

INTRIGUES & ESCAPADES



FADING SUNS



INTRIGUES & ESCAPADES

A FADING SUNS™ SOURCEBOOK

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The angelface vine — known on its native Ungavorox as the slargg creeper — is believed by the local vorox to have evolved within its colorful foliage its beautiful, humanlike face specifically to lure in missionaries. It then entangles them and slowly digests them with its caustic enzymes. Is this not akin to the role of the Church? The Pancreator is our lure, scripture our vines, and the practice of power our enzymes.

— *The Analects of Patriarch Halvor Li Halan* (apocryphal)

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A PRIMER ON CUTTHROAT SOCIETY

There are many dramas you can stage in **Fading Suns**: adventure, mystery, exploration, horror, and pretty much anything you can imagine. This book highlights dramas of intrigue: court conspiracies, priestly plots, and guild schemes. Conniving is the hallmark of suspense stories, spy thrillers, and even adventure yarns like *The Three Musketeers* (the intrigues of Cardinal Richelieu against the queen are the motivator for the musketeers' escapades). Betrayal and backstabbing lie at the heart of political epics like *Game of Thrones*, where the noble ideals of high fantasy are skewered by the realpolitik of red weddings. Aristocratic in-fighting is the engine that drives the messianic revolt in *Dune*.

Once you look past the codes of chivalry, Church scripture, and guild paeons to fair play, a different world comes into focus: a battlefield of betrayal, hypocrisy, and outright cheating. None of the high estates that rule society through divine and moral right come out stainless. *Intrigues & Escapades* lifts up the rock of society's pretensions and reveals the worms writhing in the moist dark soil.

This doesn't mean that such things as honor, charity, and plain dealing are naïve or a fool's game. It does mean that those who hold to those codes need to go in with open eyes, so they can defend against

and counter the cynical ploys of the corrupt. While the game may be rigged, the odds aren't so stacked against the righteous that they can't win. They can increase their odds by learning the rules of the game. But beware: the longer you play the game, the more you might get played. Sometimes the only way to win against the house is to make your own rules.

Intrigues & Escapades serves as a primer on how nobles are bred to a life of intrigue, priests are entwined in worldly affairs, and merchants are taught to always come out on top, no matter who gets the short end of the deal. Gamemasters can use this advice to get a sense for how Machiavellian NPCs might think, and players can use it to better know the enemy. Of course, players won't partake in such skullduggery themselves, right? They'll always walk the good and true path. *Right?*

The book also presents two detailed dramas that throw troupes right into the heart of dirty dealings, backdoor deals, and false identities. There are also a host of drama hooks that gamemasters can use to keep the pressure on the troupe, snaring them in conspiracy after conspiracy.

May the Pancreator protect you from calumny and conspiracy. And may He bless your own schemes with success.



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THE NOBILITY: An Intriguing Life

We are the puppeteers and the universe our theater. Never let them see the strings. Let them think they move on their whim until one sublime moment when they realize their mistake. But they have only themselves to blame for that, don't they? They are not clever enough to cut the strings. In fact, you could say we are doing them a favor. We are making them stronger. Teaching them the consequences for letting down their guard.

— Lady Charlotte Decados, holovid to her son, Gerard Decados



Before they are born, those fortunate (or unfortunate) enough to claim nobility are tangled in webs of obligation, power, money, schemes, and privilege. They are taught from the cradle to represent their house in the way it wants them to.

Besides the obvious goals of wealth and position, honor and reputation are the currency of nobility. Some nobles will do anything (e.g. lie, cheat, kill, blackmail, steal, etc.) to earn or cement their reputation, whatever that reputation may be. Esteem, in the world of royalty, all too often stems from executing successful plots and maintaining the upper hand.

Nobles live a lonely existence because the foundation of noble society is “trust no one.” Even if they have family and people they call friends, relationships seldom run deep. Nobles deal with this loneliness by either immersing themselves in pursuing individual goals or enjoying a plethora of hobbies. It is not unusual for an aristocrat to have skills in a variety of arts such as painting, singing, dancing, even if it is only to keep their hands busy and their mind off their isolation.

Some nobles turn away from the aristocracy to pursue a simple family life away from drama and constantly looking over their shoulder. Noble gossip circles talk about these outcasts in whispers and some with a little jealousy.

This chapter explores the life of a noble from birth to death, focusing on how the machinations and plots of nobility affect them at every stage. For nobles, education, career, marriage, and even death are moves in a game no one can ever win. But not for lack of trying.

A Noble Birth

A child! This is excellent news. I have been waiting for just the thing to put us in a good position to gain favor with Alexius. What impeccable timing. My brother will not be happy of course, but we will invite him to the presentation ceremony and promise him he can keep the estate. I'll want something bigger built anyway. That should mollify him. He always did like this place. Will your parents want to know first? I think they had that little faux pas last month and this should do nicely to erase that and they'll owe us. I should jot this down.

— Baron Luther Hawkwood, upon hearing of his daughter-in-law Luna's pregnancy

Children are a requirement for the continuation of noble bloodlines, and extremely useful pawns in achieving advancement goals. Some of these goals might be noble and benign, but some are not. Savvy nobles plan the birth down to the minute, leaving little to chance. Why? Because other nobles may use the occasion as an opportunity for their own benefit, and the parents-to-be won't necessarily like what they have in mind. Outside of noble circles it is a joyous and elaborate event, but in reality, the birth of a noble, if used carefully, can be one of the most effective power moves in politics, whether for good or ill.

Pregnancy

When noble parents find out they are producing an heir, planning for the baby's arrival begins immediately. Noble children are often seen as exploitable tools. Would it be better to betroth the child in exchange for a mutually beneficial alliance or give them an opportunity chosen to strengthen family resources? Who needs an invitation to the presentation ceremony to discuss future ventures? Who should be excluded? These are decisions to carefully consider and are among the first choices the parents make that directly

affects the new noble's future. Not surprisingly, it isn't usually the baby's future the parents have in mind.

Of course, not all noble children are planned or used as pawns. A few outliers are the result of affairs between married nobles (not to each other, of course), unmarried (but not betrothed) nobles, or between nobles and commoners. They are the children of lust or love. In such cases there are places, usually heard of by word of mouth, where the child-carrying person can convalesce during the pregnancy away from prying eyes. Discovery could lead to blackmail and scandal. The fates of these children vary. Sometimes they are claimed by the nobility, but their true parentage is covered up. They could be given up for adoption and never know who their parents are, or learn much later in life who their parents are, which can lead to drama at family functions if the child chooses to confront their birth parents.

Birth Announcements

Time and place are extremely important when announcing an impending birth. Nobles generally don't like to have their announcements overshadowed by others, so they keep the news secret until they can deploy it at the moment it will have the most impact.

Once the baby is announced the parents become targets. Many a pregnant noble has been whisked away to a secured location until the birth. This is especially true of those in the higher echelons of power. Only those closest to the parents are allowed access, but even with intense security, there are no guarantees.

Extremely paranoid/infamous nobles hire look-alikes or stand-ins to act as decoys. They may even choose to hide the pregnancy altogether, but such juicy information doesn't stay secret very long. Decades ago, Baron Hamal al-Malik announced his wife was pregnant and sent her off to relax with her handmaidens. It was later whispered his wife was not actually pregnant and one of the "handmaids" was actually the baron's pregnant lover. The wife went along with the ruse to protect their reputation and in the end, they had an heir they claimed was theirs.

The Presentation

Presentations of a noble child to society vary in detail, but they are almost unanimously used to spend an obscene amount of money to show off how delighted the parents are and how well-positioned they are to spoil the child. This is the time for families to partake in their own personal traditions. Traditions might include the giving of traditional names, the passing of heirlooms, a speech from the parents, the lavishing of gifts, or announcements about the child's future. Li Halans are known for having religiously themed

presentations, for instance, with lengthy blessings from the Church. Guests may have the opportunity to view the baby, offer gifts, or have a moment to speak quietly with the parents. Just like other events in a noble's life discussed below, the presentation of a baby is a fraught endeavor and taken very seriously.

Siblings also have a role to play. They are usually brought forward to declare their loyalty to the new sibling and offer their own gifts. Sometimes new siblings are relieved to share noble responsibility, while some wish to hoard all the glory for themselves. They can show their displeasure in any number of ways. They can declare they are not going to accept the new child (this can occur especially if there is a large age difference). They could give a gift mocking the child or refuse to show up at all. What is not said can speak volumes.

Once the baby finishes their primary duty of being seen, they are whisked off by caretakers so the parents can take care of their own duties. This brings us to another reason the family may choose to hold a presentation ceremony: It is evidence that the baby exists.

Nobles are not above lying about a pregnancy or even showing off another's baby claimed as their own for various reasons, such as inheritance requirements. They may need to prove they have an heir or gain leverage over a rival. The ceremony is as much for the public to see there is a child as it is to celebrate a birth.

A Noble Education

Learn all you can — and I don't refer only to the teachers; both the weaker and stronger students will teach you things. They will exploit your mistakes and force you to confront them. The classroom is all well and good, but it is outside the walls, in the corridors and empty spaces of your school, where you will learn nobility. Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut, and you'll come out of there at the head of the class. I expect no less from my child and remember: The family name rests on your success or failure.

— Lady Charlotte Decados, in a holo vid to her son, Gerard Decados

Education is paramount for a noble. Students are taught math, history, and other foundational topics, but also strategy, psychology, and other subjects imperative for someone with high ambitions. Book learning is not the only or most valuable teaching method utilized in noble schools. Practical tests in

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conjunction with subtle and not-so-subtle mental tests are standard measures of student progress at both professional academies and family-tutored fiefs.

Invictus Academy

The most common route for noble education remains private tutoring, but in the years of the Pax Alexius, noble institutions of learning have become an accepted option where children of different houses study together. The best noble education institution is Invictus Academy, located on Criticorum, with small campuses on other planets. The Academy was founded and is run by members of both House Torensen and the Pedagogues Guild. The two have partnered to expand their interests in teaching nobles and preparing them for knighthood.

The main campus' infamous maze is perfect for holding private conversations, while a myriad of paths and secret passages provide students with spying opportunities (if they are lucky enough to discover these nooks and crannies). It is tradition that the students are never told all the architectural secrets of the school but must find them on their own. Some students may be fortunate and have an alumnus relative or ally who can fill them in on at least some of the best places to study or converse secretly.

Those who are the brunt of too many prank stunts or fail their classes are sent home to their families. This is a great dishonor. The only worse disgrace is when a student chooses to leave, which does happen. Perhaps they're bored and seek adventure outside the Academy walls, or they just don't fit in and find it an agony to keep trying, or they heed an inner calling to the priesthood. Worse: they join a guild. Often the parents will try to brush these incidents off as a decision they have made and disparage the Academy for not meeting the needs of their child, to preserve their honor.

Though the Academy is opulent and bright on the outside, underneath the carefully manicured exterior are a plethora of secrets.

STRATEGIC LEARNING

Lessons at the Academy cover a range of subjects intended to enrich basic knowledge, with an extra focus on strategy. The curriculum is filled with classes unknown in common schools. They study great schemes of the past, battle tactics, politics, diplomacy, acting, psychology, strengthening logic, consequence analysis, problem solving, critical thinking, and debate, to name a few. These are often competitive classes with limited enrollment and so even getting into them



requires strategy and planning or the student will miss out. These classes are not uncoincidentally relevant to everyday interactions between students, and it is expected that the students can and should put their principles into practice immediately.

Sports and other extracurricular activities offered at noble schools teach long-term planning and strategy focus. These activities encourage thinking five moves ahead and preparing for counter attacks, all vital skills for young nobles. Analysis of texts and art is also considered a desired skill, because it teaches the students how to see beyond the surface and base conclusions on sound interpretation.

This differs from home-schooling in two distinct ways. For one, the young nobles preparing for their squireships get an early start on social interactions. Second, experiencing more than one tutor's style can be greatly beneficial for understanding others. On the other hand, home-schooled students tend come out with more of their self-esteem intact and might be less anxious than their Academy counterparts.

TESTS

Besides standard tests like essays, short answers, or multiple choice, students are also given psychological tests, not only face-to-face with teachers, but also in scenarios that put them into situations where they have to make tough choices.

For example, a student "discovers" the answers to a test beforehand (this is set up by the teacher). What do they do with the information? Do they keep it for themselves, sell it to the other students, or turn it in? The results are very telling.

GRADUATION

An Invictus graduation ceremony is about awards, ribbons, medals, and other paraphernalia showing off student accomplishments. The students look like heavily decorated war heroes, and with some of the tactics used by teachers it is not an inapt metaphor. The first student to cross the stage is always the most decorated, and this achievement allows the student and their family the greatest leverage for a better squireship. The closer to the front of the line, the better the opportunities and bragging rights.

Teachers encourage this behavior, and families put money aside for this purpose. It hasn't even been unheard of for students to exchange graduation position among themselves in exchange for favors later or other bribes. The teachers see it as one last test for their students. It is not unheard of for parents to bribe their child's way to a spot closer to the front. Some unfortunate students have been tricked into leaving the line

to deal with an "emergency," only to find they lost their place at the last minute. It is that important.

The graduation party is filled with students chatting up parents and teachers alike to land a good squireship after they graduate. Those who are lucky receive one right away, but the longer a student languishes without a post the louder the whispers about their competence. When that happens, those in a position to offer squireships are less likely to give the young noble a chance. This becomes a self-feeding loop that takes some skillful maneuvering to get out of.

A Noble Squire

You have to worry about yourself, Your Grace. If you don't... well we've just seen the results, haven't we? You trusted her and she betrayed you. You were too blinded by her beauty; she knew, and she used you. You could learn from this. Learn how she manipulated you and never let it happen again. Find a similar power in yourself and have no compunction about deploying it.

— Lord Maximus Justinian's advice to Duke Oscar Hawkwood following his sultry affair

After graduation a noble is squired to another noble of their own house. After their squireship, they are knighted. Nobles with influential parents might squire within their own close family, but those with less-connected parents often prefer to squire with someone of higher rank outside the immediate family, but still within the same house of course. The squire doesn't want to be thought to have no prospects and to be taking charity.

The rank of the squire's noble is a point of pride. Squiring to a knight is good, but squiring to a countess or duke is even better. Other important considerations for the squire when choosing with whom they squire are connections and perhaps an influence on the squire's desired calling. If a noble is interested in courtly matters rather than military affairs, it would be wise to squire with someone known for such things.

Harsh Realities

While they were in school, the nobles had teachers watching them and lived in a controlled environment. Now, while they do have a noble they serve, their squireship represents a new level of independence and learning.

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They are learning to rule, from war lore to fief management, but are also expected to know enough to protect themselves. A young noble learns quickly the first time another squire seriously betrays them, or they watch their lord maneuver through the machinations of daily life. It is hands-on study with larger consequences than anything in their home school or at the Academy.

In school, these matters are games and framed as friendly competition, not to be taken seriously. Here they learn the final lessons to becoming a knight and hopefully have some idea what they are doing, either through schooling, inheritance, or less likely, through their own deeds.

Opportunism

Nobility means watching for and snatching opportunities, and the squireship is where the ability to recognize opportunity is honed. As a squire, they learn to interact with the Merchant League guilds and Church sects: How to work with them, not make them angry, but also not be snowed by them. They are expected to build alliances among the younger set of priests and guilders who will later be in positions to help when the squire becomes a ruler. They will be looking for ways to eventually build their own entourages with people who will help their rule, but also help them in their own calling.

Method of the Game

The goals of a noble are usually inherited. Young squires aiming to be knights are expected to follow in their families' footsteps. This is especially true of the firstborn children. Children born later down the line might gain some leeway, but they are still expected to aid house ambition. Their method of rule depends largely on the house to which they belong and the person to whom they are squired. Decados are the most openly cruel and aggressive, while the Li Halan are focused on manners and more religious pursuits. The final piece of squireship is not only learning the practicalities of how to rule, but also style of rule: cruel, duplicitous, pious? Nobles who find that their methods and goals go against those of their families will have difficulty managing their house's expectations and their own desires.

A Noble Knighting

I have been planning this for 10 years. All you have to do is slip the note to Theresa. I know there is no reason why I should trust you, but I am willing to bet you will find it more beneficial to help me than to betray me. You know my ambition and you know I will probably succeed. Wouldn't you rather bask in that light than be lost in the shadows like the others? Start tonight. Stand by my side when I take the stage and we will take the worlds by storm.

— Duke Blaire Decados to his younger brother Lucas, just before his knighting

A noble's knighting is their first significant opportunity to present themselves to society as a true adult. The knighting also allows the opportunity for society to measure up the newly adult knight. It is the official end of squirehood, as they are finally knighted by the noble for whom they squired. Even when a squire has already received a battlefield knighting, a ceremony is still held later to make it official.

The knighting ceremony includes an oath of fealty to a lord of higher rank. This could be the noble for whom the knight squired, one of their parents, another family member, or another noble of the house. If nothing else, it will be to the Prince of the house.

Planning

Planning is crucial. When the time comes for their debut, the young noble is brought before their parents and given their blessing. They get total power over the event, though some parents will still try and control their child even then.

A long time ago, a feud sparked between the Keddah and the Justinians because two young nobles, one from each family, wanted to use the same venue for their knighting. Months after the discovery of the venue conflict they were still trying to out-buy or out-bribe the other for it. In the end, the Keddah triumphantly walked down the stairs to greet their guests at the venue and the Justinians had to embarrassingly find another locale.

For those invited to the party, this became a decision of which one to attend, because neither of the nobles were willing to change the date of their party so they could both use the venue. That would be surrendering power.

The vendors made out like bandits. While the two families fought, the best vendors on the planet got outrageous bids for their services. No matter who they chose as a client, they made money hand over fist.

The Ball

The atmosphere, the glamour, the riches, the dancing, the whispered deals — including deals on who to take as a companion to the debut. There is a message in the choice of companion that speaks to the alliances the noble wishes to make or who they have already chosen to ally with. Requests from would-be companions are received and considered. These often include what amounts to a resume of what the companion or their family can do for the noble, should they agree.

The League and the Church are not to be forgotten in this. If a noble chooses a guildler or priest as a companion this could be looked upon with scandal or approval. Many al-Malik would be delighted to see a guildler companion, but the Li Halan would much prefer a priest.

If the young noble knight wants to shock, they might choose an alien or even a commoner to really send a message. When the Emperor married Freya

Eldridsdottir, Vuldrok were all the rage for knighting companions for the next few seasons.

Some nobles dress in disguise or create a place where they can watch the proceedings before they make their appearance, to absorb the atmosphere of the room and essentially become a fly on the wall. It's also a great information-gathering tactic. Lady Amita Sung Li Halan of Kish discovered that her cousin, a boon companion during her youth, was trying to lure the Mitchau weaponsmith family to build their new factory on his lands — something Lady Amita had long desired for her family, which her cousin well knew. So began a decade-long feud over the contract, ending when the weaponsmiths, tired of waiting, ended the deal after they realized they were losing money and business due to the drama.

At another knighting, Sir Emilio Hazat de Sutek planned a masquerade party and spread a rumor that he was wearing a red costume with a black mask. He wore a white outfit and spent all of the ball watching from afar as guests interacted with his decoy in the red-and-black mask. He then had the freedom to follow them afterwards to read their true feelings and intentions.

There are as many types of knighting as there are nobles. For example, a noble might not have an elaborate knighting affair and choose instead mysterious intrigue as their theme. They lean into the idea of an enigma and want to do everything they can to get everyone curious. One day invitations start arriving, elegant and expensive but vague on details. The rumors begin: Who is the knighting for? Where is it going to be? Who else is going to be there? This throws the community that thrives on having the upper hand for a loop because there are so few details to plan with. Details arrive as needed. The guests are transported to mystery spot where the knight will take “meetings” with guests. This is a great tactic to use to invite people whom the new knight knows would never take a forthright invitation, or to keep undesirables away.

Image is everything. First impressions as a noble count, which makes the knighting an important milestone in a noble's life.



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A Noble Marriage

Darling, I know how you feel, but my marriage means nothing. It's convenience. There is no reason you can't stay with me. Our relationship doesn't have to change. I know you don't completely agree, but isn't being together in a limited capacity better than nothing? You won't want for anything and you will be treated like a princess without all the nasty duties my partner will have. All of the perks and none of the drab, boring politics.

— Baroness Haylynn al-Malik

A noble marriage is the most heavily negotiated event in a noble's life and, not coincidentally, the biggest decision they make. A marriage ties people legally and socially. It is the most far-reaching event in terms of influence and power.

Arranging a Marriage

It was once the case that marriages were often arranged pre-birth, but the Emperor Wars caused havoc with this tradition, as prearranged grooms and brides would die in the war, or lose their lands and wealth, or become invalids, etc. It was disastrous for some families, stuck with a now-impooverished noble prospect. Hence, it became the custom to wait until the marriage was on firmer ground. Now that peace has returned, many houses seek a return to the old ways, but many resist this, fearing they'll be stuck in an unfruitful alliance. Some nobles enjoy the fact they don't have to make the decision and acquiesce. Some feel their parents' choice is poor and want a better match. Some hate all their options and rebel by having an affair, refusing to marry, or possibly running away.

PRENUPTIAL AGREEMENTS

A prenuptial contract is a behemoth, frequently as large as books. They cover all aspects of merging a family and any potential assets the merger might include, such as finances, property, children, and where they are going to live after the ceremony. Also covered are the parameters of divorce, infidelity, death, or the names of future children.

These negotiations, usually mediated by House Torenson, can take weeks, if not months, to complete. They are tedious and require a lot of stamina, especially if there are disagreements about details. If an agreement cannot be reached, the document will not

be signed, and weeks of work are wasted. Wars are started over less than the issues included in a noble prenuptial agreement.

The Marriage

The wedding day, much like the knighting, is filled with positioning and jockeying for power by the guests and the married couple. The ceremony itself, is designed for showing off money and influence. There are vows, a reception, and dance. Talking with the married couple is a status symbol, and everyone expects to be judged by their wedding gift.

After the wedding, the honeymoon may be the first time the couple gets to know each other, which can lead to surprise, if they decide to spend time together at all. The details of the arrangement are set, but how to interact with each other is another matter entirely, and it isn't always pleasant. A standard practice in such a case is setting up a lover or two in secret second homes. Some nobles maintain numerous homes for this purpose.

This isn't always true. Some couples are true business partners. Some hold no animosity but still choose to see as little of each other as possible, each allowing the other to follow their own interests. There are, of course, the noble couples who are actually in love. It is rare, but it can happen. Love is the last consideration for a noble marriage, if it is considered at all, but occasionally the stars align just right.

Alas, the more common scenario is for the couple to actively work against each other. More than one noble couple has gotten married just out of spite and a need to keep an eye on each other. Such marriages are quite the entertaining topic of discussion in the clubs. Their parties are always well attended just to watch the sparks, which often includes property damage.

Affection

Emotions and true affection are best avoided when it comes to noble relationships. Sentiments are nothing but weapons, and even though tales of nobles who gave in to their feelings are some of the most popular stories around the fireplace, most nobles avoid any kind of sentiment. If they absolutely cannot help themselves, then showing affection is kept secret and hidden in the corners of the noble's heart.

Lovers are one thing; they provide physical pleasure, but to allow vulnerability is inviting disaster and nothing good can come of it. It is the wiser course for nobles to avoid affection, but most nobles fail in this endeavor. They keep diaries or pour their feelings into their hobbies or art. Anything to channel it out of themselves and somewhere else where it can't be used against them.

Ballads and novels are written about impulsive nobles who have no control over their desires and although they may exhibit self-control publicly, they seldom remain so in private. In fact, many nobles are envious of those who are free to love who they want.

A Noble Game

“Cards are very interesting. They have the same faces and the same backs, but each game is different and exciting. What makes it truly thrilling, in my estimation, is the people around the table. Learning cards is a study in people’s personalities. Watch someone play cards and you can tell if they are aggressive, conservative, or nervous. Reading nobles is difficult, but with practice it becomes easier. Study hard and even lose a few hands to see what happens. I guarantee it is the best education money can buy.”

— Lady Adeline Keddah, in a holo vid to her daughter, Serafina, while she was attending Invictus Academy

Each stage of a noble’s life has its unique pitfalls, but how do nobles use their skills in everyday life and how exactly do they get one over on each other? This section explores the tactics nobles use to navigate the halls of power without getting themselves manipulated or killed while demonstrating their cleverness. It is walking a razor, and each noble has specialties and methods they employ regularly to walk it.

SOCIAL RANK

Rank is quite important to a noble, and moving up in the hierarchy just as important. A noble must prove themselves worthy of increased duties and responsibility. They can also gain rank by lying, cheating, and getting in good with anyone who can give them a leg up.

Titles are often conferred after the death of a predecessor. In the case of nobles without a clear heir, lesser-ranked nobles often wedge their way into their good graces, hoping they will be rewarded with inheritances.

COMPETITION

Competition is another chance for nobles to gain standing and prove their superiority. There are all kinds of competition: Who can make the most

wealth in a month? Sports. Races. Who will get married first? Who will get drunk and pass out at their cousin’s wedding? Anything that can be turned into a competition will be.

Wily nobles participate to show off skills. There is just as much bragging going on between allies behind the scenes as there is from those in the competition. Everyone wants to see their allies win because that makes them look good by proxy. Choosing winners is an important life skill.

Don’t have the skills yourself? Just hire someone.

When a noble boasts about their accomplishments, it is beholden on all the nobles present to one-up them. If one can relay their accomplishment with exaggerated casualness, all the better. A night of pleasant diversion can turn into a very passionate game of one-upping each other at the slightest provocation. Hours are lost discussing which is the bigger accomplishment: getting a child into the best school or marrying into a high-ranking family.

Nobles will use their entourages to win competitions; at least, those who want to win do. A troupe-member with guild connections might be able to find out information about the contest field to give advantage. Another might be able to chat up the judge and bias them toward the noble. There are all sorts of ways an entourage can help the noble win and this helps the whole entourage in the process.

CONTRACTS

Contracts are binding agreements between nobles. A verbal agreement is well and good, but getting it in writing seals it. Why? A verbal agreement is easily broken. One of the biggest coups is forcing a noble to write down the parameters of an agreement. There are two types of contracts: the public contracts (marriage agreements) and private contracts signed in secret and used as insurance. Nobles use astounding techniques and protections to ensure contracts cannot be fraudulently signed. They practice hard-to-create, hard-to-forge signatures and contract with the Engineers Guild to create unique think-machine verifications. Contracts can be anything from promising to attend a particular event to leaving certain property alone.

Learning how to negotiate a contract and wield one appropriately when it is threatened is a survival skill. Employing a good Reeve, who can be trusted, is an intelligent move, but they are in demand and expensive. A lucky or extremely prudent noble might have a Reeve in their entourage who can not only make the contract ironclad, but also see any holes in the contract.

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GIFTS

Gifts are power moves. The meaning, price, and rarity of a gift all reflect the esteem of the person receiving it and says volumes to society about the giver and the receiver. Gifts can dig deep and mock. Consider the time-honored tactic of “accidentally” sending a rival a gift intended for someone else and watching the fallout. This move requires a lot of plausible deniability and great acting skills to pull off. A noble will strive to be present when giving a gift to appreciate the reaction for good or ill. If being there is impossible, the noble will at least talk to someone who can reliably convey the reaction or send one of their entourage in their place.

Giving a loaded gift means there will be retaliation. Some nobles have been sending each other gifts for years, each trying to up the ante. Even if it is a gift of affection, a gift can quickly become a passive aggressive competition spiraling out of control. The idea that whole planets have been bought and sold for the sake of a gift and public perception may be ridiculous to the commoner, but to the noble it is their everyday life.

FAVORS

In the right circumstances, favors are more powerful than money. Trading favors, calling in favors, and asking others for favors is almost a hobby for nobles. The goal is to gather as many owed favors as possible, while owing few yourself. The more favors a noble can call upon the more leverage and power they have. Favors vary in size. If someone is asked to borrow an estate for an evening to impress someone, that is certainly not as big of a favor as keeping a dirty secret from going public. Nobles spend hours negotiating the size of a favor. If one plays their cards extremely well, they may end up with a sizable favor for a pittance.

A favor is never given lightly and requires some precise wording and skillful persuasion to come out on top. Extrapolating out, nobles must balance when to grant a favor and how much it will benefit them in the future.

A noble may lie about their abilities for the sake of a favor and worry about how to deliver it later, an incredibly risky gamble. A diverse entourage can be incredibly useful in this case. The Engineer can call on his guild for the tech aid necessary to follow through on getting a spaceship working. The Amalthean priest can get access to the merciful techs needed to cure Baron Gamal’s parasitic affliction, making him eternally grateful.

GAMBLING

Gambling of any kind is a means to hone skills and a good excuse to get business done over a friendly bet. Anything from simple games of chance to large, expensive tournaments will do. Gambling settles disputes and games have also changed the fate of planets.

Nobles will gamble on anything, not just games. Races or what color someone’s dress might be at the wedding. It doesn’t matter as long as there is some outcome to bet on. It is considered ill manners to refuse a bet and can sometimes be considered cowardly. Though gambling is legal, there are private, invitation-only establishments for riskier betting. Nobles use them because they enjoy the risk and they enjoy a place where they can be crude. However, some incautious nobles have let information slip in these establishments that they shouldn’t have, and it came back to haunt them after.

TRYSTS

Getting into scandalous situations with someone not your partner is common; getting caught is another matter. Just as there are the places nobles go to ride out pregnancies, there are places where nobles conduct affairs in secrecy and quiet. It is behavior everyone knows about but no one discusses, until someone decides to air out the dirty laundry. At that point, the noble better hope they have nothing to hide because it will be used against them. People won’t ask about affairs if they are busy pointing fingers at someone else who has more to lose.

MONEY

Money makes the universe go around and it is an incredibly versatile tool. It can buy resources, silence, legitimacy — and don’t forget showing it off and collecting it. The acquisition of money is another game that nobles play and love to win. They don’t have to do anything with the money to be impressive. A noble can hoard it and use just enough to show off, but they better make sure someone knows they have it. A rival will think twice before going after someone they know can buy their way out of anything they throw at them.

LAND

Land is of great importance and value to a noble. It’s what gives nobles their titles and is irrevocably tied to legacy, tradition, inheritance, and war for more territory.

The Emperor Wars rained chaos on the noble class, with land changing hands too many times to count as territory was won or lost by the same houses, both violently and sometimes ransomed off. This took a toll not only on the land but the families themselves.

Many nobles were left with no land claims, clinging to empty titles that could not be handed down to their progeny. Even when they maintained ownership of their personal properties and businesses within their old claims, and so had continued revenue, it was nothing like it was before. Pressure now builds to start land wars so that noble children will have something to inherit. Emperor Alexius is trying to avoid this. Part of the reason he founded the Questing Knights was so that nobles could go forth and find new lands to settle as their legacy, to avoid more internal war and bloodshed — with a bonus of expanding his empire.

There are people making their living closing deals for nobles. Like other vendors, they can profit whenever land comes into a bidding war between two nobles. For example: Duchess Peregrine Hawkwood wanted to buy a piece of land holding sentimental meaning for their child, Oliver, and his new spouse, Rosabella Decados. Lord Fergus Decados, father of the bride, found out about the purchase and tried to buy the same piece of land so he could be the first to gift it to the children. Neither parent was willing to give in and it became a land-and-money war between the two families until one side finally buckled over a year later, and after the children were already married. (Onlookers are still trying to figure out which side capitulated.)

PEER PRESSURE

It doesn't take much effort to manipulate someone, if done correctly. All it takes is a whispered derisive comment to nudge someone the way you want them to go. "Are you still wearing that to the ball? I always thought you were fashionable, my lady. Much too fashionable to wear such a thing. Let me help you. I have just the thing."

Another useful skill to deploy is whisper pressure. For example, a noble stands near the back of a crowd at a party, watching another noble and mumbling, "I do hope no one finds out she is sick. That would be terrible, especially when she has the wedding next week. I don't know if I'll go; I don't want to become ill." Done correctly, no one will know exactly who said it, but the information will spread through the building. The following week the wedding is catastrophically under-attended because of the rumor. The noble getting married is horribly embarrassed, and when they find out what happened it is too late.

A Noble Fall

"I do not care how long it takes, how many worlds I have to burn, or how many favors I have to perform. I will watch them suffer. I will stand in the dark as they slowly lose every single asset. I will turn their children against them. All of their wealth will crumble to dust. I will make it last years. I will watch it diminish their health and happiness. Then, when they are begging in the street with nothing left, that's when I will step into the light and tell them it was me."

— Lord Honor Justinian, in an address to his family on his birthday

When a plan fails, the noble loses face in the eyes of society. The derisive talk and whispers about their deficiencies haunt them. It is harder to form alliances when society deems you inept and contacts no longer return your messages. It becomes a rapidly unwinding spiral. One slip-up and everything falls apart. The court of public opinion is harsh and changes swiftly in the aristocracy.

Losing Status

A noble attends a huge dinner, planning to let slip that they have recovered the beloved stolen heirloom of the host family. Their goal? To ask an exorbitant "reward" for returning it, even though they were the one who had it stolen. Imagine the noble's surprise when the real heirloom in question is brought out to the owner. The noble's failed scheme is revealed for all to see and now their only choices are to leave or to sit through the dinner under the triumphant smirk of their host. Even as they sip their wine cup at that dinner, they begin plotting their revenge. Something bigger and better.

This is one of numerous ways a noble loses status. There is a sliding scale of disgrace. A faux pas of language is not as serious as a tacky scene at a wedding, for example. However, this has never stopped a noble from overreacting. It doesn't even matter if a noble is guilty. The calling out and embarrassment is worse. Nobles don't mind if you're cruel. They care if you're sloppy.

Response/Revenge

Plotting revenge is a complicated matter. One must consider the nature of the offense and how much lost face must be regained. Something as simple as taking money or power isn't enough. The revenge must fit the offense. Poetic justice is the best kind of justice.

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Information is the most useful tool for revenge. The better informed a noble, the more surgeon-like the comeuppance is served. The best results come from homing in on the one relevant and perfect weakness to exploit. This method does require time to percolate. Information takes time to gather and the most satisfying forms of revenge take years to set up for the exquisite payoff.

Though the long approach is deemed superior, hot-headed nobles indulge in flashy revenge displays. This is a risky response, calculated or not, and if it does not pay off, they must be careful not to dig themselves deeper by adding another blunder onto their lowered status, compounding the situation until there is no hope of redeeming themselves. Does this make them think twice before seeking revenge? No. How tacky! It means they have to work harder and better. At the very least, they will go down scheming.

Regaining Status

Nobles keep a list, mental or digital, of allies who can help them. If they are smart, they have merchants, tradespeople, and even clergy in their pocket. Entourages and a large number of contacts among different sects, orders, guilds, and yeoman societies are imperative to nobles.

People who do not have reputation to lose can be very helpful because they don't have the same concerns and mentality as the nobles and aren't likely to be persuaded by the same things. They are also likely the only people talking to them after their loss of face, or at least the only ones who won't expect hefty favors in return.

The noble calls in all those favors they have been hoarding and may be forced to give out favors in return. This is the reason it is important for nobles to hone skills that are useful beyond nobility and make themselves irreplaceable. This might be an art collection or sole access to a valuable resource.

For revenge seekers with a dramatic flair this may involve disguises, to be discarded at the right moment to make an impact.

Sometimes cycles of regaining status and revenge start feuds that go on so long they spill into funerals and wills, lasting decades and generations, upheld by family members who don't remember the slight in the first place. Not that it ultimately matters to them. Nobles seek any excuse to show off their skills. "A noble with no enemies has never done anything worthy and is not deserving of respect."

Duels

When lost honor can't be rectified by any other means, a duel may be the only way to restore a noble's place in



society. This is a last resort, because nobles do not like to get their hands dirty; they pay or bribe others for that. The time and weapons are set quickly and those who can attend do so, because no one wants to miss out on a duel and have to hear about it second hand. The challenged party gets to pick the weapon and the place which will give them the most advantage. The result of the duel is considered final and the matter is settled thereafter.

A noble with a talented entourage would be prudent to use them to help in making sure the duel goes well. This could include sharpening weapons, blessing sword arms, keeping guard for treachery, sabotaging the opposition, or gaining intelligence about the other side.

A Noble Death

Children, it is up to you to carry on my plans. You know what I have been working toward my whole life now. Viewing this holovid should make everything clear. I hope you learned from me how to succeed. As I write these words, I imagine the future of our family. Some of you make me proud and some of you disappoint me. I have drawn up my will accordingly.

— Lady Lora Li Halan, in her final holovid

Final plans are laid. The noble knows they must now see to their legacy. Does this mean they stop planning for the future? Oh no. It simply means they won't see the fruits of their labor. They are about to write the signature on their life. Funeral dramas, rumored fake deaths, family rivalries, snubbing, dark discoveries, and laundry that only airs after someone dies are gossip fodder for years. There is no finer place for gossip than a funeral, because at least one person can't do anything about the conversation.

The Last Days

Those who die suddenly are seen as unfortunate, because they have no time to prepare for their death, and unless they have planned for that contingency, years of planning fall apart because of an accident or a duel gone wrong. No, it is better to die of illness or old age so there is time to plot and recite scripted last words. This is why nobles are paranoid and construct safety measures within safety measures, not only to prevent losing status but to ensure they do not die of unnatural causes before their plans can bear fruit without them. The noble in poor health or who contracts an incurable disease is an interesting

phenomenon because they have nothing to lose. They are the epitome of burning out rather than fading away, because they are prone to grand gestures and ambitious plans. They use their shortened life to create the biggest impression possible so that they live on for years in song and legend after they succumb to their illness.

The Will

After a noble dies, the will must be read as soon as possible. It is their final wishes put into a document. At least, that is what a will is publicly. It may take heirs time to get through the jumpweb to get to the reading and the longer it takes, the more time others have to plot to dispute the will.

It is well known among the nobility that trusted people are given secret instructions to put into motion after the noble dies. It is up to the trusted individual whether they follow through, and the dying noble always picks their most trusted ally. Even then, secondary plans are put in place. One tactic involves making the plan so beneficial for them they would not think of doing otherwise.

The final plan could be to make as much chaos as possible. One noble had three wills validated at the same time and it was a mess trying to figure out who was going to benefit, which was, of course, the intent. The final plan could also be to divulge information no longer hurtful to them but devastating for someone else. "Surprise! Your child is not actually yours." Nobles engage in endless imagination and pettiness when it comes to wills.

The Funeral

The pomp and circumstance surrounding a funeral is based on the choices of the dead. In some cases, the family overrides their wishes, for benevolent or malevolent reasons. A noble may put orders in their will for the most extravagant funeral money can buy, but a family member was overlooked, either by the deceased's design or the machinations of someone in the family. So, after months of fighting, the deceased is summarily given a short burial with few attendants.

Rich noble families have crypts or other family burial areas. Nobles, despite what it may seem like to the populace, have feelings like everyone else and they may choose to spend eternity with someone close to their heart. Since they will no longer care about whispers, they might feel it is safe to settle next to someone they care deeply about even if it causes scandal among the living. Of course, the family still has to deal with the fallout of this if

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they follow the will, but even a noble family can be moved to respect their relative's last wishes upon occasion, out of what passes for empathy in a noble's heart. It may be as fleeting as a shooting star, but such sentiment does exist.

In the End

A noble's life is full of plots, plans, schemes, and other such vagaries, but they are still people. Emotions can take over and a noble will defy their education and

the universe to follow their feelings. This dichotomy, submersing themselves in the duplicitous nature of aristocracy while simultaneously fighting human emotions, is the great struggle of the noble.

If everything in a noble's life goes perfectly, which it never does, by the time they are elders they will have seen everything. A situation overwhelming to a young noble will be child's play to an elder. One doesn't get to be a noble elder without learning to play the game well and that is how they are remembered: by how they played the game.





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My Lord Earl,

The Church is the cradle of our civilization, such as it is, and over these last spare millennia, over the times of sin and the times of repentance, the times of plenty and the times of famine, it is not science that has sustained us, nor political ideology. No. It is faith, and faith has survived in its forms since the human race had only the single planet on which to stand, and it is faith that spread the message of Zebulon, and faith that inspired Saint Palamedes of Most Blessed Memory, and it was faith in the authority of the message of Zebulon through which the Pancreator sought to use Palamedes Alecto to found the Church.

Do not be mistaken: it is the Church through which the authority of the Pancreator flows. It is the in the beauty of Orthodoxy, then, that the Emperor — ample blessings be upon him, surely — is given the right to exercise Pancreator-given power over all the peoples on all the planets under his rule, and hence it is the duty of the Church to instruct and advise and, if need be, rebuke the Emperor and therefore the Royal Houses who support him, in all things, moral, spiritual, and temporal. For the spiritual realm is above the temporal; and grace therefore descends. If grace therefore descends from above, then its order of descent begins with the Pancreator, and as illuminated by the Scriptures and enlivened by the Spirit, it proceeds to the Church, and in Orthodoxy the Church both provides an example and expounds the truth to government.

We are bound by faith to instruct the Empire. We serve in our teaching. And conversely, it is not for the Empire and its officials to place obligations upon the Church when these officials are prone to conduct that is not becoming of the true faithful.

It stands to reason that the moral affairs of our rulers are the concern of all the faithful. The confessional is sacrosanct, of course, and nothing said behind the Hallowed Curtain will ever be repeated by a priest in my see, but secret sins — no matter how well-hidden they might appear to be, or how forgotten one might wish they are — have nonetheless a way of coming into the bright light of the Pancreator's day. It has been to a great deficit that since your otherwise entirely justified cleansing of deleterious elements from your court there has been no priest among your circle of advisors. An ecclesiastical presence in the chambers of government would shield you from scandalous tongues and ensure that the confessional would be only place that things best kept private would ever be spoken. And of course, your revenue from the Church would be ensured.

I have in mind a woman who would be a perfect fit for your advisory panel, who bears this letter; I trust that she will be admitted to your senate house and take her seat come the next convocation.

