

LI HALAN Fiefs



Imperial Survey 4



WALKING THE GARDEN WORLDS

The thirst of your souls beckons you to break stagnant chains and open star lanes to new worlds and tomorrow's without end.

— Zebulon the Prophet, *Omega Gospels* (Galaxia 12:18)

To Emperor Alexius Hawkwood, Bringer of Order to the Non-Garden Worlds: Greetings.

This work sheds light, as if through an enveloping fog, on the Li Halan Worlds. The Garden Worlds of Kish, Midian, Icon and Rampart are often veiled in a mist of metaphors used by those outside the Ordered Gates. This is due to the ancient customs and reputation of the Most Illustrious Family of Supreme Merit, for we provoke both fear and misunderstanding due to our family's past reputation for necromancy, despite our conversion to the faith of the Prophet. We do everything, it seems, in extremes. Perhaps because of this, I find myself in the temporary position of scribe for you, a Hawkwood Emperor.

I grew up in the Greenswarth on Kish. My father, Count Tang Jee Li Halan, was a member of the "countrified" nobility, slowly descending to rural gentry status. My mother, Jie Jie, came from the Lu Qi clan, famous for their fighting men and herders. She also possessed Justinian blood. I was the second son and third child, born in the Year of the Phoenix, Feng-Huang, due to inherit our rural holdings in Gamsaang. My traditionalist father took to honoring Li Halan customs that had fallen out of favor at court. Thus, no "interstellar" names for us like Antonious Chang Li Halan or Cassandra Sung-ah Li Halan. We were raised in the old ways with old names. Later, I learned that even the old names were a reaction against close Hazat-Li Halan ties from two centuries earlier. Thus, the awarding of ancient Asian names from Urth was a conscious political act against then-current court politics. Wrote the Jade Philosopher, Jehung Ni: "History, like court dress, is also fashion, to be designed and redesigned as style dictates."

Through circumstances too complex to repeat here, a cloud of disfavor fell on me. Rakai, the Court Poet, suggested

I join the Questing Knights to clear my name. I had met you briefly once before, my emperor, when Prince Flavius joined you to arrange an alliance during the wars. We discussed bird hunting for a few moments as you passed through the palace, chatting with the gathered Hawkwood and Li Halan nobles. I later sent you a rare book on the sport and you remembered me, and then approved my application.

I hope this report meets with your favor, for I sincerely believe that only by contemplating and utilizing the knowledge learned from the Garden Worlds can you hope to bring order to the Known Worlds. The Hawkwoods are a noble family, true, but the Li Halan lineage is older, and possessed Heaven's Favor long ago when the Hawkwood lands on Urth suffered barbaric chaos.

I also hope to explain how I recovered Cardano's Banner after it was stolen from my family. I would not write of this — viewing it as a private matter — if Sir Juan Elabaro Hustin de Jericho had not inspired me by relating his own adventures on the Hazat worlds. The banner holds the divine likeness of Zebulon himself, when He appeared before Prince Cardano Li Halan in the Cave of Miracles and led our conversion to the Omega Gospels. His image emblazoned itself on a number of banners borne by the prince's heralds. The Prophet is calm in appearance but with the most beatific expression on his face. This banner, kept by my family, was stolen just before I returned to Kish to write this work. Naturally, I went in pursuit of it.

This work thus contains the travails of one man's search, which the author hopes will prove enlightening. However, Jiquian Xi, the Sage of the Plum Orchard, also desired a similar outcome when he jumped into the still waters of Jian Lake to catch his reflection. He left the philosophical world the poorer when the weight of his ceremonial robes dragged him down to where even reflections became opaque and are lost in the stygian waters.

— Sir Piao Liu Li Halan, Questing Knight

Kish

"And when selfishness and darkness have had their fill, then the vessel yearns for light," Zebulon said to the First Citizen of Kish, and the Li Halan looked at the Prophet in deep thought.

"Go your way, prophet, it will be long before I follow you," he replied, and then walked out of the garden with his guards and wisemen. Zebulon turned to Paulus and said, "Long is the journey into Night, but at last the dawn breaks. So shall it be with them."

— *Omega Gospels* (Galaxia 2:1)

Kish is the heart of my family's power. We might dream on Midian or pray on Icon, but it is Kish, with her vast deserts and clear skies, to which we return. The people of Kish are devout and hard, competitive in play and ruthless in war, firm in their belief that they are the Pancreator's favored.

