in the Deliberative, hoping to better coordinate Wyld Hunt activities with the Seventh Legion against the resurgent Anathema threat — and to wreak revenge against the Mask of Winters for the Ledaal scions who perished in the fall of Thorns.

The Battle of Mishaka

Eighteen years ago, the armies of Thorns — backed by Realm military advisors — invaded the Scavenger Lands. Fourteen years ago, the armies of the Confederation of Rivers, led by the Seventh Legion, broke the back of Thorns' forces at the Battle of Mishaka. Most Lookshyans lost a friend or relative in that conflict. Although passions have had time to cool, the youngest generation has an instinctive mistrust of Realm scheming, and they cast a suspicious eye on any Dynastic presence in and around the Scavenger Lands. Likewise, while they recognize the threat of the Mask of Winters, they harbor little sympathy for fallen Thorns itself.

Lookshy and the Guild

Lookshy's relationship with the Guild has always been somewhat tense. Its seasoned military tacticians recognize the mercantile syndicate's activities for the economic warfare it is, and the Guild understands that its mercenaries and bodyguards are outmatched by Lookshy's regulars, let alone its special forces. However, the General Staff is well aware that the Guild could cause significant economic distress to the city and its trade if it wished — its contracts with the gentes be damned — which would impede Lookshy's ability to maintain operations elsewhere in the River Province. Thus, while neither side trusts the other, their mutual unwillingness to confront each other and risk their respective power bases — especially in the current climate — has resulted in a grudging understanding.

Gods of Lookshy

Tien Yu, Lookshy's city mother, takes an active role in spirit court politics throughout the River Province, tirelessly advocating in Lookshy's interest. She appears as a soldier with jet-black skin and silver hair, wearing dragon armor of moonsilver and black jade.

Tien Yu's predecessor — and, some say, her father, son, brother, or lover — is **Tu Yu**, Deheleshen's city father. Once a sage tactician and battlewise scholar, he lost much power and prestige when the Old City fell to the Great Contagion and rampaging Fair Folk, and his former duties have largely been shouldered by Tien Yu. He seems little more than a doddering fool at times. His pride, however, is undiminished, and he owes a debt of gratitude to the Seventh Legion for reviving fallen Deheleshen.

Outcastes

Many outcastes never set foot on the Blessed Isle. Indeed, rare is the Dragon-Blood born far beyond the Realm's satrapies in the Threshold who ever joins forces with more than her Hearth. Some few never find another to share their long lives with. But even a single Exalt suffices to change the course of a war, to shift the fortunes of an entire kingdom, to dominate a region's trade — they're heroes, one and all, and when the blood of the Dragons stirs, none can ignore she who bears it.

A Spark on the Wind Ignites a Hundred Wildfires

The Threshold is replete with tales of wandering sellswords, martial artists, champions, and culture heroes. More often than not, the kernel of truth at the heart of these tales is that once, long ago, a wandering outcaste passed through.

There are many reasons a young Dragon-Blood, fresh from Exaltation, might forsake the comfortable life of home and set out to seek adventure or fortune. For one thing, the vast majority of Creation's inhabitants are peasants who live a life practically identical to that of their parents and grandparents. Exaltation marks the young outcaste as destined for greater things — most can only bear so much of village life when they can bend the forces of nature to their whim, when all of Creation seems within their grasp. Others know no such comforts, born into a harsh life or shackled in slavery. Captors or abusers stand little chance of preventing a new Dragon-Blood from claiming her freedom, and few can withstand her should she pursue vengeance.

Even those who linger overlong in their birthplace find reason to leave, sooner or later — the most common being nothing more than mortality. Their friends, family, and lovers are all mortal, aging as mortals do, departing for the next life only six or seven decades after entering it. Their filial obligations spent, their wedding vows ash in the wind, their grandchildren grown and with families of their own, there's nothing left to hold a Dragon-Blood back.