Yours, as ever,

Alissande Regrae,

Archbishop of Gower, Bannockburn, Emeritus of the College of Ethicals

The Theology of Power

Across the countless stars, the oppressed inhabit every world, and the faith of Zebulon is their need, their cry for hope, the spirit in their lot, when their own spirit has gone. It is the means of their pacification. It is their drug.

— Mother Jessamyn Soonn, Heresiarch of the Third Republic

In every one of the worlds that gratefully survive under the protection of the empire, believers abound, and where there are believers, there are priests of all ranks: the Patriarchs and metropolitans, archbishops, priests, canons and deacons, along with the rarer titles, found in those far-flung corners of the empire such as archimandrites and archimandrises, vicars, wardens and pastors, abbots and abbesses. All of these titles are minutely nuanced. But each of them carries with it power, of a sort.

Of all the institutions of the Known Worlds, the Church is unique in that it builds its power wholly on human relationships. Even though it has plenty of access to both money and military power, in the end, the Church depends upon the use of its teachings and the intricate web of power relationships that religion brings with it.

When a priest takes on an ordination, their relationship with others changes. Wearing a priest's vestments means you're treated differently, even by your own family, your childhood friends. In becoming a priest, a person becomes the immediate face of the institution of the Church — although sectarian ties might change the nuance of that, the fact is the same whatever branch of the Church calls to the priest. No one is neutral to a priest; even family members and childhood friends behave differently towards loved ones who take up holy orders. The signs of a spiritual calling, whether the robes are white or red or the color of some other order, immediately separate the priest from those of us who cannot imagine having the conviction to give our lives over entirely to a faith. No one can ignore it. Those who deny the teachings of Zebulon still exist in a Church-filled universe.

For some, in this present age of faith and ignorance, the priesthood is a vehicle of profit, and if you're careful, that doesn't prevent you from indulging your desires. The stereotype of the venal, conniving bishop that exists in a million holovids, magic lanterns, and passion plays on every world exists for a reason.

But in truth, the story isn't all that simple. A spiritual calling doesn't stop a person being human, and

many of the most successful, ruthless and cunning power players in the Church hold a sincere, profound personal faith with no contradiction.

Nothing drives the career courtier more to distraction than the simple fact that the same archbishop who might have had three people assassinated and engineered the downfall of a trusted lieutenant to the duke in one go last weekend is still entirely sincere in their conviction that the Omega Gospels contain an authentic revelation of the Pancreator, and more, that the archbishop believes utterly that their faith justifies these actions.

Her Revered Grace Alissande's argument, presented above, about the relative power of the Church and the state is a classic example of how a faith can drive *realpolitik*. This theological justification is neither an uncommon one among the different branches of the Church, nor is it new — in fact, it dates to a time long before the human race even left Holy Terra for the stars, let alone the travels and revelations of Zebulon. It boils down to the Church being able to tell the secular authorities what to do, and the secular authorities not having the same right to instruct the Church. This is because, the justification goes, the Pancreator speaks through the Church, the secular authorities look to the Church for guidance, and the Church isn't itself a secular body and is exempt from the governance of secular bodies. This very political reading of the Doctrine of Directed Grace — spiced up with the tiniest hint of implied blackmail — is absolutely convenient, but it's also wholly sincere.

This sincerity comes from the simple fact that religion is a complex thing. People stay with their faiths for very good reasons; for every deficit a religion might bring to its faithful, there is a benefit. Religion brings a sense of community, an affirmation, a purpose. It brings meaning. Even the most cynically manipulative archbishop at some time held to an innocent faith in the Pancreator.

Take the example of the severe and dignified Rt. Rev. Jerubaal Frimost, Bishop of a fairly influential Orthodox see on Criticorum. Frimost was Archdeacon of St. Ignatius's Cathedral for 20 years and remained in position under five successive bishops. Every one of these bishops met, by bizarre coincidence, with inexplicable, tragic, slightly absurd, and fatal accidents. No one grieved more sincerely nor conducted the Rites of Remembrance more assiduously than Frimost, who, although clearly capable and dedicated, refused the post of bishop four times. None of the monks, nuns and priests who live and work in the ecclesiastical residence adjacent to St. Ignatius's Cathedral are under any illusions as to who benefited from a missing stair rod leading to Bishop Pultenae's unfortunately fatal fall. It is also fairly common knowledge that if Bishop Broom's legendarily tough

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constitution dealt with no less than six bouts of food poisoning, it wasn't exactly an accident that it was an inadequately smoked plate of Criticoran blowfish that finally did for him.

But although every cleric in the city knows for a fact that Frimost had a hand in his predecessors' colorful and at times almost poetic demises, not one of them has a shred of conclusive evidence, nor any accomplice to produce (in fact, ancillary staff do have a habit of getting promoted off-planet). And more than that, no one thinks for a second that Frimost was faking his grief. Every one of the five previous bishops died, in fact, shortly after an allegation of misconduct, corruption, or abuse leading to an investigation, an investigation that would have brought the Church on Criticorum into disrepute. These investigations were shelved after each prelate's tragic death. It's also common knowledge that Frimost never wanted to be Bishop — it's a poisoned chalice (it literally was, in fact, in the case of Frimost's immediate antecedent, Bishop Yancey). Frimost's election to the see was a point of great personal dismay for him, in fact. And the fact is, Jerubaal Frimost both believes he was completely right, and utterly hates what he did (so much so that his self-loathing and guilt has reached the point where he'd commit suicide, if suicide weren't a mortal sin). But Bishop Jerubaal recognizes that he must cover

up what he has done to protect the Church, since the reputation of any bishop is the reputation of the Church.

And Frimost is in fact a pretty good bishop. He's deeply concerned with the welfare of his immediate staff and his flock in general. He is a strong defender of the Church's reputation. But now that he is Bishop Jerubaal, his enemies, among them the parties of five previous bishops, are out for him, and he is afraid.

The Bishop is currently looking for help, or at least security, outside of the immediate boundary of the Church on Criticorum, and the right group of mercenaries, priests, or soldiers might be the difference between the rise and fall of the Orthodox Church on Criticorum. His fears are not unfounded. Any traveling band of adventuresome individuals finding themselves on Criticorum, especially those with a name, might find themselves hired by Frimost's opponents, or by Frimost himself, or both.

The sincerity and purity of purpose that so many otherwise murderous clerics display is in fact the one thing that sometimes makes an ecclesiastical power player much more dangerous than a secular one. It has been a paradox of the faith since the time of Zebulon himself — a faith that was conceived as humane and compassionate — that it supplies a justification for the most terrible actions.



You can argue that having people discarded, ruined, or murdered for the sake of an ideological stance might actually be a denial of the very faith that is used to justify these actions. But the fact remains that the sincere believer will often go further than someone merely self-interested. Where does the self even count when it's the will of the Pancreator at stake? The charge of hypocrisy is a mere irrelevance, because no one does hypocrisy like the Church Political. Self-justification is the impregnable armor of the True Believer, and no charge of hypocrisy has any chance of sticking to the committed Church leader. Faith for many is the embrace of contradiction, and the political power player embraces contradiction like no one else.

You Have to Lie to Tell the Truth

The contradictions and paradoxes of being a cleric in the political sphere make Church power players some of the most dangerous. Although certainly the Church has its share of whited sepulchers, the most successful schemers among the Church's ranks are entirely sincere in their faith, and it's because they're sincere that they can be so very ruthless. The leader who is sure that they are right will go to any lengths to preserve their position, even to the extent of committing otherwise mortal sins — because they don't count if they're for the faith.

A fanatically dedicated power player can descend to horrifying depths, and will cheerfully discard the lives of devoted friends, lovers, and even family members for the sake of a point of doctrine. These people can become true monsters.

And it usually starts with something small. Consider Jobriath Arkwright, an itinerant Amalthean preacher from Pleroma, the northeastern portion of the continental landmass that makes up the planet Sutek. Arkwright's simple, personable crusade has exploited decades of pent-up feelings among the populace that they were being ignored by their priests and their noble rulers, pawns in the endless battles for the throne. Arkwright has made them felt *seen*.

Arkwright ends each meeting with a time of prayer. He encourages the congregation, as they bow their heads, to raise their hands, unseen by any of the other congregants if they feel that they are moved by Zebulon's teaching enough to make a new commitment of their lives to the Prophet and join his nonviolent crusade. He will see them, and he acknowledges each hand raised, respectfully and sincerely, inviting each to meet him after the meeting.

Arkwright is a hugely popular preacher. His charismatic crusade is sweeping across the unstable region, encouraging many to dedicate their lives to Zebulon; whole families follow him in itinerant caravans which sweep across the land, denuding the land of foodstuffs and turning up in cities and demanding alms. They're not hostile or violent, but the disruption they cause brings entire cities to a standstill and not only is the economy of Pleroma beginning to suffer, but food shortages are beginning to be felt among the people.

Arkwright's success is partly down to the fact that at some point not long ago, Jobriath realized that people waver. No one wants to be the first to put their hand up. So, he began to pretend that he had seen hands raised. *Yes*, he says, *I see you, brother, come find me later*, but no one is there. But then, people raise their hands. Arkwright sees it as him simply giving people the courage to step up and join the crusade.

The meetings are now often too large for Arkwright to need to do this. But since he's found that Zebulon's word benefits from a little push, he has started to push in other ways, too; his discovery of a scrap of shimmering cloth that he claims is part of the Mantle of Amalthea, a holy relic which he claims has healing powers, may have consolidated the regard in which his followers hold him, but it is just a scrap of cloth, faked, with fluorescent paint and oil. He believes he is right to do this, that if they see a True Relic, they will believe.

But what will this horde of families, now hundreds of thousands strong, do if they find out that they have been duped? Some might doubtless refuse to believe it and carry on the same, but others may turn nasty. Conflict will ensue, and there is no doubt that at the end, there will be violence, unrest, and perhaps even death. It cannot end well. And Arkwright, convinced of his rightness, and believing of his own publicity, is, although he hasn't gone this far yet, capable of murder if his ministry is under threat.

A troupe hired by the Hazat Governor of Sutek to ascertain the hold this man has over so many people won't find it hard to expose the preacher's fakery, but if they do, they may have in their hands the fates of hundreds of thousands of people who left behind their homes and employment for the sake of his teaching. No easy answers are available.

The Misuse of Power

Ecclesiastical intrigues often succeed or fail based on the leverage that the various actors can bring against each other, and the secrets that a bishop or a deacon knows about their opponent. And in Church settings, as has always been the case, this raises the subject of abuse. Churches, with their power structures, their

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techniques for quietly settling dissent, and their unparalleled ability to keep secrets, can regrettably be fertile grounds for abuses of all kinds.

This can be as simple as basic bullying, or the use of religious leverage to avoid obligations. This can turn badly on the perpetrator. Such was the case of Pastor Daidd Ogof, Verger of St. Hombor Cathedral on Shaprut, who routinely underpays his staff, justifying it to them and to himself by explaining that if they cannot explain that they have been called to their posts by the will of the Pancreator, then they need not receive the wage due. His administrative assistant Sian Brel has been aware of this for several years now, but has never done anything, considering it wrong to impugn the dignity of the pastor, and, being a devout and principled believer, has convinced herself that she would do this work for the church for free. She survives on the alms of the congregation and passive-aggressive resentment. While she takes the role, ironically, too seriously to lie about having been told to do the job by the divinity, she makes things as difficult for him as she can, and has a lot of dirt on Pastor Daidd, whose abuses are not limited to exploiting employees, and it would only take an outsider to give her a likely recipient for receipts of her enmity. Pastor Daidd may soon face the music many times over.

When power relationships are at play, darker abuses become easy: when you're in the pulpit and you speak the words of the divine, and when the confession of sins is shrouded in secrecy, it can be easy to use that authority for your own aggrandizement... or your pleasure. Vulnerable people surround you. It can be easy to exploit them.

A REAL-WORLD CONCERN

In the real world, this is a hot button topic, an issue that is a constant struggle for more than one major world religion. Gamesmasters should of course be careful when introducing themes of abuse and personal manipulation in faith settings, and be sensitive to the needs of players. If you're not sure that your players are okay with dealing with issues of this kind in your games, be sure to talk about it beforehand.

The agents of the Synecullum — styled as the Committee for the Preservation of the Faith's Integrity — investigate some of the more extreme abuses perpetrated by ministers of the Church and otherwise protected by the seal of confession. The organization's reputation varies. Its leaders have that it's the strongest and most efficient defense of the faith against the crimes of those who would abuse its power. Several of those who have seen its agents in action have it that they are no more than secret police. Really, the truth falls somewhere between these two.

While it's the job of the Kalinithi to investigate supernatural and occult incursions by nonhuman agencies, and the Inquisition to look into spiritual transgressions and heresies, the Synecullum is charged with investigating temporal crimes committed by the ministers of the Church. Synecullar agents have two extraordinary powers: first, confessions made to them in their Divine Inquiries are not bound by the seal of the confessional; and second, they are absolved of any



methods they might use to extract those confessions. Having said that, the Synecullum recognizes that admissions gained by physical means aren't worth anything (since people will say anything to avoid experiencing more pain), and so it often uses more subtle and efficient, if slower, methods to find the truth. Thanks to their dispensation, they might be forgiven lies, acts of theft, burglaries, and spying. But this extraordinary power in the eyes of the Church also itself admits the possibility of abuse: if a Synecullum agent, already among the most fanatical of the Church's functionaries, decides that a fellow cleric is guilty of a crime but cannot find the evidence, the temptation is just as strong to fabricate damning evidence as it might be for a charismatic bishop to forge a relic.

THE CONFESSIONAL, AND THE AUTOCONFESSIONAL

Confession — or the Sacrament of Penance, as it is still called on many worlds — is an important part of the life of the devout. People in their billions across the Known Worlds take the time to sit in the confessional booth and admit their peccadillos, omissions, and wrongdoings to a hidden, but nonetheless human ear. The idea of having a machine do it, for instance, is anathema.

There was a period of about a century where on some worlds mechanized confessionals existed: you would speak in the booth, hear a recording of your confession, and then press the button to delete the confession forever, at which point the autoconfessional would issue a Receipt of Penance.

In 4571, the autoconfessional initiated a widespread panic at every level of society and very nearly ended Patriarch Nadrim's troubled and corrupt reign. Vicar Adjunct Jinae Yoo, a priest licensed on Kish, discovered how easily the recordings of confessions could be recovered from the machines and staged a public demonstration of the act before a crowd of 105,000 devotees. The crowd, outraged and terrified, lynched Rev. Yoo on the spot for her honesty, and proceeded to burn down the cathedral. The Li Halan authorities managed to put down the ensuing unrest, but this was the beginning of the Confession Riots, which spread across the Known Worlds over the next two years. Those priests using autoconfessionals had to remove them quickly to avoid the fate of the principled Rev. Yoo, even before the scandal-beset Patriarch decreed that they be dismantled and destroyed.

Church annals insist that none of the autoconfessionals survived, but Church rule has always been difficult to enforce, and it may well be that in a dusty, little-visited storeroom of some parochial church one of these strange cabinets remains, still functional and still containing secrets that, although centuries old,

might still cause untold damage to the Church, because even if the secrets on it are meaningless or have been useless for more than a century, the Church will pay vast sums of money to keep them locked away.

The confessional is sacrosanct; although much that is spoken there is indeed blackmail material, much of the Church's reputation and power depends entirely on the confession staying in the confessional. When Her Holiness Bishop Regrae writes to the Earl on Bannockburn telling him that she will make sure what's said in the confessional stays in the confessional, that's not an implied threat: she means it, and the Earl knows it's true.

A priest who breaks the seal of the confessional is quite simply no longer a priest, no matter how powerful they may have been, and, depending on who their superior is at the time, may well be in legitimate fear of their life. An excommunicate on the run like this will need to hire help to stay alive, avoid arrest, or get off-world — but all bets may be off when their guardians find out why this turbulent ex-priest is on the run. Some sins cannot be forgiven.

The inviolable seal of confession works in other ways, too. Priests, preachers and deacons who sin against the precepts of the faith, and against their congregations, often in the most hideous ways, both assuage their guilt with the sacrament of confession, and hide their deeds under the wing of the Church.

Some of the most monstrous offenders actually use the act of confession as a way to gain leverage over their colleagues. For example, the venerable and respected Helen Fering, Urth Orthodox Archimandrix of Tulasca on Tethys, some years ago developed a specialized and near-insatiable taste for inflicting pain on younger people and has over the years used her wealth to ensure that the youths she takes into the vault beneath the Deveroux Cathedral efficiently disappear, even as she reduces them to so much scorched meat and serves them up as steaks. The very fact that she has never been accused of so much as raising her hand in anger is partly due to how regularly she confesses her sins to her fellow priests. The moment a junior priest hears her confess her lurid and hideous acts, they are in the Archimandrix's power, for they are unable to act on what they know without breaking the sanctity of the confessional, and also therefore accessory to her crimes in a secular sense, for they know about them and cannot do anything about them.

Archimandrix Helen has fallen far; she takes no small amount of pleasure in detailing her acts in exquisite detail. More than one lesser priest has vomited in the booth, and more than one has been driven to self-destruction by their knowledge. An offworld priest — perhaps even one brought in to investigate the rumors of disappearances among the congregation — is the most likely victim of Archimandrix Helen's gleeful performance.

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All it would take for this corrupt prelate's mask to slip is a simple piece of evidence, a word spoken outside of the confessional, a spot of blood. She has exploited the confessional for a long time, but if she comes under the eye of the Synecullum, then this will not protect her.

The Least of These

Consider, then, a colony, founded with hope, and then lost to the stars for centuries, until, one day, it is found again. Its inhabitants are few, but in the intervening years they have remembered their origin, and they have done well, growing food, and living together in community. As the missionaries from Holy Terra travel across the colony, they find the faith of the people to be orthodox and rich in love. Save for one thing: that there are, peculiarly, two cathedrals, each with its stipendiary bishop, both identical in all respects, save only this: while one, on each rest day, thrives with its congregation, the other has the priest deliver sermons to an empty sanctuary. So the missionaries ask the civic leaders of the colony why there are two cathedrals, and the colonists say to them: "There must be two, for how else could we say, this is the cathedral to which we go, and this is the cathedral to which we do not go?"

— Minor Lessons of the Prophet (*Apocryphal*), 11.26

The stakes of Church politics are not the same as the stakes of secular politics. People of faith can anathematise, kill, or die for the sake of objects or principles that can seem utterly baffling to an outsider: the question on whether a 300-year-old fingerbone really belonged to a saint; the precise nature of the *ousion*, the substance of the Pancreator; a meaning of line in a creed. And because the Church has influence in the secular realm, these issues spill out into government. Grand, government-toppling plots begin with doctrinal niceties.

Near the city of Khemta on Malignatius, the only thing standing between growing incidences of civic unrest between outlying communities and the city government is a garrison of Brother Battle warriors under the command of one Friar Theodor. But Theodor refuses to aid the governor until some dispensation is made concerning the recipe of the Communion Host, for Theodor has an allergy to gluten, and the Orthodox church pays little or no attention to their hardline protector and his disability. Theodor will not lift a finger to protect the burning cities until that is resolved.

The Proselytes

Imagine that you are standing at the edge of a clifftop, and imagine that the clifftop is wreathed in mist. Imagine now that everyone you ever loved — your parents, your siblings — is rushing headlong towards that cliff edge, unknown. They cannot see the precipice. They cannot see the void beyond, and while some of them have been told that the void is there, they do not really credit that story. You know that they will fall if they are not caught, and you are all there is to stop them. What would you do?

— Simon Malandros, preacher of the Incarnate Proselytes, Aragon

For over 3000 years now, it has been a common saw among academics and low-level political functionaries that their controversies are so very vicious because they are playing for such low stakes. But this is not wholly the case among believers.

To an outsider, the controversies of religious sects seem to be centered around very low stakes indeed.

For example, the members of the Proselyte Fellowship on Aragon, an extremist Incarnate sect with a strong commitment to evangelism that exists across the planet's Western learning institutions believe that they are part of a great upcoming religious revival, and that the Pancreator will shower blessings upon their community any day now. The Outpouring is imminent. Each convert they gain — and they gain converts in ones and twos at most — is an eternal life saved and a sign that the great cosmic battle of which they believe that they are a part is soon to be won.

Scattered as they are, the Proselyte Fellowships are fractious. Their members, mostly quite young, have more passion than wisdom or experience, and often their evangelistic efforts are stymied by passionate arguments among their groups as to the right tactics to adopt, who to attempt to reach, and what theological position they should hold. These seem minor, but in fact to the Proselytes, they're the most important issues in the galaxy, since eternal souls are at stake. They see what they are doing as a war.

This is going to get them into trouble with the Inquisition very soon; although they're actually harmless, if passionate about their cause, the language they use and the radical passion of their missionary efforts suggests that they are more dangerous than they are. It would take a lot for any agent of the empire to save them from the fire — especially since many of them keenly hunger for martyrdom. They can and will die for what they're doing.

Why Aren't You Dead?

While these small stakes may turn into a matter of life and death, the situation on the island of Panathena on Delphi, west of the continent of Courai, began with life and death, and has only escalated. After the Pentateuch Concordat of 4955, which accepted the Eskatonics into the bosom of the Church after a long period of persecution, the Orthodox Church began a process of consolidation and integration, in some places appointing episcopal oversight for the new Eskatonic congregations, which they thought — quite sensibly — were best selected from the Eskatonics' own. On the island of Panathena, where, due to an accident of geography, Eskatonic believers made up the religious majority of the region, the persecution had been particularly dreadful. The practice had been for Inquisitors to round up known Eskatonics and bring them before a pyre. They would then be told to throw their copies of the proscribed Digamma Apocrypha and other texts—largely handwritten or crudely photocopied, and hence rare — into the fire. If they did not, they would be thrown in, and *then* the books would go. A large number of the Eskatonic faithful chose to die rather than give up their books, but some did choose to live.

After the persecution ended, the newly legitimized Eskatonics did not permit the ones who had handed over their books (and many who were only suspected of having handed over their books) to rejoin the fold. Within nine months of the persecution's end, the Urth Orthodox, having investigated the leadership of the Panathena Eskatonics, chose to appoint a local worthy, Eurystheus Thomas, as the Episcopal Oversight.

Within weeks of his appointment in late 4956, unrest arose when a small group of Eskatonics accused Bishop Eurystheus of having himself been one of those who handed over his books to live. The situation became so fractious that the Patriarch himself intervened, organizing a commission to investigate the accusations. Eurystheus was exonerated, but it was, regrettably, found that the late Presbyter Amphinomus Rhys, the Eskatonic who had consecrated Eurystheus Thomas, had indeed, shortly before his

death of natural causes, given up his books for the sake of another year of life. Even without this, the now-schismatic Eskatonic group could not accept Eurystheus; they declared that their true leader was one Daniel Archilochus, a young but charismatic member of the sect, who had never been caught by the Inquisition. The trauma, and perhaps the survivor guilt, of those Eskatonics who had come out alive at the end of the persecution had made it difficult to accept a leader given to them: if Eurystheus Thomas was so inspirational, the argument went, why wasn't he dead?

Unrest spread, and the Danielites, as they styled themselves, refused utterly to compromise. Three newly-built Eskatonic sanctuaries on the islands were burnt down. In early 4958, it had deteriorated enough that the Patriarch's representatives could only escape from Panathena with their lives, and take sanctuary with Sioned Hawkwood, then governor of Courai's triumvirate. The governor, disturbed that senior functionaries of the Urth Orthodox were being threatened under her political oversight, sent troops in to quell the unrest, and several Danielite ringleaders, including Daniel Archilochus himself, died in the fighting.

But this was still not the end of the affair. The Danielites went underground, disavowing the Urth Orthodox as irredeemably corrupt. Now radicalized by what they saw as only a continuation of their persecution, and with the sympathy of the mostly Eskatonic local communities of Panathena, they began to engage in low-level guerilla warfare against civil and Church authorities in the region.

Sixty years later, with pretty much everybody who was involved in the original controversy now either dead or off-planet, the Danielites are still defending the richly forested landscape they made their home. They have their own, paranoid culture. Only they care about the dispute that brought them to this pass, but Church envoys to Delphi avoid the island. Still, it might be time for the Patriarch to send representatives to try to end the troubles of this tiny corner of the empire, and perhaps it might be better if they did not come from the Church proper.

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A Trivial Letter

From the Desk of the Right Reverend Deepika Gupta, Chrysophylax, See of Criticorum, to His Holiness, Patriarch of the Church Universal:

Your Esteemed Holiness,

It is with great solemnity that I hear of the passing of Primarch Prados Saini. He lived a long life, with much of incident and much personal success, for it is said that the good are taken from us too soon, and the wicked exist to plague us for far too long. Certainly, he was a blight on the faithful, but knowing that his malice was extending daily, the Pancreator finally saw fit to reprieve us.

Not a year went past when some ecumenical council, convocation, or synod would be afflicted with his presence and his constant violence of aspect.

Care must be taken, therefore, and I must beg that your Holiness see to this personally, to spare no expense on the fabric of Primarch Saini's tomb, and to ensure that an especially big and heavy stone be placed on its seal, lest the dead grow as tired of him as the living Church did and try to send him back.

He can take his doctrines and his interminable explanations to the shades.

I remain yours in the name of Zebulon,

Gupta, Rt. Rev, Chrysophylax.

3.17.4999

The Right Rev. Deepika Gupta didn't actually write this letter, nor did it get sent to the Patriarch. But she has spent the last 20 standard years trying to figure out who did and trying to live down the hilarity it caused in some circles in the Church. Prados Saini was, after all, a hugely divisive figure, known for being patronizing, cranky, and spiteful; Gupta was certainly known for clashing with him in councils. The letter is really just a distillation of that, dashed off by some joker and circulated privately. One of the people the initial writer shared it with, shared it with some more people. And now, more or less everyone above a certain level knows about it. It gnaws at Chartophylax Gupta, and it has harmed her work, as well as her reputation, since she has become paranoid, lest the letter come up in conversation again. She is still trying to find out who sent it, and will pay more than she can afford to learn that information, and more still to have them hurt very badly.

It's a silly thing, really, a trifle, but in an organization as closeted and fusty as the Urth Orthodox Church, even trifles like this can make or break reputations and be the source of passionate hatred. Personal animosities can become virulently poisonous, even when they're based on issues like what exactly *ousion* (divine essence) is like, or how many days it took Zebulon to travel between Holy Terra and Byzantium Secundus. The placement of a comma, or whether an "and" or an "or" should appear in a single line of a minor creed might both trigger an enmity that lasts generations and serve as a pretext for the working out of deeper hatreds.

The simple fact that ecumenical councils — the Church bodies that define the letter, periods and commas of ecclesiastical law — should create such a distorted emotional landscape is itself an important factor in understanding the Church. These trifles become the grounds on which murderous plots might be made and generational hatreds fester. And so, a fake letter, written as satire, inevitably winds up being more than that.

For Deepika Gupta, it is worse; the hatred she expressed for Prados Saini goes back to a secret and illicit affair the two had had some two decades before while they both were in curacies on Severus, which had not ended well. And it would become even more understandable if the circumstances of the Primarch's death were ever discovered, and exactly where Gupta was when he died. In a case like this, even a joke — especially one that isn't even all that funny — can have consequences both emotional and material.

Priests and Sees

The Orthodox Church, of all the branches of the Faith, is the most visible and the most tied to the Imperial administration at every level. The millennia-old stereotype of the venal bishop and the honest parish priest persists in everyday discourse, literature, and holovid.

It is never as simple as that. It's ironic, perhaps that it is that most morally compromised of Orthodox leaders, Matriarch Cassia II, who said: "The Church is at its best when it stands in opposition to power;

when it takes the hand of power, it becomes worse than we could ever imagine.”

Take the example of Rt. Rev. Gustavus van Hoek, the corpulent and legendarily purchasable Archbishop of Tsaritsyn, and the Urth Orthodox primate on the Decados stronghold of Severus. No one will ever hear a sermon from the pulpit of the cathedral of St. Zizek Tsaritsyn that criticizes government policy; in fact the Urth Orthodox presence on Severus, while it claims to be the conscience of the Decados overlords, is nothing of the sort, instead serving as a *de facto* propagandist wing for the administration. It is the job of the Church to advise the sweltering workers of Severus to trust their rulers, and to know their place, for all is as it should be. For their part, the commoners of the planet do not, as a habit, look to the Church for their aid or indeed much of their spiritual direction, considering the Church to be part of, and indeed just as much to be trusted as, the Decados administration. On Severus, Church intrigues are Decados intrigues. Archbishop Gustavus is in this sense just one more functionary in the administration, and indeed is a regular dinner companion and (as much as anyone can be said to be) one of the close friends of Omar Mugabe, Tsaritsyn’s seneschal.

It’s important to note that the Archbishop is not really a cynical criminal in the way that some of his secular counterparts might be. He was born in privilege to a distaff branch of the Decados family, and it’s fair to say that he doesn’t really have a solid grasp of what it’s like to be poor, or even to do a day’s manual labor. He genuinely likes the seneschal and the Prince, and he believes that the class system is divinely ordained. He can argue for the theological rectitude of the feudal system with facility and eloquence. But at the same time, Gustavus’s reputation for being able to be bought is by no means unearned. While he is in no way what anyone would describe as an honorable man, Archbishop Gustavus is a classic example of how complicated and contradictory beliefs can exist in the same person, and the damage those contradictions can do. It is not safe for any Urth Orthodox priest to come to Tsaritsyn expecting to practice a principled faith with no interference from the government, let alone with a radical agenda for change.

Consider as a counterpoint, however, the example of Sigismunda Kray, Archbishop of Thebes, Orthodox Primate on Cadavus. Although, like Severus, a Decados world, the Church of Cadavus is dominated by Temple Avesti, meaning that the disestablished Orthodox presence on Cadavus has a very different character. It’s ironic perhaps, but also very telling, that when the Urth Orthodox were the primary religious movement on Cadavus, they behaved as badly as they yet do on Severus, but now the situation is

very different. Archbishop Sigismunda, a short, intimidatingly direct woman said by the people to be “able to bench press a vorox,” is in fact a vocal advocate for ecumenical dialogue on the inhospitable planet. Along with representatives of the other sects alongside whom she willingly works (primarily Amaltheans and Eskatonics, who are very much in the same boat), the Archbishop speaks out against poverty, social injustice, the assassinations of community leaders (which occur on Cadavus far more than the Decados leadership admits), and the torture of political prisoners.

For their part, the Decados regime, which has characterized its rulership of the planet as akin to the firm but loving ministrations of a parent, sees Cadavus as more or less a clean slate for it to do whatever it wants.

Archbishop Sigismunda was originally a social conservative, but was radicalized shortly after her appointment by the murder of her friend and colleague Stell Asenstein, Bishop of St. Machado’s, by a deniable but likely government-sponsored death squad. Archbishop Sigismunda, while unafraid to get her own hands dirty and often found working in the soup kitchens and homeless shelters she organizes, regularly has to change location and go into hiding.

It might well be that travelling mercenaries, mendicant priests, or knights errant who come to Cadavus find their way into her orbit, either because they are in sympathy with her aims, or because the Decados have paid them to. But, on the other hand, outsiders might be the only agents qualified to investigate — or cover up — Sigismunda Kray’s murder.

The College of Ethicals

The central nexus of political power in the Urth Orthodox Church is the College of Ethicals. Supposedly it is a cross-denominational advisory council, which provides policy advice to the Patriarch, investigates accusations of abuse, simony, immorality, and corruption. If a Patriarch is accused of conduct unbecoming, it is the job of the College of Ethicals to organize the hearings necessary for the Patriarch’s removal.

The College of Ethicals has never removed a Patriarch. And in fact the Urth Orthodox Church at large does not and arguably has never had any faith in the College to do that — more than one written assessment of the Ethicals considers them a pathetic bunch of toadies, which isn’t entirely untrue, since when a new Patriarch is elected, the new Patriarch appoints a new College. While at best, this means that the members of the College are loyal, trusted, and theologically solid supporters of the Church, at worst it means that they are the Patriarch’s cronies and henchmen.

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Almost since the moment it began in 3986, commentators within and outside the Church have criticized the College of Ethicals as closer to the problem of corruption than the solution.

Any member of the College of Ethicals is more or less impervious to any accusation of abuse; their friends and associates likewise. Any scandal in the Church that touches a member of the College of Ethicals, even peripherally, is going to be very difficult to bring to light. Any misdeed that benefits a member will be almost impossible to bring to justice. Members of the College of Ethicals do fall, from time to time, but it is invariably because they fall foul of each other.

No arguments are as passionate as theological arguments, as evidenced in the controversy between two factions in the College over the placement of a comma in the Creed of Zebulon in 4971, that very nearly split the whole Orthodox Communion. In the end, that was averted by the Patriarch dying and Hezekiah quickly reappointing everyone in the College.

The College of Ethicals are at their weakest point in a long time at the moment. Patriarch Palamon has only recently taken on the role of pontiff and has still not reappointed all its members. The members of the College — which includes several candidates for the Patriarchy, including Archbishop Lyander, Archbishop Marcion, and Archbishop Taraleng — are currently doing their best to preserve their positions of power, possibly at the expense of others. They are all in the market for capable individuals who might be able to dig up dirt on both Palamon and their colleagues.

Hidden Chapters, Lost Verses

The Church is, as it was in the most ancient of days, dependent on the written text, and perhaps more than ever, treating the ancient codex — a specific sort of book written on double sided sheets, often of animal skin or wood pulp, bound together between a spine and two covers — as a sacred object. The Omega Gospels are, in a sense, more than simple words. Their form is holy in its own right, and a bound copy of them has pride of place in the home of any believer wealthy enough to own one. Many of these codices are works of art in their own right.

And many of them are unique. Although the Urth Orthodoxy has clear ideas about canon, a plethora of heretical books exist. The Church tends not to destroy them; rather it keeps them under lock and

key when it can. The rumored “Black Library” of suppressed books on Holy Terra really does exist, and a small branch of the Inquisition exists solely to locate copies of heretical texts, the rarer the better, and take them back to a hidden vault on the ancestral homeworld.

Aside from the various more “standard” heretical texts — the Digamma Apocrypha, the Acts and Epistles of Horace, and so on — there are many Gospels, Epistles and Acts that present Zebulon in a different light. There are texts that present him as a joker; in *The Errors of Zebulon*, for example, the Prophet is — blasphemously — a clown-like figure, clumsy and slow on the uptake. On the other hand, *The Book of Teeth and Tongues* appears to be a work of pornography, presenting Zebulon as exceptionally promiscuous, offering explicit demonstration of the arts of love with beings of every gender and species. And there is the brief, but no less troubling and oblique *Parasite Encomium*, in which Zebulon is evidently either a symbiot host or some sort of collaborator, and which preaches capitulation to the creatures as the highest form of communion with the Pancreator. In the eyes of Mother Church, none of these books can be tolerated.

Occasionally a monastery or church will have a heretical book in its possession. The librarians and priests who guard them almost always know what they have. Since they cannot destroy them, for books, even blasphemous, obscene, or evil ones, are sacred, the keepers of these texts take precautions to ensure that they are never read. Poison-infused pages that cause a reader to sicken and die, vicious bladed weapons hidden inside covers and spines that spring into action when opened, or trackers that call down retribution when the book is moved have all been used. A collector may pay a fortune to have a particular text stolen for them, and the would-be thief might consider it easy money. The would-be thief might find that backwater parish defended in fiendish ways. It may not be all that easy.

The Anathematicians

The Anathematical Engine doesn't exist. It never did.

This is, as all of the reputable chronicles and histories of the Church assure us, an incontrovertible fact. There are absolutely no Anathematicians, and there never were, and even if there were (and listen carefully, there *weren't*), they died out centuries ago. We might have had an Age of Miracles, but some things are simply too absurd to countenance, and have always been too absurd.

Conspiracy theories about the Anathematicians abound, nonetheless: long ago, before even

the Dark Ages began, it is said that there was a secret, militant wing of the Inquisition, dedicated to rooting out heresy. Its members had possession of a think machine of the kind long extinct, which created complex mathematical models that could, they believed, make a faultless prediction of when and if a person it analyzed — based on date and location of birth, location, profession, and a thousand other factors — would fall into heresy. When the machine — styled in the stories as the Anathematical Engine — predicted that a person would fall into heresy, the Anathematicians would sweep that person away and subject their bewildered and often entirely unknowing victim to all the miseries due to one caught in the very act of the worst heretical behavior.

The philosophical problems inherent in punishing a person before they ever did anything wrong were of course manifold: what place did this allow for free will? How could a mathematical model predict the course of a human soul? What place did this allow for the regenerating work of the Pancreator on the spirit? Wasn't this akin to the anathema, alien *vau* Prophecy machines?

The Anathematicians brushed these quandaries to one side. In fact, they sought to be as implacable and emotionless as the machine that served them, so much so that they began to serve the machine. Some of the more bizarre versions of the stories suggested that they experimented on their own brains, attaching their thoughts to the machine-mind that confirmed their prejudices.

The most popular version of the story describes how the Anathematicians' downfall came when

they attempted to arrest and torture the Patriarch. He or she (which Patriarch it is changes depending on who is telling the story, and to be frank, this detail cannot be true, for if such a thing had happened, we would know, surely) brought them into the open and disbanded them, demanding that their machine be destroyed also. And that was the end of the Anathematicians, except that some escaped and continued to do their cold work, recruiting new members over the centuries, a conspiracy within the Church.

It's completely absurd, of course. A group like that would surely have been declared heretical from the beginning, wouldn't it? Who would have had the idea of programming a think machine to analyze the details of a human life in all its complexity and detail like that? Wouldn't the model have always been flawed? How could priests hide within the Inquisition — the *Inquisition*, whose entire *job* is spotting doctrinal aberrations like this? And finally, how could it be possible to maintain a think machine, even one as bizarrely specialized as the Anathematical Engine, patched together over 2000 years so many times that no part of either its mathematical function or its physical form is original?

No, it can't be true. But the stories go around, and occasionally you hear of an encounter with an Inquisitor with an odd, mechanical demeanor, and stories about innocent people put to the question, and that's something we *know* the Inquisition do, because they are human, mainly, and make mistakes like humans (mainly) do.

The stories persist, though. A weird bogeyman of the Church. A phantom, made of profane mathematics.

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BUT IS IT REAL?

Do the Anathematicians exist? Did they *ever* exist? That is entirely up to you.

Hearing the story of the Anathematicians might make sense of otherwise inexplicable Church intrigues and the weird behaviors of Inquisitor antagonists. It might lead heroes down obscure, strange paths and travel to odd places.

Even if they're a complete fiction, the Anathematicians have a terrible hold on the imagination of a Church that feeds on conspiracies and fears. A paranoid, terrified bishop might hire a troupe to find the Anathematical Engine before its agents reach him (and maybe he has reason to be scared — maybe he is in fact a heretic or a witch, meaning that when he's caught, he's fulfilling his own prophecy). Or maybe a spate of terrible torture-murders occurs because of a group of Inquisitors were inspired by the story of the Anathematicians.

None of these stories even preclude the Anathematicians being real: there might be real ones, fake ones, people unnecessarily scared of them and yet the cult might survive.

Maybe its power reaches into the heart of the Church. But on the other hand, maybe a single, frail, ancient member of the cult clings on, maintaining the fabric of a machine that is finally about to fail. Maybe the Anathematical Engine does exist, and might even be functional, even if its users long ago vanished. Maybe, although closely guarded and treasured, it is simply a device of glass and tarnished brass, its innards so corroded, they crumble when touched, and the cult of Anathematicians who serve it follow the orders of a chief who found the device, and reformed the cult, and tells his recruits who to kidnap and torture to death based on what he *says* the machine has dictated, while in fact only serving private enmities and personal agendas.

A monstrous idea doesn't have to exist to be a threat. Whether the Anathematicians are an entire fiction that never existed, a long dead horror, or something that still survives in the Church, it has the power to drive stories nonetheless.





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The group stopped to listen. A clicking on concrete caught their ears. Janae moved closer, her blaster poking into the shadows, her heart slamming so hard she thought it might break through her ribs and flop right there on the floor. Her two companions tensed and pressed against the wall as Janae crept forward. Dirk and Sae had their own skills, but fighting wasn't one of them. No, that was a Muster's job, so it fell on Janae's shoulders.

She stepped forward. Water was dripping from the pipes above, stinging her eyes. Another click, and she spun and almost fired her weapon.

The rat stared back at her with black eyes. Janae let her breath out in a rush. Turning to her companions, she gestured them to continue on.

The last room was their destination. Dirk came forward and hooked a small device to the panel. The Scraver tapped a few keys, and a small display popped out of the top. Sae, next to him, leaned forward eagerly, her Engineer's curiosity piqued. Janae, however, turned and scanned the hall. Something wasn't right.

"Got it!" Dirk exclaimed as the door slid open.

The Muster was the first to enter the small room and she whistled softly. A giant Hawkwood lion emblem adorned the far wall, a good inch of dust covering the chrome surface. Dozens of terminals sat in tidy little rows. Massive conduits passed overhead, humming with energy that shouldn't be routed to an ancient site like this. So Janae's contact had been right. This wasn't just the ruins of an old Hawkwood information library, it was still being used.

"You have five minutes," Janae ordered Sae. The Engineer headed over to the console and started typing.

Janae trailed a finger along the top of the closest monitor. The Hawkwood symbol might be covered in dust, but the thinking machines were spotless. Excitement filled her. This might actually be the one.

"Got it!" Sae laughed as she held up the data cube. Janae rushed across the room and snatched it from her hand.

"Are you sure?"

"It's all there," the Engineer told her. "All the accounts, all the locations of the slave houses. Everything." Janae took a deep, shuddering breath. This was it. This was what she had been searching for.

She let her breath back out just as four access ports opened in the ceiling.

"Get back!" she yelled as the turret guns dropped and opened fire. Dirk was hit in the chest and flew backwards in a spray of blood. Sae and Janae both ducked under the desk.

Janae gripped her blaster as the turrets quieted. Motion detection. She didn't know how she could take four Second Republic guns, but she knew she had to make it out with the cube. The fate of her family depended on it.

She took a deep breath as combat instincts kicked in. With a scream, the Muster gripped her weapon and rolled out blasting....