My family can be roughly divided into three clans: the Qing-long (Blue-Green Dragon), the Tian-long (Heavenly Dragon), and the Di-long (Earth Dragon) Li Halan. The current royal dynasty is of the Qing-long. It is interstellar in outlook and descends from Prince Xiao. The Tian-long regard those outside the Garden Worlds with contempt; they descend, for the most part, from Prince Cardano and Prince Constantine. Finally, the Di-long trace their ancestry back to Prince Lucifer. They are the greatest in number, usually rural gentry or minor nobles, and are close to the cultivated fields and peasantry. They tend to be the most religious and status conscious of the Li Halan, and often stress local matters over interstellar affairs in debates between the Blue-Green Dragons and the Heavenly Dragons.

Kish's patron saint is Saint Charissa, one of the Prophet's followers. She is mentioned only twice in the *Omega Gospels*. Church lore states she remained on Kish for a time after Zebulon departed. She performed five miracles, the most famous being the gushing of water from Hellrock in the deep desert. The water still flows from where she placed her flowered staff. Her tomb is now in Zebulon Cathedral, next to the great princes of the House, removed from the Cave of Mysteries in the Jierra Mountains, where her body laid untainted.

History

Kish, originally named Escoral, was discovered during the First Republic and settled by my family as a mining colony. After many years of intentional obscurity, my family then reentered history as the Li Halan-Takeda, a powerful merchant clan on Urth that extended its corporate power into space. It controlled the Shen Corporation, one of the zaibatsu leaders of the First Republic. A distaff member of

the family, Adriano, was given leave to oversee operations on Kish. The remnant threads of the First Republic were rapidly unraveling. Adriano later seized the planet with his corporate security forces in a fairly bloodless coup and proclaimed himself Adriano I, Protector of Kish (2525?). He ruled from Escoral City, a small spaceport at that time, and sent soldiers to subdue and settle the Greenswarth, then a land of fearsome beasts. He also reformed the family's pictogram script (*xin kai shu*).

Adriano's son, Lucifer, Prince of Morning (also named Yasao Nan-chen Li Halan), inherited his father's power. He is also named Lucifer the Sathraist. My family's dark reputation begins with him. Seeking realms beyond human perception, Yasao formed an alliance with the dark spirit, Pangeren — the Compact of Lucifer, forged with a spiritual entity from the Unreflective Realms.

Two other powerful families, the Verloren and Tanaka, also had settlements on Kish. Members of the three families vied for the post of First Citizen, then the title of Kish's ruler. There were marriages and wars among them, but my family eventually emerged victorious. As for the populace, few took heed when Zebulon came among them. There is an interesting conversation, known to all the faithful, between the Prophet and Prince Lucifer III. They talked about spiritual matters in the Li Halan gardens (now lost, thought to be in Escoral's west quarter). Their discourse was polite and gentlemanly, but my ancestor left unenlightened, while the Prophet foretold the eventual conversion of my family.

After the Ukar Wars, many Ukari found refuge at the Li Halan court. Princess Casandra produced a son by an Ukar. That son, Leonardo the Magnificent (3011-3217), slew the last Verloren and united the Li Halan with the aristocratic Tanaka by slaying Duke Sidiro and marrying his daughter, Aika, after the siege of Dosho-machi. Convinced that it was the destiny of the Li Halan to rule the universe, Leonardo created a secret, psychic police force, the Inari, to free himself from reliance on Decados agents, who then provided him with information. Next, he invited the Synco-Anarchists and Red Orthodox leaders of Cadavus to peace talks, where he then slew their leaders, claiming the troubled world for his own. He later extended the Li Halan rule to Midian. It was rumored that he sold off his soul in shards to various dark powers and so became known as the Patchwork Prince. Upon his death, the Inari were disbanded. Following a brief war, Shizuka Li Halan seized the throne, claiming the Mandate of Heaven. My family now ruled with royal decree, while paying lip service to a democratic parliament that they largely controlled.