A rare few are thrust from their old lives by force. Though the Exalted are known across Creation, kin to the mighty Scarlet Empress, many powers resent their presence. The god who dominates a village may cast a young Exalt out, rather than watch her grow to rival him, while a warlord might send underlings to kill the young Dragon-Blood for much the same reasons. Even mortals can threaten the Exalted, and some would rather cut down an outcaste while she's still fresh from her Second Breath than risk being subjugated by her might as she matures. Rather than fight and risk destroying everything they've ever known, many an outcaste bows out and rides across the horizon — often planning her return and vengeance, when she's grown powerful enough.

An Empress in Miniature

As the Scarlet Empress is known across Creation, so too is the legend of her rise to power — quelling rebels, crushing potential rivals, and bringing stability and peace to Creation. Drunk on the power coursing through their veins, more than one outcaste has taken this tale as inspiration, and sought to replicate the great successes of that semidivine figure of legend. None have yet succeeded, but every corner of Creation knows of a conqueror who, in her private moments, compared herself against the Scarlet Empress and wept to find herself wanting.

Power naturally draws followers, and Dragon-Blooded are blessed with power, leaving their mark on the world as they pass whether they mean to or not. Whatever draws them to war and conquest — be it desire to overthrow a cruel tyrant or desire to be one — the Exalted find willing accomplices in droves, seeking to better their stations through proximity to true power. One outcaste and her retinue of exiled nobles and wandering swordsmen might make a citadel of an ancient, shattered fortress in the hills. Another might sweep across village after village at the head of an army of bandits and raiders, putting the fields of any who resist to the torch with his bare hands — champions and villains alike are blessed by the Dragons.

Masterless Dragons

The ranks of the outcastes also include Dragon-Blooded cast out from the Realm and Lookshy. Some are military deserters; others are exiles, sentenced for high crimes or cast out by a political rival's machinations. Some are ideological dissidents who strike out on their own rather than live in a society they find contemptible.

A Family Chosen

The outcaste's lot is lonely at first, for she's often the only Dragon-Blood she or anyone she knows has ever seen. Elders, perhaps, remember a hero who rode through the town once, decades ago — a rare town boasts of a Dragon-Blooded residing within a few days' ride. When a young outcaste meets another like herself, it's often a jarring moment fraught with emotion. The encounter may well end with swords drawn or a night of frantic passion — or both — but it won't be easily forgotten.

Even more than Dynasts, outcastes thrive in the company of their peers. Some outcastes seek out and become a part of a Sworn Kinship with Dragon-Blooded of the Scarlet Dynasty, becoming heir to the intrigues of their sworn kin's houses but able to call upon Dynastic resources to aid their own struggles. When outcastes come together to form a Hearth, however, often the only desires and needs they're beholden to are their own and those of their sworn kin. Along with camaraderie, they also earn the freedom to pursue goals previously beyond their reach.

Other Outcastes

The following outcaste cultures, as well as the more detailed ones that follow, provide players with potential cultural backgrounds for their characters, Storytellers with possible groups for her player's characters to conquer, and inspiration for other outcaste cultures to serve whatever purpose may be necessary.

The Cult of the Violet Fang: Out of the inhospitable icy wastes of the North rises a resplendent cathedral, its stained glass windows cut from gemstones and its gargoyles hewn from opal. This is the home of the Cult of the Violet Fang, the children of a strange armistice between a decimated Shogunate-era bastion and the invading Fair Folk. Dragon-Blooded members of this reclusive culture devote themselves to honing body and Essence, preparing themselves for a ritual quest into the Wyld

against the cult's raksha ancestors every seven years. Those who return victorious bear alien blessings and otherworldly treasures; those defeated return with their mind and soul in tatters. It's not always easy to tell which is which.

The Grass Spiders: Hidden at the edge of the River Province, this clan of assassins is composed of Dragon-Blooded and mortals alike. Some seek out such a life; others are kidnapped shortly after Exaltation and indoctrinated. Of course, as with any secret sisterhood of killers, more than a few have fallen in love with one another, and occasionally a child is born and raised within the clan's very heart, the hidden fortress-manse called the Unrepentant Sinner Palace. Here, the Three Elite Fiends — believed to be elder outcastes, though no one knows for sure — train their subordinates in every manner of killing, but most especially in the use of poisons. When they strike down their targets, they do so with subtlety, grace, and most importantly *art*.