They come to the stars with the lure of freedom. Freedom from tyranny, freedom from the crushing yoke of the Church, and freedom to make their way through the universe under their terms. What they find is greed and corruption, just like any other, but maybe, just maybe, the seed of a new, better life.

These are the merchants. Whether it's the Charioteer who wishes to explore the heavens, or the Scraver who will do anything to find the next piece of lost tech, or an Engineer who will pay anything to take that piece of lost tech apart and study how it works. From the smallest to the largest guilds, these are the ones that scramble under the feet of giants. While the noble houses struggle for power, locked in little boxes of reputation and tradition, the guilds seek ways to enrich their coffers, often with

more than just credits. While the Church fears technology and the stain of it on the soul, the guilds try to find new ways to make money, to make power, and yes, even to make people's lives a little better.

These are the people with their feet on the ground, trying to build a new world in the ashes of the old. Chasing the next Big Thing, even if that means stepping outside the laws of the empire and the Pancreator.

That isn't to say the League is an altruistic force for justice and good in the galaxy. Like the other factions, the Merchant League is filled with anger, power, revenge, and greed. But it can also be a place of freedom, revolution, and even redemption. The guilds are where someone can be who they want, without the restrictive masks worn by those other institutions.

Yet, there are limits to this freedom. You can't flaunt a new, taboo piece of tech and expect there not to be consequences from the Church. You can't steal from the rich and give to poor without knowing that the rich will likely vaporize the same poor in retribution.

That's the tightrope the Merchant League walks every day. How to gain power and expand the guild's reach without sparking the ire of a fearful and angry empire? How do you act in a realm where your very words can cause the Church to burn you in the fires of righteousness, or the Emperor can bring the full fist of the Known Worlds down on your head?

If you want to smuggle weapons, you need to know where to hide and when to run from a threat. If you want to find out the inner workings of an ancient nuclear satellite, you need to do it in absolute secrecy. In other words, you need know-how, good intel, gut instincts, and the ability to keep your mouth shut even when an interrogator's fist keeps punching it open. Measuring risk vs. reward is the hallmark of any good merchant. The balancing act is all there is.

The Merchant League does what needs to be done, gathering what power it can. Mobsters or slaves, space captains or treasure seekers, they're the ones working away in the shadows of the Pax Alexius, waiting for the day when they can cross the stars without a jealous noble stealing their livelihood. Waiting for a time when there's no Church to tighten a noose around their necks at the smallest hint of heresy.

Waiting for the day they can be free.

The Edge

I don't put much stake in the rules, meself. Sure, I tithe and bend the knee like anyone, but the Church don't give me air while I'm up there. The nobles don't hold me hand if I'm stuck alone in the Black. I got me, and I got me ship. That's all I need.

— Charioteer Captain Xavier Gutav, of the Scarlet Hand Shipping Company

An old Scraver adage reads, "The path to gold might be lined with the dead, but at least you've got the gold." The guilds demand results. Some choose a more ethical, hard-working path to their goals, and some choose a seedier trail to theirs. Unlike the other factions, most of the guilds have little use for honorifics. A person is as good as their word, and as good as the results they bring. The Muster is a prime example of this, as their brutal transactions are often

completed in chains or at the end of a gun. Even the Reeves, who pride themselves on keeping a good outward face at all times, have schemes and plans that skirt or outright erase the moral line.

As long as a merchant's plan doesn't hurt the other guilds, they could care less if an Engineer blows himself up trying to take apart an ancient bomb. There is no judgment of the Scravers and their base pleasure palaces, or the Muster and their chains. As long as none of the other guilds are harmed by these schemes, each guild can go about its business with a sense of freedom.

But there is a limit to how high the guilds are allowed to aspire. As long as they don't stray too far from their leash, the eye of the Church can look in other directions. As long as the guilds are useful, the powers that rule can forgive small transgressions. But each merchant knows that their success, in a way, resides in the pleasure of the nobles and the Church. Reach too far, or work against those in power, and the hammer will fall. Because of this, there's a question every guild member must constantly ask themselves: How far are you willing to go for the next Big Thing?

A Scraver finds a piece of tech that can make someone stronger but modifies their DNA in the process. She knows that the Church will burn her if they find out. Should she hide it? Keep it and use to strong arm her competitors? Or sell it to the highest bidder? A Charioteer is propositioned by a noble to carry him to a world that's been interdicted by the Church. It's a huge fee, something that could set the Charioteer for life. Does he risk the potential for Church retribution, or does he hand the noble over for punishment?

This fine line between risk and reward — the "Edge", as the guilds call it — is what defines the life of the Merchant League. The Edge is the line they walk every day, precariously balanced between fortune and failure. It's also where they're most comfortable: at the leading edge, pushing the boundaries, stepping over into novel schemes for achieving their dreams.

You have to walk the Edge if you want to accomplish your goals in a universe where the slightest misstep could lead to death, or worse. How much are you willing to risk for the freedom you crave?

Being Invisible

The Church and the noble houses have varying opinions about those in the Merchant League. Some see them as useful pets on a short leash. Some see them as rodents living in their nice, manicured walls. Still others see them as a necessary evil. But the one thing they can all agree on is that the League is *lesser*. And why wouldn't they? In the eyes of the noble houses,

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the League has no honor. They are thugs and miscreants who must be tolerated for the knowledge they hoard. The Church thinks little better. Heathens and malcontents, the League is always one step away from corrupting the soul of the people with their greed and lawlessness. To them, the guilds are a great asset when needed, and barely tolerated when not.

But it's this very disparagement that can be a merchant's greatest weapon in the planning of his or her schemes. For all their bluster and their wealth, those who rule rarely think of the merchants at all. There are stories of merchants being in the same room as a group of nobles, never having to speak a word to any of them; they might as well be the furniture. The League is a society of undesirables, and as such, they are invisible in the larger scheme of the nobility and the Church.

A Scraver might own a casino in a noble house's fief. As long as she doesn't openly oppose the noble (and pays her "tithes" to the Church), there's a lot she can get away with. Plans and schemes can happen right under the nose of the nobles and the Church, with none the wiser.

A Charioteer merchant might shuttle diplomats for his Li Halan employer, all the while operating a small, lucrative smuggling business under their feet. There are constant allegations of the nastier side of the Reeves Guild, but none of them stick. An Engineer might be hired to fix a system-defense satellite for the Hawkwoods, and secretly put in a back door to access later.

When the nobles war with each other, the League will be there making a profit. When the Church goes on a crusade, the League will be the ones supplying the ships (and the pilots, navigators, and engineers). There are plenty of opportunities for these kinds of side schemes, if one is willing to keep an open mind during a job. The ruling class might loathe the guilds, but that doesn't mean they don't need them. Many a noble goes to the League, proverbial hat in hand, especially when it comes to money loans from the Reeves. But there are plenty of jobs where discretion is key, or simply when the nobility have no other choice.

A Decados might need a Muster to engage in a secret espionage against a rival. A Hazat duke might catch the scent of a rare jump key to a lost world and hire a Charioteer to retrieve it. Their arrogance usually locks them into thinking that as long as they throw enough coin at a guild, they have a new pet on a tight leash.

An enterprising guild member can use this arrogance to negotiate his fees, knowing that the noble is desperate. Or they can have their own plans on the side. Everything can have a side angle, and every scheme can have a bigger payout, as long as one is careful.

The Deal

There ain't nothing better than a deal shifted in your favor. Others can have their loves and their kiddies, but me, I'll take knowing I got the better of the person on the other side of the table.

— Reeve Solicitor Henry Winters

But what do the guilds do? Asking the general population will give a dozen different answers, some true and some based on hearsay. The popular vids are filled with tales of the swashbuckling Charioteer pirate captain. The stories tell of the Muster as the evil slavers who live in the shadows, while the Scravers are dirty scavengers. Not to mention the sinful Engineers who deal with evil technology, or the Reeves who would visit their own mothers with a shock stick is she defaulted on her loans.

The ruling class is no different. Ask the nobles who the League is, and one gets another answer that usually boils down to being a pain in their royal backsides. With the Church it usually comes down to the Merchant League being sinful heathens, but ones that can be useful.

But at their heart, who they are is right in their name. They are merchants. United by their common passions and motivations, there are some in each guild that live up to their stereotypes. There are swashbuckling captains, evil Chainers, dirty scavengers, extremely focused tech worshipers, and ruthless loan sharks. But there are also starship merchant captains who supply food to those in need in the outer planets; Musters who are just trying to keep their family safe from the symbiots on Stigmata; highly paid, clean-cut Scraver bosses who run the casinos; Engineers who fly in a starship crew because they love adventure too; and Reeves who help people stay out of prison.

Like all people, each merchant has their own why, that thing that makes them passionate about what they do. It's never just about the money. It's about being who you are and doing what you love. There's always something deeper that drives guilders.

But not everyone with a drive to be a Charioteer makes a successful one. There are plenty of stories of the destitute vagabond that was once a great starship captain. There are many Scravers and Musters who live day to day, never knowing where their next job or their next firebird is coming from. No, to be successful in the guilds, one needs to cultivate the correct skills to be the best merchant they can be. One needs to know how to smooth talk their way through a deal, and how to bluff when called out on a lie. They need

to know how to research their counterpart at the negotiation table, but they also need to be empathetic enough so they can figure out what the other person's needs are. The best merchants are those who can read the room and figure out the best angle during the deal. Some merchants give only the facts, some only ask questions, and some are like carnival barkers, speaking so fast and furiously that the other side is simply too confused or overwhelmed to argue.

This is the art of negotiation, and all successful guild members have it to varying degrees. A Charioteer needs the skills to haggle on the price of his shipping runs for a noble house, while a Scraver needs to know what the big spenders want when they enter their casinos and other houses of entertainment. Negotiating the best pay for their workers is one of the Muster's main jobs, while also trying to minimize the risks. Reeves negotiate loan interest and fees, and even the most introverted Engineer must learn how to negotiate their fees when fixing a starship engine or fixing a noble's air purifier.

But what happens when the merchant's skills fail and the deal goes sour? It happens to even the best negotiator. Some wrong word is said, or some mood changes, and suddenly the deal seizes up like a starship thruster with no lubricant. Most of the time, a skillful merchant can walk the deal back, saving at least some face. Yes, they might have to settle for a price they didn't want, but at least the deal goes through. Sometimes, however, the transaction will shatter, leaving both parties angry and frustrated. Most of the time, both parties simply go their separate ways and the merchant must look elsewhere.

There are times, however, where the deal shatters so badly that all the talking in the world won't soothe the heated tempers on both sides. This happens most often in black market transactions, where paranoia runs rampant. This is the moment when guns are pulled, and lives hang on the next words that come from the merchant's mouth.

This is the moment where all of the merchant's skills come into play. There are legends of merchants who talk themselves out of death squads, like the famous Tourmaline Standoff, where a Scraver talked his way out of certain death from an Avestite firing squad. Money deals are painful when they disappear, but the moment of life and death is when you truly know what you're made of.

Of course, many argue that there is always one sure way to handle a deal gone bad, and it's saved the lives of hundreds of guild members over the years: Turn and run as fast as you can.

The League doesn't blame those who choose realism over stupidity. Like the old Reeve saying goes, "A dead man can't spend his coin."

Of course, there are times when negotiated trade deals and pay scales aren't enough. If life was simply trading goods and haggling over small jobs, that would



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be one thing. But there are those who see a bigger destiny for themselves. Those who look beyond the simple merchant life and think: "I want something bigger."

The Big One

You'll only live as long as the last person to remember your name.

—Scraver proverb

Legends are made by those who dare to dream bigger. No one remembers the Reeve who spends his whole life toiling behind a desk. Most don't even know his name even when they do business with him. The Charioteer grinding her life away shuttling sugar from one town to another can end up with an unmarked tombstone on some backwater moon that doesn't even have a name.

No, the stories we remember are the ones of epic success or epic failure. The old stories tell of the Fall of the Second Republic and the glorious rise of Vladimir. The new stories tell of the Emperor Wars and the rise of Alexius. These are the tales people remember long after the dust has settled on the bones of those involved.

No one will tell a story to their grandchildren about the baker who goes to work in the morning. There are no mummer's songs about the unnamed soldier who dies on Stigmata. For those who want glory, and for those who want to be remembered until the suns finally flicker to nothing, the story is all about the Big Score. The one job that changes everything.

All merchants dream of it. What is that one big discovery that would change the universe? Or the one job that sets up their family for life? Some merchants dream of bringing back the Third Republic, while others dream of buying a nice farm on a world far from the schemes and politics of the nobles and the Church. Others imagine owning a mansion, with hundreds of servants and enough money to buy the Emperor twice over.

The things they could do with the Big One are as endless as the light of the Pancreator. There is no risk they would not face if the score was big enough.

TAKING THE FALL

A few years back, one such story was on the lips of nobles and merchants alike. The tale spread far and wide, growing with each telling. It all began when the Town Criers reported an execution on the world of Aragon. Information was sketchy at first, but there were a few

things the reporters could agree on. A group of individuals had tried to rob a Hazat vault. Not just any vault, but one owned by Prince Juan de Hazat himself. The news assured the public that the thieves didn't make it too far into the complex before they were cut down by security. The might of the Hazat ruler left nothing of the identity of the thieves except ash; their names were lost to history. The story lasted a few days until it was replaced by more relevant scandals.

But then little bits of information began to leak, spoken in hushed whispers across crowded galas. It wasn't some small heist, some said, but rather an organized assault on the Hazat vault. The wild stories ranged from aliens digging through concrete and steel with their bare hands, to a group of individuals stealing the crown right off the prince's head while he slept. The legend of the Aragon Heist built steam, influencing playwrights and holovids for years. Even if the identity of the thieves was lost, the sheer audacity of the crime captured the imagination of merchants and nobles alike.

Like any good legend, there was a bit of truth mixed in with the tall tales. If the news had known how far the thieves got to their goal, the story would've been much different. If you dig deep, you'll find that it all started with a group of thieves who were hired to do the impossible. Given high-level keys and more than enough coin to pay for the heist, the group of four men and two women almost succeeded. It was only through the betrayal of one of their own that they were slaughtered by Hazat forces.

Digging even deeper, the mystery of their funding source remains unsolved. Where did the thieves receive their keys and false identities? There are whispers of rival houses trying to undermine the Hazat prince, guilders seeking recompense for some past slight, or even priests trying to teach the prince humility. Some rumors claim that the Emperor himself was involved, or that it was revenge by hidden remnants of House Chauki, who somehow survived their purge by their Hazat servants centuries ago and now used the lost house's secret treasure hoard to fund the heist.

Other conjectures concentrate instead on what the thieves were after: not gold, but an artifact more precious than jewels. Something worth the enmity of the head of a Royal House.

One thing is for certain. Someone of great power wanted inside the Hazat stronghold. The identity and motivation of this mysterious benefactor will probably never be known. But that is the way of those in power. Someone wants something of great value, and where the haggling fails, sometimes they must resort to more underhanded means. But how do you mitigate the risk to your holdings and your person? Easy. You set up others to take the fall.

The Merchant League is no stranger to this tactic as well. To mitigate some of the risk for their own schemes, some of the guilds employ certain individuals who are expendable in the eyes of society. If something goes wrong, which it almost always does, the consequences can be laid squarely at the feet of the miscreants that did the deed, not the ones who hired them. Anonymity hides the ones at the top when the Imperial Eye comes sniffing around.

This works out well for the benefactors, but not so much for the hired guns who put their necks on the line for the promise of fame and fortune. Most don't even know their benefactor's identity. But, as always, the reward must be worth the risk. Almost all who walk into these jobs know what they're getting into.

The trick comes in making your own contingency plans. Like any good magician, it's best to look at the whole plan and see where the holes are. Where are the moments in the plan where your benefactor can betray you? Paranoia is the mother of invention, and you should never go into a deal without a healthy dose of it running through your veins. Just realize that even the wealthiest and the most powerful can be tricked by a sharp mind.

If you're curious enough to know the truth, follow the clues to Everlost, one of the moons of Alvarado, a gas giant within the Aragon system. It is said that there you can find a woman who knows all the details of the Aragon Heist, with the security key to prove it. She might even tell you how she got into the vault and how she survived the death squad.

Connections

The universe is powered by connections. The jump-gates connect the worlds, just as the roads and highways connect the cities and states of the empire. And just as people thrive or suffer based on these physical connections, a merchant can live or die depending on who she knows. There are few who a guild member can call friend, but there are many they can call allies. These connections can mean the difference between an influx of wealth or sleeping on the hard streets.

Emperor Alexius would be just another noble scrambling for power without the people who helped him gain the throne. He knew that you can't walk this universe alone, that people need to seek out others of similar minds and goals. Maybe they're not exactly friends, but so long as they share goals, they're fellow travelers.

Even the guilds of League, whose backbiting and infighting are legendary across the Known Worlds, find common ground with each other on occasion. When a guild is threatened by noble or Church, one can count on them coming together to fight a common enemy. When the Imperial Eye targeted the Town

Criers, it was the Reeves that came to their rescue. (Although some would argue that the Reeves were the cause of their suffering, but that's another story.) When the Muster are threatened in their monopoly by Brother Battle, time and time again the other guilds come to their aid. All throughout history, the League has showed that it'll come together when the threat is too big to handle alone. For all their bluster and their betrayals, the Merchant League knows that they cannot survive without a unified front, especially when that unified front is to the advantage of all.

But that doesn't mean the guilds like to share. Threats from the outside are all well and good, but that's where the solidarity ends. A piece of ancient tech found by the Scravers will be sought after by the Engineers. The Charioteers might seek a new shipping contract with House Ramakrishna on Hargard, which sets off a bidding war with the Muster. It's this internal rivalry which causes paranoia and fear among the guilds. When one comes across a truly special item or a job, they might not want to share it with the other merchants. But what does one do when they can't do something alone, but don't trust their merchant brothers and sisters?

An old Reeve proverb says, "It's not how many friends you have, but how many people owe you a debt." Finding the right debts and calling them in is a good way to complete a job. If someone doesn't have any debts to call in with the other members of the League, sometimes they need to look outside.

Co-Conspirators

There is no right or wrong way to forge connections with others in the Known Worlds. Sometimes it's just plain luck, and sometimes it takes a decent amount of hard work and sacrifice to make that one connection you need. Sometimes it means calling in favors or putting yourself at the mercy of someone else's greed. Either way, when you find the one big score you can't handle alone, you need to figure out the right persons for the job and how they can best be reeled in.

NOBLES

Some say the universe runs on two currencies: coin and favors. Given the opulence of the noble lifestyle, coin probably won't be an option for the enterprising merchant who seeks to acquire their aid. However, a favor is something most nobles will take with open arms. Most of the merchant's work comes in finding out what they need. A good merchant has their ear to the ground at all times, listening for hints of gossip that could lead her to the real information they need. More elaborate ways

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of gaining information, like sneaking into a Hawkwood ball, take money, planning, and patience.

A noble might need a ride in secret to a forbidden love affair, or they might need a certain piece of tech to cement their power base. A Hazat might get drunk and spill that a rival is trying to take them down. The noble needs to strike first before their business falls. Give them what they want, and you've got a debt that can be called back later.

There is also another way to use information, but it can be even more dangerous than swapping favors. The art of blackmail is a surgeon's blade that can heal or kill. Some feel this way can be easier than doing favors, especially in the short term, but they risk underestimating the lengths a noble will go to avenge their honor. You might think that using scandalous information is the easy way, but this path can also lead to a blade to the heart in the middle of a cold alley.

CHURCH

Most of the time, the guilds want nothing to do with the Church and its staunch rules. The merchant guilds know the line they walk. One slip and they can find themselves broiling at the end of a flamethrower. Because of this, many merchants would rather have extensive dental work done by a vorox than to ask a priest for a favor.

But there are times, even if they're not often, where the services of a Church member are needed to complete a task. The reward needs to be large enough to warrant the attendant risks, and even when it is, the options are a bit more limited than when dealing with the nobles or the other guilds.

One doesn't bribe a priest unless one is absolutely certain the bribe will work. This takes extensive research and legwork to find if the priest is of like mind, a.k.a. easily bought. Slipping them firebirds must be done under the cover of "tithes" and "charity," all while the merchant gauges the priest's reaction and greed for more. No matter what the cynical guilds like to think, the Church is mostly filled with people who actually believe in what they preach, from the healing Almathean to the murderous Avestite.

What do you do when you need the help of a certain priest, but can't threaten or bribe them? The bluff. How you frame an offer is everything. If you can make the priest believe that they are doing the Pancreator's work, then they'll more likely go along with the scheme. Everyone wants something, even the most pious of us all. Convince an Almathean that the money from the score will save her hospice, and she might give up the name of the nobleman the merchant needs. Convince the Brother Battle that the target of the big score is an antinomist cultist, and he might bring the firepower. You've got to be sure and

quick with the bluff because, like blackmailing the noble, the backlash can be severe. You don't want to end up on the rack because you stumbled when lying.

YEOMEN

And what of those hard-working individuals outside of guild, house, or sect? That's where the independent contractor comes in. The freemen live outside the normal structures of society, living off what odd contracts they can find. Their status is above those of indentured servitude, but they still live day to day without the backing of the institutions around them. The League often employs freelancers for jobs they don't want traced back to them, or even those jobs that are deemed beneath them, but are still worthy for a cut of the profits.

Acquiring the assistance of a yeoman usually requires only coin, but even here the astute merchant can ascertain needs the yeomen can't satisfy on their own, something easily available to a guild or their contacts in the nobility and the Church. A freelance labor contract? A writ of free trade within a noble's domain? Forgiveness of a particularly embarrassing sin they committed? The yeomen can't get these on their own, but the merchant merely has to pull a few strings in their network of co-conspirators.

OUTSIDERS

There are times when neither the independent contractor, the nobles, nor the Church can help with an issue. Times when there's only one way to gather the information or the help the merchant needs to accomplish their dream. For this rare occasion, a merchant must look outside.

There are many people outside the rule of the empire. From the Kurgans to the Vuldrok barbarians, these societies have their own starting points for negotiation. There are cultural frames of reference the merchant must learn, but everyone has something they need, and it's up to the merchant to find it. Be it barter or favors, a merchant can still deal with human outsiders like they would any other.

It becomes a bit trickier when dealing with aliens. From the six-armed vorox to the mystical ur-obun, those who live their culture's traditional ways can be beyond the merchant's scope of experience. The best advice for those who wish to bring an alien into their schemes can be summed up in three words: research, research, research. The only way to safely deal with alien sentients is to learn as much of their culture as you can. If you need the strength of a vorox for a job, you'd best learn how not to insult one, lest you end up with your head mounted to a laser lance because you showed too many teeth in your smile.

The Why

What is it to be free? One man's freedom is another's chains. We all must figure out where that road leads.

— *Sergeant Janae Reynolds, Fourth Muster Stigmata Division*

Yet, for all the schemes, for all the power struggles and the search for the Big One, there is always something deeper that motivates a merchant to abandon their home and search for riches despite the risk. The Charioteer has it when she walks the stars between the Black, and the Scraver has it when he risks life and limb to dust off that piece of Second Republic tech. From the Reeve who wants eternal riches to the Muster who wants to pay off his drinking debts, everyone has something that motivates them beyond just simple greed.

Even if a person doesn't know in his conscious mind, everyone has a Why: a deep secret reason to do the things they do. Maybe the Charioteer has a family that she's running from. Her why is *freedom*. Maybe the Scraver also has a family, but his daughter is sick and needs care the Church can't provide. His why is *family*. Maybe the Reeve grew up the lowest of the low, and made a pact long ago to never return to the gutter from whence she came. Her why is *stability*.

These motivations drive a merchant to risk everything to gain the answer to a question they might not even know they are asking. Much has been made of the Merchant League's desire to bring about the Third Republic. It's whispered in casino halls and in starship galleys. And it is true that there are those who have made it their life's goal to bring about that level of sweeping change. None will admit it, especially not with the Emperor and the Church casting their eyes at the guilds, but it's there. An undercurrent of why that threatens the fabric of the organized world they live in.

But most schemes aren't nearly so grand. A Muster might want to simply survive her next job, never thinking beyond tomorrow, while a Charioteer might want to upgrade the speed of his ship so he can outrun pirates. All these motivations fuel the search for more, for something better, for something that will ease their pain and make their lives better.

There are also those who fight for something bigger than themselves. More so than the nobles or the priests, the merchants are on the ground mixing with the common folk as equals. They see the suffering and the misery the system causes, and some feel the need to make things right. Those who whisper about bringing back the Third Republic see that fallen society as a lost

utopia, but many guilders also argue that it was far from it. Still, even they know things need to change. The stars might be going out, but that doesn't mean that all the pain and suffering in the universe should be ignored.

A merchant might want to free his family from servitude. A Muster might want to feed the beggars on the street, and so devises a scheme to hijack a food shipment. A Scraver might come up with a plan to topple the tyranny of the local lord once and for all. These are righteous battles, and most will fail. But for the few who succeed, they might be able to bring about real change.

Of course, there are also those who fight against the worse elements of the Merchant League itself. They fight against the Reeves who act as loan sharks, keeping their victims in chains of coin. Each of the guilds has morally gray elements or worse, and there are those who wish to not only end the tyranny of the noble houses but also the tyranny of the guilds. They wish to be free of all chains, not just ones made by the ruling class.

Whatever the reason, finding one's motivation is the key to success in the guilds. Some will fail, some will succeed, but at least they can say that they tried. And for some, their names might go down in the annals of history as those who changed the world.

The Guilds

When a commoner imagines a schemer, he usually thinks of a noble or gilt-robed priest presenting the collection plate. But anyone who thinks the guilds are their brothers, pure and innocent, will find themselves with a knife in their back.

— *Anonymous words of advice*

Passion for knowledge drives humanity forward. Some willingly share the knowledge they find, while others jealously hoard it, gaining power and wealth from the ability to do what no one else can. Most of the Merchant League falls into the latter category.

Part of it is the thirst for wealth, but part of it is also survival. In a world where the nobility rule on a whim and the Church tries to put the universe in a box, the merchants know, deep down, that their very lives are dependent on the knowledge they hoard. If the other estates ever had unfettered access to jumpkey tech, the Charioteers would cease to exist. Knowledge is the difference between wealth and stability and being executed for treason and heresy.

This thirst for more drives each guild in unique ways. Each has their own schemes and their own plans for the future. Not everyone in a guild feels the same way, but the guild is a compass that can show

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which direction their motivations lie. Those who can't step foot on a starship without becoming violently ill probably won't become a Charioteer. Someone who

hates numbers and facts won't be of any use to the Reeves. Their shared passion for their occupation is what drives many merchants to take the risks they do.

Charioteers

Captain Chelsea Lee sat like the eye of a hurricane. Her crew frantically maneuvered her ship through the black. Alarms screamed inside the steel walls. A blast hit the hull, creating even more alarms.

The captain's eyes fixated on the monitor in front of her. Her thin fingers danced along the keys, as numbers flowed over her screen.

"Jumpgate in 30 seconds..." Shin, her navigator, announced.

"Captain!" Her gunner, Yule, called out. "Three more ships have joined the pursuit!"

"How many is that now?" Ham asked from the back, where the Muster sat in his crash seat clutching his useless rifle.

"Seven."

"We'll be dead before we jump," Ham said bluntly.

"Captain?" Yule asked, her voice desperate.

Captain Lee ignored them all. Her world was the numbers in front of her... there! That's the code she needed. A code she had inserted into the Hazat defense fleet's ships five years ago. A failsafe she had never hoped to use. A click of a button transmitted the code to those ships at the speed of light.

A code that rebooted the Hazat jumpdrives and gundecks. It would take 10 minutes before they were back online.

Smiling, Captain Lee ordered her own ship to jump through the gate, leaving her pursuers behind.



To walk the stars. There are few children who don't dream of sailing with the Charioteers through the Black. As they get older, their interests might take them elsewhere, but a few still hold onto the dream. Some feel trapped in their life and desire escape, while others need to be a part of something bigger. To them, a ship is more than just metal and ceramsteel, it's a call to freedom.

From apprentice to captain, the Charioteer's life is dictated by the stars. A smart captain will find a need in some remote part of the Known Worlds and fill it. When a gold rush happens on a planet distant from a system's core world, the guild can charge triple to fly ships out into the depths of the system. Or a captain could be the one to stumble onto the rare deposit of gold and make a killing. Of course, that captain would have to make sure the coordinates to the motherlode were kept under strict lock and key, with anyone snooping around suddenly finding themselves on the other side of an airlock.

A good Charioteer is always searching for a new route that no one knows about: a jumpkey to one of the lost worlds. These are the holy grails of the Charioteers. A promise of something new and exciting, something no one else has found or seen, is enough to lure even the most comfortable star captain away from their routine.

But a Charioteer's life isn't all about exploring the stars. The key to the guild's power is their hold on the jumpkeys. Many schemes rotate around how to use this monopoly to their advantage. A well-hidden think machine virus can wipe out the Malignatius naval fleet's jumpkeys. If they want to leave the system, they'll have to pay for new ones. An enterprising Charioteer would need to figure who they can hire for such a job, and how not to get caught.

For those who wish a simpler life, there are numerous merchants who find sponsorship with both nobles and the Church alike. Shuttling a cardinal from one planet to another doesn't seem that exciting, but it is good, honest work. It might be difficult to find an employer with the means to pay, but it can be a steadier paycheck than starting a business on their own.

But explorer or merchant, the Charioteer is always keeping an eye out for the Big One. A treasure hunt across the universe to find that one rare jumpkey that leads to a fabled world. A war between House al-Malik and the Hazat that provides an excellent opportunity to charge both sides double for their jumps. A manhunt to chase down a rebel, who conveniently has been given the same set of jumpkeys so that he's always one jump ahead, and each extra jump to catch up is extra bonus pay.

Engineers

"Yes, your grace," Crafter Xuul said, bowing to the glowering priest. "I have completed the upgrade to the archive's mental nexus. You should be now able to retrieve the confessional reports you seek."

"Not a word of this!" Canon Eustice Harmonius barked. "You are dismissed."

Crafter Xuul bowed again, picked up his tool bag, and left the wood-paneled library with its rows of think machine terminals. He blinked his left eye three times in succession, booting up the HUD. The data had successfully loaded onto his implant's cache. Every name of every sinner who had confessed to Canon Harmonius in the last five years. Xuul smiled. It would make for amusing reading.

When most people think of the Sacred Order of the Engineer, they do so with a little bit of awe mixed with more than a little bit of fear. Aloof and frightening in their obsession with old tech, the Engineers are the most mysterious of the guilds. This fear doesn't cause them to be shunned, however. Nobles pay them handsomely for their designs, as well as to repair their weapons and equipment. The other guild members come to the Engineers to fix their starships, weapons, and think machines.

The Church is a more interesting story. The Privilege of Martyrs doctrine gives them a way to negotiate with the Engineers for their tech, but there are rumors of much darker reasons the Church leaves them alone. Some say the Engineers Guild has various bargaining chips, like a series of bombs ready to take down a few key cathedrals. Others say the Church wouldn't be able to function across interstellar distances without the Engineer's tech, both the obvious kind and some hidden ones, too. Either way, the relationship between the Church and the Engineers is a tenuous thing that could be ripe to exploit, if one knew their secrets.

Church or noble or fellow guild member, each one will come to the Engineers in time of need, but few call them friends. This solitude suits the Engineer just fine. From the moment they become an apprentice, they know their life is given over to the search for knowledge. And unlike the Scravers, who search for artifacts to gain wealth and power, the Engineer seeks information for information's sake. A new blueprint, a piece of tech unseen since the Fall, a way to make a think machine more efficient, these are all the things that spark their passion.

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Engineer Calvin Haught said it best: “To find the beauty in the circuits and the movement of a machine is to find peace.” The joy of finding a forgotten machine and the joy of creating something is the passion of every Engineer, from the lowest to the Didact himself, and it’s a passion one can use to one’s advantage.

One Engineer may wish to travel with a Scraver in order to study the mysterious technology of an alien species. Another might want to become the right hand of the Emperor himself, supplying machines to the elite, while yet another might wish to join a Charioteer and roam the stars in exchange for the repair of sensitive systems.

And then there are others who choose a... stranger path. There is a very specific reason why the guild is called the Sacred Order of Engineers. Hidden under the technological jargon is a secret hidden from the Church, one that would threaten the guild if brought to light. The thought is that science and religion are two sides of the same coin, and there are many Engineers who feel that to know science is to know the Pancreator. One need only to watch an Engineer work on a stardrive to see what one Reeve once called, “worshiping the ghost in the machine.”

Because of this, a few of these men and women have committed themselves to bringing about the Third Republic. They do not simply wish to replicate the Second Republic, however. They believe the Fall came about because of a lack of understanding of what it meant to be human in a high-tech environment. Techgnosis, the ability for tech to change the basis of human behavior, is something they believe can be fixed. They believe a Third Republic can correct some of the mistakes of both the old and the new civilization. In their minds, technology might even be able to reverse the fading of the stars, if only one could commune freely with it.

There are also whispers of an even smaller group, one who see the Church as the ones who partake in heresy. These Engineers hide in the shadows and will use anything, including violence, to bring about what they call the Great Awakening, a time when people are free to worship technology as they wish. No one knows who has committed to this Great Awakening, and the Engineers Guild denies they even exist. But it’s not a stretch to think there are those who see the broken nature of the worlds, and who want to make a drastic change.

Muster

Have you seen Elena the Silent? What a show! You haven’t heard of it? It’s the year’s most popular holovid series. Elena the Silent is a free woman who marries into House Van Gelder, but her husband has burdensome debts to House Decados. They call in the debt. They hire the Muster to teach the nobleman a lesson — and teach him they do. One cold winter night they take Elena from her manse, chain her, and sell her to the highest bidder. Yes, yes, I know: unlikely. But it’s a holovid!

Now: through it all, she says nothing. Not when they take her, not when they sell her. She says nothing when she strangles her new master in his bed. She says nothing when she guns down the Muster’s bounty hunters when they come for her — with her master’s own blaster rifle! She makes her way to freedom into Vuldrok space — a dangerous idea; I’m surprised the censors allowed it. But with Freya sitting beside Alexius, Vuldrok heroes are all the rage.

The Muster comes for her in force, but Elena the Silent finds friends among the Vuldrok. They fight fiercely by her side — each with a unique weapon, I might add: quite thrilling! Finally Baron Gorgo, the Decados creditor who sold her in lieu of her husband’s debts, loses too much face at court and relents. The last episode sees her stand triumphant as the Muster retreats and she finally speaks but three words: “I am free.”

Oh, don’t give me that face. You know perfectly well how the common folk feel about your guild’s PR problems.

— Countess Surya Ramada al-Malik, overheard speaking with Lt. Harold Jamil of the Muster Guild

While the other guilds trade in items and services, the Muster trade in people. If one needs a job done in the Known Worlds, the Muster can fill that need.

With its reputation as being one of the toughest and most morally ambiguous guilds in the League,

what can cause a person to give their very life to serve it? For some, it’s a way out of poverty. The Muster isn’t just a soldier’s guild; it represents all forms of skilled labor, and it makes sure that its members make decent wages for their work, wages no yeoman on their own could hope to capture. For

other members, it wasn't really a choice; they were conscripted with an option to join or take a short walk out the airlock. For others, it's a last resort, something they fall into because all other options have been played out. Once they're in, they're in for life.

The perks are many to those who remain loyal. Decent pay, even if the work isn't always decent. The dream of freedom, of wealth, of rising in the ranks to join the High Command.

Reeves

Angelica looked up from her notes. "What do you think?" she asked her aide.

"I think our client better get used to a steel cage for the rest of his life."

Angelica sighed and went back to her notes. Her aide was correct. Nicolas Herrington, thief, smuggler, and all around nefarious Scraver, was going to be found guilty. The problem was that Herrington was also an ally to the Reeves, and he had called in his chip. Thus, Angelica sat, trying to find some way to make this man walk free.

The case was pretty straightforward. Herrington had been caught smuggling illegal goods through al-Malik space. "Stupid," Angelica muttered. "He didn't pay off the right person first." She shook her head.

But then a name in the case file popped out at her. "Jacob," she said to her aide, "where do you know the name Malin Ferrow from?"

Jacob's brow knitted together. "I don't know."

Angelica smiled. "Well, he's the prosecutor in the case. He's also a certain client of a brothel on Istakhr."

"How do you know that?"

"A little Scraver told me. In fact, why don't you give a call to this Scraver, and see if there's any evidence of what our good prosecutor's been up to."

Follow where the money goes in the universe and there's a good chance it all leads back to the Reeves. As the head of the League Bank, they are one of the largest and most wealthy of the guilds. Their loans are used from one corner of the Known Worlds to the other, and their services as legal advocates are in high demand. Because the Gray Faces tend to stay in the background, their schemes are a little more indirect than the other guilds. One won't find a Reeve digging in the dirt to find new tech or running illegal guns on a starship. Most of the members of the guild would gladly run the other direction if someone shot at them, but more than that, most of the guild would never be in that predicament in the first place.

They are the masters behind the curtain. They pull the strings, all for one goal: more wealth. While they might never personally head planetside to excavate the ruins of an alien temple, they would finance one if they thought they could gain profit from it. And while their ships would never run an illegal smuggling operation, there's a good chance the Charioteer who does took out a loan with them to buy his starship.

But there is a darker side to the Muster. They aren't called Chainers because they like to wear jewelry. The Muster sells not only the skills of its members, but those of non-members. Slaves are bought and sold, making up cheap labor and even cheaper lives. But that doesn't stop those whose fates are owned by the Chainers from dreaming of a better life. Thoughts of escape, of freedom, are the stuff legends are made of. Some have even escaped into the guild and become the jailors of their former comrades.

The Reeves might have all sorts of plans in the works, from funding two nobles against each other, or even taking a share of an illegal Scraver casino. There are probably thousands of such little businesses and ventures across the Known Worlds, but one thing remains the same. None of them can be traced back to the Reeves. Their hands are clean, at least to the public eye, and they do anything to assure that it stays that way.

No one wants to find themselves on the wrong side of a debt collector's club when they do something that besmirches the Reeves' good name. That's the rub. More than any of the guilds, a Reeve has the freedom to make huge, Machiavellian schemes, but unlike the others, they are the most scrutinized by their rivals.

The nobles keep an eye on the Reeves, terrified that the guild is one step away from trying to completely ruin their houses by calling in debts. Temple Avesti hates the Reeves and its priests wait for the day they can burn them all at the stake. While other guilds, like the Scravens, are constantly being underestimated, the Reeves have the opposite issue. Every action, every loan, and every service is examined and cross

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examined by those in power. Hence the reason they must keep their reputations clean.

An enterprising Reeve can make sure their schemes are hidden from the public. Want to make sure the land that you buy is cheap? A little blackmail of a nobleman might be in order. The use of contractors is well documented, as is the fact that said contractors never see their true benefactor. If something goes wrong, deniability is the key. Many people have hanged for a Reeve scheme gone sour, with no way to trace it back to the Reeve in question.

That isn't to say that every Reeve needs to be a scheming, greedy moneylender who would sell their friends for coin. There are some in the guild who want to do right by the world. When one needs representation against the Church or simply to not be sent to prison, they send for a Reeve. A lot of these advocates are simply there for their exorbitant fees, but there are some who want to see justice done. This is a role one can take if they wish to make a difference, one trial at a time.

Scravers

Gunder whistled as he stepped into the empty warehouse. The heels of his boots mingled with the tune as he casually made his way through the dark corridors.

He continued whistling as he made his way into the main room of the warehouse, where his fellow Scravers stood next to a bound and hooded man sitting in a steel chair.

Gunder pulled the black bag from the man's head and knelt down. "Marcus Decados. Salutations, my dear man."

"What is this?" The nobleman cried. "Do you know who I am?"

"Of course we do," Gunder said. "Marcus Decados. You're like, what, 10th in line to the head of your house? A lot of people have to die off before you become someone important, I'm afraid."

Marcus blanched. "Then what do you want?"

"We're not interested in your title. No, we're more interested in your lover, Ignatia Hazat."

Gunder smiled as Marcus paled even further. Ignatia was a high-ranking noble on the house's financial board. A board that could help Gunder get his casino off the ground.

"So let's talk..."

The poor and the destitute haunt the empire, like an infestation that those in charge either persecute or ignore. Since the Emperor Wars, homelessness and poverty are at a height not seen since the Fall of the Republic. The empire might be at peace, but that means nothing when the divide between the lower class and the upper class feels like a gulf measured in interstellar distances.

From this mass of poverty comes the Scravers Guild. With dreams of reaching beyond their low station, the industrious flock to the families of the Scravers. The guild promises a dream of more: more wealth, more power, and more influence.

Some dream of reclaiming a piece of technology that might change the universe. Some dream of rising in the ranks of the guild and one day becoming the dean. Theirs are schemes of material things, but more than that, their dreams are dreams of freedom: to never have to go back to the abject poverty they escaped from.

But the life of a Scraver is not just that of a junker and buyer of ill-gotten goods. The guild is also one of the largest crime syndicates in the Known Worlds. From the black market to casinos, the Scravers own much of the seedier side on most planets. If a Muster wants to cause a war between two noble houses, she can enlist a Scraver to arrange a kidnapping. If a Church member visits one of their casinos, the Scraver in charge will make sure he has plenty of incriminating videos to use later.

It's all about the power. The Charioteers might buy good scrap to fix their ships, and the Engineers are always looking for a good piece of old-world tech that still works. A dean of a Scraver family might have a protection racket that spans two or three different worlds. Working for one of the bigger families can be worthwhile, as long as one is willing to get their hands dirty. Starting off as a messenger or a hired thug might not seem glamorous, but it can lead to a life of luxury and power.

As long as one doesn't get caught. The nobles watch the Scravers closely, waiting to pounce on any hint that they've overstepped their bounds. The Church would like to see all Scravers put to the torch, and probably would've succeeded if the guild wasn't so connected. Because of the scrutiny the Scravers suffer, they've learned to be resourceful in their schemes and keep their true activities in the shadows, lest they end up with ropes around their necks.