Kish Traits

Ruler: Prince Flavius

Cathedral: Zebulon's Cathedral, Escoral (Orthodox)

Agora: Baahk Street, Escoral (Li Halan/Merchant League)

Garrison: 9

Capital: Escoral

Jumps: 2

Adjacent Worlds: Criticorum (dayside), Icon (nightside), Rampart (nightside), Malignatius (nightside),

Solar System: Solasa (Sun), Akasha (0.799 AU), Kish (0.935 AU), Vector (3.015 AU), Shatan (9.235 AU), Urum (19.01 AU), Tern (31.66 AU), Jumpgate (42.5 AU)

Tech: 6 (4 or lower in rural areas)

Human population: 149 million

Alien population: 1.5 million (mostly Obun, some Vorox)

Resources: Coal, copper, diamonds, agriculture, petroleum, cattle, wood, dairy products

Exports: Wheat, olives, millirice, barley, peanuts, meat, petroleum, animal hides, chemicals, weapons, solar energy tech, precious stones, wine, metals, crafts

Landscape: Kish is largely desert studded with deeply-weathered mountains. Unlike Istakhr, the deserts are not completely barren, for hardy plant and animal life survives in all regions. The Greenswarth and northern hemisphere receive the greatest amount of rainfall; these areas host the most agriculture. Native mammals evolved similar to Urth's Australian and South American marsupials.

During the Second Republic, the ancestors of what would become the Ishwin Confederacy settled in Kish's desert interior. Drawn from followers of the unique scientific and philosophical schools that arose during that era, they settled here and were largely undisturbed. Vast domed cities and irrigation projects brought much of Kish to life. Two political parties, the Blues and the Greens, vied for power. The Blues claimed to speak for the laboring people, and were often denigrated as "Reds" (from "red hands," those who toiled in the fields) by their aristocratic rivals in the conservative Green party, largely made up of Li Halan traditionalists. The Blues' greatest leader and reformer was Citizen Speaker Dior Du Ghent (3615-3722), who enacted just laws to protect those in hazardous occupations. In the end, however, my family's wealth purchased and corrupted both parties, and their candidates became indistinguishable from each other. Long before the Second Republic fell, my ancestors extended

their aristocratic power, opposing the centralized government. They supported the Hazat in that house's wars of emergence from the Republican Chauki and, under Prince Manju, sent ships and troops to join the Ten Noble Houses to rescue the remains of the Republic from barbaric invasion in 4000.

After the Fall, the power of the Ishwin Confederacy grew. Escaped serfs and political prisoners found freedom among their ranks. My family used both bribery and the sword against them, paying off their leaders and encouraging war among the tribes when they were strong or fielding armies against them when they were weak. By the 4400s their power had grown and their raids increased. After Prince Cardano experienced his famed conversion, he led a great force against them, finally capturing their great war-chief, Aran, at the Battle of Seven Eagles. The Ishwin leaders swore allegiance to Cardano, and my family has ever since collected a levy of their bravest warriors to augment its forces. In exchange, Prince Cardano recognized the Ishwin Confederacy's people as freemen, and sent priests to convert them. The Confederacy converted to Orthodoxy, but their customs are still strange to dwellers in Escoral or the Greenswarth. After Cardano, the Li Halan dynasty moved to Icon and Midian.

Xiao Li Halan returned the capital to Kish in 4816. He immediately set to reforming the military, which had fallen into disgrace during the Midian Dynasty. He sent his sons to the Hazat court and included foreign experts in his army. This did not sit well with some of the dukes, who took to giving themselves more traditional names, recovering our Urth past for political reasons, while Xiao retained the more interstellar naming tradition. This dichotomy continues to this day. The current ruling family is Universalist, called the Interstellar Dynasty.

Recent History

Prince Justinian Shanquin Li Halan (4890-4951) followed Xiao. Many of his nobles ruled too independently. To augment his own power, he invited Hazat advisors to his court. When the prince was struck with illness, his brother, Tai Chung Augustus Li Halan, ruled in his stead for two years, but willingly stepped down once his elder brother recovered. Prince Tai is famous for his *Book of the Middle Doctrine*, which pleased the traditionalists. He was not happy with the foreigners at court and some say he had a hand in aiding the traditionalist rebellion that soon followed. Count Stephano de Montana Hazat's forces defeated Duke Junjin's New Traditionalist army, comprising dissatisfied Tian-long Li Halan. So pleased was Justinian with his victory that he wed his daughter, Princess Melissa, to the Hazat count.