Heaven's Dragons: When the Exalted threw down the enemies of the gods from their thrones in Heaven, not all returned to Creation. A small population of mortals and Dragon-Blooded, in the service of gods forgotten or absent, live on the periphery of Yu-Shan to this day. Dwelling in tight-knit extended families within tenements carved from subdivided palaces or divine slums teeming with unemployed gods, a few rise to prominence as freelance agents of Heaven, gaining employment in the celestial bureaucracy or carrying out the agendas of a divine patron. Some fall afoul of Heaven's law, and are exiled to Creation, where they bitterly plot their return.

The Khamaseen Battalion: When the Contagion swept the world and the Shogunate tottered and fell, its legions were spread across Creation. General Khamasi Tala, seeing a city dying around her, deserted her post, fleeing with her garrison into the isolated steppes of the far Southeast. The descendants of that lost and forgotten legion still walk the steppe and the Summer Mountains' foothills, passing from village to village, speaking a language long dead anywhere else in Creation. To enter service with the Shogunate's successors in the Realm or Lookshy is unthinkable to them — they know only one punishment for desertion — and instead devote themselves to mercenary work in service to far Southeastern peoples.

The Rogue Legion of Saloy Hin: Seven Imperial legions disbanded rather than let themselves be divided up among the Great Houses. Rumors in the South tell of one such legion wandering the deserts, seeking out unclaimed manses and amassing stores of firedust under the leadership of Saloy Hin, an outcaste graduate of Pasiap's Stair. Once renowned for the daring tactics and rigid discipline of his legion, he recruits Dynastic exiles, outcastes, Exigents, and God-Blooded into his legion while selling firedust to Southern cities, seeking to destabilize the region and establish a foothold as a stepping stone to bringing the Realm under his bootheel.

Yatani's Children: Their manner of dress and speech may be strange, but the stories they tell are stranger yet, for the Children of Yatani claim to hail not from Creation, but from another world, from which they were separated in a terrible, ancient cataclysm. A diaspora culture of savants, they comb through every scrap of lore they can find, hoping to find any evidence of home — and maybe even a way back.

The Wanasaan

The story is the same across Creation — the unquiet dead rise to bedevil the living, dominate them with arcane powers, or prey upon their flesh, and communities make provision against such things. Chiaroscuro has its enormous salt lines; in Great Forks, the dead are pacified by worship alongside gods, one cult among many; and in the Realm, the Immaculate Order crushes any hint of ghostly insurgency with stunning force. Along the Whispering Coast of the far Northwest, beyond distant Fajad — where tiny fishing villages huddle in the lee of rocky coves, wreathed in thickest fog amidst snow and stringy, weathered pine — communities lack such resources, but have recourse nonetheless. When ancestors grow unquiet, when hungry ghosts stalk the night, or when other, darker things well up from the Underworld, they need only build a great bonfire and cast something precious into it, whispering the name of the Wanasaan.

The first sign their call has been answered is always the mist that rolls in off the sea, blanketing the area in a fog thick enough to make the world all but vanish, thick enough to dampen the loudest of shouts to a whisper. Only when the fog snuffs out the bonfire does the exorcist show herself, wrapped in thick cloaks and wearing a wide straw hat to hide her eyes. Moisture drips from every surface in her presence, and when she lifts her arms the various totems and talismans hanging from them jangle discordantly. She is fêted, given the best of everything as she's told of the problem the community faces. When the elders are finished, she'll pause, consider, and nod — this, too, is part of the ritual. Then she'll name a price. The price is always paid, for to refuse the Wanasaan once is to refuse them forever, and the Wanasaan are loath to tolerate a competitor to their services.