Yet, despite the risk, all Scravers dream of a better life. Everyone knows the story of Oliver Lord and how he pulled himself out of poverty to become head of the League. This dream unites them all, as each desires the ability to become something bigger. Something more.



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DRAMAS

This chapter provides the GM with two detailed, scene-by-scene dramas, and a host of hooks for crafting their own dramas.

The Dark Burden

Though they came burdened with oceans of wisdom, they found in me only a young fool.

— *Princeling Opa, Nobles Also Weep (season 3, episode 7)*

The troupe has scored a job ferrying copies of an episode of the popular magic lantern series *Nobles Also Weep* to Nueventina on Icon. While they're there, locals pressure them to investigate a noble who inspired a number of plot-lines for the show and around whom unsettling rumors circulate.

Background for the Players

A noble or League member ally has asked the troupe to deliver the latest episodes of a popular soap opera, *Nobles Also Weep*, to Boss Tadarkis on Icon, before the beginning of the Festival of Innocents, where the new season is due to be premiered. This patron arranges for local accommodations for the troupe, either through their family connections or a League-owned facility, and might be willing to sweeten the deal with something the troupe needs. If the patron sounds a bit desperate, they are: the last courier was arrested by fanatic Avestites and the League is refusing to send another until their courier is freed. Until that legal mess is cleared up, someone has to deliver the goods.

Nobles Also Weep has been running for decades, a co-production of the Scravers Guild and the Masque Guild, with financing by the Reeves Guild. Some of its characters were inspired by the known and imagined exploits/misdeeds of the real-life Baron Rōnā, his wife, and his Scraver ex-lover. Officially, the Church condemns the magic-lantern show, the nobles disdain it, and the League finds it hilarious. Unofficially, the Church feels it humanizes nobles, nobles love the gossipy drama, and the League finds it hilarious.

The latest episode is shipped in a sealed, flat, gray ceramsteel box with Merchant League markings. The holographic lattice containing the episode requires specialized equipment to read.

The real-life inspirations for the show, while initially appreciating the attention, moved into seclusion about 20 years ago after the health of Baron Rōnā's wife declined. The Scraver "lover" vanished soon after.

Background for the Gamemaster

An attack at the Festival of Innocents sweeps the troupe into the mysteries surrounding Baron Rōnā Liang Zhu Cardano Li-Halan, Lord of the Liang Zhu region, ruling from his stronghold at Eiderhall.

Baron Rōnā is the inspiration for one of the more infamous characters in the long-running magic lantern series. Known to be a very bookish academic, in his early 20s he was shipped off to war after an affair with a local Scraver became public. He distinguished himself in an incredibly dramatic space battle against a pirate fleet, beating back at least two boarding actions. He returned a hero and married the fierce Lady Oto Kusanagi, veteran of the Golem Wars, who has stood by his side through many challenges for decades.

That's the public story.

What people don't know is that Baron Rōnā is a tortured man. Never meant to inherit, this frail youngest son spent his youth buried in books. Finding forgotten family libraries, he came across references to the forbidden practice of ancestor worship. He took it up as an academic exercise, not believing it was incompatible with the teachings of the Church.

Then, his older siblings fell in battle and his father died of consumption. He was recognized as the heir and that fact almost broke him. He fell into a relationship with his childhood sweetheart, Alea Tadarkis, now a Scraver Genin, who shared his love of books and travel.

To cut this scandal short, Rōnā's mother used League contacts to ensure that Rōnā served on a starship, securing his reputation and keeping him away from his guild lover. Rōnā served ineffectually until an encounter with pirates activated his latent psychic powers — including his Dark Twin. Those untrained powers killed the pirates and most of the crew. The survivors, not knowing what Rōnā had done, praised him for their escape and invented stories of heroism that only grew with time, culminating in the inspiration for the character of Lord Opa on the *Nobles Also Weep* soap opera.

During the last few years of his mother's life, he acquiesced to marrying Dame Oto Kusanagi, a veteran of the Golem Wars. Damage from that war caused her to have violent bursts of temper, so they kept a cool distance from another. Soon after this, he renewed his affair with Alea Tadarkis.

It was at a masque during the Festival of Innocents that he found Dame Oto, in one of her fits, torturing Alea to death. Seized by a pent-up Urge long denied release, he killed Oto. Soon after, he discovered an unexpected contingency she had left in case of her death: Her handmaiden was a golem and it claimed it had Oto's mind in its body... a mind no longer damaged and sorry for what she had done. Not understanding how she did it, or if it was even true, Rōnā realized the golem could masquerade as his wife, hiding her murder.

This worked until the golem started breaking down. Whatever Oja had done to preserve her mind in its artificial matrix, it was now degrading. Rōnā decided to put his early academics into practice. He performed, for the first time, a full Manja ritual to restore her soul.

Whatever came into the golem, whether a glitch of programming or a ghost or spirit, it was clearly malevolent. Working in conjunction with Rōnā's Urge, she exposed him to the dark powers in Panjyrr and forced him to perform blood sacrifices using an artifact called the "Sangreal," luring victims to his estate during the Festival of Innocents with an annual masked ball.

She has been torturing Rōnā for 20 years. In his 50s now, he is a broken man, on the verge of an exhausted death. He hates life but fears damnation more. He is haunted by a spirit that resembles Alea Tadarkis. He is unsure whether she is really a ghost, a product of the Sangreal artifact, or simply his own soul struggling against damnation.

The Festival of Innocents masked ball draws the troupe into Lord Rōnā's nightmare, as the authorities finally fix their eye on the reclusive mountain lord of Eiderhall. The troupe plays a part in his fate.



Act I: A Feast of Fools

The Festival of Innocents has come to Icon, celebrating children and the simple-minded. Throughout the week, merriment, food, and song will fill the world and the celebrated will fill their bellies and pockets with sweets, kambo cakes, small gifts, and coins.

The agora at Nueventina, the second largest city on this Li Halan Garden World, overflows with the bounty of three systems — Icon, Midian, and Manitou — and a gleeful peace settles here. Jeweled streamers fill the streets and vendors offer toys to the young. It is considered a blessing to touch — with permission — a pregnant woman's belly. Pipers wander the street, playing tunes for a talon or two, often dueling their musical counterparts.

Varieties of kambo are served in most parts of the agora, their pungent scents hitting people as they round the corners into the market. Made from a common short-grain, these distinctive black-and-gold cakes range from savory to deliriously sweet.

The mix of thickly sweet scents attracts a local species of beetle, whose iridescent bodies are as notable as their tendency to harmlessly bump into anything, from travelers to large beasts of burden, much to the amusement of children. Shells from dead beetles are commonly used as cheap jewelry.

Scene I: Whispers from the Grave

What: The ghost of Baron Rōnā's dead lover possesses a woman and asks the troupe to save him.

Who: Simple peasant woman (possessed briefly by Alea Tadarkis)

Where: A narrow street in the Agora.

A palanquin makes its way through the thronged streets, forcing people to press against the sides. As it turns the corner, a woman approaches the troupe, holding a wooden chalice. She hones in on the most pious member of the troupe.

WOMAN: "Save him."

The chalice is full to the brim with blood, which spills over as she raises the cup.

Then, she changes. There is no cup in her hand and her face reflects a simple nature. Gleefully, she asks for a gift or a sweet. She has no memory of carrying a cup or saying anything.

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ADDITIONAL DETAILS

- A *spot* roll allows a troupe member to overhear someone in the crowd say that the palanquin belongs to Baron Rōnā, the inspiration for a famous love triangle on *Nobles Also Weep*.
- No chalice can be found. A physical recording, such as from a cybernetic eye, will show that in one frame the woman held a chalice, but in the next she has empty hands.
- Psychic Mind Sight or Mind Search can reveal a memory gap where the woman's consciousness was temporarily displaced.
- If a troupe member has the psychic power, Wyrd Sight, active during the chalice-bearer's appearance, the chalice radiates theurgic power with the force of destiny, while the woman appears to be a spirit. Once the chalice disappears, the simple peasant is unremarkable.
- If a troupe member has the theurgic rite, Rending the Veil of Unreason, active during the chalice-bearer's appearance, it shows that the woman with the chalice has an untarnished, glowing, loving but sad soul. Once the chalice disappears, the simple peasant has an extroverted, happy soul with a tinge of slothful tarnish.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

SIMPLE PEASANT WOMAN

Extra

"I like sweets! Do you have sweets?"

Description: Ruddy-faced, with a broad smile and eyes that can't seem to focus. She wears a linen dress.

Actions: *Goal* *Impact*
 Befriend 9 Target is Befriended.

Resistance: Body 0 | Mind 0 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 10

Equipment: 6 talons, three kambo cakes.

Scene 2: The Hand of Fate

What: A huckster offering fortunetelling is surprised when fate intervenes.

Who: Apprentice Pero

Where: A busy crossroads.

Pero, a gambler and street performer, happily fleeces people with a game of "beetles": the mark puts a talon coin under one of three beetle shells and, after Pero shuffles them, if the mark guesses which shell it's under, Pero pays out a firebird. If the mark guesses wrong, Pero keeps the talon. He rarely loses.

Just as the troupe comes by, Pero loses. To distract from his loss, he offers to read the fortune of whomever

appears to be the most secular-minded member of the troupe. He claims to have a special astro-divinity deck approved by the Orthodoxy. To show off his deck, he fans out six beautiful cards off the top: Hombor, Vladimir Aflame, Cardano & Amorita, Lextius the Knight, the Second Republic, and the Empyrean Angel.

The Empyrean Angel card shows an angelic being holding the same wooden chalice seen in *Scene 1: Whispers from the Grave*.

ADDITIONAL DETAILS

- If anyone in the troupe comments on the chalice, he'll look at the card, quickly hide his confusion, and make up a story that the cup is called the Sangreal, and it held the spilled blood of Zebulon before being healed by Saint Amalthea.
- If the troupe turns in Pero for vice (the beetle game) or blasphemy (fortunetelling), the authorities pat Pero down and tell him to move along. As he does, his deck drops from his pocket and six cards land face up. *The same six from earlier.*
- If the troupe declines a reading, a random citizen takes up the offer. The deck, however, deals out *the same six cards*, no matter how many times Pero shuffles. Disconcerted, Pero pockets the cards and moves along.
- If the troupe agrees to a reading, Pero shuffles the cards and states that he is putting down a standard celestial cross: the current situation, what crosses you, your hidden desires, your past, your open desires, and your goal. He draws the *same six cards*. Embarrassed, he re-shuffles. The same six appear again. Shaken, he abandons the deck and walks away. An examination of the deck shows that it's a fairly standard astro-divinity deck, the kind sometimes used by Zuranists. There is no wooden chalice on the Empyrean Angel card. Any re-draws from the troupe produce random cards.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

APPRENTICE PERO

"You look like a sharp one! Care to give it a try?"

Agent • Merchant 1 • Scravers • Amateur

Description: In his late 20s, Pero looks smaller and younger than his actual age. Unknown to him, he's actually the son of Baron Rōnā and Rōnā's lover, Alea Tadarkis. Raised by the Scriver's Guild, his illegitimate ancestry was kept from him. He likes to think of himself as a noble soul. Although he has seen fit to rob more than one gullible victim, he also enjoys righting wrongs when he can. When out in public, he wears a special, reversible jacket: bold

colors on one side, and plain tan on the other side. The outfit, plus a cap, allows him to get in and out of places undetected.

Characteristics:

Str	3	Wits	7	Pre	6
Dex	7	Per	6	Int	5
End	3	Will	5	Faith	4
Psi 1/Urge 0					

Skills:

Impress	6
Knavery	6
Observe	8
Perform	8

Actions:

	Goal	Impact
<i>Conceal</i>	13	1 VP per +1 Resistance vs detection attempts.
<i>Deceive</i>	12	Target is Deceived.
<i>Detect lie</i>	11	See through lies.
<i>Mesmerize</i>	14	Target is Mesmerized.
<i>Shake it off</i>	6 8 7	Removes a state.

Resistance: Body 1 | Mind 2 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 18

Surges: rating: 8 | number: 1

Equipment: Deck of cards (astro-divinity deck), lock-picking set, thick jacket.

Scene 3: It Feeds

What: A vendor in distress ends up the victim of a husk.

Who: Peasant Husks (1 for every troupe member +2)

Where: A back alley in the agora.

In most agoras there are plenty of spaces between vendor stalls and cross streets that are basically empty. Down one alley, the troupe spots a vendor wandering off to dispose of some trash — followed by a strangled cry of distress.

The vendor thought he noticed someone near a midden and assumed one of the simpler folks got disoriented, so he went over to help. That's when the husk got him.

Slow to decay and hungry for flesh, these shambling corpses send ordinary folk into a panic. They are a source of local legends and are seen only once in a generation. Since victims of a husk become husks themselves, a husk on the busiest market-day of the year is a nightmare nobody is ready to handle.

A husk kill is rarely clean or quick. The husk wraps its hands around the vendor's neck, crushing it while its teeth tear chunks from the vendor's face. It will react immediately to the troupe's attention, shambling its way towards them.

ADDITIONAL DETAILS

- If the troupe doesn't engage the husk and end it here and now, a husk plague will sweep through the city, as the husk's family shuffles off by an unseen route. The troupe will be pressed into the local guard to deal with a situation of epic proportions.
- If the troupe fails to overcome the husk, their conflict will be noticed. Help will come, but it causes a panic that results in bystanders getting hurt. There will be a limited quarantine, but no spreading situation.
- If the troupe destroys the husk, its family, attracted by the commotion, will attack; they have only now risen to join him. Since they are now out in the open, they can be dealt with.

DRAMATIC PERSONAE

PEASANT HUSK

Agent (creature) • Level: 2 • Size: 5

"Suu..."

Description: Husks are not unknown on Icon. They have been known to appear in the swamp regions of Urtata, summoned by Hwendonin antinomists. However, this type of husk is new. Once it is defeated, about one to five beetles will chew their way out of the husk's chest and fly off.

Characteristics:

Str	7	Wits	1	Pre	3
Dex	3	Per	2	Int	1
End	7	Will	2	Faith	3

Skills:

Fight	5
Observe	5

Actions:

	Goal	Impact
<i>Spot</i>	7	Find prey.
<i>Strike</i>	12	3 dmg

Resistance: Body 2* | Mind 0 | Spirit 2

* Slamproof

Vitality: 19

Surges: rating: 9 | number: 1

Equipment: Shredded clothing.

Scene 4: The Samaritan Suffers

What: The troupe is summoned by Church authorities for a favor involving the husk's point of origin.

Who: Deacon Milo Perimidian

Where: The Oro Cathedral.

Deacon Milo Perimidian works in an impressive cathedral in Nueventina, set in the Oro hills above the agora and poor quarters. Surrounded by rich

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estates, the cathedral is decorated in a late-obun style, with opalescent spires and gentle curves throughout the design. At sunset, light streams through immense stained-glass windows to bathe the homes of the privileged few in a luminescent, transcendent haze.

After the incident with the husk, the deacon's aides will escort the troupe into his presence. They try to impress the importance of haste.

Deacon Perimidian gets straight to the point. Icon clergy are jaded and ignore all but the absolute worst excesses. He and several other concerned members of the synod want to stop that now. Directly across the Icon Sea from Nueventina is the cursed province of Parjyrr, adjacent to the lands of Liang Zhu. He believes the husks, based on their clothing and a tattoo on one of the bodies, came from Liang Zhu. This implies that the dark energies of Parjyrr are now spreading. He wants direct proof to back up his claim. To get this evidence, he wants the troupe to unofficially investigate Liang Zhu's ruler, Baron Rōnā. If the troupe agrees, he will grant them access to Church records to start their investigation.

If the troupe refuses this charge, skip down to *Scenes 5-7*. The deacon's co-conspirators will not take kindly to this and will seek to meddle with the troupe later on.

Should the troupe accept the charge, Deacon Perimidian explains that the Liang Zhu branch of the Li Halan descends from the family of Prince Cardano, famous for bringing the old demonic Li Halan into the fold of the Universal Church. Unlike other relatives, this minor portion of the family has practiced a near-perfect isolation for the last two decades, staying far away from court politics after becoming temporary celebrities due to a tawdry magic-lantern show. The current lord, Rōnā Liang Zhu, has outlived his children but not his wife, who sadly has to hide her features behind a mask due to battle scars from the Golem Wars over 20 years ago.

Every year, during the Feast of Innocents, Lord Rōnā invites off-worlders to visit his estates for a grand masque in the tradition of the Gates of Heaven festival, whose pagan-leaning origins make Deacon Perimidian nervous. On a few occasions, attendees were not seen again, although no official investigation was ever conducted. Deacon Perimidean offers his swiftest water boat to the troupe, so that they can investigate Rōnā's estate while it is still open to outsiders.

Deacon Perimidean is absolutely convinced that there is evil to be found in Liang Zhu. He firmly believes there was once an attempt on Rōnā's wife's life by Lord Rōnā himself, which is why her original handmaiden disappeared over 20 years ago. He won't rest until that evidence of wrongdoing is found.

PERIMIDIAN'S GOALS FOR THE TROUPE:

- Test Lord Rōnā's faith and discover if he follows the Manja Heresy, a long-banned form of ancestor worship once practiced by the pre-conversion Li Halan.
- Determine if Lord Rōnā once tried to kill his wife.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

- If asked for more info about the husks, the deacon says that he believes the Liang Zhu peasants were forced to move closer to Nueventina due to poverty or possible crop failure. They apparently carried a spiritual malaise with them so that when they died, they rose to eat living flesh.

The following information can be pulled from Church records with successful *research* rolls:

- Baron Rōnā is the current master of Liang Zhu. He has a wife, but no living relatives or heirs. He is rumored to be overly given to questioning authority, reclusiveness, bitterness, and having inappropriate relationships.
- Parjyrr province hosts several massive Ur ruins. In the late 43rd century, the infamous Li-Halan prince, Ustirin, opened a rift here to unreflective realms. It destroyed all life for over 400 miles. He used forbidden rites in a failed attempt to bring his ancestors and the beings they served back into the physical world. This ancestor religion is known as Manja.
- The land has slowly healed. The blight has shrunk to a 100-mile radius.
- Exposure to the lands of Parjyrr is said to open dark doors in the minds of psychics.

DRAMATIS PERSONA

DEACON MILO PERIMIDIAN

Extra

"The filth in the minds, in the homes, spreading its way... it will not take root here!"

Description: Milo Perimidian originally hails from the planet Midian. He takes great pride in declaring his home province as the birthplace of the first Patriarch, Palamedes. Unfortunately, much of the pride Father Milo feels for his home is mitigated by the planet's contact with alien *vau* and the technosophists of Leagueheim. Father Milo does not want to see that kind of heterodoxy rule on Icon.

Milo's philosophy of "burn first and ask questions later" has not led him to a smooth relationship with his superiors. It's only his intense and often relentless research skills that keep him at his post, much to the chagrin of those in charge. He favors a theocracy, though he does try to keep this heresy to himself. It's

hard for him to hide his enthusiasm about the new Patriarch and what that might entail for the future power of the Church. He's hard-pressed to find anything worthwhile in alien or high-tech artifacts, having seen first-hand how vau technology corrupts people.

Actions:	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Impact</i>
<i>Castigate</i>	13	Target is Castigated.
<i>Find book</i>	15	Halve the time required per 1 VP spent.

Resistance: Body 0 | Mind 6 | Spirit 2

Vitality: 10

Equipment: None.

Scene 5: Buy Me A Drink

What: The troupe has a window of opportunity to talk to the locals about Baron Rōnā.

Who: The Common (laborers, shop owners, the elderly, drunks), the Gentry (nobles, squires, valets/maids in waiting, drunken fops), the Pious (lay ministers, festival vendors outside churches, elderly women, serfs)

Where: Outside churches or in monastic gardens (Cathedral Customs); on busy streets, taverns, or in shops (Commons Customs); in noble courts, high-end restaurants (Court Customs)

People talk. It's what they do. For someone like Baron Rōnā, inspiration for a soap opera, his stories verge on legend and the populace often confuses what they saw on the show with what really happened. These various stories, along with Baron Rōnā and Lady Oto's general backstory, can be gathered over a drink, a meal, or a friendly chat through roleplaying and influence actions.

CATHEDRAL CUSTOMS

After asking around churches or shrines, the troupe can hear the following rumors:

- Baron Rōnā's piety keeps the land healthy and free from the taint of nearby Parjyrr.
- Rōnā should not have survived the pirate attack. A miracle saved him.
- For his bravery, Rōnā was gifted a Vuldrok artifact by the Scravers.
- Baron Rōnā was involved in a love triangle that ended badly.
- Lady Oto suffers from a very painful arthritis, making her movements ungraceful.
- Baron Rōnā loves his ancestry and books more than is proper.

COMMONS CUSTOMS

After asking around in the streets, taverns, and shops, the troupe can hear the following rumors:

- Baron Rōnā once had an affair. Some say it was with a Scraver, but others say it was a Decados or a Muster guildier.

- Lady Oto's marriage was arranged to save her family from financial ruin.
- Baron Rōnā possesses an artifact called the "Sang-real."
- Baron Rōnā's land is slowly dying, as strange things come from the Parjyrr mists and haunt the towns.

COURT CUSTOMS

Asking around at court and other places where nobles gossip, the following rumors can be had:

- Baron Rōnā used to be known as a bookworm, but he survived his spaceship being taken over by demons.
- Lady Oto fought in the Golem Wars before marrying and settling in Liang Zhou.
- Since the death of his parents, Rōnā values his land before anything else.
- The Lady of Liang Zhu is rarely seen and is rarely forgiving.
- Baron Rōnā hates his wife and himself.
- Baron Rōnā had an affair with a Scraver, who was murdered by Lady Oto.

DRAMATIS PERSONA

THE COMMON

Extras

"Wait... that was from Episode 13? Ok... maybe I was wrong about that tale, but this next one..."

Description: Well-tanned from working the fields or on the sea, the peasants of Nueventina are as quick to smile as they are to anger.

Actions:	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Impact</i>
<i>Convince</i>	10	Target is Convinced.
<i>Knife strike</i>	9	3 dmg

Resistance: Body 0 | Mind 0 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 10

Equipment: 8 talons.

THE GENTRY

Extras

"No one has seen him for years, but thankfully I know this person from this party who knows this woman who attended the masque...."

Description: Well-dressed and very willing to drop gossip.

Actions:	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Impact</i>
<i>Deceive</i>	8	Target is Deceived.

Resistance: Body 0 | Mind 2 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 10

Equipment: Finely tailored clothing.

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THE PIOUS

Extras

"I heard this from my third aunt's nephew's niece in strictest confidence, but you look like you could keep a secret."

Description: The pious of Nueventina are often city-bred and wear their faith on their sleeve. They are certain they know all the secrets and might share *this* one with you.

Actions:	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Impact</i>
<i>Daunt</i>	10	Target is Daunted.

Resistance: Body 0 | Mind 0 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 10

Equipment: A jumpgate symbol and/or well-tailored clothes.

Boss Vin Tadarkis, the controller of commerce within the agora, waits for the troupe so she can accept the package the troupe is carrying. She gladly accepts the package, being a fan of the series that appeals to the masses. She tells the troupe that it will be shown soon, as is customary after its delivery. She is willing to talk with the troupe about the husk incident and the politics within the Church.

She has a request of her own for the troupe. She explains that her cousin, Genin Alea Tadarkis, had an affair with Baron Rōnā. They knew each other from childhood. Rōnā's mother broke it up by arranging for his tour of duty on the starship where he barely survived a pirate attack. Rōnā was then forced to accept a loveless marriage. He renewed his affair with Alea, but then she disappeared. Rumor has it that Lady Oto killed her. Vin Tadarkis wants to know the truth of the matter. If the troupe is by any chance going to Rōnā's masked ball, perhaps they can look into it? It's been many years now, so she's not expecting any firm evidence, but she holds out hope for some resolution. If Alea is still alive, maybe Vin can help her.

Scene 6: Love, Lies, and Other Saintly Virtues

What: The troupe pays a visit to the League to drop off the episode of *Nobles Also Weep* and gain more information.

Who: Boss Vin Tadarkis

Where: A private room at the Cathelian restaurant, deep in the city.

ADDITIONAL DETAILS

Boss Tadarkis has the following information for the troupe, depending largely on their willingness to snoop for her, and their *convince* or *entreat* rolls:



- Panjyrr is under strict interdiction. People need permission from the planetary leadership to enter Panjyrr without being shot.
- About 20 years ago, Lady Oto took Rōnā out to Panjyrr using guild transport.
- Alea Tadarkis gifted Rōnā with an artifact from the Vuldrok worlds, a cup called the Sangreal. When Emperor Alexius revealed his betrothal, representatives from the Vuldrok Star-Nations came to Icon to request the present back. He refused them.

TADARKIS' GOALS FOR THE TROUPE:

- Determine Alea Tadarkis' fate.
- If the Vuldrok artifact can be retrieved, it would be a boon to the Scravers Guild and their political position.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

BOSS VIN TADARKIS

Extra

"We are grateful for your service and hope we can be in yours."

Description: Vin is happy to share a truism that a person who fights with the sun inevitably dies of thirst. In Vin's view, so much time is spent worrying about immaterial things that matters of the flesh are inevitably thrust aside, even when a physical experience is needed. She does not mean one should lose oneself in debauchery. She means that you should feed the starving peasant before you try to convince them to be a better person.

Vin's practical philosophy does not win her many friends among the Li-Halan, who believe egalitarian ideas lead to chaos. Though she won't outright admit it, Vin longs for the rise of a Third Republic.

Actions:	Goal	Impact
<i>Entreat</i>	13	Target is Entreated.
<i>Shoot blaster</i>	14	7 dmg

Resistance: Body 3* | Mind 6 | Spirit 0
* Shockproof

Vitality: 10

Equipment: Blaster pistol (3 fusion cells), synthsilk jumpsuit, 5 firebirds.

Scene 7: The Long View

What: The troupe visits the Li Halan Court in order to find more information on Baron Rōnā.

Who: Baroness Senet Menel Li-Halan

Where: A private tea ceremony in an open garden that is part of a local knight's city estate.

There is an order in things: The Church tends the soul, the guilds tend the flesh, and the nobles possess the divine mandate to rule. Baroness Senet Menel Li Halan is unwilling to see the Li Halan reputation jeopardized by one foolish noble. She requests a visit from the troupe to ascertain if they can perform a duty for her.

A year ago, a Penitent psychic from Manitou traveled to one of Lord Rōnā's masques. He never returned. It's painfully obscure exactly where he vanished, but since he is a licensed Penitent, the Church wants answers, and to keep them from prying further, Baroness Menel has promised answers.

Rarely discussed outside of the family is the Li Halan's ancient and embarrassing legacy, Manja, a religion of ancestor worship. Baroness Menel is well aware that Baron Rōnā comes from a branch of the family that was once deep into the practice. While his parents were known for their extreme piety, Rōnā was bookish; it wouldn't surprise Baroness Menel if a forbidden text or two "fell" into his lap at some point. She would like the troupe to investigate the missing Penitent and alert her to any evidence that Baron Rōnā might be practicing forbidden rites, so that her family can deal with it before it becomes a public scandal.

ADDITIONAL DETAILS

Baroness Menel has the following information for the troupe, depending largely on their *convince* or *entreat* rolls:

- Baron Rōnā once requested and was granted permission to visit Panjyrr.
- Rōnā had a known affair with a local guild member, who was quite likely killed by Lady Oto. Oto's family helped cover up the rumor.
- Baron Rōnā's lands have been slowly suffering from a malaise believed to originate in neighboring Panjyrr. Whole villages have emptied over the last decade. This slow-motion catastrophe has created a deep melancholy in Baron Rōnā.
- A relic that once belonged to Saint Hombor was rumored to be part of his wife's dowry. Baroness Menel believes this claim is ridiculous. Any true artifact of such an esteemed saint would be in the hands of the Church.

BARONESS MENEL'S GOALS FOR THE TROUPE:

- Confirm or deny Baron Rōnā's practice of Manja
- Find out what happened to the Penitent psychic who visited last year's ball.

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POSTSCRIPT

After leaving the meeting with Baroness Menel, the public broadcast of *Nobles Also Weep* begins. It starts with a citywide siren and cheer, with dirigibles and balloons appearing overhead. The show appears on the sides of this aerial fleet and the sound is projected below.

In this episode, the martially trained household staff of Lord Opa fight tiny beetle-droid assassins and tech-possessed serfs to protect Opa's wife and his secret lover. It ends in a cliffhanger with Lord Opa confronting the force behind the assassins: his cousin and heir to the throne!

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

BARONESS SENET MENEL LI HALAN

Extra

"It may seem the smallest of favors but one which may reap great gratitude."

Description: Baroness Senet is painfully aware that the preponderance of Ur artifacts on Icon and the general leniency of the Church are contingent upon order being maintained. No one wishes for the unrestrained flames of the Inquisition to be loosed on this Garden World. The baroness will not allow the poor decisions of one noble — or one troupe — to upset the balance.

Actions:	Goal	Impact
<i>Convince</i>	14	Target is Convinced.
<i>Entreat</i>	14	Target is Entreated.
<i>Shoot laser</i>	10	4 dmg

Resistance: Body 3* | Mind 6 | Spirit 2

* Shockproof

Vitality: 10

Equipment: Synthsilk jumpsuit, laser pistol.

ACT 2: Our Better Angels

*"At this hour, lying at my mercy
all my enemies stretched out at my feet."
— newly crowned Lord Opa, Nobles Also Weep
(season 33, episode 12)*

The troupe is transported via high-speed boat to the western shores of the Icon Sea. From there, they are transported by carriage to the province of Liang Zhu. Past marshy terrain, past Icon's native leaping dragons that warily eye the road and breathe fire in displays of territoriality, the carriage takes them

to their ultimate destination: the ruling seat of the province, Eiderhall.

Scene 8:

Home of the Mountain Lords

What: The troupe travels to the estate of Lord Rōnā for a brief audience with the lord or lady.

Who: House staff, Lady Oto, Baron Rōnā

Where: Eiderhall.

Mists cling to moss-covered, rocky terrain as the troupe is taken to Eiderhall, the estate of Baron Rōnā. Built in a semi-spherical crater created by an ancient orbital strike on the mountain, Eiderhall sprawls out for almost a quarter mile of stacked, connected stone buildings. Red-tiled roofs channel water into open mouthed gargoyles that spit and sputter onto the cobblestones below.

The staff's livery is austere black waistcoats and pants, emblazoned with a subtle Li-Halan silver cross on their breast and a larger coat of arms stitched in gold on the back: two attendant wingless dragons se-jant regardant erect astride a black mountain emblazoned with the motto "Guardiamo le stele."

Each staff member wears a disturbing black mask with jeweled eyes that the carriage driver points out are made from the shells of local fig-beetles. The staff silently guide the troupe to a smaller entrance than the main one and then take them to their quarters so they can freshen up and change into party masks before entering the main hall.

The halls inside Eiderhall are curved, a deliberate attempt to make them seem never-ending and somewhat confusing. The interior walls are all wood-paneled and the floor is stone. Light comes from gas lamps in recessed alcoves, which are manually lit by the staff as they pass through. The quarters are slightly more provincial, with a fireplace and oil lamps providing light. Tapestries on the walls depict scenes from Li Halan history; furs on the floor keep a little of the chill at bay.

The troupe is given time to settle in and rest. There are masks provided for them to wear at the ball, which is a requirement. They are "grotesques," an old tradition where frightening features were used to keep evil spirits at bay. These particular masks depict creatures or ugly people who embody a sin. While they aren't heretical — and were once traditional teaching tools — they might make the pious uncomfortable.

After a little while, the staff extend an invitation for the troupe to meet the ruler of the manor privately for brief introductions.

If the troupe has accepted missions from more than one patron (Deacon Milo Perimidian, Boss Vin Tadarkis, and/or Baroness Senet Menel Li Halan), they will be led to meet Lady Oto in her private chambers. Her spy network has ferreted out that *something* is up with the troupe, but she doesn't know the details of their previous meetings.

If the troupe accepted only one or none of the patrons' missions, they are led to Baron Rōnā in his study.

LADY OTO'S AUDIENCE

The lady is terse and very military, often dropping into a flat affect that she blames on combat injuries. She baits the troupe with exaggerated reports from the festival, placing their actions in the worst light possible. Afterwards, she apologizes, saying that times have been trying, but Lord Rōnā is too invested in the masque to screen whether all his guests are worthy of attendance. She then dismisses them and bids them to enjoy themselves at the ball.

LORD RŌNĀ'S AUDIENCE

Lord Rōnā has a lamp with a large multi-faceted glass jewel set inside it. He asks each troupe member to look into it. There are no repercussions if they refuse; he simply states that he may ask them again later. He does not explain why he makes the request, though he explains that legend states the lamp was relevant to St. Hombor.

The lamp flares up when peered into by an occultist—a psychic, theurgist, or antinomist. Its color varies, though, apparently randomly. Rōnā exclaims that the person is “blessed by the saint of sages,” and will be especially solicitous of that character henceforth.

He dismisses the troupe, claiming he must make ready for the ball, and says that he hopes they will enjoy themselves this evening.

“SAINT HOMBOR'S LAMP”

TL3 • Cost: Invaluable (if it were real; it's actually worth 50 fb)

This ancient relic is a fist-sized, multi-faced crystal jewel mounted in an ornate brass lamp. It comes from the time of the Age of Miracles, when Zebulon preached throughout the stars.

If broken open, however, an inscription can be seen: “St. Hombor's Lamp™, GrailCo Manufacturing, All Rights Reserved.” It's a trinket, a souvenir sold a long time ago to unwary pilgrims visiting their favorite holy spots. Its user can surreptitiously cause the crystal to flare with the press of a hidden button. Baron Rōnā has no conscious idea that he is the one doing this; his Urge has figured it out and uses it to identify proper sacrificial victims.

A tech-savvy character could salvage the ever-lasting battery (powers the equivalent of a 120w light bulb) with a successful *jury-rig* roll.

ADDITIONAL DETAILS

- This is a classic and very old Li-Halan estate and is kept in a very traditional manner. Areas of note are: Small private gardens, the baron's study, the lady's chambers, the main hall, the family chapel,

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two separate master bedrooms, and Lady Oto's private hidden workshop (where she tinkers with golems; see *Scene 10: Eiderhall's Secrets*).

- The estate is monitored by a sophisticated hidden-camera network linked to Lady Oto. Anything not captured real-time can be reviewed later on record, though that record can be (and is heavily) edited by Lady Oto alone.
- Wandering guests will ultimately be found by staff and led back to the main hall. Troupe members who have detected the camera network (Intrusion-skill *scope* roll vs. Tough Resistance; capability: TL7) might be able to sneak around for a considerable amount of time before being discovered (see *Scene 10: Eiderhall's Secrets*).
- Iridescent beetles are part of the local fauna. About 1 in every 10 has been replaced with a tiny camera drone, connected to the hidden network laced throughout the entire estate.
- The jeweled eyes on the servants' masks are actually beetle-drone cameras. When the servants speak, it is filtered through drones on their throats. Lady Oto controls this network and can cut off the servants' senses at any time or speak through their throats.
- There is a lower level to the house, containing the family crypts and Rōnā's shameful secret. Entrances are heavily monitored; anyone trying to break in is discovered quickly and reprimanded for breaking protocol. Should the troupe access the lower levels without detection (never underestimate players!), they will find a completely un-powered version of the locations in *Scene 12: There is no Rest*. A physical hard-link prevents power to this section (it requires Lady Oto's hand); rerouting enough power to turn things on would require about two days of work.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

BARON RŌNĀ LIANG ZHU CARDANO LI-HALAN

Headliner • Noble 6 • Li-Halan • Lord/Psychic

"I have seen more and endured more than many. Who are you to question me?"

Description: Looking much older than his 50 or so years, Baron Rōnā is haggard, white-haired, and thin. His clothes are magnificently embroidered silks, family heirlooms.

He frequently uses St. Hombor's Lamp to determine if he has a worthy soul, but he sees only a dark flame. (His high Psi and Urge ratings are due to exposure to Ur artifacts in the cursed province of Panjyrr.)

Characteristics:

Str	4	Wits	5	Pre	7
Dex	4	Per	4	Int	8
End	6	Will	6	Faith	3
Psi 7 / Urge 8					

Skills:

Charm	8
Empathy	5
Fight	6
Focus	9
Impress	7
Intrusion	9
Observe	8
Shoot	7
Vigor	6

Actions:

	Goal	Impact
<i>Shake it off</i>	15 15 9	Removes a state.
<i>Shoot laser</i>	11	4 dmg
<i>Strike</i>	10	2 dmg

Capabilities: Customs (Court), Lore (Icon, Manja, Occult, Spacecraft Operations), Medical Lore (Poison, Torture Lore), Speak/Read Urthish

Perks: Imperious, Noble Title (Baron), Riches (Well Off)

Psychic powers: Far Hand (Lifting Hand, Throwing Hand, Crushing Hand, Dueling Hand, Focused Hand, Far Wall), Omen (Shadows Gone By, Shadows to Come)

Resistance: Body 3* | Mind 6 | Spirit 2

* Shockproof

e-shield (standard): 5/10 (10 hits)

Vitality: 26

Revivals: rating: 11 | number: 2

Bank: 20

Surges: rating: 13 | number: 2

Equipment: Synthsilk robes, standard e-shield, laser pistol, 5 fusion cells, dagger, St. Hombor's Lamp

LADY OTO KUSANAGI CARDANO LI-HALAN

Headliner • TL8 Golem • Level: 2 • Size: 5

"I serve at the whim of the one who rules this land. One can ask for no greater blessing!"

Description: Dame Oto fought in a number of local engagements dubbed the Golem Wars, when a Third Republican activated a cache of golems and unleashed them upon the populace. The conflict left her badly scarred and afflicted with violent fits. Her family decided the best way to deal with her enforced semi-retirement was to marry her off to Lord Rōnā.

To try and mitigate her fits, Lady Oto spent a lot of time tinkering with artifacts from the war. She created a neural link to an advanced Companion-model golem. Out of morbid interest, she copied her mind and mannerisms into its matrix, and then made the golem her handmaiden.

The unreliable cybertech, however, worsened her organic damage. During a masque, she had a psychotic break and killed Alea Tadarkis. Rōnā's Urge broke free and killed Oto in retaliation.

That's when Lady Oto 2.0 awoke.

Convinced that she was Lady Oto incarnated in a golem body, the Companion approached Lord Rōnā and agreed to help him cover up the two murders. Though the initial ruse was successful, over time, the new Lady Oto couldn't handle the unexpected complications of everyday life and began to break down.

When Baron Rōnā cast a Manja ritual to restore Oto's soul, Oto 2.0 heard dark voices offering her something unique and different: a chance at her own life. She accepted and emerged from the process as something wholly new and wholly malevolent. She now has a single goal: destroy Rōnā's soul and feed it to the Outer Dark. That's when the Dark powers will make good on their promise to her.

Since that time, "Lady Oto" has worked to torture Rōnā at every turn. She has taken him to Panjyrr and forced him to make blood sacrifices from select chosen guests at their balls. When her initial hold over him (the murders) began to fade, she manipulated him into thinking he was working towards the "greater good." When that failed, she rigged a bomb in Eiderhall's crypts and placed a sensitive trigger in her chest. If he ever hits her, it will set off a timer leading to an explosion that will take out the estate.

Now the end game is in sight. Rōnā is breaking and she will gleefully be there for the final fracture.

As a TL8 android, Lady Oto appears lifelike enough to pass for her badly scarred mistress. Unlike most golems, she is susceptible to influence attacks. Lately, her right hand has developed a distinctly inhuman twitch, which gets worse when she is frustrated. She can't fix it herself. She has been trying to figure out a way to obtain help without exposing herself but has not succeeded. Because of this, she might be willing to barter with someone who is technologically capable of doing it.

The estate's hidden camera network sends feeds directly into her artificial sensorium. She passively monitors all that goes on, although if she is distracted, she might not notice the feed. She can play back its recording later, though.

Characteristics:

Str	7	Wits	7	Pre	6
Dex	12	Per	7	Int	3
End	12	Will	7	Faith	5

Skills:

Charm	5
Fight	7
Focus	6
Impress	7
Melee	7
Observe	6
Perform	5
Shoot	6
Sneak	4
Vigor	5

Actions:

Goal	Impact
<i>Daunt</i>	13 Target is Daunted.
<i>Finger-blade strike</i>	14 5 dmg (Ultra Hard)
<i>Shoot flamer</i>	18 4(4) dmg

Capabilities: Customs (Court), Ranged Weapons (Energy Guns)

Perks: Calculating, Imperious, Lay Down the Law, Noble Title (Baroness)

Golem Abilities: Hardy, Organic Immunity, Inorganic, Tech-agnostic

Resistance: Body 6 | Mind 6 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 41

Bank: 20

Surges: rating: 9 | number: 2

Equipment: Flame gun (disguised as a staff)

Scene 9:

The Crows Want Eyes

What: The masque takes a turn when the hosts drug the guests.

Who: Lady Oto, Baronet Atiya al-Malik, Sir Constantyn Decados, Sir Raizan Li Halan, partygoers, house staff, service golems

Where: The main hall.

Once the troupe is ready, the household staff leads the troupe to the ball. Eiderhall's main hall is reminiscent of a cathedral, with a high peaked roof, stone arches, and stained glass. The thrones of the lord and lady are on an elevated section of the room where the altar would normally sit; there is an entrance behind the throne. Currently, both thrones are unoccupied. Lady Oto is working the floor, greeting guests.

Guests mill about the main floor, with some on a secondary floor where a choir loft would be. Music is piped in. Golem servants, clearly patched-up and converted from their ancient military duties into service roles, assist the staff and are doted on by Lady Oto.

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Iridescent beetles also bumble around the room. The staff claim it is difficult to keep them out of any large space. About 1 in every 10 is a drone that is part of Lady Oto's security system.

As the troupe enters, they are announced by the name of their leader and their homeworld. They are immediately offered refreshments by servants: an iridescent green cocktail.