When Princess Melissa took the throne, she was beset with troubles. Her husband was slain, along with her two nephews, defending the Rampart Li Halan holdings from the Academians. Her ambitious studies into longevity —



producing a rival to the wonder drug, Lypee-55 — were destroyed by the League. Minor nobles, chaffing under what they considered a half-foreign dynasty, took to arming their retainers. With the breakout of the Emperor Wars, she realized that she could not effectively lead the Li Halan in the troubled times that beset them, and so abdicated in favor of her eldest son, Prince Flavius.

Prince Flavius proved a master of the situation. Swiftly crushing the rebels, he promoted family unity by stressing the Way of Heaven over his Hazat blood. Next, he was proclaimed Halvor's heir and soon seized Rampart. With an upgraded fleet, he eyed Byzantium Secundus. Ignoring the Decados seizure of Malignatius, Prince Flavius moved his fleet to Criticorum. However, when elements of his first strike force were defeated by the lightning victories of Alexius Hawkwood, Flavius reconsidered. At the patriarch's urging, he allied the house with the Hawkwoods. Returning to Kish, he set about directing his homeworld's defense against Decados raids from Malignatius. Princess Melissa defeated a Decados armada, ramming her starship, the *Sun Dragon*, into admiral Lermatov's dreadnought. With the Miracle of Urum, or the Battle of Three Martyrs, the Li Halan forces destroyed the invading fleet and took the offensive into Decados space, disrupting their shipping lanes. A small force, under General Ijiri Li Halan, the greatest tactician of our house, went to fight with Alexius. They were on Byzantium

Secundus when the war finally ended.

However, my emperor, not everybody at court celebrated your ascension as Glorious Heir of Vladimir. Some felt that Prince Flavius, as Halvor's heir, held better claim to the title. The Decados realize that the Li Halan contributed far less to the Hawkwood cause than did the al-Malik, and their agents now work to draw us closer to them. Some hold that the Decados did us a favor by taking Malignatius, with its unruly heretical populace. We gained high-tech Rampart in exchange for a useless iceball.

Kish survived the damage of the wars and Prince Flavius has now begun the Four Revitalizations with work on the Jade Canal, which will connect the desert with the Greenswarth via Escoral. He has also opened the Jin Academy, the Li Halan War College, under General Ijiri, and the Jiang Academy of Engineering and Allied Sciences. Finally, he has lifted the oppressive millrice tax, to further the present prosperity of Kish.

Solar System

Solasa: Kish's sun is remarkably unaffected by the fading suns phenomenon, except for wild solar storms that flare up every 123 years. The uninformed but always amusing peasantry say then that Solasa battles with demons seeking to steal her holy power.

Akasha: This planet seems to have once been green and Urthlike. Scientists believe that a large meteor collided





with the world, throwing up a massive dust cloud that trapped the planet's heat and denied it sunlight.

Kish: I cannot reflect on Kish without commenting on its twin moons, Chira and Rui. Chira is closest, the desert moon, the lover's moon, with a beatific lady holding a flower engraved on her landscape. Rui is smaller and more distant, the solemn moon, the philosopher's moon, with a wise dragon studying an ideogram. Both moons host military bases for the planet's defense.

Vector: This lifeless world supports some mining and a military starbase that guards the system. Its two cities of Kashgan and Ihan are buried deep under the surface, off-limits to most. Anunnaki ruins are believed to exist here. The planet is ruled directly by the prince's representative, General Ichiun. Listening posts in space nearby can pick up traffic throughout the system. Although Vector was attacked during the Emperor Wars, it sustained little damage.

Shatan: This gas giant possesses seven moons. Life exists in Shatan's upper atmosphere: the Chemyluth, large gaseous floaters with predatory tentacles. Since the gravitational pull is too strong for much exploration, this curious life is observed from stations on the orbiting moons. Small, golem-guided ships have managed to obtain specimens of these rare creatures. My ancestors used them to create the Known Worlds' most deadly poison, *chim sei*.

Urum: This world, believed to be a fragment of a larger one, has Anunnaki canals crossing her surface. Water and life has been found near the poles. The famous dead city of Tlanthrun was once much explored but its recently discovered sister city, near the southern pole, remains largely untouched. It was near Urum that Princess Melissa perished, saving Kish from the Decados invasion fleet by ramming her personal ship into the invading admiral's vessel, creating the Miracle of Urum. After that, the Decados shifted their attention away from us and onto capturing Byzantium Secundus with their Hazat allies.