A Drowned and Frozen Heart

The Wanasaan tread the line between the living and dead, not only figuratively, but literally. Every Dragon-Blooded member of the family, upon reaching her twenty-fifth year, is ceremonially drowned in a freezing cold spring on the Silent Isle that's forever enshrouded in the unmistakable Wanasaan fog. On occasion, an initiate proves too weak to survive the rite, but it's the only way to ensure the family's preeminence. Mortals born to the family may petition to do so as well (though they're much less likely to survive), as may prospective adoptees. A survivor, when resuscitated, brings a measure of death back with her, a chill spike of ice in her heart from the water she inhaled. This is a source of sorcerous enlightenment (p. XX), and an ever-hungry pit that consumes the souls of the dead.

A Bloodline Touched by Frost

Over two centuries ago, or so family legend has it, Wanasaan Adiura happened upon the Silent Isle. Whether she fell into the Spring of Echoes or drowned herself of her own

volition, none can say, but the terrifying enlightenment she brought with her has spoken for itself over many generations. Her descendants, more mercenary than Adiura herself, still hold the Isle in a kind of possessive reverence as the cornerstone of their monopoly on exorcism in these cold waters. The Wanasaan have built it into a citadel over the centuries, and while not all dwell here, enough do to make it the heart of their tiny, insular culture, a home filled with mist and sorcerous knowledge in equal measure with secret ambitions and bloody plots. For the sake of fresh blood, they marry outside the family at least a few times in every generation, courting in a manner almost as perfunctory as their business dealings. Those who sail away with the Wanasaan rarely return to their families thereafter.

The current head of the Wanasaan family is Kemra, an aged but still vital Wood Aspect who took the Isle from her brother, Shiga, in a bloody coup that decimated the family some thirty years ago. Custom would have her direct the family business from her heavily guarded retreat upon the Silent Isle, not venturing forth to conduct exorcisms herself. But with scarcely a dozen Dragon-Blooded Wanasaan remaining, the family is strained in its efforts to retain its old monopoly. Much of Kemra's time is spent recruiting outcastes for marriage into the family lest its diminished bloodline dwindle to nothing, and she fears she might be forestalling the inevitable. Even her most loyal partisans wonder whether the cost of victory over Shiga was too great.

The Sisterhood of Pearls

A century ago, two Immaculate missionaries came ashore on the Isle of Fevers. They hoped to spread the faith and cultivate a proper society on the island, where a few thin-blooded families of outcastes dominated a sprawling undercaste of farmers, fishermen, and artisans. The passionate rhetoric of Rising Flame and the bounty provided by Willow's Strength won over some of the population, little by little. Within the year, they'd assembled a humble temple — within five, children were being taught to read within it. All the while, Flame and Willow conversed with one another to deepen their understanding of the Immaculate Philosophy.

Year by year they argued, slowly refining the wedge that separated them from their old faith — the Five Insightful Criticisms that redefined the way they saw the world. With religious fervor driving them, they redoubled their efforts, and their new message of absolute equality won them followers without number from the undercaste of the island's native society. Soon, the old order had been abolished; those of the ruling caste either converted or fled the island in exile.

Sister Flame and Sister Willow rebuilt the island in the image of their perfected community, driven by a new faith that guided them ever further. To them, they're the cycle of rebirth itself responding to the excesses of the Dynasty, as a pearl forms to protect a clam's interior from grit. This convenient example, used frequently in sermons, became so popular with the community that they chose it as a name. The Sisterhood of Pearls has, ever since, sought to perfect themselves, as a pearl is mere sand perfected and made beautiful.

The Five Insightful Criticisms

The First Insightful Criticism is: *All souls are part of the cycle of death and rebirth; all souls are therefore equal.*

Unlike the Immaculate Order, the Sisterhood holds that all beings with a soul are equally worthy of respect and compassion, and to kill any being interrupts the lesson that life is meant to teach the soul within. All members of the community are therefore vegetarians, and vastly prefer non-violent solutions — though, if need be, they'll defend themselves or others.