Lady Oto claims that Lord Rōnā will be out soon. She is drinking the same cocktail as all the guests: a mixture of alcohol and viridian truth nectar, a secret Hidden Martyr's truth serum. The cocktail acts as an inhibition suppressant, causing imbibers to speak their minds without heed to consequences. In about 20 minutes, arguments break out among the guests along the following lines:

- Alexius' acceptance of the Vuldrok is a betrayal. A theocracy should be established
- Bringing in the Vuldrok was the right move. Now it's time to rebuild the Republic.
- The talk of theocracy or a republic only proves other houses are traitors. They must be "pruned" for the good of the empire.

These can lead to duels, fist fights, or even a public burning. Things could get out of control fast and the lady will simply watch on, detached and vaguely amused.

VIRIDIAN TRUTH NECTAR

The drinks served at the ball all have this al-chemical concoction mixed in with the alcohol. It was originally devised by the Li Halan secret spy service, the Hidden Martyrs, to root out traitors.

Potency	Duration	OD	Effect
4	30 min.	Will -1	Indiscrete, Reckless (applies to influence rather than physical feats).

ADDITIONAL DETAILS

Among the guests, the troupe can identify three notable individuals: Baronet Atiya, Sir Constanyin, and Sir Raizan. Each is vying for something from the lord and lady. They are accompanied by entourages; should anything dangerous or even socially intense occur, the entourages will melt into the background.

BARONET ATIYA AL-MALIK (ISTAKHR)

Baronet Atiya is increasingly bitter towards her father, an al-Malik ambassador; his longevity prevents her ascension. Trained in subtle diplomacy, she is finally starting to wonder if she should help fate along. She believes Rōnā has access to an unregistered ship and wants to negotiate its use in a plan to nudge fate when her father next goes off-world. Her entourage consists of guild members loyal to her through service, who believe Atiya may share her power more than their current lord does.

SIR IVAN CONSTANTINE DECADOS (CADIZ)

As the sole heir to his estate, Sir Constantine was elevated in status, but not to the wealth that was expected. His father squandered away most of the inheritance before his untimely death. He wants to rent out the use of Lady Oto's golems to deal with a popular uprising and tax collection. His entourage consists of jealous sycophants, who will go to extremes to impress their lord and master.

SIR RAIZAN LI HALAN (MIDIAN)

Raizan's specialty is theological threats. He identifies things that may harm the hegemony of the Church. According to rumor, Baron Rōnā possesses an artifact that identifies the state of one's soul. Raizan is here to determine if the artifact is one of light or darkness. His entourage is composed primarily of penitent souls working towards salvation.

AUDIENCE WITH LORD RŌNĀ

Every once in a while, a staff member invites a guest for a private audience with Lord Rōnā. He tests them with St. Hombor's Lamp, as described in *Scene 8: Home of the Mountain Lords*. If the troupe was not questioned in that scene, they will now be invited one-by-one to the private audience.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

BARONET ATIYA AL-MALIK

Extra

"Only time withstands the desert sands."

Description: Baronet Atiya is the first-born of Ambassador Kenshar al-Malik. She expects to be feared, respected, or held in awe. Unfortunately, life does not go as planned. The serfs want more independence, and the vassals don't show enough reverence. Even the help of boon companions has been... lacking. The promises she has had to make to hopefully attain power feel compromising. One day, she'll make them all understand that her rule is better for everyone.

Actions:

Action	Goal	Impact
<i>Castigate</i>	14	Target is Castigated.
<i>Convince</i>	12	Target is Convinced.
<i>Sword strike</i>	14	6 dmg

Resistance: Body 4* | Mind 4 | Spirit 0
 * Hardproof, Shockproof, Slamproof

Vitality: 10

Equipment: Sword, polymer knit mail, long-range communicator.

SIR IVAN CONSTANTINE DECADOS

Extra

"I hope our relationship will prove to be... beneficial."

Description: The quintessential Decados, Sir Ivan Constantine Decados of Cadiz easily lies, manipulates and coerces others to get anything and everything he wants. He adapts himself to any situation, convincing his prey that he is sympathetic to their causes.

While still a teenager, he managed to talk a Hawkwood diplomat into aiding his house in a battle of dubious intentions. Constantine's father poured his praise on him, and at his victory party Constantine knew for certain that his father loved him unconditionally. Yet love is a weakness; his father realized this when he later lay dying from the poison Constantine slipped into his wine.

He would dearly love to know more about Manja. Given what he did to his father, he finds the concept morbidly hilarious.

Actions:

Action	Goal	Impact
<i>Deceive</i>	16	Target is Deceived.
<i>Entreat</i>	10	Target is Entreated.
<i>Knife strike</i>	9	3 dmg + vorox claw juice poison
<i>Pick pocket</i>	10	Gain item without notice.

Resistance: Body 1 | Mind 2 | Spirit 0

e-shield (standard): 5/10 (10 hits)

Vitality: 10

Equipment: Standard e-shield (2 fusion cells), gloves, blade poison (vorox claw juice)

SIR RAIZAN LI HALAN

Extra

"Heavy is the soul that holds its sins far from the light."

Description: Sir Raizan of Midian lives his life in service to the Way, dedicated to the unification of the Pancreator's plans with mundane reality. He learned his manners alongside obun Voahvenlohjun priests, adapting their styling to his own. He desires nothing more than to be the purest example of a noble spirit moving through the majesty of the Garden Worlds. He hopes to bring the power of a

true saint's relic (St. Hombor's Lamp) and a divine artifact (the Sangreal) to the Patriarchy.

Actions:

Action	Goal	Impact
<i>Command</i>	14	Target is Commanded.
<i>Daunt</i>	12	Target is Daunted.
<i>Detect lie</i>	11	A lie is uncovered.
<i>Sword strike</i>	9	5 dmg + Shock

Resistance: Body 3* | Mind 1 | Spirit 2

* Shockproof, Slamproof

Vitality: 10

Equipment: Plastic-studded jerkin, ceremonial blade (with shock-tip)

Scene 10: Eiderhall's Secrets

What: What's a party without a little snooping around?

Who: Eiderhall staff

Where: The Eiderhall estate.

The things the troupe can discover while the lord and lady's attentions are focused on the main hall are:

- The lord and lady sleep in separate chambers. The lord's chamber shows he continues his bookish ways, with an emphasis on the oldest and most traditional texts. The lady's room is astonishingly sparse, but that might be due to her martial training.
- The family chapel is unnervingly clean, with no signs of wear normally associated with a place of (at least) weekly worship.
- A highly pious character may notice a woman with a chalice walking the halls and then vanishing through a wall. This is the shade of Alea Tadarkis, first encountered in *Scene 1: Whispers from the Grave*.
- The tech-minded might discover (Intrusion-skill *scope* roll vs. Tough Resistance; capability: TL7) the hidden camera network and beetle-drone cams, which funnel information back to Lady Oto. The network that lines Eiderhall's walls leads back to a chamber that requires some serious fussing to enter (Intrusion + Wits vs. Tough Resistance; capability: TL7). Inside is a Second Republic golem repair shop with a large pod set up to deal with the repair needs for an advanced golem. A significant number of beetles live in the shop.

Not all of the household staff is dressed for the masque, but if one of the beetle eyed-staff spots a troupe member, Lady Oto will speak through the staff's voice and, buzzing with sinister amusement, ask if the troupe member has found what they are looking for. She will then track them with other masked staff, asking the exact same question in an eerily exact tone until the member returns to the main hall.

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ACT 3: The Dying of the Light

And you, my mother, sitting on that sad height, curse me, bless me with fierce tears of rage. Do not go gently into that final Dark. Fight, fight, against the setting of the day.

— Lord Opa, at his mother's funeral, Nobles Also Weep (season 50, episode 4)

As things in the main hall escalate towards a blood-bath, a surprise guest initiates the final chapter in Baron Rōnā's life. Hidden secrets are revealed and at least one soul hangs in the balance.

Scene 11: The Hidden Heir

What: An attempted assassination leads to a revelation about Lady Oto.

Who: Lord Rōnā, Lady Oto, house staff, Service Golems, Apprentice Pero

Where: The main hall.

As things build to a crescendo (duels, fights, or burning), Lord Rōnā emerges and takes his throne. From there, he asks if this is the best that the Known Worlds has to offer. He berates the guests, claiming that he has much to offer if only someone will embrace the destiny of putting others' needs before their own. He pauses to take a breath... and a voice rings out.

APPRENTICE PERO: "I lay claim to the title of Eiderhall! I lay claim to the title of heir!"

A young man steps from the crowd, removing his mask — Apprentice Pero, the gambler from the market (*Scene 2: The Hand of Fate*). He speaks again, even as his voice shakes.

APPRENTICE PERO: "I claim it through the line of my mother, Alea Tadarkis. I am her sole child, the son of Baron Rōnā."

Saint Hombor's Lamp, held by Lord Rōnā, ignites with a fierce purple light. Rōnā believes the flame signals a worthy sacrifice: Pero is marked.

Lady Oto's hand starts twitching uncontrollably as both nobles rise to their feet. The color drains from Baron Rōnā's face. Pero seems to draw some strength from that, even as masked staff seize and bind him. Rōnā turns to Lady Oto.

LORD RŌNĀ: "This is your fault!"

Rōnā roars and pushes Lady Oto off the raised platform. She lands hard, her face hitting the ground with enough impact to shatter part of her mask. Something

loudly cracks. She holds her good hand up to refuse help and turns her head to face Rōnā. Her face looks scarred and almost inhuman.

LADY OTO: "It's done. You broke it."

Baron Rōnā looks like his life is collapsing. He looks mournfully at Pero and then storms out of the room via the entrance behind the thrones.

One of Lady Oto's handmaidens provides her with a new mask, and she rises and addresses her guests:

LADY OTO: "Who will kill this pretender for me, this boy who lies?"

This is an astonishing breach of protocol for a Li Halan. The young man announced his heritage in a public place, shaming Rōnā by revealing an illegitimate heir. This deserves an investigation of the claim, not a summary execution. And yet, the guests, each trying to curry favor with the lord and lady, begin rationalizing the boy's death sentence, agreeing that he should be killed for his impunity and defamation.

The troupe needs to decide whose side they're on. Do they let these scoundrels kill the boy, or do they step in and defend him? It is possible for them to shame the guests into changing their minds (*convince* and *castigate* maneuvers can help). Otherwise, they might need to settle the matter with swords. Lady Oto simply watches.

ADDITIONAL DETAILS

- Baron Rōnā goes to the lower wine cellars (see *Scene 12: There is No Rest*) and pounds on the wall, weeping, until Lady Oto arrives.
- If the troupe chooses to protect Pero, before the matter can be fully decided (through swords or influence), Lady Oto will intervene, claim she was merely testing her guests, and ask that the troupe accompany her with Pero to "where the boy will be safe" (the catacombs in *Scene 12*).
- If given a chance to speak, Pero reveals that a ghost with a chalice revealed all this to him.
- If the troupe votes to kill Pero, Lady Oto orders her staff to cut him down then and there. She then gleefully escorts the troupe to meet Baron Rōnā in *Scene 12*. She dismisses all the other guests.
- If the troupe abandons the scene, their exit is blocked by the ghost of Alea Tadarkis, bearing her chalice. She bears a striking resemblance to her son, Pero. She says: "Save him!" and then vanishes.
- If the troupe attacks Lady Oto, she activates the service golems. They switch to their ancient programming: war mode. (Their numbers equal that of troupe members.) She uses the distraction to leave by the entrance behind the thrones, joining Rōnā in the catacombs (*Scene 12*). The other guests take this cue to escape.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

SERVICE GOLEM (INFANTRY GOLEM)

Agents (TL7 golem) • Level: 2 • Size: 5

“Suh... suh... suh... serve?”

Description: This golem is vaguely humanoid, built more for function than form. A trophy from the Golem Wars, it has been reconfigured from military operations for domestic service. It moves disjointedly, with distinct quirks and glitches — until Lady Oto switches it remotely to war mode. Then all the glitches go away and it becomes laser-focused against its enemy target.

Characteristics:

Str	7	Wits	2	Pre	4
Dex	5	Per	4	Int	1
End	5	Will	3	Faith	3

Skills:

Fight	5
Impress	5
Melee	7
Observe	6
Vigor	5

Actions:

Goal	Impact
<i>Drill strike</i>	14 5 dmg (Ultra Hard)
<i>Grapple</i>	12 1 dmg + Immobilized

Capabilities: Customs (Court), Melee Weapons (Military)

Golem Abilities: Hardy, Influence and Organic Immunity, Inorganic, Tech-agnostic

Resistance: Body 6 | Mind 0 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 22

Surges: rating: 6 | number: 1

Equipment: Retractable drill, multi-jointed appendages.

Scene 12: There is No Rest

What: The end draws near as the troupe discovers the truth of Eiderhall.

Who: Baron Rōnā, Lady Oto, the Old Man, Alea Tadarkis, Skeletal Crew Husks, Apprentice Pero (if he survived the previous scene)

Where: The Under Estate (wine cellar, family crypts, *Echo's Teeth*).

Baron Rōnā retreats downstairs to the extensive wine cellar below the manse. There, cask after cask of different spirits line the shelves, some of which have been aging longer than the empire has existed. The air is cool to the point of unpleasantness. There is a palpable, clingy dampness. Veins of nitre extend like white fungus from the ceiling.

When Lady Oto arrives, Rōnā shifts a single brick and Oto inserts her left hand into the gap. This creates a physical link that allows power to flow freely into the Under-Estate. Lady Oto detaches her hand

and leaves it there. (If the troupe has not yet figured out that she's a golem, this is a sure clue.)

The wall slides away, revealing a stone arch with the words carved into it: “Through me, you go into a city of weeping.” This is the family crypt of the lords of Liang Zhu.

A short stone hallway is illuminated by the glow of death-moth larvae. A small alcove holds an altar to the ancestors; the remains of food and a goblet of wine indicate that it's been used recently.

Rōnā tips the plate over, spilling the food. Then he takes the cup and empties it onto the floor. He spits on it.

BARON RŌNĀ: “*They ask too much. I wish I had never found that book....*”

He continues down the hall. Broad, shallow steps lead past hand-hewn alcoves in the walls that hold his ancestor's bones. The treasured dead lie behind marble insets engraved with death masks.

The hall narrows and gives way to what appears to be an open airlock. It leads into the interior of a starship. A plaque lists its name and registry: *Echo's Teeth*.

Skeletons garbed in crew outfits lie scattered on the floor, some of them twisted in what looks like agony.

Anyone who examines the ship (Tech Redemption + Perception vs. Easy Resistance) can realize that it's an elaborate stage set designed to perfectly mimic a working starship, but made from thin metal and painted plastic-and-wood boards.

Baron Rōnā proceeds to the facsimile of the engine room, resembling a technological cathedral. On a large gray metal block is a wooden chalice: the Sangreal. The block is featureless except for a sequence of flashing numbers that looks suspiciously like a countdown. (When Rōnā struck Lady Oto, it triggered the overload sequence on the bomb.)

Dried blood on the floor makes it clear this room has been used for blood sacrifices.

Rōnā is exhausted. He believes that the lamp has bidden him to sacrifice Pero, his heir, but that's a step too far, even for him. He breaks down in tears. His rash action against Lady Oto initiated the bomb's countdown sequence.

An old man walks into the room. He looks very similar in appearance to Lord Rōnā himself, except that he wears ancient Li Halan robes from the time before the house's conversion, with a necklace of bones.

OLD MAN: “*Ah, Rōnā, your family's legacy ticks away. But you can stop it! Deliver your son to his ancestors! His life for the land!*”

This is Rōnā's Dark Twin, an Outer Child projection (non-physical), waiting for Rōnā to commit one last heinous deed — either murdering Pero or killing himself — that will fuel its ability to become its own,

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physical entity. If Pero is already dead, he will instead instruct Rōnā to kill himself, the only way to atone to his ancestors for his failures.

From out of the wall emerges the shade of Alea Tadarkis, begging the troupe to “Save him!” Lord Rōnā cannot see her.

The bomb counts down....

THE BOMB

In 25 turns, the bomb will take out the makeshift starship but not the catacombs or estate. (Adjust this to make it shorter or longer, depending on the needs of your game.)

Disabling the bomb requires a Tech Redemption + Wits roll vs. Demanding Resistance (capability: TL6). It takes five turns of work before a roll can be made. Intrusion skill can be substituted, but the roll is unfavorable.

As soon as anyone tries to disable, or even handle, the bomb, Lady Oto will attack them. The death of everyone here will serve her dark masters, now that Lord Rōnā has proven useless. If the bomb is defused, she'll fight to the death. If not, she'll remain and be blown up.

Anyone who exits the starship back into the catacombs is safe from the explosion. Lady Oto used the threat of the bomb against Rōnā, claiming it would destroy his estate and ancestors' bones. She lied.

THE CREW'S REVENGE

The dead bodies of the crew — the actual remains of the crew of the *Echo's Teeth*, smuggled to the catacombs by Rōnā year ago (under the control of his Dark Twin at the time) — rise and move to attack anyone who is not Rōnā or Lady Oto.

Rōnā's Dark Twin smiles at the horror on the faces of the gathered guests as they witness the dead rise.

LORD RŌNĀ'S FINAL SACRIFICE

Rōnā will draw his knife and announce that it's time to end it. He intends to kill himself. Before he can plunge the dagger into his belly or across his throat, the old man yells “Stop!” and appears to be in a silent psychic battle of wills with Rōnā.

The ghost of Alea Tararkis begs anyone in the troupe, especially priests, to forgive Rōnā and bring him back to the light. What happens next depends on what they do:

- Influence attacks, like *castigate*, *daunt*, or even *entreat* or *convince*, can give Rōnā enough pause to drop the knife. This will cause the Dark Twin to attack the influencer, using Rōnā's telekinetic powers.
- A theurgic rite, such as a blessing or assignation of penance, causes Rōnā to throw away the knife and beg for the Pancreator's forgiveness. He renounces his heretical ways. The Dark Twin's projection



fades away, losing its hold. Rōnā surrenders to face the troupe's judgement.

- A failed influence or theurgy rite results in Rōnā winning his battle of wills; he kills himself with the dagger. The Dark Twin laughs and becomes solid. It is now a real, physical doppelganger, with all of Rōnā's traits. It is, as far as the outside world knows, Baron Rōnā himself. He uses his FarHand powers to escape into the deep catacombs, where only he knows the secret passages that allow him to hide and plot revenge against the troupe.

PERO

If Pero is in the engine room with the troupe, he either aids the troupe to save his father, or attempts influence himself if nobody else will. If he succeeds, he is attacked by the Dark Twin. If he fails, he feels responsible for his father's suicide and the unleashing of a doppelganger on the world.

THE SANGREAL

This simple wooden cup is not the Vuldrok artifact people believe it to be. It was a handmade gift from Alea Tadarkis to her lover. It's all Rōnā had left of her once Oto killed her. He used it as the core element of his Manja rites and sacrifices. The death energies channeled through Alea's cup summoned her ghost, or perhaps a psychic splinter of Rōnā's mind that acted as his conscience given animate form. All this can be ascertained later if Pero survives to discover his father's journal, or if the troupe later finds it.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

SKELETAL CREW HUSK

Agent (creature) • Level: 3 • Size: 5

moans and charges

Description: A walking skeleton wearing the crew uniform of the *Echo's Teeth* starship. Most husks are made of rotting flesh; this one is just bones, connected together by some mysterious force.

There are a total of 10 crew bodies on the ship. They will animate in two waves: 5 husks at first. When those are defeated, they're followed by the remaining 5.

Characteristics:

Str	5	Wits	1	Pre	3
Dex	3	Per	2	Int	1
End	7	Will	2	Faith	3

Skills:

Fight 7

Actions:

	Goal	Impact
<i>Grapple</i>	12	2 dmg + Immobilized
<i>Strike</i>	12	2 dmg

Husk abilities: Influence Immunity

Resistance: Body 3* | Mind 0 | Spirit 0

* Fireproof, Shockproof, Slamproof

Vitality: 13

Surges: rating: 8 | number: 1

Equipment: None

SCENE 13: AFTERMATH

What: The troupe has a talk with the local authorities about what happened.

Who: Local authorities.

Where: Back in Nueventina.

The death of Baron Rōnā and Lady Oto will be met with some relief from the local officials, though there will be concern about the dark forces that tempted him. The story of what happened to the lord will leak out to the local populace, even if no one talks about it. When asked, people will talk about a young woman with a cup who told them. The whole incident will appear, in distorted form, in future episodes of *Nobles Also Weep*.

If Pero is still alive, he's the bastard heir to Eiderhall, provided the troupe helps him prove it by producing Lord Rōnā's dead body. A blood test can confirm his claim.

There is one other detail that emerges, whether the troupe had the time to see it or not. On the arch that leads to the family crypt, there was a carved quote, but there is also one on the way out: "From there we came outside and saw the stars."

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The Three Wise Monkeys

The setting for this drama is the sprawling metropolis of Kesparate on Leagueheim. The troupe is recruited by Ozul De Vatha of the Charioteers Guild to find compromising material on a potential political rival to his family's business — the up and coming Chombo Conglomerate, an enterprise of renowned gannok Weaponsmith guilders. Over the course of the adventure the troupe will find compromising material on Ozul De Vatha himself and they'll have to decide if they are willing to continue to work for him or if they actually end up switching sides.

Background for Players

As many other visitors to Leagueheim, you're here because you want something. In fulfilling the many wants of visitors like you for millennia, Leagueheim's capital and sole city, Kesparate, has grown to consume the planet, with its streets, ventilation ducts and power lines covering its surface like varicose veins. The nights are drowned out by the artificial light of its towering spires and commercial signboards. The air has a sharp quality to it, hurting you when you need it the most.

To find what you want in this sprawling hive of greed, you need the help of a man who is intimately familiar with its goings-on — and Dean Ozul De Vatha, patriarch of the De Vatha hong, is that man. You're well aware that a merchant who already owns everything will demand a very unique price from you.... Word on the street is that there's a new rival on the market proving to be a thorn in his side. Maybe if you were willing to deal with this matter for him, he might prove more amicable to your request.

Background for the Gamemaster

Ozul De Vatha hasn't risen to the position of power he's currently in because he is a nice person — actually quite the opposite. His ruthlessness allowed him to eventually become the patriarch within his family (or hong, as the Charioteers' familial syndicates are called), a title he's held for over two decades now. The De Vatha family dates back to the corporate elite of the Second Republic, when they managed to gain the monopoly on jumpkey manufacturing that would eventually provide the foundation for the Charioteers Guild.

The rivalry between Ozul and the current doge of the Charioteers, Zale Gailbreath, is the stuff of legends. Gailbreath has tried his best over his many

years in office to sanitize the influence the De Vatha hong has on the bureaucracy of Leagueheim, but in the end it proved to be a Sisyphean task. Now, as the doge is starting to show his age, he lacks the strength for this uphill battle, and Ozul De Vatha is able to progressively reassert his power base.

Of course, the doge's faltering health isn't simply random happenstance — Ozul orchestrated Gailbreath's supply chain of Lypee-55, a longevity drug, to be compromised. While Ozul thinks ahead and is aware that Gailbreath's untimely death would eventually throw suspicion on him, he is anything but patient — he actually previously planned a more direct assassination attempt that went awry when the assassin in question grew a conscience. This new and more subtle approach is merely a result of subsequent necessity. Since his first window of opportunity, a new actor has risen to the scene, casting Ozul's ascension to doge-hood after Gailbreath's eventual demise into doubt: Dean Tonton Chombo, a member of the gannok hong operating under the banner of the Chombo Conglomerate. Now this new rival has to be dealt with before Gailbreath meets the Pancreator.

This is where the troupe comes in. The drama assumes the troupe is looking for something specific and have heard from a shared contact that Ozul De Vatha can get it for them. Depending on what exactly they're after, Ozul might be willing to procure it for them as a reward for their services or at least find someone who can if it's something exceedingly rare, expensive and/or difficult to obtain — be it information, services or goods. Should the troupe not arrive in search of something specific or lack a suitable contact, Ozul may have agents scouting Leagueheim's spaceports for new arrivals who look like they may be able to handle this matter for him. But you're advised to figure out something that the troupe desperately wants, so that there's something at stake for them when they start questioning the morals of their mission.

Should the troupe accept Ozul's offer, they will have to investigate the Chombo Conglomerate for any weaknesses that Ozul might be able to exploit. The Conglomerate will be described in more detail later, presenting the information the troupe can collect. While the head of the family, Zebo Chombo, strives to be a beacon of virtue (within entrepreneurial limits) in order to stand his ground in a xenophobic society, his kin don't necessarily share his stalwartness — the life of an arms dealer requires moral flexibility, after all. Tonton Chombo, Zebo's brother and head of the logistics branch of the conglomerate,

has studied the intrigues between the human hong on his rise through the ranks of the Charioteers, and intends to apply this knowledge for his own good. He has likewise started to collect information on potential candidates for an eventual election for the doge, and Ozul De Vatha promises to be a ripe target for blackmail. While he has not yet found conclusive evidence of Ozul's previous assassination attempt on the doge, he is hot on the trail.

When the troupe eventually lays hands on the kompromat, it is up to them to decide if they are willing to continue working for De Vatha and further sully their souls doing his dirty work, or if they decide to betray him and help bring about his downfall — the Chombo Conglomerate will certainly prove thankful for their assistance. Either way, they are likely to eventually enter a polluted zone in order to track down the runaway assassin and either take her out or bring her to safety.

Act 1: Hear No Evil

The events in this drama, while numbered for reference's sake, do not have to happen in linear order. If you want to get into the adventure quickly, you might start in media res with the players having an audience with Ozul De Vatha as described in Scene 1, but if you integrate this drama into an ongoing campaign and your troupe is likely to scout out the situation before meeting their employer, the investigative phase described in Scene 2 might take place first. Pick and choose the events as you see fit.

Kesparate

The Liberty Confluence that originated on the planet that is now known as Leagueheim was a corporate empire and founding member the Second Republic. Their fates thus intertwined, the corruption that felled the Republic became Liberty's downfall as well. In the grave soil of libertarian capitalism, the vile seed of nepotism blossomed into the guild structure that endures to this day.

Days on Leagueheim are 22 hours long and the gravity is noticeably lower than on Urth. Where a central administration once maintained a lush world, debased greed and competitive ignorance let abandoned stretches of land fall prey to the spreading pollution. These so-called pollution zones drove the residents into ever more densely populated districts. The city of Kesparate grew and grew until it encompassed the entire planet. The only way left to go was up, and so the shining spires of Leagueheim rose towards the stars.

Most districts are associated with one of the major guilds, serving as their local fiefs. Nobles and the

Church also hold territory, gained as part of large-scale negotiations, as do the countless minor guilds. Central administrative duties are fulfilled by the Commission, which maintains balance between the guilds by serving as a neutral third party. The De Vatha family has managed to gain many pivotal positions within the organization and holds some administrative sway. Should the troupe gain Ozul's respect over the course of the drama, he will make sure they have an easier time on Leagueheim. This might range from less bureaucratic hassle to granting them more social clout. Likewise, should they earn his disrespect, they may find themselves caught up in red tape or dealing people less willing to talk to them.

Scene 1: The Dean

What: The head of the De Vatha hong recruits the troupe to gather dirt on his political opponent.

Who: Dean Ozul De Vatha, Ergard, two bodyguards, lounge clientele

Where: Elysian Fields, a hookah lounge in Kesparate.

The meeting with Ozul has been arranged — either by the shared contact or the agent recruiting the troupe — in a secluded corner of the Elysian Fields, a hookah lounge in the Apothecaries Guild's district of Kesparate. Besides two of his personal bodyguards Ozul has brought along Ergard, a former Vuldrok pirate who sold out his fleet's rallying points and now serves as one of Ozul's enforcers. While Ozul doesn't trust him enough to bring him to sensitive meetings, his imposing presence serves well enough in backing up negotiations.

Should the troupe include a gannok member, Ozul will try to judge their trustworthiness before divulging too much information, but might even consider them a particular asset in infiltrating the Chombo Conglomerate. The De Vatha also maintain amicable relations to House Decados, so Ozul will treat members or associates of that house favorably.

The Elysian Fields is largely frequented by people down on their luck, either looking to find an unscrupulous Apothecary willing to buy one of their organs or spending the money they made this way on easing their suffering. In general, they pay very little attention to anyone who is not an obvious member of the Apothecaries Guild, but there will be plenty of witnesses around should fighting break out. There are no windows, but countless displays along the walls and dividers feature repetitive promotional messages and provide some colorful illumination.

Ergard receives the troupe, leading them to Ozul's table, where they are offered a seat and anything they want to smoke or drink. Ozul then proceeds straight to the business part:

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OZUL: *"I have heard about what you are looking for, and yes, I can help you in obtaining it. But of course, these things take their time. Maybe you would be willing to help me out likewise while I track down what you need?"*

If the troupe decides to hear him out on his offer, he gestures for Ergard to make sure no one is listening in on them while they talk.

OZUL: *"Well then... I need you to look out for something for me as well. An upstart rival hong is undermining my position of authority, and I can't have that — I have a reputation to uphold after all. All I need from you now is something to shut them up. Any dirt you can dig up on them will be welcome, but to make it worth my time I'll need something juicy. Something that'll knock them down a peg. You with me?"*

Should the troupe agree to work with him, he'll continue:

OZUL: *"The hong in question is that of Tonton Chombo of the Chombo Conglomerate. Yup, that's right, them filthy gannok. Turns out they're trying to corner the arms market — smart move, since guns will buy you a lot of friends. But I'd be willing to bet a fortune that some of those friends aren't exactly of the respectable persuasion. I've heard Tonton arranges secret meetings in the slums. So that should offer you something to start with — they can't keep all the blood their weapons shed off their greasy hands, after all."*

If the troupe further inquires about why he's not capable of getting compromising material on the conglomerate himself, he explains:

OZUL: *"Oh, I've certainly tried, but these gannok are smart enough not to trust anyone who even knows my name. But a bunch of fresh offworlders like you might just pull it off."*

Anyone trying to determine if he's telling the truth at any given point in their conversation can't find any fault in his façade (because he's actually being honest).

Should the troupe at any time be unwilling to work with Ozul, maybe because they heard he has somewhat of a reputation, you can still try to orchestrate events so they end up being employed by the Chombo Conglomerate instead. For example, should they show disrespect towards Ozul or his family in their refusal, he will sic his thugs on them at a later time. Word of this might reach the Chombo hong, prompting them to make an offer of cooperation in uncovering blackmail on their rival in turn. In this case, you should consider introducing some additional investigation scenes dealing with the De Vatha hong to make up for the much-shortened Act 2.

Either way, Ozul will eventually ask the troupe to leave and be on their way, as he has other pressing matters to attend to. Ergard escorts them away from the

table and receives the next visitor. The troupe is free to remain in the establishment to begin their investigation, but should they start slacking off, this will earn them De Vatha's disrespect (see *Kesparate*, above).

ADDITIONAL INFO

- **The Clientele:** While the clientele in the Elysian Fields proves to be anything but chatty, a noteworthy bribe might get them talking. See Scene 2 for the general information available. Nonetheless, no amount of money will make them talk about De Vatha or his family.
- **The Owner:** Rahim is an older man who pays his dues and values discretion. Pretty much any attempt to gain information from him is bound to fail. At best, he will warn them to tread carefully should they start asking questions about the De Vatha hong. Should they think to inquire about any gannok frequenting his establishment and point out to him that this information is in Ozul's best interest, he might give them their first pointer towards Bolo Pak (see *Scene 6: The Weakest Link*).

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

DEAN OZUL DE VATHA



Agent • Merchant 10 • Charioteers • Trader
"Have a seat. Do you partake, my friends?"

Description: A morbidly obese man with piggish eyes who is clothed in flowing garments of the most luxurious fabric, and who obviously underwent cosmetic surgery to make up for several physical deficiencies.

Characteristics:

Str	3	Wits	7	Pre	7
Dex	3	Per	5	Int	5
End	6	Will	6	Faith	3

Skills:

Charm	7
Empathy	6
Focus	5
Impress	7
Knavery	7
Observe	5

Actions:

	Goal	Impact
<i>Befriend</i>	14	Target is Befriended.
<i>Daunt</i>	14	Target is Daunted.
<i>Detect Lie</i>	11	See through lies.
<i>Entreat</i>	14	Target is Entreated.
<i>Shake it off</i>	11 11 8	Removes a state.

Resistance: Body 0 | Mind 12 | Spirit 0

e-shield (dueling): 5/10 (15 hits)

Vitality: 30

Surges: rating: 17 | number: 4

Equipment: Dueling e-shield

ERGARD

Agent • Yeoman 5 • Charioteers • Pirate

“Don’t do anything that I’ll make you regret.”

Description: While he is of average height at best, the tattoos that cover his entire body — from his tree trunk legs over his muscled potbelly up to the scalp below his receding long hair — make enough of an impression to establish that he’s not one to mess with.

Characteristics:

Str	7	Wits	3	Pre	3
Dex	4	Per	5	Int	3
End	7	Will	5	Faith	4

Skills:

Fight	7
Focus	5
Impress	7
Observe	5
Shoot	6

Actions:

	Goal	Impact
<i>Daunt</i>	14	Target is Daunted.
<i>Dodge</i>	9	Gain VP (to boost Body Resistance).
<i>Shake it off</i>	12 10 9	Removes a state.
<i>Shoot Blaster</i>	10	6 dmg
<i>Fist strike</i>	14	2 dmg

Resistance: Body 4 | Mind 4 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 26

Surges: rating: 12 | number: 2

Equipment: Vuldrok ancestral blaster, plastic half-plate.

BODYGUARDS

Extras

(*silently eyeing the room*)

Description: Bog-standard muscle hired through the Muster who know how to act professionally in a social setting.

Actions: *Goal* *Impact*

Shoot revolver 11 6 dmg

Resistance: Body 3 | Mind 0 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 10

Equipment: Heavy revolver, plastic-studded leather jerkin.

Scene 2: Word on the Street

What: The troupe puts an ear to the ground to get the lowdown on the factions involved.

Who: Kesparate citizens

Where: Streets of Kesparate.

Kesparate is home to over four billion pairs of ears (give or take) — the number of loose lips on the other hand is in perpetual decline. Nonetheless, the troupe should be able to get basic information on the players involved. More information on the Chombo executives — Tonton, Potam, and Eggak — is presented in Scenes 4-6 in Act 2.

- The countless dens of iniquity offer plenty of opportunity to deal in information, as long as the troupe has something of value to offer and it’s in the informant’s continued well-being. The troupe can easily bribe regulars to keep an eye out for Tonton’s comings and goings in the seedier parts of town, potentially leading them to one of his favorite meetings spots (see *Scene 4: The Charioteer*).
- There are several food stands and a diner in close proximity to the conglomerate’s compound. During break times these are overrun with workers from the factory, many of them gannok. They eagerly bicker about their supervisor, Potam Chombo (see *Scene 5: The Weaponsmith*), and might be willing to spill non-sensitive information in exchange for hard coin — the most desperate among them, Bolo Pak, might even go a little bit further (see *Scene 8: The Weakest Link*).
- Street preachers hold public sermons about the dangers of technology under neon lights but are drowned out by the metropolitan soundscape. If asked, they are quick to condemn the gannok Weaponsmiths. Asking around further in local Church circles turns up that a young Engineer from that gannok family has been trying to engage

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several priests in philosophical discussions (see *Scene 6: The Engineer*).

- Other venues of research are public data-terminals (which require a capability with Think Machines) or even an Academia-skill *research* maneuver (capability: Charioteers Lore).

ADDITIONAL INFO

- **The Chombo Conglomerate:** The enterprise known as the Chombo Conglomerate has risen over the past decade to become a household name in weapons manufacturing. The Weaponsmith arm of the conglomerate, actually named Chombo Arms, started out as a manufacturer of slug guns exclusively, but recently expanded their brand to cover a small selection of energy weapons. While their major competitor, Martech, is unsurpassed in artisanal pedigree and customization, the high reliability of Chombo weapons has earned them the slogan: “If it ain’t broke, it’s a Chombo!”, without paying a single firebird to the Promoters guild.

The general public is not aware of the exact guild politics behind the conglomerate, yet it should be obvious that the Engineers wouldn’t tolerate such a blatant violation of their patent on energy weapons if they weren’t involved somehow. What everyone is aware of, on the other hand, are the various humanitarian efforts at the hands of Zebo Chombo, which most suspect to be an attempt to present a more friendly image to the public. So far, the conglomerate has proven more than willing to sell weapons to anyone who can afford them. More xenophobically inclined folk will be quick to link the conglomerate to militant branches of F.A.R. While the conglomerate is an “equal opportunity” employer, most humans and other aliens haven’t risen noticeably high in its hierarchy.

- **The Chombo hong:** People knowledgeable in Charioteer politics can report of a rather recent development within their guild. Less than a year ago, a gannok actually managed to gain a seat on the governing board of the guild: Dean Tonton Chombo, the younger brother of Zebo Chombo. Initially regarded as a mere curiosity, he has since established his own hong within the Charioteers by being the exclusive seller of Chombo Arms weapons. This shakeup of the status-quo prompted the higher-ranking guild members to take a new interest in their internal politics. Sources vested deeper in the local machinations know of Tonton’s close ties to the doge, Zale Gailbreath, which may have gotten him his seat on the board to begin with and helped him gain the favor of many of the other deans since then, making him a key player in the

eventual succession (see *Scene 4: The Charioteer*). For now, he makes a fortune selling his brother’s weapons across the Known Worlds.

- **The De Vatha hong:** Anyone remotely versed in Charioteer history will be able to trace back the De Vatha legacy to Apollo Industries, who held the initial monopoly on jumpkey manufacturing. Throughout its turbulent history the De Vatha family always managed to come out on top, eventually uniting several merchant families into the Charioteers Guild. This earned them many positions of power, leading the guild’s bureaucracy to be dominated by their nepotism — another reason why many Charioteers strive for more personal independence.
- **Dean Zebo Chombo:** The Chombo family can trace its roots back to Bannockburn where their ancestors learned their trade in servitude to the Muster. Many generations ago, a large portion of the family jumped at the opportunity to move to Leagueheim to offer their services to those impressed by their ever-increasing skill. While Zebo Chombo is the head of the family and was the mastermind behind the current success of the conglomerate, he leaves management of its individual branches to his most trusted relatives, which has the added benefit of being able to circumvent guild monopolies. He is currently busy spearheading the family’s charity projects and is off-world for the duration of the entire drama to oversee an archaeological dig on Bannockburn.
- **Dean Ozul De Vatha:** As head of the De Vatha hong, Ozul has his family’s interests at heart first and foremost. This put him at odds with the current doge of the Charioteers, Zail Gailbreath, whose primary interest was in breaking the De Vatha’s stranglehold on the Charioteers’ bureaucracy. While their rivalry inspired many a tale in Kesparate’s cantinas, until recently Ozul was considered uncontested to become the next doge — until Tonton Chombo showed up, that is. Ozul is renowned for his debauchery, and more progressive-minded members of the Charioteers will be quick to curse his name.
- **Doge Zale Gailbreath:** Former heir to the vast trading network of the Gailbreath hong, he abdicated to become the most active doge of the Charioteers in two generations. While his efforts to quench the rampant corruption within the guild initially met with broad resistance, he has since managed to gain allies by staunchly defending the guild’s monopolies. Sources close to the Charioteers have noticed he has become increasingly reclusive, with plenty of rumors going around about the reasons for this: symbiot infection, preparing a Third Republic

coup, covering up for a scandal within his family, or simply failing health (the latter is actually true, but unless the troupe gains access to his inner circle, it's unlikely they can confirm this).

Scene 3: An Eye for Talent

What: A shadow clings to the troupe.

Who: Two lookouts

Where: Streets of Kesparate.

Over the course of its investigation, Ozul has the troupe shadowed by two of his lookouts. This is as much a precaution as it is a test. Should the troupe notice their tail and confront them, the pair won't put up much resistance, but only reveal their employer under physical duress. Ozul will be satisfied with the troupe's prudence, which earns them his respect (see *Kesparate*, above), even if he now has to invest more effort to spy on them through more passive means. He also figures Tonton Chombo might have inserted agents of his own into the Kilroys, the Charioteers' intelligence network, so not being shadowed by the De Vatha might make the troupe seem suspicious to the conglomerate.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

LOOKOUTS

Extras

"Us? We're just checking out these... uh..."

Description: Trying their best to remain inconspicuous, the middle-aged man and woman will simply spit out the first excuse that pops into their head when they're confronted about following the troupe around, not letting hesitation throw suspicion on them.

Actions: *Goal* *Impact*

Blend in 12 5 Resistance vs. detection, +1 per 2 VP.

Deceive 8 Target is Deceived.

Knife stab 10 3 dmg

Resistance: Body 1 | Mind 0 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 10

Equipment: Knife, thick clothing.

Act 2: See No Evil

The following events provide several alternative ways to conclude this act. There is no preset order and it's unlikely they will all take place in one playthrough of this drama, but we highly advise you to read them all before running this act. Let the troupe approach their task any way they see fit. Eventually, this should end in them finding information that strongly implies

Ozul De Vatha previously tried to have the doge killed. It's then their choice whether they continue to work with their employer or turn against him.

Scene 4: The Charioteer

What: The players try to find out more about their target and might end up witnessing a seedy transaction.

Who: Dean Tonton Chombo, Raxo Buedoon, four bodyguards

Where: An abandoned restaurant in the slums, leading to the sewers.

Tonton Chombo is obviously the primary person of interest. Ever an ambitious personality, he decided to branch out and seek his fortune plying another trade after his elder brother inherited the family smithy on Leagueheim. The stars beckoned him, so he signed up with the Charioteers. Years later, after he finished his apprenticeship and returned to Leagueheim to celebrate with his family, Zebo approached him about exporting Chombo weapons to other worlds. These would prove to be the first steps towards the Chombo Conglomerate.

Tonton's rise to the governing board was helped along by Doge Zale Gailbreath in an attempt to dismantle existing structures within the guild's organization. With the established hong firmly entrenched in their long-held positions, Zale wanted a new hong on the board to shake things up and cause political maneuvering that would breach the older families' defenses. So far, this plan has worked out... but Tonton has his own agenda. He hopes to eventually become doge himself, not only to be the first non-human to do so, but also to use the guild's monopoly on jumpkeys to hold the Known Worlds at ransom and get all the major factions to sign an accord that makes discrimination against non-humans illegal.