Tern: A small world, lifeless and cold, with a single moon. Some say that Tern is the guardian of wisdom. "Born under Tern's beams" denotes a scholar who gets lost in his head and stumbles over his own feet looking too long at the stars.

People & Places

Escoral

I landed at Escoral, the city of bells and banners, and was greeted by a sizable delegation, with the words "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita, Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura..." uttered by my cousin Rakai, the great poet and master of the School of Twenty-Three Cranes. His wife Sidera, dressed in her traditional dragonfly robes, gifted me with a hand-painted scroll. Rakai said that his opening remarks were from one of the Seven Sage Poets of Urth, and denoted

a journey from the hellish to the heavenly. "Rather like your tour," he said. "Certainly for a hellish climate, Kish is the right place to start."

Escoral is covered in banners — red, yellow, blue, jade and purple — rippling against a backdrop of the intense, blue desert sky. Slogans are seen everywhere in colorful displays: "Long Life to Prince Flavius, Guardian of the Middle Principality!" "Zebulon's Four Seeds Find Fulfillment on the Garden Worlds!" and my favorite, "Keep Escoral Clean — Please Ask the Police for Trash Removal and Restroom Stations!"

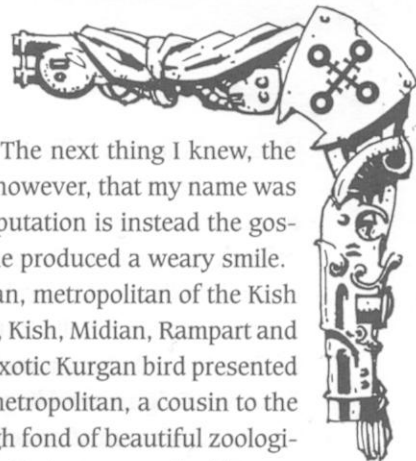
Bells constantly chime from the many churches and homes and the city boasts abundant fountains, artfully designed to showcase Escoral's victory over the desert. The architecture is grand — stone and terracite — with ancient buildings in the First Dynasty style to be found in the Old Section, formerly the entire city. Here, quaint homes overlooking small gardens crowd together, housing many bureaucrats, teachers, professors and engineers — the small but proud class of intellectuals and city freemen. Nearby is the ancient Jade University, the second oldest such institution on Kish. The remains of the First Palace now host a great marketplace and museum devoted to the Li Halan worlds. The museum is dedicated to cultural displays and also contains a zoo with many fierce creatures from Ungavorox.

Escoral's architecture provides a low skyline, with the palaces built in a graduated step pattern. Most of the buildings are white or pink, and the brilliant sunsets cause the city to glow with amazing colors. Below the old section is the Keih, the industrial sector, whose factories produce weapons, building supplies, refined ores, glassworks and irrigation generators — all the things needed for a desert world.

Many guilds vie with one another here and each street carries its guild's banner, including a childrens' favorite, the Puppeteer's Guild. South is the west section, Xi Bian, where the Cathedral of St. Maya overlooks the small shops and alien tenements. It houses the leatherworkers and dyers' guilds, and illegal gambling and crime takes place here. The streets are remarkably clean. Many Obun dwell here, most working in the palace gardens or as small hotel managers, and there are some Vorox on the Street of The Claw. Overall, aliens are tolerated in small numbers. Needless to say, this section has a bohemian air, and many come to dine in the Obun restaurants, listen to Vorox poetry or mingle with an Ukari.

The New City, built on the shores of Lake Cordimo, houses the great Zebulon Cathedral, built by Prince Cardano, said to be the third largest cathedral in the Known Worlds. Among its eightfold spires and holoivid windows is an impressive array of gargoyles and angelic statues, curious to the eye. The surrounding neighborhood houses merchants,





ambassadorial houses, military barracks and communications centers, as well as the University of Kish, famous for theology, rhetoric and engineering.