The Second Insightful Criticism is: *The Essence of the Immaculate Dragons is the Essence of enlightenment, but though the enlightened may be wise, and may help to guide others, their souls are no greater in worth.*

Rising Flame and Willow's Strength may lead the community, but it's not because of their blood; nor may the Isle's other outcastes treat the mortal population as inferior as they once did. If all souls are equal, none should be treated as greater than another. In practice, the Dragon-Blooded are still very much respected, and their word given much weight, but any mortal may speak against or criticize them if that mortal finds them wanting of enlightenment according to their station.

The Third Insightful Criticism is: *To divide the community according to place and purpose is to ignore the fundamental equality of all souls; abolish, therefore, all divisions.*

The Sisterhood retains the Immaculate belief that the purpose of life is to instruct the soul, but fundamentally disagrees regarding the organization of society. In the Sisterhood, all but a few personal possessions are held in common, and none are permitted to accumulate wealth or power over others — those who join the community must give up their valuables as part of the process of conversion, either throwing them into the sea or donating them to the Sisterhood's arsenal, a choice that depends largely on the object's utility. The Sisterhood doesn't consider men to be inferior to women, or vice versa. Decisions are made by the entire community after extended religious debate, and anyone may argue what they believe best aligns with the Five Criticisms.

The Fourth Insightful Criticism is: *Dragon-Blooded who squander their enlightenment on the material have turned aside from the True Way; they imperil their souls in doing so.*

Rising Flame and Willow's Strength had always shared a fundamental disgust with Dynastic society and its excesses, which each had joined the Immaculate Order to escape. Seeing how the Order's strictures have utterly failed the Dynasty, they were determined not to let their new, perfected society fall prey to the same petty ambitions. Labor is done in common, and duties are rotated; in this society, all hands are rough from work. Dragon-Blooded in the Sisterhood are, if anything, expected to live in a far more ascetic fashion than their mortal comrades, rather than to surrender to the torpor of luxury.

The Fifth Insightful Criticism is: *The path to enlightenment is not a straight road but a turning wheel; the most high may be reborn as the lowest.*

The Sisterhood doesn't teach that Dragon-Blooded Exaltation is a reward for enlightenment in past lives, but a transient state of grace. Upon death, the soul might be reborn as mortal, Dragon-Blooded, or even wretched Anathema, all in accordance with the greater harmony of Creation. Mortals ought be treated with respect, lest a cruel

Dragon-Blood find herself suffering the same treatment in her next life. The Anathema are wicked, and the Sisterhood forgives the sin of killing one when the Wyld Hunt is called, but they too are deserving of compassion.

Trouble in Paradise

For all that Flame and Willow have come to rely on one another over the last hundred years, and for all that they each do their utmost to support the community they serve as prophets and mystics, for all that they passionately love one another, the two are divided over a question that has consumed their arguments for decades — the matter of the yet-unwritten Sixth Insightful Criticism. Rising Flame submits the following: *Even a pearl was once a grain of sand; so too must the Sisterhood soothe the ache of the Dynasty's misrule.* Willow's Strength's counterpoint: *Even a pearl was once a grain of sand; so too must the Sisterhood be complete in itself.* Their disagreement ripples throughout the Sisterhood as a whole, as disputes previously smoothed over by Flame and Willow make themselves manifest, and nascent factions begin to coalesce.

Rising Flame and her closest adherents seek to proselytize, first across the West and then (in Flame's vision) the whole of Creation, and to replace the Order with the Sisterhood for the betterment of all souls. Flame finds Willow's objection a betrayal of the First Insight, placing the enlightenment of the Sisterhood above the needs of Creation. For Willow's Strength's part, she sees in Flame the seeds of ambition, and though it be for a noble purpose, she cannot bring herself to allow her beloved to imperil her own soul. She and her inner circle strongly condemn any expansion beyond the Isle of Fevers in communal debates.