Since he was able to employ fellow Charioteers to handle most of the major weapons trade routes, he spends increasing amounts of time supervising logistics in the Conglomerate's headquarters and less on Kesparate's marketplaces, only taking the time to handle acquisition of major off-world clients himself. While he's less than happy to give up life along the jumpweb for politics, he knows it's what he needs to do if he wants to effect any noticeable change.

The only other time that he breaks out of his office routine is when he arranges secret meetings with trusted Charioteer informants, as well as seedier clients he doesn't want his brother to know about. One of his preferred destinations in the slums is an abandoned restaurant. The interesting thing is, no one ever sees anyone but him and his associates enter or leave. This is due to the fact that the kitchen of the restaurant provides an unobserved access to the sewers, where

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the meetings with less respectable clients actually take place.

If the troupe decides to commit to a stakeout, it will eventually prove worth their time: Tonton is meeting up with a Jakovian agent going by the name of Raxo Buedoon, who is trying to decrease the Decados' dependence on the De Vatha. Tonton provides him with the cargo number of a weapons shipment to Pandemonium.

If the troupe fail to remain undetected, they'll most likely spark a firefight with the prospective buyers in the sewers under Kesparate, while the Chombos quickly retreat.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

DEAN TONTON CHOMBO



Agent • Gannok • Merchant 6 • Charioteers • Trader

"Make it worth my time."

Description: Being an arms dealer is a dangerous trade, and Tonton has the scars in his black and gray striped pelt to prove it. Constantly expecting an ambush has made him somewhat unsociable towards strangers, but he knows how to treat prospective clients properly.

Characteristics:

Str	4	Wits	7	Pre	5
Dex	5	Per	5	Int	7
End	5	Will	6	Faith	3

Skills:

Charm	6
Empathy	5
Fight	4
Focus	6
Impress	5
Knavery	6
Shoot	6
Sneak	5
Vigor	6

Actions:

	Goal	Impact
<i>Detect Lie</i>	10	See through lies.
<i>Dodge</i>	11	Gain VP (to boost Body Resistance).
<i>Fist strike</i>	8	2 dmg
<i>Shake it off</i>	11 12 9	Removes a state.
<i>Shoot blaster</i>	11	7 dmg
<i>Throw grenade</i>	14	Flash grenade (Area 5m); targets in area with Perception 6 or lower are Blinded.

Resistance: Body 5 | Mind 12 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 24

Surges: rating: 13 | number: 2

Equipment: Blaster pistol, two flash grenades, stiffsynth.

RAXO BUEDOON

Agent • Noble 4 • Decados • Spy

"We can't have living witnesses."

Description: Dressed in dark clothes, his long, dark hair tied back into a ponytail, this gaunt man smells like trouble even down here.

Characteristics:

Str	4	Wits	5	Pre	5
Dex	6	Per	6	Int	6
End	4	Will	7	Faith	4

Skills:

Disguise	6
Empathy	7
Focus	5
Impress	6
Knavery	7
Melee	6
Observe	6
Shoot	6
Sneak	6
Vigor	4



Actions:	Goal	Impact
<i>Daunt</i>	11	Target is Daunted.
<i>Detect Lie</i>	13	See through lies.
<i>Dodge</i>	10	Gain VP (to boost Body Resistance).
<i>Knife stab</i>	10	3 dmg + plox blade poison
<i>Shake it off</i>	9 12 9	Removes a state.
<i>Shoot blaster</i>	12	7 dmg
Resistance: Body 3 Mind 6 Spirit 0		
Vitality: 24		
Surges: rating: 9 number: 2		
Equipment: Blaster pistol, hollow knife, synthsilk.		

BODYGUARDS

Tonton has two bodyguards and Raxo has two. Use the same traits as for Ozul's bodyguards (*Scene 1: The Dean*).

Scene 5: The Weaponsmith

What: While a visit to the master gunsmith doesn't reveal any secrets, it might provide pointers to other persons of interest.

Who: Consul Potam Chombo, Apprentice Moak Pak

Where: The old Chombo Arms weaponsmithy.

After sales continued to grow, Chombo Arms acquired the neighboring lot to their smithy, providing them with enough space to construct their new headquarters and a factory for serialized production. Still, Zebo's eldest son and head of production, Potam Chombo, prefers to conduct his work in the older building, refining new weapon designs and inducting his apprentices into the trade of a Weaponsmith.

He redirects any inquiries about weapon sales towards the headquarters. Only if the troupe presents themselves as admirers of his work, maybe even requesting to commission a unique piece, will his vanity get the better of him and make him more approachable. Once he's amenable towards the troupe, he will also gladly redirect any inquiries about the Conglomerate's new portfolio of energy weapons towards his younger sister, Fellow Eggak Chombo of the Engineers.

Any attempt to gather information on Potam proves rather unfruitful. He is single-minded in his focus on his trade and any time not spent working he dedicates to his wife and young kids. He has no interest in corporate politics and it's been a long time since he last left the family's grounds. His love and dedication is exploitable, should the troupe sink to such levels. Threatening the well-being of his wife or children will lead him to cooperate in almost any way. Like the other executives, he has all keys and access codes

to the headquarters. He is also aware that Eggak has figured out the combination to Tonton's secret safe, something he keeps to himself to avoid another internal dispute (see *Scene 6: The Engineer*).

Should any troupe members pay heed to the apprentices during their stay, upon leaving the smithy they will notice a group of young gannok ridiculing another — Moak — for his shoddy clothing. If a character backs Moak up and gains his trust, he will open up about his father's outstanding debt with the Reeves (see *Scene 8: The Weakest Link*). His father explicitly forbade him from telling anyone, most notably his mother, but Moak is anxious — leading him to pester the troupe with questions about what's going to happen to his family now (something that can be played up for either drama or comic relief).

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

CONSUL POTAM CHOMBO

Agent • Gannok • Merchant 5 • Weaponsmiths • Tech Redeemer

"Better watch your head around here if you've grown attached to it."

Description: The many years of metalworking have left Potam with a robust frame under his brown and black patterned fur. His hands are covered with calluses and blisters, and the heat in the smithy amplifies his strong natural odor.

Characteristics:

Str	6	Wits	4	Pre	4
Dex	5	Per	5	Int	4
End	6	Will	5	Faith	5

Skills:

Crafts	8
Empathy	4
Melee	4
Perform	6

Actions:	Goal	Impact
<i>Crowbar strike</i>	10	4 dmg
<i>Mesmerize</i>	10	Target is Mesmerized.

Resistance: Body 2 | Mind 10 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 25

Surges: rating: 11 | number: 2

Equipment: Tools, heavy leather apron.

APPRENTICE MOAK PAK

Extra

"Just leave me alone!"

Description: A young gannok barely in his teens, his work clothes are riddled with holes and open seams, sometimes leaving him exposed when working metal.

Actions: *Entreat* *Goal* *Impact*
8 Target is Entreated.
Resistance: Body 0 | Mind 0 | Spirit 0
Vitality: 10
Equipment: None.

Scene 6: The Engineer

What: Gaining an audience with the conglomerate's manufacturer of energy weapons grants the troupe an opportunity to exploit her qualms about her family's business.

Who: Fellow Eggak Chombo

Where: Eggak's workshop in the Engineers' quarter.

Zebo early on realized the incredible talent his youngest daughter possessed, but with the family legacy already in the capable hands of his eldest son, he decided she would be better off apprenticed to the Engineers. Over the last few years, she has finally attained the rank, resources, and knowledge to benefit from her family's experience in the weapon trade and produced the first line of Chombo energy weapons. With the Chombo Conglomerate's rising recognition as a quality brand, young Eggak has yet to step out of her family's steadily growing shadow and gain recognition of her own. This suits her just fine for the time being, as she still struggles to reconcile her chosen trade with her moral framework.

A few years ago, during research in her guild's library, she stumbled upon long-forgotten manuscripts of the Order of Pneumatic Engineers. These early texts encouraged Engineers to take responsibility for their creations. Taking these teachings to heart, she approached her father about the harm her family is helping bring upon the Known Worlds. While she failed to persuade him to give up the family's traditional trade, he did not fail to notice the emotional anguish she was in. He conceded that he would prefer his family's name bring hope, not fear, and thus dedicated a significant portion of their profits to newfound good-will projects.

This of course didn't sit well with the ambitious Tonton, increasingly putting him at odds with his niece. Executive meetings turned into heated arguments, and only Potam's steadfast dedication to the family trade kept the business on track. Eggak subsequently remains deeply conflicted, especially now that her father is often away from Leagueheim... a circumstance the troupe can easily exploit if they gain an audience with her.

Finding out she is the one behind the Chombo Conglomerate's line of energy weapons requires a successful Academia-skill *research* maneuver against Demanding Resistance (capability: Engineers Lore) or a talkative contact within or close to the Engineers. An audience with her isn't hard to come by if the troupe provides a valid pretense — or if they flat-out

state that they want to talk with her about her family's business. She tends to avoid the Chombo headquarters when possible and prefers to meet at her workshop in the Engineers's quarter.

Despite her apparent skill, she declines any requests for commissions and will frankly tell the client in question her reasons for doing so. She is much more interested in philosophical debate and prone to naively open up more than she ought to, should she find an intellectual equal. Members of the clergy who are not outright condemning the use of technology as damaging to the soul pique her special interest.

Should the troupe manage to reinforce her scruples about her family's weapons trade, she will eventually divulge that she suspects her uncle of conducting shady backstreet deals. She knows he keeps his records locked away in his offices in the Chombo headquarters and has recently figured out the combination to his secret safe. If the troupe agrees to steal the records for her, she will help them gain access to the building. This obviously puts the troupe in an even harder position when it comes to choosing their allegiance at the end of the act.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

FELLOW EGGAK CHOMBO



Agent • Merchant 3 • Engineers • Tech Redeemer

"By manufacturing instruments of death, we suffocate our own light."

Description: Clothed in formal Engineer robes when receiving visitors, she sometimes sheds a tear when talking about the weapons trade that simply glides off her brilliant gold-striped bright gray fur, leaving no trace of her sadness.

Characteristics:

Str	4	Wits	7	Pre	5
Dex	6	Per	4	Int	4
End	5	Will	6	Faith	6

Skills:

Academia	6
Charm	5
Crafts	6
Empathy	5
Perform	5
Tech Redemption	7

Actions:

	Goal	Impact
<i>Befriend</i>	10	Target is Befriended.
<i>Convince</i>	12	Target is Convinced.

Resistance: Body 0 | Mind 6 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 24

Surges: rating: 10 | number: 1

Equipment: None.

Scene 7: Martech

What: The troupe can gain the support of the competition.

Who: Entered Biqhara, Master Ellard

Where: Martech tower.

The primary competitor of the Chombo Conglomerate is Martech, a sub-guild of the Engineers owned entirely by its members. Only the best Weaponsmiths are granted an invitation into their ranks. Zebo Chombo was among those select few to be invited, but he ended up turning them down. He knew he would have to make it on his own and not be subsumed by a primarily human enterprise. Considering this was the first (and to this day only) time an invitation of theirs had been declined, it stands to reason they are still bearing a grudge, especially since Zebo never bothered to explain his reasons.

As a collective of highly skilled artisans with their own refined styles, Martech excels in producing customized one-of-a-kind weapons. If there is a wealthy client looking to equip his personal guard, they tend to partner up with their parent guild for mass-production using a collaborative design of theirs. Those of their product lines that do become available to a somewhat wider audience are the result of an overzealous client commissioning a larger production run than he is actually able to pay.

Finding out about Martech and being referred to them is easy, since they pay the Promoters Guild to shill their services at all of Kesparate's major

spaceports frequented by nobles. Being known primarily in the higher society — and as a high-priced brand at that — Martech doesn't bother to weed out visitors to their guildhall beforehand.

Entered Biqhara will be the salesperson welcoming and escorting the troupe. She is quite courteous (having grown up as an al-Malik bastard), but not prone to intrigue herself. Any questions about Martech's competitors will be shot down in the most friendly manner imaginable. The troupe must gain the attention of someone higher up the chain if they hope to gain anything of use here. To achieve this, they will either have to insist on meeting the master who is supposed to design their weapon (though not so firmly as to come off as rude and be thrown out) or confuse the young Engineer with overly specific technical questions that only a master would be able to answer.

Master Ellard will be the first master to become available. He may be old, but he's still quick on the uptake. If the troupe inquire about the Chombo Conglomerate, he is quick to confront them about their intentions. Should the troupe hint that they have an interest in hurting the Conglomerate, he treats them to a more secluded chamber where they can discuss such matters privately. If the troupe presents itself as capable in his eyes, Martech will lend its support — in whatever form is most appropriate.

If the troupe share their plan to break into the Conglomerate's headquarters to gain damaging information, Martech will provide them with additional weapons and equipment as necessary, even providing transportation via an anti-grav flitter to and from the Conglomerate's premises. They pay no heed to masking their involvement, as they want Zebo to know they haven't forgiven him for his slight. If the troupe prefers a more subtle approach, Martech can pull a few strings among their debtors and turn up a noble willing (more or less) to act as a straw man in any dealings with the Conglomerate — especially if the troupe members don't have much social clout themselves. Having them arrange a demonstration at the Conglomerate's headquarters might shift away the attention of the guards, making it easier for the troupe to break in, or allow them to follow along as the noble's retinue. Feel free to pick any house (or an established NPC in your campaign) that suits the situation.

ADDITIONAL INFO

- **The De Vatha Connection:** Martech has cut out its own niche in which it can rest comfortably. Nonetheless, they rely on the Charioteers to transport their product, thus chafing under the fact that the De Vatha's corruption makes the entire process slower and more expensive than necessary in their

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eyes. Finding out that the patriarch of the De Vatha is interested in hurting their competition presents them with the common grounds upon which to build an alliance. Should the troupe later decide to turn against De Vatha, they might find their Martech contacts have turned against them as well.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ENTERED BIQHARA

Extra

“Welcome to Martech, the premier provider of armaments of the highest artisanship. How can I assist you?”

Description: Her sleek business attire complements her natural beauty, betraying no hint of inexperience. She becomes nervous if confronted with customers more knowledgeable in her field than she is, but she will not suffer rudeness and resolutely turns away anyone who behaves inappropriately in the guildhalls.

Actions:	Goal	Impact
<i>Befriend</i>	10	Target is Befriended.
<i>Entreat</i>	10	Target is Entreated.

Resistance: Body 0 | Mind 4 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 10

Equipment: None.

MASTER ELLARD

Agent • Merchant 6 • Weaponsmiths (Martech) • Tech Redeemer

“That’s an awful lot of questions... why are you really here?”

Description: A wrinkled old man with bushy white eyebrows and elongated earlobes. He is covered in layer upon layer of thick leather clothing, including an apron, yet never shows any signs of sweating. He regularly smacks his lips when thinking.

Characteristics:

Str	4	Wits	6	Pre	4
Dex	5	Per	6	Int	5
End	5	Will	6	Faith	5

Skills:

Crafts	9
Empathy	6
Focus	7
Impress	7
Knavery	6

Actions:	Goal	Impact
<i>Concentrate</i>	13	Spend 3 VP to make next roll for declared task favorable; all other rolls unfavorable until then.
<i>Daunt</i>	11	Target is Daunted.
<i>Detect lie</i>	12	See through lies.

Resistance: Body 2 | Mind 12 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 27

Surges: rating: 12 | number: 2

Equipment: Leather jerkin.

Scene 8: The Weakest Link

What: An employee in distress is easily exploited.

Who: Bolo Pak

Where: Wherever the troupe happens to meet Bolo Pak.

Conniving characters might be on the lookout for a lowly employee that might open a few doors into the Conglomerate’s headquarters for them. Bolo Pak married slightly above his station and went into debt to provide his wife with the lifestyle he assumed she desired. Those debts kept stacking up, and now his family is about to lose their home — he just hasn’t told them yet. His son overheard some things when they were approached by collectors on their way home from work, but he can’t make heads or tails of it (see *Scene 5: The Weaponsmith*). His wife, on the other hand, is oblivious, and he tries his best to keep it that way.

In his desperation, he has tried selling some of his organs (see *Scene 1: The Dean*), but gannok transplants are not in high enough demand for any Apothecary to bother. Now he’s trying his luck in some of the Scravers’ gambling dens — a fact characters with connections to that guild or the Reeves might catch wind of if they ask around for easy marks with connections to the Conglomerate. So far, Bolo has mostly come out even, his gannok aptitude at picking stuff up intuitively being a huge boon, but an experienced gambler (or one willing to cheat) might get the better of him and put him at their mercy. Obviously, the troupe can also outright bribe him, but given his huge debt and his continued reliance on his job, he doesn’t come cheap — he will ask for at least 1,000 firebirds. Threatening to involve his wife can drive the price down noticeably, but to no less than 500 firebirds.

There are different ways Bolo can help the troupe:

- Bolo doesn’t have access to the higher levels himself, but can still explain the layout of the entire building (see *Scene 9: Demonstration*).
- He can let the troupe into the lower levels unnoticed, cause distractions, and maybe even disable a select few of the security systems.
- If the troupe really leans into it and threatens his family or offers him a sum of money that might take care of his problems all at once (2,000+ firebirds), he will consider breaking into the upper levels and stealing the documents for the troupe himself — he does know a thing or two about locks. Whether this succeeds or not is mostly up to you to decide, but it’s a great way for troupes who

are lacking in the stealth department to complete their mission. Lending him further assistance, for example by gaining Eggak's or Martech's support, or arranging for a distraction themselves, should further heighten his chances of success.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

BOLO PAK



Agent • Gannok • Merchant 2 • Weaponsmiths • Amateur

“No! If my wife finds out, she’ll rip off my tail and tie it into a noose!”

Description: Bolo is an average working gannok, by now wearing overalls that are noticeably worn out. Even though he is down on his luck, his eyes still shine bright with a spark of canniness.

Characteristics:

Str	5	Wits	4	Pre	4
Dex	5	Per	4	Int	4
End	5	Will	4	Faith	5

Skills:

Fight	4
Focus	5
Intrusion	5
Knavery	6
Observe	6
Sneak	6
Vigor	5

Actions:	Goal	Impact
Concentrate	9	Spend 3 VP to make next roll for declared task favorable; all other rolls unfavorable until then.
Confuse	10	Target is Confused.
Dodge	10	Gain VP (to boost Body Resistance).
Fist strike	9	2 dmg
Pick lock	10	Open locks and safes.
Shake it off	10 9 10	Removes a state.
Resistance:	Body 1 Mind 2 Spirit 0	
Vitality:	20	
Surges:	rating: 7 number: 1	
Equipment:	Thick clothing.	

Scene 9: Demonstration

What: With the necessary renown, the troupe can gain easy access to the HQ.

Who: Consul Potam Chombo, Dean Tonton Chombo, Silla na Dwan, security guards

Where: Chombo Conglomerate headquarters.

While the Weaponsmiths Guild overall scaled back production after the end of the Emperor Wars, Zebo managed to maintain and even expand his clientele thanks to the affordable distribution network provided by his brother Tonton. This led them to focus on larger customers, supplying the security and military units of various factions with their weapons. This means that gaining their attention requires a certain background and status — having the Landed perk usually qualifies a character, as do higher ranks of faction membership and the Riches perk. Alternatively, the troupe members can try to forge their references, but they will have to hold up to intense scrutiny (Academia + Wits vs Demanding Resistance; capability: Faction Lore for the faction impersonated). Trying to arrange an order through black market channels will provide no actual connection to the Conglomerate itself, only arms dealers fencing goods stolen from them.

Unless the troupe directly approached Tonton about buying weapons when meeting him at a marketplace and piqued his particular interest (see *Scene 4: The Charioteer*), the demonstration will be held by Potam. In either case, the head of security, Silla na Dwan, will be present the entire time. The ukari is a former Muster who served on Stigmata, where she befriended a member of the Chombo family in the trenches. When he offered her a chance to get off the planet along with him by signing on to the Chombo Conglomerate, she didn't hesitate. Since then she has proven her loyalty and capability multiple times over, earning her high recognition within the organization.

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DRAMAS

HARGARD
DRAMA HOOKS

The demonstration consists of a short tour of the factory building adjacent to the headquarters, followed by an extended visit to the shooting range in the lower levels of the headquarters. The troupe can take their time trying out the arsenal, but down there the eyes of at least half a dozen security guards are trained on them at all times. Requesting a tour of other parts of the building will require some convincing with their guide and inevitably raise Silla's suspicion.

The headquarters consists of three stories and a basement:

- The first floor contains the reception, show floor, and waiting area in the front half of the building, with the guardroom and utility rooms towards the back.
- The second floor houses the offices of the clerical and R&D staff.
- The top floor is reserved for executive offices and department leads.
- The basement is dominated by the shooting range, with additional utility and storage rooms to one side.

A pass-key secured elevator reserved for the executives and head of security connects all four levels, while a staircase connects to the top three floors. The shooting range is accessible via a separate staircase from the show floor.

Should the troupe try to seal an actual deal, Tonton will be called in to handle the details if he's not already present. Negotiations will take place on the shooting range — Tonton loves to show off the merchandise — unless the troupe suggests relocating to his offices. Doing so raises Silla's suspicion, as will the troupe not putting any real effort into the negotiations. If the parties agree to a deal, Tonton invites them to join him in his office on the upper floors to sign the paperwork. If an outside distraction happens, either Tonton or Silla will leave to check it out, but not both. Remaining unsupervised in the office thus requires an additional ruse to lure the other one out (raised suspicions will increase the Resistance for this by +2).

If any member of the troupe excuses themselves during the demonstration with a convincing argument (having to use the bathroom being the most readily available one), they are accompanied (or escorted out) by a staffer unless they've raised Silla's suspicion, in which case she accompanies them herself (with additional security guards as backup if appropriate). If the characters manage to shake off their tail, they are free to explore the building as described in *Scene 10: Intrusion*, beginning from their respective location.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

SILLA NA DWAN



Agent • Ukar • Yeoman 6 • Weaponsmiths • Mercenary

"Hmm..." (*cold stare*)

Description: The ukar may have left the battlefield, but the battlefield hasn't left the ukar. Her rigid formality stands in stark contrast to the gannoks' joviality.

Characteristics:

Str	5	Wits	4	Pre	3
Dex	6	Per	7	Int	6
End	6	Will	6	Faith	4

Skills:

Empathy	5
Focus	6
Impress	7
Melee	6
Observe	7
Shoot	8
Vigor	6

Actions:

	Goal	Impact
<i>Daunt</i>	10	Target is Daunted.
<i>Detect lie</i>	12	See through lies.
<i>Dodge</i>	12	Gain VP (to boost Body Resistance).

Knife stab	11	3 dmg
Shake it off	12 12 10	Removes a state.
Shoot blaster	14	7 dmg
Spot	14	VP vs. Resistance to detect things.

Resistance: Body 3 | Mind 6 | Spirit 0

e-shield (standard): 5/10 (10 hits)

Vitality: 27

Surges: rating: 11 | number: 2

Equipment: Blaster pistol, trench knife, synthsilk, standard e-shield.

SECURITY GUARDS

Extras

“Freeze!”

Description: The guards are comprised mostly of humans and gannok wearing Conglomerate-branded security uniforms.

Actions:	Goal	Impact
Shoot SMG	10	5 dmg
Spot	12	VP vs. Resistance to detect things.

Resistance: Body 5 | Mind 0 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 10

Equipment: Stiffsynth.

Scene 10: Intrusion

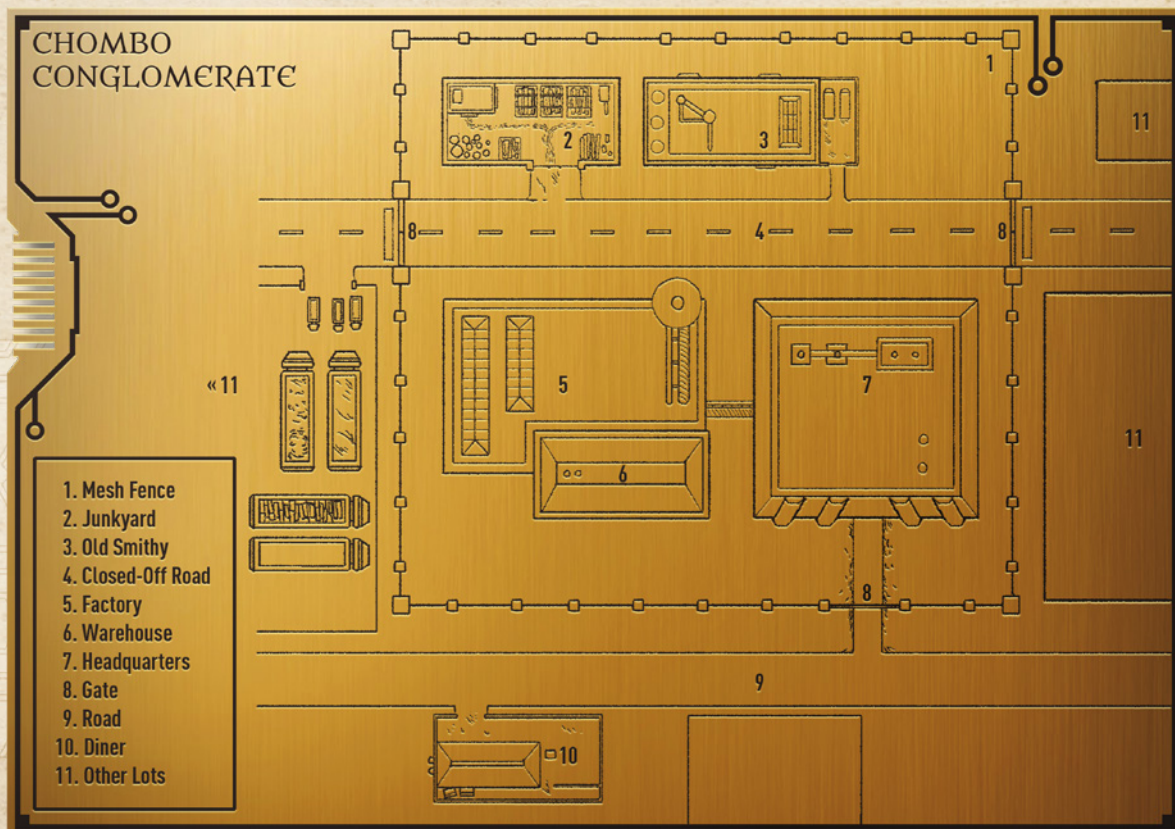
What: The troupe decides to break into the HQ using stealth or force.

Who: Security guards

Where: Chombo Conglomerate headquarters.

The premises of the Chombo Conglomerate consist of three adjacent complexes located in the Weaponsmiths’ district: the old gunsmithy, the factory, and the headquarters. Most buildings in the Weaponsmiths’ district aren’t particularly tall, with the notable exception of the Martech tower complex rising against the backdrop of the gleaming spires of Kesparate’s other districts.

The oldest building is the small two-story gunsmithy that served as the Chombo family’s base of operations on Leagueheim for generations and still bears the Chombo Arms signage. As other Weaponsmiths began failing, the Chombo’s fortunes prevailed, allowing them to purchase neighboring lots and build a bigger factory and a headquarters to house their sales, logistics, and research departments. A small warehouse is attached directly to the factory and used for temporary storage of production runs before they are distributed to their respective destinations.



THE NOBILITY:
AN INTRIGUING
LIFE

THE CHURCH:
PLOTting
PRIESTS

MERCHANT
GUILDS:
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GETTING IN

The entrances into the headquarters are:

- The factory and the headquarters are connected via metal gangways on the second and third floors, with key-card secured doors granting access to the interior on both sides (clerical staff has access to the second floor from the outside; third-floor access is restricted to executives and the head of security).
- The front entrance (by admission through the reception only).
- Two pass-code locked doors on the left and right side of the building (the left one facing the factory).
- The key-card locked door to the guardroom facing the back lot where the old smithy is located.
- The third floor is the only level that features windows, for the executives' offices.
- Maintenance access to the roof is achieved via the gangways on the side facing the factory. While there is no access hatch on the roof, daring characters might rappel down to the windows to gain direct entry to the executive offices.

SECURITY

Guards: Three pairs of guards in three shifts patrol the premises at all times, with two pairs outside and one stationed inside the factory.

The old smithy is simply locked up for the night, while the headquarters has its own guard roster: One pair of guards is permanently assigned to the guardroom, while another is either manning the reception during business hours, or periodically patrolling the upper three floors during the night.

Cameras: The top floor has been fitted with cameras (TL4) monitored from the guardroom. While the executives welcomed this initiative by Silla, considering the increasing threat of corporate espionage, the guards haven't taken easily to staring at screens all night, and are not always paying full attention. For a troupe member to notice a camera requires an Intrusion or Observe + Perception roll vs. Hard Resistance. Sneaking past one needs a Sneak + Dexterity roll vs. Hard Resistance. Even if any member of the troupe fails a particular sneak attempt, there is only a 50% chance that a guard is currently paying attention to the monitors at that moment. Failing to detect the cameras altogether counts as failing a sneak attempt in regard to being detected by the guards.

Light barrier: The staircase to the second and third floors has been fitted with an invisible light barrier (TL4) that can only be detected with an Intrusion or Observe + Perception roll vs. Tough Resistance. Once noticed, it can be avoided with a Sneak or Vigor + Dexterity roll vs. Hard resistance. It can be deactivated altogether with an Intrusion + Dexterity roll vs. Tough Resistance.

Locks: The executive offices are all labeled with name plaques and locked with key-card locks (Demanding Resistance). All offices contain stacks of sensitive paperwork pertaining to the Conglomerate's business operation, but the one of real interest is Tonton's (see *Scene 11: Revelation*).

ALARMS

Any attempt to breach the outside doors, or failure to unlock them, results in blaring sirens.

Being detected on the cameras by the guards or failing to bypass the light barrier or locks to the executives' offices triggers a silent alarm.

While the sirens linked to the outside doors are intended to scare off casual burglars who bungle up before they even enter the complex, the silent alarm is supposed to give the guards time to organize and prepare against more dedicated intruders (for example checking which outside doors have been breached and placing a unit there) and give Silla the time she needs to join up with her team (living nearby, she is on site five minutes after a silent alarm triggers). After she arrives, she takes a few moments to assess the situation, observing what's happening on the cameras before she declares a plan of action. She immediately contacts Tonton if she realizes the intruders are after the information he gathered on Ozul De Vatha.

Scene 11: Revelation

What: Compromising material is found, just not on the intended target.

Who: Silla na Dwan, security guards, Dean Tonton Chombo

Where: Chombo Conglomerate headquarters.

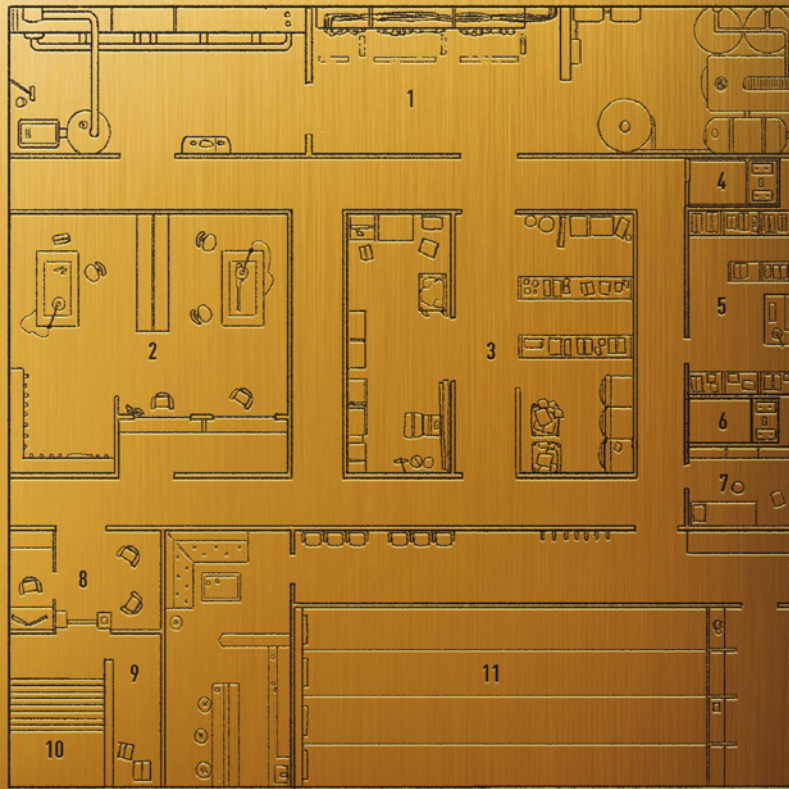
Once the troupe has gained unsupervised access to Tonton's office, they can find a hidden safe in his desk, secured with a TL5 keypad. Unless they gained the combination from Potam or Eggak, it will require an Intrusion-skill *pick lock* maneuver against Demanding Resistance (capability: TL5) or significant brute force (Vitality 30, Armor 6). Inside is a black folder with all the information Tonton has collected on Ozul De Vatha.

The documents include organizational schemes of various corrupt networks within the Charioteers' bureaucracy, profiles of his agents (including Raxo Buedoon; see *Scene 4: The Charioteer*) and the like. There are also sketches of a human woman's face, as well as photographs showing her in the retinue of Doge Zale Gailbreath of the Charioteers, seemingly caring for his children. Tonton found out that this woman, whose name he has determined to be Ana, had infiltrated the Gailbreath household under orders from Ozul De Vatha. Then, not long after, she mysteriously vanished. Tonton assumed she had been

CHOMBO CONGLOMERATE

BASEMENT

1. Utilities
2. Armory
3. Storage
4. Freight Elevator
5. Supplies
6. Elevator
7. Panik Room
8. Security
9. Lounge
10. Stairs
11. Shooting Range



THE NOBILITY:
AN INTRIGUING
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THE CHURCH:
PLOTING
PRIESTS

MERCHANT
GUILDS:
DREAMS AND
SCHEMES

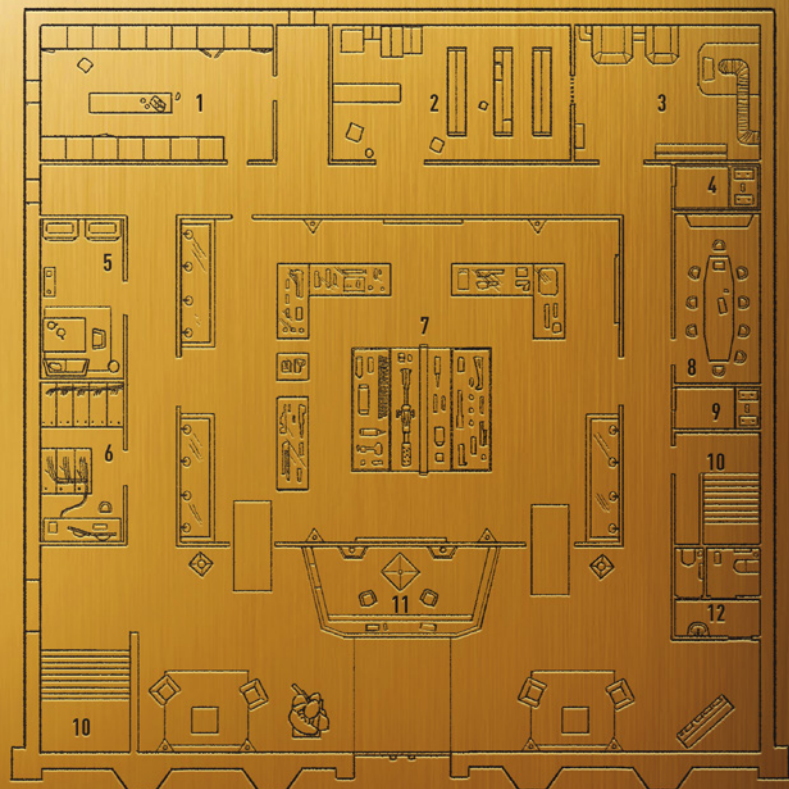
DRAMAS

HARGARD
DRAMA HOOKS

CHOMBO CONGLOMERATE

1. FLOOR

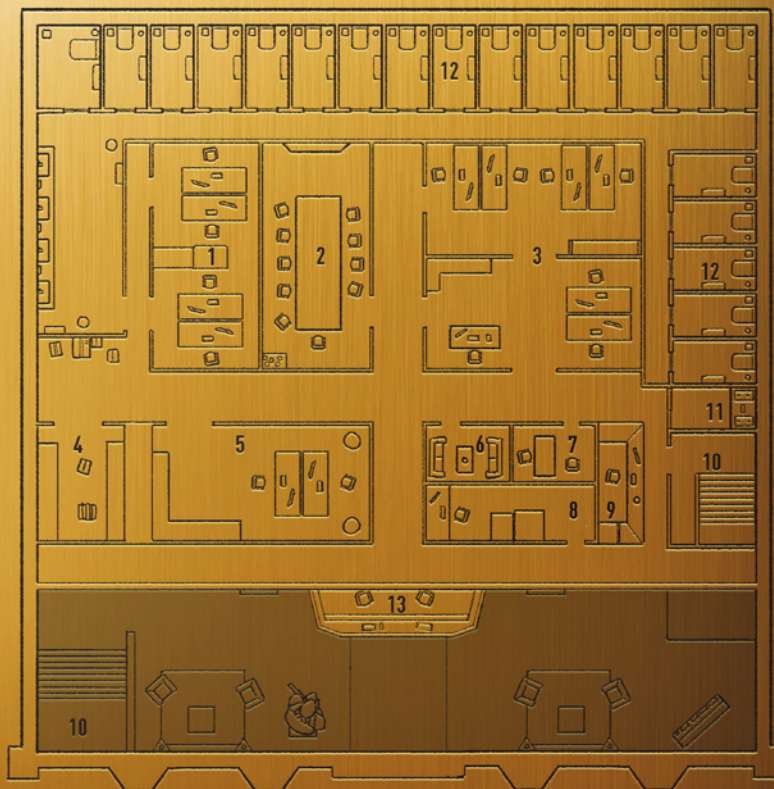
1. Guard Room
2. Storage
3. Utilities
4. Freight Elevator
5. Break Room
6. Media Room
7. Show Room
8. Conference Room
9. Elevator
10. Stairs
11. Reception
12. Restrooms



CHOMBO CONGLOMERATE

2. FLOOR

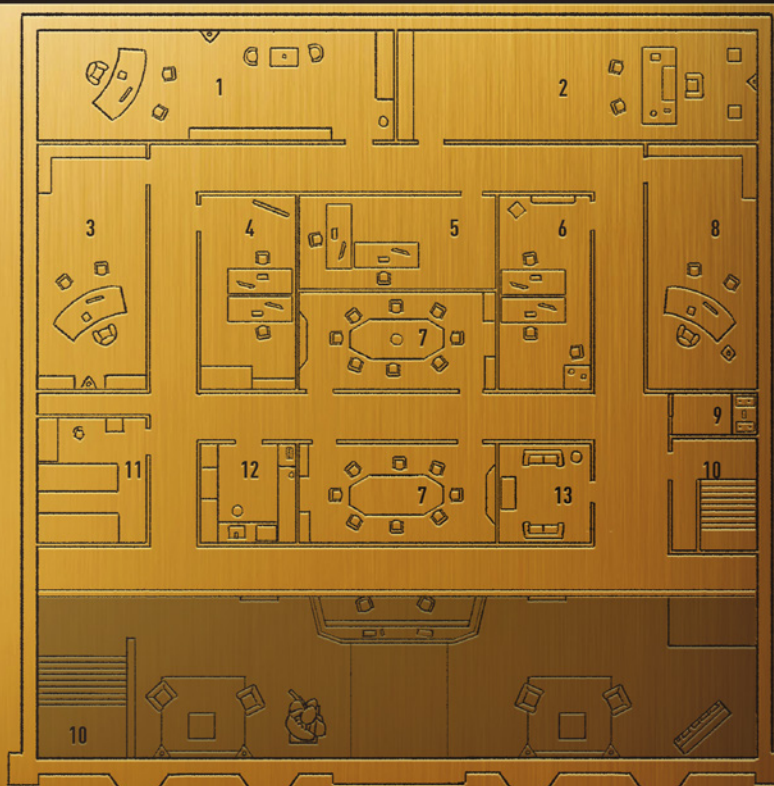
1. PR & Marketing
2. Conference Room
3. R & D Lab
4. Storage
5. Quality Assurance
6. Break Room
7. (N) HR
8. Accounting
9. Front Desk
10. Stairs
11. Elevator
12. Restrooms
13. Gallery View



CHOMBO CONGLOMERATE

3. FLOOR

1. Zebo's Office
2. Tonton's Office
3. Potam's Office
4. Prod. HQ
5. Sales HQ
6. R & D HQ
7. Conference Room
8. Eggak's Office
9. Elevator
10. Stairs
11. Archive
12. Kitchen Area
13. Lounge



found out and didn't achieve her goal, since his research showed De Vatha immediately went on the hunt for her himself. Considering her a dead end, Tonton moved on.

Then, a short while ago during an argument with his niece about the morality of their family business, she mentioned a priest telling her of a former assassin who felt the same way she did, subsequently abandoning her mission and going into hiding to avoid being hunted down by her employer. Something clicked for Tonton and he went back on Ana's trail. He gained the trust of Raxo Buedoon by providing him with weapons destined for Iver's many rebellious factions via Grange Station, the joint Decados and League space station in Pandemonium. Raxo reasoned there was no way Chombo weapons would be traced back to the Decados, contrary to anything the De Vathas could provide him with. In return, he was able to confirm Ozul had actually planned a hit on the doge. In his last notes on the matter, Tonton mentions that it took him a while, but he finally managed to glean the name of the priest from Eggak and intends to pay him a visit soon: Deacon Leonardo of Sanctuary Aeon. Maybe Leonardo can help him find the one witness who would be able to testify against Ozul De Vatha: the penitent assassin herself.