Flame and Willow know the argument is at a deadlock, and both know that an implacable divide between each other is certain. The only thing keeping them from taking the final step is their love for one another, and for the family they've built for themselves on this remote island — each weeps to think that she may be the one to destroy everything they've sought to build together, but neither can turn aside from their faith. Yet in the end, the decision may not be theirs to make, as the factions that follow them grow increasingly radical in their convictions.

The Temple of the Reverent Whisper

At the confluence of two rivers sits the city of Great Forks, a city that never truly sleeps, that celebrates into the wee hours each and every night. By day, these celebrations favor gods and goddesses without number, who descend upon the City of Temples in their thousands hoping to build a cult of their very own. By night, the mortals of Great Folks take their own pleasure, seeking the blue lanterns that mark the city's profusion of bordellos and pleasure houses.

But one temple turns this arrangement on its head, displaying blue lanterns and streamers at its door by day and night alike, sating divine rather than mortal hungers. This unassuming building of polished stone is the Temple of the Reverent Whisper, and it's dedicated to all gods and none, for here the inhabitants of Heaven may come to have whatever manner of reverence they choose — provided they can pay for it.

Faithful Service

A woman, stripped of her clothing and ceremonially bathed in river water and oil, sits atop the mountain. She does not move, she does not speak, and if she breathes she gives no sign of it. The wind whips around her, driving her long hair across her face like a lash. Her skin goes white in places, yet still, she does not move. She composes a mantra in her mind, five times five times five lines in length. She commits this mantra to memory, but does not recite it until the twenty-fifth day on the mountain. She recites it only once, and then never again.

A man shaves his head — this isn't his act of reverence, but preparation for it, for he doesn't wish his hair to smolder and give off an offensive smell when he lies back in a bed of hot coals. He endures the heat, the burning, the pain, his skin supernaturally tough but not proof against flame. When he rises, the hot coals, artfully arranged, have seared a sutra into his body, writ in reddened skin. He will heal, in time, but until then he wears not even a scrap of clothing, that others might read the book he's made of himself.

Some acts are small, but still deeply meaningful and incredibly dangerous. Gods of poison, for example, have notoriously subtle and deadly tastes — Whirling Lady Koro-Bana prefers to take tea in high ceremony with her favorite priestess at the Temple of the Reverent Whisper once each week, for she's the only person the goddess has ever found who can appreciate the taste of hemlock.

A Business Most Divine

While some gods seek tantric rituals comparable in scope and kind to the pleasure mortals prefer, far more hunger only for worship, for reverence, for the jolt of power and ego that comes of being the focus of a sentient being's obeisance. Worship varies, and some forms are more puissant than others, in proportion with the strenuousness or austerity of the practice in question. Mortals cannot endure the most exotic and demanding forms of worship without risking life and limb, so the Temple of the Reverent Whisper only accepts Dragon-Blooded (and occasional Exigents) as priests and priestesses, for only they're resilient enough to serve its clientele. Popular and in-demand as they are among the various deities of Great Forks, outcastes who serve the Temple are recognized throughout the city, enjoying a status only slightly lesser than that of the gods they serve.

The Temple of the Reverent Whisper sees nigh-constant traffic, not only from local gods, but divinities from far and wide. Occasionally — once a year or so — a god will even descend from Heaven itself for the sole purpose of attending the Temple and calling upon its services. Such an exclusive clientele lends itself exceptionally well to networking. Priests and priestesses engaged in service overhear all manner of gossip between deities, taking note of who's talking to whom and who's most definitely on the outs. Information, too, is valuable, but discretion is what makes that information valuable, and the Temple doesn't speak of its clients' secrets with outsiders. Rather, they merely "advise" what actions may be auspicious and which may not be — an entire wing of the Temple, and the only one in which mortals are permitted, deals exclusively with this arm of the Temple's business.

Such a thriving business model has inspired much jealousy — even in a city where gods regularly walk amongst mortals, such intimate and personal ties are rare and valuable. The Temple of the Reverent Whisper has historically tolerated no competition in its

particular idiom, and thus far it has successfully leveraged its enormous wealth and the favors owed it — by mortals and spirits alike — to ensure that misfortune befalls any who hope to seize a portion of this market for themselves. The current Headmistress of the temple, the outcaste Riela Tenan, has seen no less than three such endeavors ground beneath her heel in the hundred years she's managed the Temple's affairs. She is wise, still very beautiful despite her advanced age, and utterly ruthless when it comes to protecting what she calls her own.

The Seven Storms Brotherhood

Innumerable traders ply Lake Makrata in the Southeast, in the shadow of mountains that conceal countless thieves and bandits. The most dangerous and tenacious of these are the Seven Storms Brotherhood, led by seven outcaste Dragon-Blooded. They've terrorized the region for over a decade, and now their attacks grow in audacity and ambition. Local governments and Guild merchants can neither appease nor capture these bandit lords, so they offer increasing bounties for the Brotherhood's heads.

History of the Seven Storms

Long before the Seven Storms Brotherhood's arrival, low-level banditry and piracy plagued the Lake Makrata region. Guild trade ships and wealthy caravans offer tempting targets to unemployed mercenary groups, barbarian tribes, and desperate farmers. The region's mountains and natural cave systems provide ample hiding places, frustrating soldiers and trackers tasked with capturing outlaws. Traders navigating Lake Makrata must often use narrow channels, valleys and bridges, any of which can hide deadly ambushes.

A decade ago, two outcaste Dragon-Blooded came to Lake Makrata. They called themselves Sky-Choking Sirocco and Spring Squall. Bitter exiles from a foreign shore, these brothers-in-arms saw opportunity there to live in wealth, free of commands from any higher power. They forged a reputation as daring robbers whose audacity and success exceeded anything seen in generations, attracting followers from among the ruthless and the disenfranchised. As they gained Exalted lieutenants, the outcaste bandit lords named themselves the Seven Storms Brotherhood, each claiming a type of baleful weather as their title.

Since then, the Brotherhood has gorged on the region's wealth, poisoning its waters with the blood of rich and poor alike. Villages offer tribute and regional governors send armies, but the Seven Storms won't be calmed. Cities struggle to accommodate refugees from abandoned farmlands. Immaculate temples petition the Breath of Mela — the Immaculate Order's administrative wing for military training and defense — for Dragon-Blooded monks capable of defeating or converting the unruly outcastes, while merchant princes funnel resources into peacekeepers, caravan guards, and food imports to avert the possibility of financial collapse. The region's wealthiest Guild factors have offered a legendary bounty for the Seven Storms, backed by contributions from regional leaders. Desperate merchants and nobles pool dwindling resources to hire mercenaries, strategists, and explorers capable of flushing the Seven Storms Brotherhood out of hiding.

Methods and Resources

The Seven Storms Brotherhood is famous for descending upon villages, ships, and caravans without warning, vanishing well before any organized response can be made. Its outcaste leaders enforce military precision and obedience, masterfully predicting the movements of those who'd cage the Seven Storms. When pressed, they retreat into mountain hideouts, protected by treacherous terrain, cunning traps, and camouflage.

Once the Seven Storms have occupied a village or boarded a merchant ship, they brutalize and rob the population as they see fit. When incensed, the Dragon-Blooded may order other crimes, like kidnappings and mass executions. Hostages are guarded by trained mountain hyenas — some refugees swear that these hyenas are men and women forced into animal form, for they cry and shout like humans. Others believe that the Seven Storms are Anathema who've avoided capture by taking the shapes of beasts and hiding among the packs roaming the mountains.

The Brotherhood has many hideouts and an extensive knowledge of the cave networks riddling the mountains. Their primary base of operations is a Shogunate-era relay tower overlooking a collapsed pass on the road to Varangia. Once, the bell at the tower's apex would resonate with elementals bound in the mountains' depths, a complex chorus audible for hundreds of miles. After centuries of disuse, the bell has been warped: its tolling enrages local elementals, often resulting in deadly rockslides and avalanches.