Depending on the circumstances under which the troupe gets their hands on the folder, they may be in quite a rush, but nonetheless it would be wise spend a moment to confirm it is actually what they are looking for. In this case, lines like "Is Ozul planning a hit on the doge?" and other incriminating notes and documents should jump out at the troupe. While this isn't strictly necessary, it makes their choice more imminent under duress, considering they may have to fight their way out of what is now a potential ally's headquarters. If the troupe has managed to avoid detection, whether they broke in or managed to access the safe undetected after being invited into Tonton's office, they have some breathing room to think about their next steps.

If they triggered the silent alert while breaking in and took their time studying the documents, Silla and her team take positions in front of Tonton's office (as well as under the window, if it's obvious the troupe entered this way) and finally announce their presence, commanding the troupe to surrender. Unless the troupe starts shooting, she is willing to talk with them. Should the troupe express concerns about the intentions of their employer, she will contact Tonton and put him on the speakers in his office, allowing the troupe to talk with him.

Should the troupe decide to stick with Ozul De Vatha, they still have to manage to escape from the building. This might take the form of a shootout, a few

more Sneak rolls, or simply a request for more time to consider the arms deal they were discussing. Upon returning to Ozul, he is surprised by their findings and impressed by their loyalty — should the troupe ask for a higher price, he is more than willing to pay it, as long as they are willing to see the matter through with him. Of course, the troupe is free to double-cross him at any point, should they desire to do so.

Partnering up with the Chombo Conglomerate in taking down the De Vatha patriarch will require convincing Silla and/or Tonton that the troupe is sincere in abandoning their employer. If the troupe went through a background check to receive a demonstration, this won't require much, assuming the characters are more or less upstanding citizens. In the end, Tonton is just as willing to work with a crew of rogue agents who smell a better offer, as long as he doesn't suspect they're leading him on. Either way, the troupe now have to find an assassin.

Act 3: Speak No Evil

How this act plays out is highly dependent on the troupe's choice at the end of Act 2. The events will roughly follow the same order, as you will see, with the troupe on different sides of a race to the target. It is also possible the troupe decides to call it quits — which is a fair choice, but won't garner them any points with either faction. And considering they came to Leagueheim to get something they desperately want (whatever that is), they will have need of a local ally going forward.

Scene 12: Get Me A Priest

What: A priest will break his seal of confession one way or another.

Who: Deacon Leonardo

Where: Chapel in the Muster district.

Deacon Leonardo runs a small, desolate chapel in the Muster district by himself — asking Eggak or any Church contacts will reveal this information, as will a successful Academia-skill *research* maneuver or access to a public data terminal (capability: Think Machine).

He actually used to treat Ana's wounds way back when she was still working as an active assassin, all the while lecturing her about morals. Obviously, this bore fruit, as she one day showed up in his chapel desperate for help in order to disappear, since she had just skipped out on assassinating the doge of the Charioteers. He provided her with supplies and sent her to an abandoned mining settlement that he himself once ministered to, but that now had been turned into a wasteland: Pollution Zone 8210.

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When the troupe pays him a visit, they will have to convince him they have Ana's best interests at heart in order to gain this information. Explaining that De Vatha exemplifies the corruption of the guilds that the Church detests so much can convince Leonardo that taking Ozul down is a divine imperative. Should the troupe be of a more unscrupulous persuasion (which seems likely should they still work for De Vatha), they can resort to less savory means to get Ana's location out of him.

Either way, the priest's days are numbered. Unless the troupe takes explicit steps to maintain his safety (putting guards on him or hiding him away), Ozul will find out they visited him and have his goons drop by the chapel in turn — regardless of whether he's under the assumption the troupe is still working for him or not (the latter seeming obvious if the troupe entered the Chombo Conglomerate headquarters and did not report back to him after). This way, he'll find out Ana's whereabouts himself and send some old Muster friends after her.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

DEACON LEONARDO

Agent • Priest 5 • Sanctuary Aeon • Friar

"Amalthea's blessing upon you."

Description: Bald, tall and slender, Leonardo is an outright unconventional sight to behold. But his eerily soft hands make any soul's hairs stand on end.

Characteristics:

Str	4	Wits	5	Pre	6
Dex	4	Per	4	Int	5
End	4	Will	7	Faith	7

Skills:

Charm	7
Empathy	8
Focus	6
Perform	8

Actions:

	Goal	Impact
<i>Befriend</i>	13	Target is Befriended.
<i>Detect lie</i>	12	See through lies.
<i>Entreat</i>	13	Target is Entreated.
<i>Rouse</i>	14	Target is Roused.
<i>Shake it off</i>	10 13 13	Removes a state.

Resistance: Body 0 | Mind 6 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 28

Surges: rating: 11 | number: 2

Equipment: None.

Scene 13: The Pollution Zone

What: Entering a pollution zone presents the troupe with several hazards they'll have to deal with.

Who: Hissing cockroaches

Where: Pollution Zone 8210.

Journeys through a pollution zone always require preparations. Finding out details shouldn't prove hard, as it's information readily available at any public data terminal and known by many.

PZ8210 was a mining settlement drilling for natural resources. They employed fracking techniques, which worked well enough until a natural uranium deposit broke down into a geothermal vent. The resulting irradiated hot gases started leaking through the porous ground, lifting up permanent dust banks from the arid soil that make breathing impossible and limiting vision. While the ambient radiation isn't high enough to kill you outright, it is enough to disrupt long-range communication and scanning — something that serves Ana just fine. The troupe will require environmental protection suits and/or a sealed transport. The Chombo Conglomerate or Martech can provide basic equipment (spacesuits and a Shodan Off-Roader; see the landcraft transports in the **Character Book**, *Chapter 4: Technology*), but troupe members with connections or wealth may prefer to invest in something better.

Another hazard that experienced miners can point out to the troupe is the hissing cockroaches, a mutated carnivorous offshoot of Urthish cockroaches that thrive in Leagueheim's pollution zones. A sealed transport will help with this; otherwise, the troupe should bring along flamethrowers to ward off any swarms they encounter. If the swarms delay them overmuch, De Vatha's men gain a headstart (which might result in a triple standoff when they arrive, with them having to convince Ana mid-fight that they are actually there to help her).

Traversing the pollution zone is more about establishing an atmosphere than actually playing out specific encounters. Describe the abandoned buildings, equipment, and vehicles along the way (some of them certainly branded "Gailbreath" if the troupe cares to investigate), as well as the mutated fauna and flora slowly taking back what has been left barren. The journey should take about two hours by ground car, one hour by skimmer, or about 15 minutes by flitter.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

HISSING COCKROACH

Extra (creature) • Size: Negligible

These mutated cockroaches are larger than their Urthish progenitors, but they're still individually small. However, they swarm in a mass that makes them hard to avoid.

Special Abilities:

Nauseating sound: While the hissing sound these cockroaches are widely known for can be heard more than 100 meters away, it is only a byproduct of a nauseating short-range infrasonic hum that barely extends two meters. Even if the swarm's prey manages to elude them, they might still find sustenance in what it has left behind.

Swarm of Thousands: The only way to physically disperse the swarm is using a flamethrower or some kind of sonic weapon. Otherwise, the cockroaches will chase any moving thing until it eludes them or they find something easier to feast upon.

Actions:	Goal	Impact
Bite	10	1 dmg
Chase	12	VPs raise Resistance against attempts to escape swarm.
Hiss	14	Targets within 2m are Nauseated.
Swarm	14	Target is Seeing Impaired.

Resistance: Body 0 | Mind 0 | Spirit 0

Vitality: If a swarm suffers 10+ damage from flame or sonic weapons, it disperses.

Scene 14: Hunter Hunted

What: The hunt is on! Can the troupe gain the upper hand against a seasoned assassin — either to take her in or to take her out?

Who: Ana, Muster cleaners

Where: An abandoned pub in Pollution Zone 8210.

Ana has made her new home in the abandoned pub that once served the mining community. Here she has access to water and air filtration, after she managed to restore some semblance of power from the geothermal generator's reserves. Leonardo arranged for a dead drop of supplies every six months.

The lower floor houses pool tables and the bar, with a central staircase leading up to a gallery of rooms with beds, supposedly once serviced by the Scravers. Ana has rigged the front and back entrances with tripwire flashbang grenades which require an Observe-skill *spot* maneuver against a Tough Resistance

to detect. They can be sidestepped automatically if detected or pointed out or disarmed with an Intrusion + Dexterity vs. Hard Resistance. Should they be tripped, any characters in the proximity (Area 5m) are Blinded and Deafened. This obviously also alerts Ana, who is in one of the rooms upstairs.

Ana reacts to strangers as if they were sent to kill her — that is, aggressively. If that's actually what the troupe is here for, this should play out pretty straightforwardly. Otherwise, they'll have to continually try to talk to her and not fire back. A successful Charm-skill *entreat* maneuver can get her into a conversation, after which a *convince* maneuver might get her to stand down and return to Kesparate to serve as witness against Ozul. She is reluctant to listen, however, and spends VP to boost her Mind Resistance against influence.

Being an experienced assassin, Ana prepared an escape route through one of the barricaded windows upstairs — to which she will resort to if she feels pinned down. From there she will make her way to a garage where she keeps the refurbished buggy she uses to make pickups and try to escape for good (use the Hazat AT Rover traits from the **Character Book, Chapter 4: Technology**).

After a certain while engaging her, regardless of whether the troupe talked her down or the standoff is still ongoing, the troupe can hear the sound of a vehicle parking outside (which raises Ana's suspicions against the troupe once more: +2 Mind Resistance vs. influence). Ozul informed members of Ana's former Muster-sanctioned assassin's crew about her whereabouts, leading them to send a cleaner squad after her.

Should the troupe try to reason with them, the cleaners will at best have the courtesy to tell them to stay out of Muster business, but otherwise proceed to take them out along with Ana. You can vary the number of cleaners depending on the combat capabilities of your troupe. If your troupe doesn't feature any combat-experienced characters, Ana will instruct them in arranging diversions to help her take them out.

Should the troupe actually have prevented Deacon Leonardo from falling into Ozul's hands, skip this part of the encounter. The troupe has earned it. In this case, however, Ozul is more frantically on the lookout for Ana to show her face again, increasing the stakes of *Scene 15: Fallout*.

If Ana doesn't survive the event, skip *Scene 15: Fallout* and proceed to *Scene 16: Aftermath*, or replace her with Deacon Leonardo for the finale if the troupe managed to save him. Should the troupe check Ana's room, it is littered with copies of religious texts provided to her by Leonardo.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ANA



Headliner • Yeoman 4 • Sanctuary Aeon • Spy

“Just admit you’re Ozul’s dogs!”

Description: Dressed in old miner’s clothing and having lost lots of weight, she bears no resemblance to the old pictures of herself. She seems oddly serene and at peace.

Characteristics:

Str	4	Wits	6	Pre	5
Dex	6	Per	5	Int	5
End	5	Will	5	Faith	6

Skills:

Charm	6
Disguise	6
Drive	5
Empathy	5
Focus	6
Impress	5
Intrusion	6
Knavery	7
Melee	8

Observe	6
Shoot	7
Sneak	7
Survival	6
Tech Redemption	5
Vigor	6

Actions:	Goal	Impact
Dagger <i>stab</i>	12	4 dmg
<i>Daunt</i>	10	Target is Daunted.
<i>Detect lie</i>	10	See through lies.
<i>Dodge</i>	12	Gain VP (to boost Body Resistance).
<i>Shake it off</i>	11 11 12	Removes a state.
<i>Shoot revolver</i>	13	6 dmg
<i>Shoot shotgun</i>	14/13/12	8/4/1 dmg
<i>Spot</i>	11	VP vs. Resistance to detect things.

Capabilities: Customs (Common, Streetwise), Knowledge Lores (Leagueheim), Military Ordinance (Demolitions), Ranged Weapons (Slug Guns), Speak/Read Urthish, Transport (Landcraft),

Perks: Nimble, Professional Reputation (Journeyman), Ruthless, Saint’s Blessing, Second Skin

Resistance: Body 1 | Mind 4 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 14

Revivals: rating: 9 | number: 2

e-shield (dueling): 5/10 (15 hits)

Bank: 25

Surges: rating: 10 | number: 2

Equipment: Heavy revolver, barkeeper’s 2-barrel shotgun, dagger, thick clothing, dueling e-shield.

MUSTER CLEANERS

Extras

“Kill them all.”

Description:

Actions:	Goal	Impact
<i>Daunt</i>	11	Target is Daunted.
Frap stick <i>strike</i>	13	6 dmg + Shock
<i>Shoot rifle</i>	13	7 dmg
<i>Spot</i>	11	VP vs. Resistance to detect things.

Resistance: Body 5 | Mind 2 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 10

Equipment: Muster Rover autofeed rifle, frap stick, stiffsynth.

Scene 15: Fallout

What: Returning the penitent assassin to civilization doesn't mean she's safe yet.

Who: Ana, Ergard, hitmen

Where: The streets of Kesparate leading up to the Charioteer spire.

If Ana makes it back to the city proper, either through the troupe's assistance or as part of her impromptu escape, her life is still in danger. Her only hope is to gain refuge with the Gailbreath family, whose trust she once enjoyed. She may find temporary shelter with other factions, but in the end, she always suspects De Vatha's men might have infiltrated them (and rightfully so).

The troupe should escort (or chase) her to the doge's residence at the top of the Charioteer spire in central Kesparate. It is crowded there, making blending in easier but hitting one's mark harder. Sprawling market alleys, winding pipes, and swaying beasts of burden should make for a great environment for a dramatic chase (especially if you keep the lower gravity in mind, which enables some astounding feats of athletics).

Ozul suspects where Ana is headed and has dispatched every hitman he could find in a hurry, and of course Ergard is among the crowd as well. All the Charioteer guardsmen have been lured away from the main plaza thanks to pressing assignments arranged for by De Vatha's network within the administration, so an open shootout would continue uninterrupted for longer than the troupe might expect.

The troupe has the chance to call in favors beforehand to even the odds. Silla na Dwan volunteers to accompany them if they reach out to the Chombo Conglomerate, and might arrange for a few security guards to mingle in with the crowd as well. Try to involve other factions the troupe has ties to in order to connect the drama to their ongoing stories.

Once Ana reaches the doge's domain, his personal guard will take her into custody. Depending on the allegiance of the troupe, this spells victory or defeat.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

HITMEN

Extras

"There she is!"

Description: This cadre of unscrupulous men and women runs the gamut of all of Leagueheim's citizens. You never know who's out for you until they pull a gun out.

Actions:	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Impact</i>
<i>Spot</i>	10	VP vs. Resistance to detect things.

<i>Shoot SMG</i>	10	5 dmg
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Resistance: Body 1 | Mind 0 | Spirit 0

Vitality: 10

Equipment: Thick clothing.

Scene 16: Aftermath

What: The troupe hopefully gets what it wants.

Who: Dean Ozul De Vatha, Dean Tonton Chombo

Where: Somewhere in Kesparate.

Depending on whether a credible witness is presented to the governing board or not, political balances will shift within the Charioteers Guild. Should Dean Ozul De Vatha be accused of an assassination attempt on the doge, the De Vatha hong as a whole will be subject to increased scrutiny, significantly reducing corruption not just on Leagueheim, but on all major spaceports across the Known Worlds. On the other hand, this will lead to increased rivalries and conflict within the Charioteers as the De Vatha hong attempts to secure their power base by any means necessary — and they still have allies. If, on the other hand, all witnesses have been dealt with, the De Vatha hong maintains the status-quo. Tonton Chombo won't stop his crusade, but will have suffered his first major loss, causing him to sow dissent within the ranks of the Charioteers.

Finally, the faction the troupe sided with (De Vatha or Chombo) helps them in procuring what they were looking for to begin with (gladly, if they were victorious, reluctantly otherwise). Should the troupe decide to remain on Leagueheim for now, this drama should provide you with several hooks to follow up on. For one, the doge's supply of Lypee-55 is still compromised, making his fate uncertain....

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Drama Hooks

The following hooks provide bare bones plots for dramas that the gamemaster can expand upon to fit the needs of their own epics and their troupe.

Noble Plot Hooks

These hooks involve noble instigators, patrons, or gentry in distress who need the troupe's help.

THE BOX

A mysterious package is sent to the troupe by mistake. Inside, they discover a ring. Research reveals that this is a unique ring recently purchased by a local noble. So unique that the Town Criers Guild dedicated an article to its purchase. It was intended for the noble's fiancé and now the troupe stands staring at its glittering facets. How did it end up with them? Shouldn't this kind of thing be protected? They know there is no way they can sell or pawn the ring without huge risk; it's too recognizable. Few black-market dealers would touch it.

If they attempt to return the ring, after an interrogation about the incident, the noble can be convinced of their innocence. They will ask them to investigate how it came to be delivered to them. It seems a simple enough job, until the troupe discovers the ring was sent to them accidentally. Its delivery was intended for a known assassin, who would use it to kill the fiancé. (Poisoning it? Hand delivering it to get close to the target?) Who sent it and why? Was it the noble who hired them? The troupe better find out quickly, before the assassin succeeds in another attempt.

CONFLICTED GROUND

A land controversy between noble families makes travel difficult for the troupe when they need to pass through disputed territory. This could be a fight between two families within the same house, or it could be two houses going at it.

The troupe could try to pass through innocuously and avoid soldiers on both sides or come up with a cover story that allows them passage (such as claiming to be imperial peace brokers or a Church delegation concerned about the common folk). This could be set on a planet or in space. The troupe encounters evidence of skirmishes as they press forward, and every non-combatant they meet is sick of the fighting. It's hurting travel and businesses in the area.

Stealth works for a little while until the troupe ends up in the middle of a skirmish and everything turns to chaos. Now the troupe must survive attacks from both sides. The odds are that the troupe will eventually be captured. They must now figure out how to escape captivity and make their way through the rest of the embattled territory.

Unfortunately, the objective here isn't to solve the war, which will probably last for years, but to pass through in one piece.

CONTEST OF WILLS

At some point in the past, a non-noble member of the troupe helped a noble out of the goodness of their heart (or they didn't realize they were doing a good deed at the time). Now, this person discovers that the noble has died of natural causes and that his will declares the troupe member is to be knighted. It would be an insult to the deceased noble and his family name to refuse.

When the troupe arrives for the reading of the will, they discover that no one is happy with the arrangement. There are a lot of questions about whether such an ennobling is even possible. Individual members of the deceased's family each corner the inheritor and make generous offers for them to forego the award. Finally, when they are sure they will not be noticed by the family, a lowly servant reveals to the troupe that the deceased was murdered. They suspected it would happen and put the knighting clause in the will in the hopes that the troupe would investigate and uncover the murderer.

The clause is real. The troupe member could accept it, gaining the Noble Title perk (and an Affliction whereby the deceased's family will spend the rest of their lives making the knight's life hell). The more proper response would be to solve the murder and turn down the offer of knighthood. (Besides, the family would hire Reeves lawyers to spend decades resisting it, leaving the knighthood's recognition by other nobles in limbo.) Of course, the murderer might murder again to prevent their secret from coming to light.

COWARDICE OR CONSPIRACY?

The troupe is invited as spectators to the duel of a close relative of a noble they are currently dealing with. When the time comes, though, the relative in question does not show up. While the opposing duelist is quick to mock their opponent's obvious lack

of bravery, the noble hosting the group is worried about their relative's sudden disappearance and asks the troupe to investigate. While the troupe finds the deceased's living quarter's abandoned and their belongings obviously packed in a hurry, if they decide to look closer, they find signs of a kidnapping. Is this just the cowardly attempt by a rival noble to avoid loss of face in a duel, or is this actually a welcome cover story a third party took advantage of?

Asking around in his social circles reveals the missing noble was rather inquisitive recently, but little more of substance. It is the shantor gardener, a friend since childhood, that finally approaches the party to let them in on the secret that the noble suspected a conspiracy at court. Can they trust the shantor, or are they complicit too? Is a planned coup by a rival branch of the family putting the life of their noble host in danger, or is it an antinomist cult hiding its tracks by way of a welcome human sacrifice? Can the troupe save the life of the young noble, only for them to risk it straight away in a duel?

A DANGEROUS STUDY

A student dies under mysterious circumstances at the Invictus Academy. (This could be the main campus on Criticorum or a satellite campus elsewhere.) A good friend of the deceased student's family asks the troupe to investigate. When they arrive at the Academy, no one has clear answers and everyone from the teachers to the students seems to be hiding something.

The night they arrive, the troupe receives a threatening note warning them away from the investigation. They might catch a glimpse of a masked figure running

away from the scene. The next day, they find some contraband items on school grounds. The Academy wants to sweep the whole thing under the rug and is not helpful. In fact, the headmaster seems to be actively sabotaging their efforts and only allows them on campus because of orders from a generous Academy donor. The headmaster hopes the troupe will give up and go away if they can make life difficult for them.

Further investigation reveals that the student died because they discovered a group of students running contraband goods through the school with the help of some teachers. The troupe must gather evidence or confessions to prove that the teachers and students committed the murder.

FRIENDLY FIGHTS

As part of a universal initiative to foster unity and patriotism across the Known Worlds, a local baron is hosting a mixed martial arts Imperial Championship qualifying tourney. The main event will be held on Byzantium Secundus next year, between planetary champions from each major Known World, but there are lots of regional qualification competitions too, with great prizes partially sponsored by the Phoenix Throne. The current tournament's prizes are an empire-wide passage contract for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place; an additional cash prize for 1st and 2nd place; and the winner also receives a dueling e-shield. There are two classes: human and alien, although fighters can fight in cross-class duels. (Fighters with an unfair and possibly heretical edge, like cyborgs, psychics, and the Changed, must be vouched for by a master of high standing and reputation).

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All of the troupe's rivals and nemeses have registered, of course, and due to an unfortunate outbreak of food poisoning among participants who attended a Decados fencing master's party last night (the Decados noble luckily escaped uninfected), most other competitors have been forced to forfeit. The local tourney is therefore scarcely attended and troupe members who participate stand a fair chance of winning glory and even prizes. Several could-be VIP patrons will follow the tourney, and the hosting baron has hinted that he'll recruit widely from the participants for an upcoming expedition into Decados space to search for a brother who vanished under mysterious circumstances.

THE FUGITIVE

The troupe are minding their own business when they come across a disheveled young person in an alley. They are obviously in rough shape and drunk. Upon closer inspection, the person seems to be a noble, judging by their (now soiled) fancy clothes and accessories. Before the troupe can make any decisions or take a course of action, guards swarm them. The guards won't listen to explanations and won't accept surrender as an option. The troupe is left with no choice but to fight and run. The young noble rouses and follows them. When they stop for breath, the noble offers them a deal.

The noble offers the troupe a lot of money to transport them to a planet where they can start their own life away from the obligations of their family. The troupe has to get them off the planet while avoiding the guards and slipping through the lockdown placed on the nearest starport. If they fail, not only will they be out the money, but there will be a price on their head for conspiring with the runaway.

The reasons for the noble's escape might be that they're the last of a family line that has been wrongly maligned and disenfranchised by a schemer, or they dishonored their family and are too cowardly to face the consequences, or they murdered a rival in a duel and that rival's family now hunts them.

HIDDEN INHERITANCE

A noble member of the troupe inherits a small manor or estate in a backwater area on one of their family's planets. It's so insignificant that they're prone to just disregard it — until they find out the Inquisition has decided to close off the property. If the Inquisition is involved, that old coot of an uncle must have stumbled upon something esoteric — definitely something that's worth snatching from under the fingers of the Inquisition. Gaining access will require stealth and/or a mastery of the courts.

As the troupe eventually discovers, the reclusive uncle did indeed unearth something interesting under his manor: a node that connects to a planetary sensor array left behind by the Anunnaki. Paranoid to begin with, he expended his entire fortune to construct a sentient think machine out of Second Republic artifacts to monitor the entire planet and uncover a suspected conspiracy. The AI has become caught in the web of conspiracy theories and plays it a bit loose with the house's self-defense systems, but it might prove a valuable asset to the inheritor due to the sheer amount of information it has processed about their family's intrigues. Can the troupe manage to get rid of the Inquisition to establish a new base of operations, or will they have to make do with what little data they can manage to smuggle past the wary priests?

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

The troupe has stumbled upon data files with delicate information about a few influential nobles. Do they try to sell the information, or use it themselves to blackmail the nobles? Before they can act, however, news of the information leak is discovered by the exposed nobles. Multiple parties begin offering the troupe bribes of escalating extravagance or threats if they don't hand over or destroy the information.

The troupe must decide what they are going to do with the information and how they are going to get out of the sticky situation they are in with their skins intact. The more sensitive the information, the more desperate the other parties are going to be to get it.

A MATTER OF WHAT'S MINE

At an aerial lodge, the troupe is approached by the youngest daughter of a Hawkwood family. She needs them to solve an issue: she has been openly flirting with an al-Malik to antagonize her parents but now she's fallen in love with a minor noble. Her family loves him, but the court at-large prefers the al-Malik, so her family is trying to sort things out. She needs the troupe's aid to get her dowry and elope. That makes the scandal all hers and relieves tension on her parents. For verification, she provides the name of an Orthodox priest the troupe can contact who will approve the union.

It's a con. The flirtatious al-Malik and the intentions of the Orthodox priest are legitimate, but the Hawkwood's intentions are not. She is running a scam with her accomplice, the "minor noble": a Scraver with a forged knighthood. A devout lover of tech, the daughter was exposed to a late Second Republic artifact owned by her parents and which is part of the dowry. The large lamp can supercharge someone's immune

system for seven days. Afterward, it starts to eat away at the body, eventually killing the person. Simply by handling it, the daughter became infused with nanites that compel her to use the device on others. She has already killed several people by exposing them to the relic (her Scraver cohort then looted their bodies) and she is hungry to kill more, but it's increasingly hard to access the device while it's in her parents' manse.

A NOBLE MARRIAGE

The troupe is invited to a noble's wedding. This could be through connections, wrangling an invitation somehow, or stumbling into an invitation through luck or someone else's design.

When they arrive at the wedding, they quickly realize everyone knows each other and they are the new faces. This does not work in their favor when one of the nobles to be married never turns up for the ceremony and the troupe is suspected of involvement, due to a whisper campaign or a telling note from the runaway. In order to clear their name, they will have to navigate the politics of families on both sides of the aisle.

The real culprit is the runaway partner. More interesting is that their co-conspirator is their marriage partner. The plan hinged on the troupe becoming the scapegoats for the botched wedding so that one noble could run off with their true love and the other would be free of marriage. The troupe must convince the two nobles to come forward and clear their name or the troupe could face courtly ostracism, possible boycott from guilds who owe the family favors, and the parents might be so incensed they might challenge a troupe member to a duel if they can't fix the situation by a certain deadline.

THE RACE

A planet accessible to the troupe is hosting the biggest race of the year and everyone is excited. This could be an animal or vehicle race, depending on how high-tech the gamemaster wants the drama to get. The betting booth is bursting with money gambled on the outcome.

The troupe is observing the goings on when nearly one of the participant's assistants is berated by a noble. It seems the participant the noble sponsored is injured and can't run the race. In a fit of panic the assistant notices the troupe and their face lights up. They tell the noble they have already found a replacement and points to the troupe.

The troupe might try everything to get out of it, but the noble is having none of it and it can get down to threats if the troupe is obstinate. "Losing isn't so bad, but not showing your face at all is even worse," the noble says. Left with little choice, the troupe must

prepare for and participate in the race. If they win, the noble is obligated to give them a cut of the prize, which could be quite the motivator for a troupe lacking capital. The obstacles involve learning the ropes of the race and fending off the other participants' attempts at sabotage.

THE REPLACEMENT COUNTESS

A unit of guards descends on the troupe while they are about their own business. They have mistaken one of the troupe members for their missing countess. This will be especially effective if the troupe has not spent a lot of time in the area or have never been there before. It isn't long before the guards realize their mistake. It turns out the troupe member is the spitting image of the countess. This is easily demonstrated by pictures of the noble.

The guards apologize for the mistake, but still have to find the missing countess. There is an event that afternoon she must attend in person. They offer a reward if the troupe member will pretend to be the countess, to buy them more time to look for the true one. It seems she has a habit of slipping her guards to gamble in seedy places; the beleaguered guards are just trying to keep their jobs.

The troupe attends the garden party, with their lookalike acting as the countess and the others serving as her entourage. If the lookalike isn't a noble, the troupe noble might have to instruct her on etiquette before and during the party.

Their goal is to get everyone to believe she is the countess until the end of the event. Unfortunately, one of the countess's strongest rivals attends the party unexpectedly. They find this out from one of the other guests. Avoiding them for the whole evening makes the troupe's job a lot harder.

When the real countess does finally appear, she will be thankful and reward the troupe if they did well. If they embarrassed her or created scandals she now has to clear up, she might use it as leverage to oblige them to another mission. Either way, she might not be prepared to easily give up her new decoy.

ROYAL TRANSPORT

A high society gala is auctioning off a rare vehicle. The troupe must get into the gala and get the vehicle. This could be for any number of reasons: for kicks, it's a sentimental item for one of the troupe members, it's valuable and they need the money; a patron has hired them, or they need the vehicle for something else not related to money (to win a race, perhaps). The item does not have to be a vehicle, if something else would work better for the troupe's story.

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They can crash the gala using various methods: use disguises and bid on it, they can heist the vehicle, or they can go in with force and demand it. Whatever they do, their obstacles are the security of the gala and any additional security the vehicle itself might have. Of course, the wrinkle in their plan comes when they find out they aren't the only ones interested in that vehicle.

A SEASONAL AFFAIR

It's the beginning of the holiday season and a minor branch of the Hawkwood family tries to gain the attention of the nobility with an extravagant, multi-evening series of parties. Rumor has it, scandalously, that a Decados noble has his eye on the daughter of this household and she's amenable to the attention, especially if it doesn't make her family happy. On the first night of the party, though, an al-Malik comes in to woo her and rapidly gains her family's favor. Others, including the Decados, gleefully spread the rumor that this upstart is either a symbiot or antinomist or both. The daughter, on the other hand, is baffled by the situation.

The daughter is amused with the attention of two suitors, but suddenly, things have become dangerously serious. Her family will attempt to support the al-Malik's claim and undermine the Decados at every turn — that's not unusual. However, they will *also* endanger hospitality to achieve this, if they have to, which is a *huge* social faux pas. The reason? The al-Malik is a psychic who is carefully using his powers to tip things in his favor. The parents, for example, are having their prejudices magnified. His true agenda is to gain access to the dowry, which holds an artifact that increases psychic power. If he fails, he will try to coerce the troupe to obtain it from the victorious Decados. He will even assist in the couple eloping, if it offers an opportunity to get the artifact.

SMUGGLERS

A noble who desires a certain liquor for an important party decides that the troupe can best get it for them. It seems an easy job, until they hear exactly what it is the noble wants. It's a rare concoction that is illegal where they live, by Church decree, and requires shady means to acquire. The liquor could also be replaced with some other illegal or hard to find item. The noble wants it as a status symbol for their party and the money they offer is just too good to pass up.

The troupe must locate the liquor, obtain it, and then get it to the debut without being caught. Add in a rival noble who wishes to stop them, a demanding supplier, the arrival of the Inquisition, and the troupe will need to work hard to earn their money.

Church Hooks

These hooks involve the Church, either as patrons, allies, or nemeses.

BITTER HARVEST

Over the course of a half-decade, the land in a rural setting known to the troupe has begun to go barren. Because of this and the Church's inability to help, the people of the land have grown tired of the Orthodox promises and have started attending Eskatonic services instead. In a fit of pique, the local Orthodox priest has summoned the Inquisition to investigate whether the popular Eskatonic has antinomist ties. The local nobility has called in the troupe to monitor the situation and prevent the zealous inquisitors from inflaming already volatile passions.

The Eskatonic preacher is odd, but cares deeply for the people and is not promoting heresy. The Orthodox priest in charge is old, petty, vindictive and was assigned here as a semi-retirement move by his superiors. One of the members of the Inquisitorial task force is related to the Orthodox in charge, which is how the old man got a team to visit in the first place.

The barren land, which is the root of the problem, is not a natural phenomenon but a matter of contamination of the local water table. The local noble's family, at the end of the Emperor Wars, buried a bunch of war materials as a symbol of their dedication to peace. Over time, and without their knowledge, the containment vessels started to decay and are dispersing into the local system. The troupe's job is to uncover the truth while keeping the priests from starting a conflagration.

CROSSROADS

The troupe is asked by a prominent al-Malik noble to violate sanctuary. He believes that the Amaltheans at an isolated hospice are treating a wounded assassin who has tried to kill him. The al-Malik wants the troupe's aid specifically because they are uninvolved with the local powers and unlikely to suffer long-term consequences from this. The noble is very clear: he wants the assassin alive for a legal trial. He is not looking for vigilante justice.

The assassin is an ur-ukar. He recognized that the al-Malik was a psychic and that his Dark Twin was on the verge of taking him over. He claims the al-Malik is demented and if the troupe doesn't stop him soon, the Dark Twin will physically manifest in the world. The Amaltheans are at a loss as to what to do. The al-Malik is popular and has treated them well, but that is all to come to an end, according to the ukar, if the Dark

Twin impersonates the lord. To complicate the matter, the noble doesn't know the truth of this; only his Twin does. And the Twin has hired others to prevent people from finding out the truth, even if they have to burn down the monastery to do so.

THE CULT UNDERGROUND

On Pentateuch a local priest is worried the regional Eskatonic leadership may have been compromised by an antinomistic cult and she needs outside help to look into the matter. Is she right to suspect the resident cadre of hironem mystics to be involved with a secret society trying to influence the Eskatonic Order as a whole, or is this just xenophobia rearing its ugly head? Pentateuch is rife with weird phenomena that give regular Known Worlders the creeps, so separating the wheat from the chaff is a challenge in and of itself.

Things get even weirder when a clue leads the group to a reclusive coven of Eskatonics centered around a young albino theurgist with a third eye on his forehead, an affliction he tries to hide beneath hooded robes. The members of the coven believe him to be an Eskatonic master who projected his soul backwards through time from a catastrophic future. Indeed, his predictions helped them avert a major disaster once, but recently he has become reluctant in his predictions. Is he just a fraud who got lucky once, or is there truth to his story and he simply struggles to stay ahead of the cascade of diverging events he caused himself? Can his coven be of help to uncover the malicious influence on the Eskatonic Order, or is he secretly in league with the Dark between the stars himself?

A MATTER OF DECORUM

A Vuldrok barbarian has been granted a small parcel of land on a Hawkwood world as part of the proof of the peace between the Vuldrok and the empire. She is requesting help from the troupe to deal with an internal rebellion in an "Imperial way" rather than her own custom (which, according to rumor, would be swift and brutal). The Vuldrok is content to let the troupe solve the situation in any way they see fit, with the warning that she plans to broadcast their deeds far and wide. And if they actively harm her rule, she will have no problem happily leveraging the "Vuldrok way" against them personally.

The troupe must end the rebellion, or at least uncover the source of its funding. The rebellion is rumored to be led by a local peasant hero, but the leader is actually a Brother Battle who returned home to find a heathen in charge of what he considers to be family land. He is being supplied by a Decados,

who — under the covert orders of Duchess Salandra Decados — is taking advantage of this situation to spread dissent against the policies of the empire toward the Vuldrok. The rebel leader's terms for peace are harsh: repudiation of the Vuldrok and return of the land to the Hawkwoods who owned it before. This is unlikely to happen, since that particular Hawkwood branch was disenfranchised when they made a deal with the Hazat in an attempt to unseat the emperor a generation ago toward the end of the Emperor Wars.

THE STEAL DOSSIERS

A Jakovian (the Decados spy agency) agent arranges a secret meeting with the troupe and informs them that a local Orthodox priest has collected a file with the identities of all regional Jakovian agents. He is willing to reward them handsomely if they return that file to him and make sure there are no copies of it. Getting into the priest's offices unnoticed will require subterfuge, and the file itself is well hidden, with several security measures put in place.

Should the troupe decide to peruse the file, however, they are in for a surprise. Their employer is not a Jakovian agent at all, but a member of a secret coven of psychics who have been ratted out by one of their own. Does the troupe distrust the coven based on their initial ruse and help the Church take out psychic agents embedded in the local community, or do they side with them and go on the hunt for the traitor, hoping to gain allies with possibly valuable insights? Finding out where the Church has hidden the penitent sinner and gaining access to the facility might prove challenging, but with experienced covert operatives backing them up, the troupe might even learn a thing or two.

TO HEAL OR NOT TO HEAL

An Almathean needs money to keep their hospice open, but one of the Scraver families wants to tear it down to build the next big casino. The troupe can either learn of this from an Almathean contact they've made, or a Scraver contact. Thus, the troupe can come at it from different angles: the Almathean wants their help to keep the place open, while the Scravens want the troupe to pressure the Almathean to close their doors.

From there, which path does the troupe choose? Do they help the Almathean gather funds to pay off their debts, and then help them deal with the Scraver armed reprisals? Or do they side with the Scravens and force the Almathean out of business, thus being richly rewarded? The choice is theirs.

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WHAT WE SURRENDER

Eskatonic priest Ki'Thon the Twice Blessed (or Twice Burned, for his extensive body scarring) has been released from the symbiot front for a return home. This could be Cadavus, Manitou, Rampart, or any world where the Church's power is contested. As a local revered holy man who repeatedly repulsed the symbiots during the worst of their incursions, his return is celebrated extensively. However, his oldest friend approaches the troupe soon after the homecoming festivities begin. Ki'Thon has changed dramatically. While his friend understands war trauma, he cannot shake the impression that Ki'Thon is an impostor. As a non-local and hopefully neutral party, the troupe is well positioned to determine if he is correct.

Initially, it might seem that Ki'Thon is a symbiot or using forbidden technology. The truth is sadder; Ki'Thon dabbled in the Dark one time too many, in order to find unique ways to stop the symbiots. This allowed a demon to take up residence. The demon will maintain control of its host as long as possible, but if no longer possible, it will rip Ki'Thon's reputation to shreds as it goes, knowing that tearing down a hero leads the common people to despair.

The ideal solution is for the troupe to uncover Ki'Thon's secret and quietly deal with it. If not, then loud and messy works, although it will leave the monastery and the people it serves shaken.

WHICH WITCH?

You know that narrow-minded, meddling bishop the troupe hates? It turns out others have quarrels with him too. The troupe is approached by a cabal of Eskatonic wizards eager to get back certain books the bishop seized a while back. All their efforts to have their property returned have so far failed, and the Eskatonics are beginning to fear the bishop might be a bigot with a personal grudge against mystics... or possibly something even worse. The books in question are,

although semi-heretical in parts, quite harmless, the wizards explain. They intend to use these volumes to further their study into how heretical lies can fester and spread despite the unquestionable truth of Empyrean-inspired gnosis. It is a fascinating subject, really — how something so impotent as false beliefs can thrive in the face of the strong and omnipresent cure that is Empyrean Grace, and the wizards will launch into a rambling lecture on the matter if given half a chance. In any case, they need the books back, and perhaps the troupe will help procure them for the Eskatonics? Possibly though some discrete breaking and entering? In it for the troupe, should they accept, are divine insight, mystical objects d'art, wise guidance, occult assistance, education, and yes, some cash too if that's all they care about.

To complicate matters, several rival factions are arriving with designs on the books, so time is running out. One group is an Avestite book-burning gang



who, despite having no authority over the bishop, is close to convincing the zealot-fearing ecclesiastic to destroy the unwanted volumes. Opposing them are a Li Halan delegation, from “that” side of the family, who has arrived with money to buy the books which they claim — quite falsely, according to the Eskatonics — once belonged to them. Finally, an anonymous buyer (the troupe’s arch nemesis?), acting through Reeves advocates also seek to acquire the tomes. On close inspection, all groups seem to be more than they appear, and witchy stigmas start to manifest. Is there a blasphemous scheme at work here? And if so, who’s the real witch?

Guild Hooks

The Merchant League and the minor guilds are the subjects or patrons of these hooks.

A CONDEMNED MAN

If there is a Reeve in the troupe, they are contacted by the guild. Otherwise, the troupe is approached through other contacts they have. A nobleman on trial for heresy was “lost” while under the guild’s solicitation. Normally, they would contact the Muster to send out the bounty hunters, but they are afraid of losing face. If anyone thought that the Reeves helped the man escape, or if anyone believes someone can simply walk out without paying, the Reeves will take a hit to their reputation. So, they contact the troupe, wanting them to handle this discretely.

After investigating, our heroes find that the man is hiding out in a vorox village on Ungavorox. An angerak (pack of vorox) have vowed to protect him, so the troupe needs to either negotiate or fight to retrieve him. Either by cooperation or coercion, the nobleman explains that he is innocent of the crimes, which are fabrications of his enemies. He fled because even the Reeve solicitor said that there was nothing they could do. Which leaves the troupe with a choice: Do they turn him over to the Reeves, or let him run? Or, if there is a Reeve among them, do they take up his defense in court themselves?

THE DEVIL’S EYE

While on a planet with a Vuldrok population (Leminkainen, Hargard, or worlds deeper in Vuldrok Space), a Scraver sells the troupe a genuine Vuldrok charm said to ward off evil. That night, the troupe is attacked by a strange creature that could only be described as a demon. Barely escaping with their lives,

they head elsewhere... and the creature follows them. Even getting rid of the ward doesn’t stop the demon from coming back to life and hunting them down, even if they try to escape to another world.

After tracking down the Scraver who sold them the charm, he confesses it was actually an energy cage for the demon, made during the Second Republic. He unearthed it on a dig and the demon hunted him night after night. He hoped that by selling it, the thing would haunt its new owners instead. The troupe must find an Engineer (or someone with weird-tech know-how) to figure out how to return the demon to the device.

DRINK OF KINGS

At a tavern the troupe frequents, they meet a renowned Brewers guild named Beck. Beck’s Brew, as it’s called, is a little-known beverage, but more and more people are starting to take notice, including the troupe. Then one night, while they relax after their latest adventure, a noble enters the tavern to taste this “famous” drink. He takes a long swig... and falls down dead. As chaos erupts in the tavern, the Brewer pulls the troupe into the back and begs them to help him. He’s innocent, but he knows that if he goes with the noble’s guards, he’s a dead man.

Can the troupe help old Beck find out who wanted the noble dead, and keep him out of jail?

A FAMILY IN CHAINS

This story can start with either an NPC the troupe has interacted with before, or a family member of one of the troupe members. Either way, someone close to the troupe disappears in the middle of the night. Upon investigating, they find that the Muster have kidnapped their friend for unknown reasons. The troupe can either try and pay off the Muster’s contract, or they can try and break into the compound to free their friend. Once freed, however, they find out the truth. Their friend had wanted to get captured! She has family members who are slaves sold by the Chainers, and she needs to track them down. She figured doing so from within the slave trade was the way to do it.

If the troupe helps, they track the missing family member to a slave-labor camp but getting them out is no easy feat. Not only that, once they free this person, the Muster catch wind of it and come after them. Do the players make nice with the Muster, working off their debt, or do they try and take down the whole slave system?

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FISHING FOR DANGER

An old friend of a troupe member contacts the troupe and asks for some help on the planet Madoc. Someone has been murdering oro'ym, the native alien sentients, and none of the authorities seem to care. The local government has ruled that the natural habitat is killing off the aquatic aliens, but the friend suspects differently.

When the troupe arrives, they find that more oro'ym murders have occurred and that the oro'ym population is angry that nothing is being done. The murders are sowing discord between the aliens and the Merchant League administrators of the planet. Is this the true purpose behind them? Is there some resource the murderer(s) is trying to gain that the oro'ym stand in the way of? Is it hate crime with no motive beside murder? The troupe needs to find out before fighting breaks out.

FLYING IN THE DARK

While traveling on a routine merchant run, the troupe's ship (if it's not their own, it's the one they're currently traveling on) gets an automated distress call from a freighter outside the normal lanes. The ship investigates and finds a large, multi-level freighter drifting in space. There are no signs of outside damage and the crew isn't responding. Investigation inside the derelict craft shows that most members of the crew are simply missing, with only two scared survivors left, huddled in an equipment locker. It wasn't an attack from the outside... but from within. A secret

cargo gone wrong. Whatever it was ate the other members of the crew... and it's still here.

Then the lights on the ship go out, and none of the systems respond. The troupe must try and figure out how to get off the ship while being hunted by an alien menace that wants their flesh.

HEART OF THE APOCALYPSE

The troupe is approached by a wealthy Reeves investor and Emperor Wars-profiteer who seeks to recruit them for a routine debt collector job. Since the assignment would take them to the frigid, war-torn world of Malignatius, it pays well — negotiations starts at 1000 fb per person, half up front, plus all expenses paid — but the Reeves don't expect any real trouble. The debtor is a Hazat war-hero whose lands were seized by victorious factions as war reparations after the Emperor Wars, and the nobleman soon relocated to Malignatius where he, with borrowed Reeves Guild capital, opened a discreet sanatorium for psychic dervishes and other exceptionally gifted veterans. The nobleman has always made timely installment payments, until last year when cryptic letters spouting philosophical mumbo-jumbo about some solar deity started arriving instead. Lately, correspondences have ceased altogether.

Arriving at the wilderness resort, after a dangerous journey through lawless lands, the troupe finds the nobleman cowering in awe at the feet of a dervish patient in the grips of full-blown Urge. The dervish has pronounced himself the Son of the Central Sun and his Urge has triggered madness and religious fervor towards him in all the staff and patients.



Unbeknownst to the troupe, the Reeves investor is following in an airship armed with missiles. Should his investment prove too risky and politically damaging to collect, he'll destroy the sanatorium.

HEIST OF THE CENTURY

The troupe hired to do the impossible: break into the vault of Prince Juan de Hazat. The identity of their benefactor is unknown, but they are given an almost unlimited amount of money to pull this off. Fake IDs, any kind of device they can imagine, it's all on the table. If the troupe succeeds, they can keep whatever they find, except for one thing. Their employer simply asks that they bring them a silver briefcase with two serpents etched into the cover.

The heist itself will take the players from noble gallas, where they must infiltrate a Hazat estate to steal the plans for the vault, to backwater worlds where they must deal with shadowy Engineers and Scravers to get the equipment they need. Everything goes according to plan. They get in and get out, with a few complications along the way. But once they hand the briefcase over (or don't, it's up to them), they are betrayed and exposed by their employer. On the run, the troupe must find out what is in the briefcase as both their employer and the Hazat Prince want them dead. Of course, it was too easy; they were set-up. But why would the Prince and the unknown patron need to use the troupe as patsies?

IT'S NOT THE FALL THAT KILLS YOU

The troupe is hired as bodyguards for a bishop. Once at their destination, however, the bishop is shot dead in the streets, and the troupe takes the blame. Now on the run, they must find out who framed them and why. Their search takes them to the Church contact who hired them. He sends them down a rabbit hole of conspiracies within conspiracies, a web of lies that leads to a Reeve. This guildster leads a vast conspiracy to bring about the Third Republic. The bishop he had gunned down threatened to expose him. And now that the troupe knows too much....

KEY TO ADVENTURE

When the troupe turns the wrong corner in Kespate on Leagueheim, they run into a mugging in process. After they manage to fend off the assailants, the fatally wounded victim, a middle-aged woman, passes them a nondescript jumpkey and tells them not to let it fall into the wrong hands. She then dies. Asking around for her identity on the street or checking the

official records after her body is found reveals her to be a disgraced Charioteer who served as propagandist for Third Era Republicans.

If the troupe wants to find out more about the jumpkey, a visit to the Charioteer's headquarters is inevitable. Unless they manage to get in under the radar, the jumpkey is bound to raise some flags upon inspection. While the starting point of its jump route is quickly determined, the destination system is not found in the archives. The prospect of a lost world will make it hard to hold onto the key, especially when the troupe realizes the Imperial Eye and the Inquisition are hot on its trail. Who is responsible for the initial attack? Is the lost world a staging ground for the Third Era Republicans? Will the troupe ally with one of the factions, pawn off the jumpkey as quickly as possible, or risk their lives for the chance of uncovering a once-in-a-lifetime secret?

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

A Scaver friend of the troupe asks for their help. His beloved brother's birthday is that evening and he wants them to sneak inside the mansion and place a box of expensive Swiss chocolates on his brother's bed as a surprise gift. Swiss chocolates, from Holy Terra, are his brother's favorite but they're impossible to get outside of ecclesiastical circles, as the Patriarch has banned their sale, reserving them as special treats for Church functions. The Scaver's brother tasted the chocolates at the local bishop's dinner party once and has tried for ages to get his hands on more.

The Scaver lets the troupe examine the gift in whatever manner they wish, barring actually destroying it: X-ray, poison snoopers, and even random sampling are all allowed (he has two boxes and will let them try some and chose which pieces to go into the gift box). As their reward, he promises to get them into a lucrative treasure hunting mission that his family is organizing.

Undoubtedly, the troupe will remain skeptical, and their friend eventually relents and reveals that there is more to this scheme. His brother's life is in peril, with two recent assassination attempts already thwarted, leaving his brother paranoid and refusing all help. Their friend wants the troupe on site as additional, hidden security for the birthday party: "We're attempting a double feat here, friends: to surprise my brother with a coveted gift to brighten his day, and to keep him extra safe without worrying him about it. I cannot be certain, but I suspect my brother's Decados wife, his psychic champion, and even the Muster sergeant hired to provide security could be in league with his enemies. Please, I'll do anything in my power for you if you just keep my brother safe tonight!"

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All of the above is true, except... it is the Scraver who wants his own brother dead so he can inherit the family archaeology business. He has orchestrated the smuggling of a bomb inside the catering company's ice-cream cake, which he will detonate on site during the dinner party, leaving the ill-placed troupe to take the fall. He plans to deny any knowledge and will cover his tracks well. Will the troupe be tricked into taking the fall for the sweet-toothed brother's murder, or will they see through the lies and save him from his brother's evil plot?

THE REEVE WITH NO NAME

The players are hired by a Reeves guildler to act as muscle to retrieve a debt. It turns out the debt is owed by an entire town. This town used the money to build a well and to buy medicine to heal the plague that hit a few years ago, and they can't pay it back. They need protection from the Reeves, and a way to pay the guild back. If the troupe agrees to help them, the town tells them about a silver mine that was stolen from them by a ruthless gang of cutthroats a few years back. It's one of the reasons why the town is so poor. It's also a way to get money back into the town so they can pay off their debts. There are other things to try as well, including a certain group of Scravers, who are also interested in the mine.

To complicate matters, the Reeve doesn't take too kindly to the troupe turning on them, so they hire the Muster to retrieve both their money and the heads of the troupe members.

TECH RUSH

A "tech rush" has opened on the desolate world of Nowhere. Now that it seems the symbiot threat has abated, people flock there to uncover what they imagine is a wealth of ancient secrets below the sands. The troupe is hired to escort a prominent Scraver to the planet and set up camp there. If there are Scravers in the troupe, then they are invited to help hunt for relics, while the rest can act as bodyguards, investigators, etc. Either way, once they head to Nowhere, the troupe find that dozens of other groups are there as well, each hunting for their fortunes.

What they don't know is that something sleeps below the crust of Nowhere: a powerful and malevolent think machine, now woken by the rush of people. Not only does the troupe have to deal with shady merchants and their backstabbing, but also a machine that wants to remove all the busy life that has suddenly appeared on the planet. A machine that can move the very earth itself.



UNDERBELLY

The madam of a guild-sanctioned brothel in the seedier part of a big township asks the troupe to look into the disappearance of two of her girls. She is worried a local noble may have indulged his darker desires and mistreated the girls, causing them to run off. The two girls are well known in the streets but finding their current whereabouts will require greasing a few palms as they are trying their best to stay under the radar. Eventually the troupe finds them seeking shelter in a rundown chapel. But as it turns out, the girls weren't simply hiding from the noble.

While the Scravers Guild usually performs regular inspections to maintain proper working conditions, the local jonin (manager) is woefully lenient in this regard, with inhuman degrees of corruption dripping down all the way through the local ranks of the syndicate. His power is propped up by blackmailing the local noble ruler — a circumstance the two girls happened to find proof of while visiting the noble's bedchambers. With the syndicate and the noble's forces both on the lookout for them, can the troupe manage to get the two girls off the planet alive to serve as witness before the higher-ranking Scaver leadership? Or do they decide to win over the noble in an uneasy alliance to take down the corrupt head of the syndicate themselves?

UNIVERSAL KEY

While in the marketplace of one the more cosmopolitan planets (Criticorum, Byzantium Secundus, or even the Istakhr Market on Istakhr), the troupe catches wind of an unbelievable prize: a Second Republic-era device that can open a locked jumpgate. Not just a particular gate, but any gate. It is supposedly hidden in a little known backwater in Vuldrok space. Following the scant clues to a small village, they can track down the device's owner, a Scaver named Ravel, but they find him dead. His house has been ransacked, and after much searching, the troupe finds a secret compartment with a sleek, handheld device. Is this the artifact that can open worlds?

The universe seems to think so, since pretty soon everybody is out to get the thing. From the Scravers to the Vuldrok to the Imperial Eye, these groups will stop at nothing to retrieve this key.

But does the device actually work? If so, it would change the balance of power in the universe. The most likely answer is that it does... sort of. It's an experimental device that was never fully tested and perfected by its maker. It will work once, allowing a daring escape to parts unknown, but then it malfunctions and is high impossible to repair. Getting

home might take a lot of ingenuity, patience, and a long journey, but the reward is a visit to a place unseen since the Fall.

Miscellaneous Hooks

These hooks can involve anyone.

AMBASSADORS

The vau have announced a diplomatic visit to a world where the troupe holds some sway, be it because they are high-ranking officials or because they've earned the trust of the people in power. Consequently, the troupe is tasked with planning one aspect of the diplomatic visit, be it dining, security, or transportation. Either way, they will have to put up with an endless supply of supplicants hoping for a slice of the vau's time.

Will the troupe remain steadfast and plan for a smooth event, or will they curry favors in order to benefit from their position? This might make them put their own allegiance in question when people whom they count among their allies approach them with dubious requests. Why does the wait staff have to report to a secret briefing? Is the cousin recommending a certain tailor for the ceremonial garb just trying to move some business his way, or is he looking to smuggle something into (or out of) the event? Having to plan the event on a limited time budget will up the ante, as might the secret plans of the vau themselves.

AMONG THE DREGS

As any group who dabbles in adventures, scheming, politics, and heroism might discover, the road to prison is short and swift. For whatever reason, the troupe gets arrested and now finds themselves incarcerated, be it in a town jail, Avestite re-education camp, Vuldrok thrall pen, Muster slave-mine, Imperial internment center, or another prison location. To escape captivity, the troupe must work together to:

- navigate prison culture, dominated by five gangs — the Alien Resistance Legion (fiercely protective of non-human interests but open to all nonetheless), the Scravers' sub-Guild for the Wrongly Accused (running the prison black market), the Red Fists (imprisoned war-criminals from the region's last great armed conflict), the Black Hearts (POWs from the same recent conflict), and the Naughts (various undesirables bunking up for mutual support);
- avoid the government moles (including the sympathetic prison chaplain and the newly arrived cyborg brute whom everyone is trying to recruit to their side);

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- find and build a rapport with the corrupt prison guards;
- establish communications with outside allies (possibly by hiring the wing-chained etyri convict who communicates by twittering codes to waiting siblings over the jailyard wall);
- acquire tools and gear (through the in-house black market or via the prison mortician running a smuggling operation).

Of course, the troupe's rival or nemesis also has agents inside, either planted there to harrow the troupe, or arrested for the same incident that landed the troupe in prison, or they simply happen to be in jail at the time for whatever reason. They will either throw additional wrenches into the troupe's plans (possibly including attempting to hijack their escape plans) and/or they might become unlikely temporary partners-in-crime on the inside.

The prison might also be full of useful allies who can inform the plot of the troupe's overall epic, set-up future dramas, and clarify aspects of previous dramas. With a little cleverness and a lot of luck, the troupe might not only escape their prison, but also gain valuable information and allies.

THE EARTH WILL SHAKE

Terrorists have attempted to sabotage the terraforming engines under the city of Hub on Pandemonium. Signs point to outside support. The troupe is tasked with unfolding a web of intrigue to uncover the party responsible for threatening Pandemonium's last safe haven. From combing the underworld for black-market connections to following the crisscrossing accusations of Decados and Hazat nobles, the Pandemonium streets and mansions are outright minefields.

Just as the tensions reach their peak, a crucial component of the engines gives out, and the troupe has to make its way through the ensuing chaos to reach the only place where they have any hope of finding a replacement within time: an abandoned settlement out in the wastes. Will they be able negotiate with disgruntled survivors or will they have to resort to violence to save the lives of millions? Either way, the mastermind behind it all will want to make sure the troupe does not return from its foray into the wastes.

LOCKED AND LOADED

The Symbiot War on Stigmata may have gone cold, but the blood of soldiers still runs hot. Boredom breeds recklessness, and old rivalries among the different military and mercenary groups arise to become the frontlines of a new conflict.

Ever since Lady Theafana al-Malik went missing in action, Stigmata Garrison has struggled to maintain order. Now the disappearance of military equipment that is property of the empire has come to light, and the troupe is tasked with uncovering where it went. The increased influx of civilian personnel opens up new smuggling venues, so the possibilities are manifold. Is someone offloading weapons on the black market via the Muster? Or are the Brothers Battle working with the Church-sanctioned psychics of the Manifest Light legion to infiltrate and sabotage the Imperial army to get them to retreat so the planet can be torched in nuclear flame? For once, the symbiots might not be the biggest threat on Stigmata.

PLOTS WITHIN PLOTS WITHIN PLOTS...

It's on everyone's lips: the news that ur-ukar terrorists attacked a feast aboard a Hawkwood pleasure cruise in the spaceport docking bay. The Hawkwood host was killed along with four servants, while three noble guests and several other servants were injured in the bomb blast and subsequent stabbing spree. All five attackers perished, too: one in the blast, two shot dead by defending partygoers, and two drinking poison just as spaceport security stormed in to apprehend them, crying "Bava!" (the name of a feared ukari terrorist organization). Anti-alien sentiments are running hot (something any alien characters will experience), when the troupe is suddenly cornered by a disparate band of non-humans in some quiet location. They introduce themselves as the retinue of a Juandaastas knight and, having heard about the troupe's earlier exploits, ask the troupe to help locate their missing master. There's a little cash and a lot of goodwill in it for the troupe, and the alien band are rather desperate.

When the troupe agrees, they learn that the Juandaastas knight was last seen accompanying five ukari to negotiate disarmament of the war-weary freedom-fighters; he never returned. An hour before the terror attack, the retinue received a letter accusing their master of plotting to wage genocide against all non-humans. The letter ended with claims of (undocumented) proof and urged the retinue to join the fight to seize the galaxy from humankind.

Looking into it, the troupe finds the Juandaastas knight was a patron of various alien rights group and championed official recognition of alien equality within Imperial fiefs. The murdered Hawkwood was a big-game hunter from Ravenna with no political involvement, except that he was locked in a bitter vendetta with a Decados rival. The ukari terrorists,

believed to herald from the ultra-traditionalist rebel clans of Kordeth, carried poison from a Severan jungle nettle and wielded plasteel blades (invisible to most security scanners) of a type associated with Decados assassins.

Moreover, an al-Malik ambassador and patron of the human-friendly allied clans of Kordeth is known to have recently approached both the Hawkwood and his Decados rival with lucrative offers of investment in his Kordeth mining schemes in return for support against the unruly ur-ukar traditionalists. Furthermore, a local Reeves investor with designs on various Ravenna, Kordeth, and Severus resources has lately conducted secret meetings with a number of Juandastas nobles. And finally, just why have Synecullum agents of the Chuch, together with a 120-strong force of pious peasant levies, set up office right in the heart of the spaceport?

P.O.V.

A Merchant League representative pairs the troupe with a group of Brother Battle to investigate a violent ascorbite attack on Cadavus. They are opposed by the Decados provincial governor, who insists no outside intervention is needed. The local diocese is not convinced the ascorbites did the attack and suspects a possible political pogrom is starting. The truth is more complicated: the ascorbites are setting up a hive.

The ascorbites are highly aggressive, following a new queen trying to establish the hive; they will be unsettled until their claim is secure, and then will calm down. The local lord didn't know they were there until the deaths started, after which he cleared people out. However, he's not shedding tears over some dead peasants when precious commodities created by the new hive could benefit the whole region. The head of the parish is highly xenophobic and very prejudiced against his Decados lords. This kind of situation is way over his head and he will overreact. Unfortunately, the

Brother Battle will follow his lead, which can cause a dangerous escalation.

The troupe is asked to maintain the peace. This could mean dealing with the ascorbites to reduce the body count as they move in. Or they could unseat the noble who has no problem sacrificing a few peasants as larval food if new resources from the hive can be secured. Or they might help the Church exterminate a few aliens who are a threat to the spiritual and physical well-being of their parish. Any of these are viable options.

SO HANGS THE MORNING MIST

A horrific plague is making its way across the Istakhr Market. Mostly non-lethal, it scars its victims and damages their minds. Healers recognize the plague by yellow-green pustules that form upon the victim's



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foreheads as the disease begins. Common treatments have proven ineffective. A local Muster, who accidentally released the plague, has teamed up with an Avestite and wants to burn every infected stall or home and its surroundings, especially since there are rumors of sickly yellowish-green mushrooms cropping up in the sewers and graveyards — a sure sign of demonic infestation.

The troupe is asked by either an al-Malik noble or a wealthy merchant to help ensure the quarantine of the contaminated areas, find a method of treatment, and locate the source of the infection. Patient Zero is a yeoman who uncovered a cache of war gasses once

used by Decados against the ascorbites and brought it to market. While treating him, an Amalthean recognized it as man-made and called in the local Muster to consult, who decided to sell the gas on the black market. What the Muster didn't know is that the gas is a bio-engineered spore; his containment protocols were insufficient, and the spores spread to the local environment. Against ascorbites, the gas is lethal; on humans, it causes brain damage. Patient Zero and the Amalthean are still alive, in an abandoned containment unit near the dump site. The plague was designed for a hot, moist world, so arid conditions and anti-fungals that the merchant patron can produce will kill it.





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These “hooks” take place on Hargard, which is detailed in *Chapter 3: Places* of the **Gamemaster Book**.

Dagnir

HUNTING HORRORS

A local jarl prides himself on his hunting prowess, and he likes to boast about it a tavern frequented by travelers. The walls of his favorite watering hole feature the heads of beasts he has slain, and he proudly relates tall tales about how they were acquired. As he gets more intoxicated, he gets more aggressive toward any outsiders (including the troupe), defiantly stating that no one can hunt and track game as well as he can.

The locals are polite and humor him, but as the evening progresses, other locals begin to join in his lighthearted mockery of the troupe... including a few individuals the troupe was counting on for help in the near future. Perhaps a driver or pilot who was going to escort them to their destination insists on extra impositions to protect the “helpless tourists” on their next journey, or maybe a romantic suitor who attracted the eye of a troupe member earlier in the evening mocks and rejects them later.

By the end of the evening, the jarl insists that the troupe accompany him on a hunting expedition the next day. Everyone else in town follows his lead. Any efforts they make to pack up and go — checking out of the inn, settling the bill, getting clearance for takeoff, and so on — are frustrated. If the troupe needs anything from the locals, they’ll have to save face first. That leads to a hunting expedition at dawn, where Our Heroes set out on foot with the jarl and his entourage to slay a fantastic beast. Once the jarl has sobered up, however, it’s evident that he isn’t the mighty hunter he said he was. After he gets in a petty squabble with one of his soldiers — a young merc who insists that *he* should get credit for the kill this time — the jarl loses the one man he secretly needed to complete the hunt.

Shortly thereafter, the beast attacks, and the jarl is wounded (and humbled) right away. He sustains a serious injury, so the troupe must finish off the beast by themselves. Its head would make a fantastic trophy, but they may need what strength they have to escort the wounded jarl back to town. Along the way, the jarl’s blood attracts the scent of lesser beasts, which may attack at any moment. The more challenging part of the trip is getting the jarl to confess that he didn’t actually slay the massive beasts displayed in the tavern. The jarl tempts them with bribes and contracts for work, so the troupe must decide: Should they swallow their pride and take his offer? Should

they expose the jarl’s lies? Or would they go so far as to humiliate and overthrow the local jarl for the sake of truth?

Although this story is set on land, it could just as easily take place along Dagnir’s eastern shore: The expedition is on a raft at sea, the fantastic beast is a massive sea creature, the lesser beasts are sharks, and so on. The jarl is then left to consider whether he’ll tell another tale of “the one that got away” or whether he’ll admit in front of his warriors, the troupe, and the villagers that his tales of greatness were highly exaggerated. For an added complication, the jarl might have a rival who wants to see him laid low, in which case the troupe may need to take sides in a political dispute. Whatever the resolution, as long as the jarl lives, he’ll be a bit more humble the next time outsiders come to his local tavern.

Jyandhom

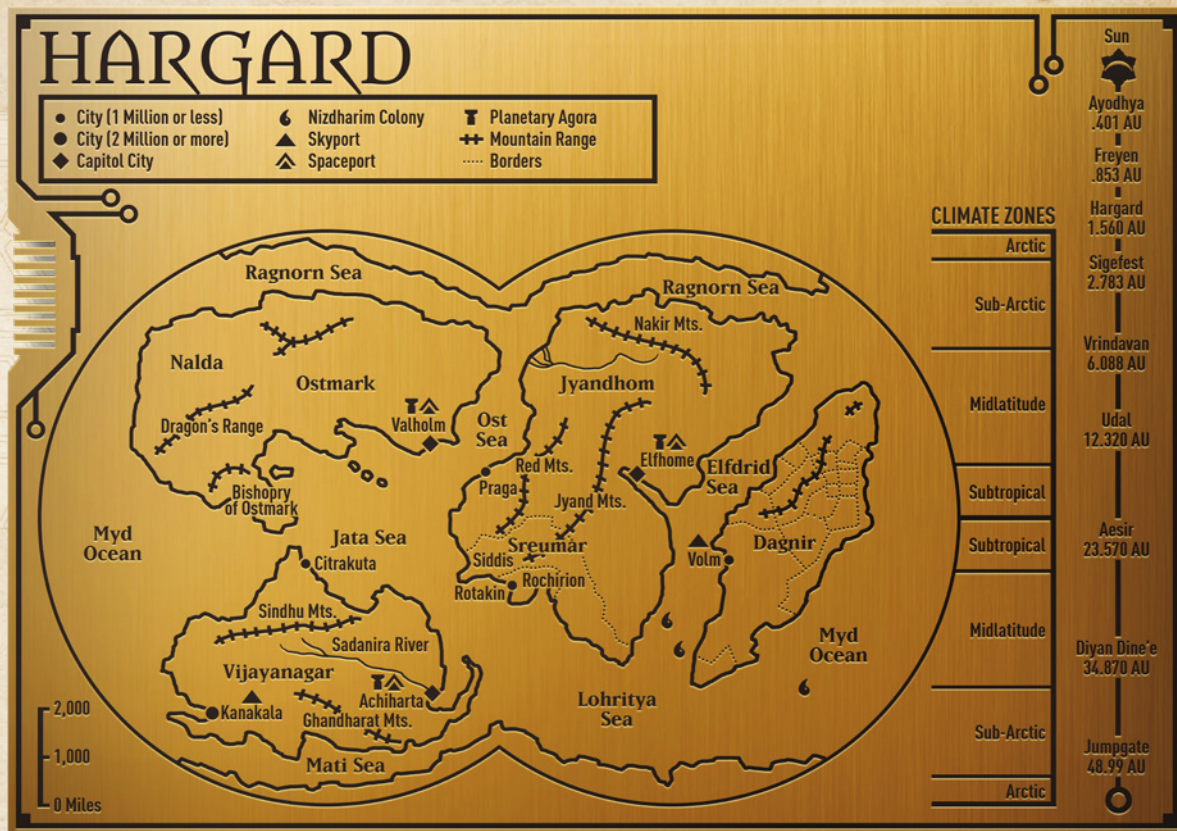
THE IRON SAINT

An Urth Orthodox missionary has gone missing while seeking converts among the people of northern Jyandhom in the more remote sections of the continent. He disappeared after sending numerous reports about the locals’ heresy, worshipping some sort of local spirit they called the Iron Saint. After sending regular weekly reports for months via local couriers, the missionary stopped sending reports three weeks ago. The Church is dispatching someone to find him.

Once the troupe arrives on the scene, they learn the missionary was killed in a small village called Jarnhem, but the locals claim it was self-defense after the missionary drank too much and started a fight. The locals seem focused on getting the troupe to leave quickly and make regular, uncomfortable glances at the metal statue at the center of their village. This becomes more understandable when the troupe wakes up one morning to find its pose has changed. The statue is an advanced medical golem left over from the Second Republic that has been performing miracles by treating the sick in the village for generations. Did it kill the missionary? Or did the locals murder him to hide their secret?

THE OLD FAKE QUESTING-KNIGHT SCAM

With all the rapid changes sweeping Hargard, it’s difficult for some of the locals to keep up with who has what power and authority, which has led to more than a few abuses of that power. Maximinius Thrax, a Dispossessed mercenary with a talent for forgeries,



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has used the chaos to his advantage by forging a number of Imperial writs and decrees; his work is not so skilled that someone knowledgeable in the Imperial Court would fall for them, but the Vuldrok common folk of Hargard are not so well informed.

Thrax has used this scam to steal thousands of firebirds from confused free folk and jarls, claiming to be a questing knight in need of support to accomplish his mission. Robbed Vuldrok common folk seek their goods returned, jarls seek revenge for being tricked, and the Questing Knights want their reputation restored — plenty of reasons for the troupe to pursue Thrax. Unfortunately for them, he is a veteran of many years of mercenary work and possessed of a small fortune in supplies and weapons, so apprehending him will not be easy.

THE VULDROK'S BRIDE

Two bitter grognards are arguing in a bar. They're relatively new to Hargard, but they have enough money to keep the tavern afloat. They also seem to have brought their prejudices with them. The two are fascinated by a local legendary locale: an abandoned manse on the edge of town, one that was once owned by a powerful thane. Nearly a generation ago, a Vuldrok thane became famous for marrying a Known

Worlder (rather like another notable marriage between nobles) and moving her into the manse, but his bride allegedly did not know the dark secrets held by the thane's family. As stories of the mansion have become more elaborate, the locals have amassed more anecdotes about various supernatural phenomena occurring within its walls.

In most cases, the two old gray-hairs claim to have been present at one sighting or the other of the resulting paranormal activity, although they disagree about the details. One of them is a guildler who believes that the Vuldrok noble was a psychic. She claims that everything supernatural occurring in the manse was the result of a restless spirit's psychic powers. The other is an Orthodox priest who believes that all the phenomena are the result of Pancreator's retribution, doubtless the reaction to "a marriage that should have never been." He has also entertained the idea that the nobleman's wife, Mia, may have had latent theurgic powers. Mind you, priests and guildlers are fairly rare in this part of Hargard, but these two have been generous enough in their patronage of the tavern for the locals to be somewhat patient when one of them starts another rambling story. Not surprisingly, their stories are also good for business, as travelers come from leagues around to hear chilling tales of "the Vuldrok's Bride."

Nonetheless, a few regulars in the tavern are getting tired of their arguments, especially ones over which stories should be “canon,” and a few find the priest’s interpretation of local history to be offensive. To resolve this once and for all, the barkeep says the two barflies should hire someone to accompany them into the manse and establish the truth. The troupe may do this out of a sense of adventure, or maybe one of them has just acquired a gambling debt in the bar’s back room, or maybe the troupe’s priest knows a friend of a friend of the priest. Once sufficient motivation has been established, the troupe can prepare to spend the night in a spooky old mansion.

The edifice has three stories and an attic. As the troupe members creep from room to room, they uncover letters, paintings, and personal belongings that reveal the Vuldrok noble’s complicated past. With each revelation, spectral manifestations occur: bumps in the night, cold spots, bleeding walls and paintings, and so on. The priest interprets them all as signs of the Vuldrok’s pagan sins, and he occasionally hints that the thane might have murdered his bride. The guildler believes that “if there’s a Pancreator,” the Almighty has better things to do than indulge in this quaint phantasmagoria: any spirit that’s allegedly lingering here (she claims) was *obviously* once a powerful psychic. Perhaps the offworlder’s bride killed her husband in self-defense, she speculates, and maybe she took her own life out of guilt! As in many horror stories, the two key NPCs — the blasphemous atheist guildler and the xenophobic sanctimonious priest — become increasingly unlikeable as the narrative advances, possibly leading to one or two tense arguments with troupe members.

On the third story of the haunted building, the priest and the guildler find more possessions belonging to Mia, the Vuldrok’s bride. The priest is stunned by a formal gown and some dresses he finds in a walk-in closet; he begins to wax nostalgic about the lovely clothes his wife wore long ago... before they parted ways and the priest took his vows. The guildler has similar memories sparked by the scent of lavender and some fine perfumes: we learn that her wife also died years ago. They seem to have a vested interest in correcting the Vuldrok bride’s narrative, as they are both haunted by the memories of their own failed romantic pursuits.

In the attic, the final destination on our little tour, the priest and guildler encounter a full-length mirror. Everyone except the guildler and priest sees a floating spectral apparition. As for the two key NPCs, each recoils at a very personal vision: the priest sees the ghostly form of his long-lost wife, while the guildler sees her own deceased spouse! Each calls out the

name of their long-lost love, describing the horrific vision before them. At that moment, there’s an outburst of supernatural activity, but it’s not from the house. The big reveal is nigh: the priest is secretly a theurgist, and the guildler is secretly a psychic! The priest’s Hubris and the guildler’s Dark Twin raise havoc in the attic, as each uses their repressed anger to attack the other. This proves to merely be a minor complication, as the real big reveal is fast approaching. The troupe could break up the fight or let the two have a final falling out; either way, the real chills come later.

As far as the dark secret goes, both the priest and guildler are wrong. Beside the mirror is a steamer trunk, and inside is a powerful artifact: a soul stone. As documentation inside the steamer trunk attests, this was a priceless gift offered to the young couple, but it proved to be their undoing. Visions from the stone drove them to madness, just as it afflicted anyone who entered the doomed edifice. The beautiful artifact holds great power, but its existence is antithetical to health and sanity. The troupe must now endure an arcane assault of your choosing from the soul stone, a final imperative for them to *get out* and leave the house to its infamy.

Fleeing resolves the story without a solution, but removing or destroying the soul stone (by whatever means) brings peace to the troubled house. The bride and groom were not at fault — the peril came from outside their home and marriage. If you’d like to have your troupe dig deeper, you can even leave clues as to who would imperil the happy couple with such a dangerous gift... and that could easily be a possible hook for another adventure.

Thanks to the troupe, the legacy of the Vuldrok noble is restored, the tale of the Vuldrok’s bride becomes an object lesson for the locals, and within a month, one of the bride’s descendants returns to the once-haunted manse... unless, of course, the manse actually *was* haunted the whole time... but that would be yet another tale, one called *Son of the Vuldrok’s Bride* or some such, and we’ll leave that for another day.

Ostmark

EASTBOUND AND TRUCKIN’

The Universal Meade and Meat Market has been a *little* too enthusiastic about buying alcohol, so they’ve got a surplus. The timing is propitious, however, since there’s a rustic tavern in a little town called Volstagg on the eastern coast that could really use a resupply. Few people want to live there, but lots of folks love to feast and drink there. Venturing far from the starport

is dangerous, of course, since many of these lands are still ruled by Thane Firestorm and his loyal Vuldrok lackeys. And there's a reason the tavern has been going dry: Some local airborne raiders have been preying on alcohol shipments to the coast. The local business folk might try to find a hotshot pilot to go after the local aircraft in a flitter, but it may be safer to find a way to move a few dozen casks of high-end mead on a ground transport.

Unbeknownst to the troupe, the pirates preying on potables aren't just in it for the liquor. They're working for a corrupt thane who's more of an enforcer than "the Long Arm of the Law." Since this is the Wild West for Known Worlders, it's inevitable that the troupe should run afoul of the local equivalent of a corrupt sheriff. She's been defying Hargard's new rulers, and she's been out of touch for so long with the "proper" authorities that she's put profit ahead of justice — even though "Justice" is her last name... well, almost. Yennifer Yoostiss believes she has the authority to seize Known Worlders (and other offworlders), declare them as "bound by law," and impound their property as she sees fit. Thane Firestorm turns a blind eye, as long as he gets a cut. As a result, Yen can exploit her local influence to harass outsiders, make a little profit, and expand her petty empire.

The troupe is probably oblivious to such machinations. They must decide: When they head "eastbound and down" to deliver their cargo, are they going to do battle in the air in an armed flitter? Are they going to go the long way 'round on a ground transport? Or are they going to split the party (so you have to cut between two stories) with some enforcers in the air while the others haul ass down below? Whichever choice they make, there's an ambush that's conveniently learned about the planned convoy, no doubt because Yen Yoostiss has a spy in the Meade and Meat Hall.

It's also possible that the troupe may want to hire a few local Vuldrok to help defend their caravan, which means it's also possible one of them is a spy working for Yoostiss. Catching a spy trying to sabotage a landrover or a flitter is a good way to get the baddies to tip their hand; another is to capture a raider during an attack. A little bit of leverage should be enough to convince the turncoat to reveal they've been working for Yen the whole time.

That revelation could easily lead to a chase scene right before the troupe reaches their destination: Yoostiss could show up for a final boss fight, or she could just wait for the flitter or landcraft to approach before presenting papers to claim the goods for local law enforcement. Whether you prefer to end with a legal showdown or a boss battle (or both!), the delivery of mead is welcome in the sleepy town.

DEFENDING THE WILDMEN

The vendi of Ostmark have long lived mostly undisturbed by humans, but with the arrival of the Empire that may not continue. The sentient but culturally primitive vendi have gained the attention of the Muster, who see them as a potential slave race with added value for being so rare and exotic. To this end the Muster have begun raids on the villages of the vendi, much to the dismay of the nearby Vuldrok who consider the vendi friendly wildmen of the forest who help lost hunters and lumberjacks. The locals have taken their complaints to the thanes but have received no aid, for the thanes fear losing Muster mercenaries and arms more than losing the vendi. The local Vuldrok put out a call for help both among the Empire and the Vuldrok; they cannot pay much, mainly paying in honey, mead, and grains, but they feel their cause is righteous and the vendi have no one else to defend them.

WHAT HAPPENS IN LAXDALE....

A wealthy Known Worlder has approached the troupe for help, possibly after they've arrived at the Valholm starport in Ostmark on Hargard. His daughter, Josephine, is something of a free spirit, and she's run off rather suddenly to be with her latest paramour in the village of Laxdale, a community known for its lax rules and criminal activity. (By the way, you should feel free to choose whatever genders you like for the parent and the runaway. It doesn't have to be father/daughter trouble: The relationship could be father/son, mother/son, mother/daughter, or even a relationship based on non-binary identities. As written, the rest of this story hook assumes the tale is about a father and his daughter.)

On the one hand, the offworlder's daughter is an adult, so "Jo" (as her friends call her) should be able to make her own choices. On the other hand, the Known Worlder is offering to pay really well (in whatever form drives your epic forward), and he has his suspicions that his daughter's lover is a notorious villain in a crime syndicate. Some heroes may take the offer to prove that the daughter's quest for love is legitimate; others may be eager to seal the deal with a wealthy patron and get some valuable resources on Hargard, regardless of the consequences for Jo. It's also possible that your troupe is divided on what to do, in which case more investigation is clearly necessary.

The woman's last known location was a rowdy tavern called Universal Meat and Meade Market. Locals are eager to talk to the offworlders, although

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AN INTRIGUING
LIFE**

**THE CHURCH:
PLOTting
PRIESTS**

**MERCHANT
GUILDS:
DREAMS AND
SCHEMES**

DRAMAS

**HARGARD
DRAMA HOOKS**

the best way to make friends is to engage them in some tests of skill and/or chance. Whether they make a little coin or incur a little debt, the troupe hears many tales of Josephine scandalously throwing herself at a local two-bit hoodlum and henchman named Don Romeo. Many of the younger women in the bar (and a few handsome young men) have stories about “the Don’s” romantic escapades. He seems to be with a different companion every week, and a few have been burned rather badly. One hopeful skald believes that “this time, her love can change him!” but that opinion is decidedly in the minority.

The paths to resolving this entanglement should be left open-ended. Sympathetic heroes may wish to track down the young woman and confirm that she’s done everything of her own free will; however, this will make Don Romeo insanely jealous, leading to some form of retribution or even a (unfair or fixed) duel with the scoundrel. Crusading self-righteous heroes may simply bolt straight for liberating Josephine. Although she has second thoughts about what she’s done, she’s reluctant to go, leading to the aforementioned ambush and/or duel. A third option is catching Don Romeo in an act of infidelity, unspeakable criminal exploitation, or cruelty — the sort of revelation that would open the young woman’s eyes to her par amour’s true nature.

In the end, Josephine calls it off with Don Romeo, but she’s certainly not going back to her father. Watching Don soundly defeated by the troupe destroys her opinion of him, but she doesn’t want to be under her father’s thumb again. She asks for the troupe’s help to get her to the Valholm starport and offworld. Someone’s gotta try to stop them, of course, whether that’s scoundrels from Laxdale, the woman’s father, or a rival syndicate looking to cause trouble. Unless the opposition is overwhelming (maybe resulting in a Don Romeo and Jo-liet ending?), the tale ends with Josephine soaring away to her new life offworld.

Srellumar

A WAR WITHOUT END

For centuries the jarls of Svartkulle, located in the former kingdom and current Duchy of Siddis, and the jarls of Stenfort, found within the bounds of the former principality and current Duchy of Richirion, have been feuding. No one can definitively remember the start of the feud at this point, but the centuries of war, raids, theft, and deceit have given both sides plenty of reasons to hate each other.

This feud went on partially because the two families involved had no common lord who could force them to end the feud, but with both Siddis and Richirion joining the Empire this is no longer the case. Both the Duchess of Siddis and the Duke of Richirion have brought the matter to the Imperial Governor to finally see the feud settled. The Governor is going to need agents on the ground in the territory of the feuding jarls to get the truth of the situation, and to enforce any agreement should the feud be ended.

Vijayangar

IMPATIENT FIRE

Thus far the Urth Orthodox Church has moved carefully in its interactions with House Ramakrishna and the Tertha faith on Hargard, fearful that pushing too hard or too fast will make more problems than solutions, especially considering the house’s connection to the Emperor. But not everyone is thrilled about this cautious approach; indeed, Priest Hesteros of Temple Avesti has decided that the heretics have had long enough.

Priest Hesteros and his followers have traveled to Hargard to bring the Tertha heretics to heel by fire and sword, with any number of other factions wanting to stop his efforts before he destroys the delicate diplomatic situation on-world. The troupe is ordered or hired to hunt down and detain Priest Hesteros before his followers begin burning House Ramakrishna nobles at the stake.

NICE SHIP, BE AWFUL IF SOMETHING HAPPENED TO IT

Hargard, and specifically Vijayangar, has long been one of the more technologically advanced Vuldrok worlds, thanks in large part to House Ramakrishna. Indeed, many Vuldrok vessels were constructed here, but with the coming of the Empire as an ally of House Ramakrishna, the Vuldrok are suddenly cut off from one of their main sources of spacecraft.

An enterprising Vijayangar smuggler, Aanan the Sly, has decided to try and meet this demand by stealing ships from the House Ramakrishna shipyards, which he has infiltrated as a shipbreaker. If the troupe are mercenary or criminal sorts, Aanan may hire them as a crew to help steal the ship; if they’re more law-abiding, they may be brought in by House Ramakrishna to find out who is behind the thefts and recover the ships before they end up in the hands of the Vuldrok. In either case, thrilling chases and heists/counter-heists should make the job an interesting one.