The Seven Storms

Like pack hunters, the Seven Storms prey relentlessly on the weak and vulnerable. Bounty hunters and heroes seeking to return peace to the region find the Brotherhood a persistent and vicious enemy. Would-be allies must show enough power and ruthlessness to earn the Seven Storms' respect, or experience bloody betrayal at the first opportunity. The Seven Storms Brotherhood's leadership is open only to Dragon-Blooded who show the will to take what they want, without apology or regret. This is their current roster:

Sky-Choking Sirocco is the Seven Storms' leader, an Earth Aspect with a dusky complexion and a quiet air that demands silence in return. His tactical acumen and merciless reputation fostered the discipline necessary for the Seven Storms Brotherhood to become Lake Makrata's dominant bandit gang. He's defeated most of his lieutenants in single combat, through mastery of Steel Devil style and his affinity with the Dark of the Earth, an ominous pair of jade daiklaves. He's also managed the gang's size and appetites, to keep their lifestyle sustainable. This last task has become more difficult following the recruitment of several impetuous younger Dragon-Blooded.

Every member of the Seven Storms Brotherhood forswears their past, following Sky-Choking Sirocco's example. His followers observe that he's an educated man who gains more excitement from bedeviling soldiers and Guild merchants than from exploiting defenseless villages. Some speculate that when the gang's power and influence are sufficient, Sky-Choking Sirocco will reveal ambitions beyond banditry. When he approaches, stones shivering with his footsteps, all speculation ceases.

The gang's second founder, **Spring Squall**, is a tanned Wood Aspect who carries with him the constant smell of poppy flowers and hyena musk. Spring Squall has trained the hyenas of the mountains, teaching them to mimic human voices. He uses them to stage

ambushes and diversions, and to discourage escape from occupied villages. Though he's a skilled wielder of the long spear, these vicious pack-hunters are his greatest weapon.

Spring Squall's appetites have influenced the Brotherhood's choice of targets since their founding. He seeks pleasure in all its forms, treasuring novelty. Sometimes he travels the Lake Makrata region in disguise, to experience a change of pace or to scout an area for a future raid. His genial attitude allows him to fit in nearly anywhere, but he has no patience for those who frustrate or insult him. He fancies the idea of claiming nobility, and pushes Sky-Choking Sirocco to consider taking some territory to rule together.

Blinding Bolt is an Air Aspect and the unofficial second-in-command of the Brotherhood. Before her induction to the band, she'd already earned infamy as a ruthless pirate and menace to Lake Makrata. Bald and pale, with numerous piercings and tattoos, Blinding Bolt's presence strikes terror into the region's populace, who believe her to be a wraith or death-omen.

The former pirate studied tactics and leadership under Sky-Choking Sirocco, and improved upon those lessons with her natural charisma. Many of the bandits she commands are more loyal to Blinding Bolt than to the Brotherhood as a whole. Her own loyalty has never been questioned, but she disdains the idea of claiming or ruling territory. She believes such aspirations will only weaken the Seven Storms Brotherhood, and may challenge Sky-Choking Sirocco's right to command if he decides otherwise.

Changing Weather

Who are the remaining leaders of the Seven Storms Brotherhood? The answer depends on your campaign's needs. They may be canny rivals, unforgivable foes, or resourceful allies. Players may play current or former members of the Brotherhood, or seek entry to their ranks during play. Here are four potential Storms for use as player characters or NPCs:

Depths That Betray is a spoiled, arrogant offspring of privilege who creates clever contraptions to entrap the Brotherhood's victims and evade its pursuers.

Rain of Ashes is a cruel, aggressive warrior concealed in heavy armor, so none may guess their shameful past.

Cold Harvest is a thrill-seeking assassin and martial artist whose loyalty was won in a duel with Sky-Choking Sirocco, and who aims to surpass him.

Heady Monsoon is a rowdy youth who emulates the older Storms, to better conceal any doubt that they're suited to banditry.