The two official intelligence agencies, the Jingcha (military intelligence) and the Yuan Men, have been headquartered in the Jierra Mountains since the Emperor Wars. The Yuan Men are responsible for gathering information on our foes across the mist-shrouded frontier. The Jingcha serves a similar capacity, but Javokian agents breached its security, leaving it with a rather low reputation. Stories about Yuan Men hunting down Jingcha are not completely fictional. I should say no more.

Next comes the Celestial City, Shang Kong, a walled off area that houses the Li Halan court. Here are found great gardens and palaces, including the magnificent, Vau-inspired Sing Palace, the estate of Prince Flavius. Built in the Second Republic, it is surrounded by flowering gardens and cherry tree orchards. It hosts several large, connected palaces that cover entire city blocks, rose and white in color and inspired by Vau design. Cardano's Stellar Palace is one, and, of course, there is the more ancient Tupal Palace, now housing guards and staff, a sort of retirement village for royal servants. Most of the pre-Republic palaces, located in the west and old sections of Escoral, are gone, victims of time's inevitable touch. The great, 100 mile spread of Li Halan gardens about eastern Lake Cordimo is a royal preserve of the prince.

On my second night here, Rakai and I were invited to the Sing Palace for a banquet thrown for visiting League and Hazat leaders. Beforehand, thousands of soldiers and peasants marched in unison before the palace, bearing banners stating "Zebulon's Light Leads the Li Halan to Victory!" and "The Seven Seeds of Victory Ensure the Success of Prince Flavius!" Vorox guards surrounded Prince Flavius Yue Se Chou Kung Li Halan, and martial songs of my family, the Hazat and various guilds wafted in the air. Princess Asteria Gui Fu, the Lady of the Auspicious Blossoms, stood behind and to the left of her husband. The youthful looking princess has some Justinian blood and a drop of Keddah. For a time, marrying into House Justinian was a Li Halan pastime, until we almost devoured the house to our benefit.

Later, the palace protocol seemed endless, but when I bowed before my prince, he recognized me and inquired in a friendly way about my time among the Questing Knights. Prince Flavius is a tall man, with a regal, martial bearing — his Hazat heritage — combined with the grace of our family. Appearing thoughtful and controlled, he is highly charismatic. Many courtiers complain that they have left his presence thinking they had gained a promise; upon reflection, however, they realize that the prince gained information from them and gave only a slight nod in return, so to speak. So it was with me. I told him all about the Questing Knights, my survey project and Imperial gossip, and he listened like an

old friend or trusted confessor. The next thing I knew, the interview was over. He did say, however, that my name was cleared, as now his brother's reputation is instead the gossip in "polite" society. At this, he produced a weary smile.

Archbishop Marcion Li Halan, metropolitan of the Kish Metropilae of Apshai, Grail, Icon, Kish, Midian, Rampart and Ungavorox, stood admiring an exotic Kurgan bird presented to him by a Hazat knight. The metropolitan, a cousin to the prince, is a serious man, although fond of beautiful zoological gardens — his one weakness. He is concerned with combating the heresies on Midian and Icon. It is said that he, Bishop Xenos and Prince Flavius run the planet as a triumvirate, but Bishop Xenos's authority has declined with his health. Archbishop Marcion has begun training some priests in theological debate and calls them the Luxite Order, the bringers of light. We spoke briefly and he held my hands in his and inquired about my father, saying he was glad that my name was cleared. I bowed to him reverently. The metropolitan is an old friend of my family. Marcion used to bring me sweets from Kish when I was small. He never tires of telling the story about when I made a dragon mask and frightened his secretary, Lu, half to death. "The family forgives you," he smiled, "and, somewhere, I'm sure old Lu does too."

You may notice that I did not mention the Hidden Martyrs with the other intelligence agencies. This is because they do not officially exist. Created by Cardano Li Halan after his conversion to watch over the cultural and spiritual welfare of the Garden Worlds, they remain an elusive mystery. It is said that they are financed by the house and have a better reputation for spying than our official spy agencies. Rumor states that they are comprised of family members who swear an oath to the Pancreator. After my conversation with the prince, I wondered if any of them thought I was spying for the emperor against my own house! I spoke of my fears to my childhood friend, Rakai, and he assured me that this was surely not so and that I must be suffering a case of spacelag. Feeling better, I returned to the banquet.

I stayed at my brother Miyamoto's estate that night. We drank too much wine, catching up on old times. My brother was a knight in the prince's service but now settles court cases in the small districts outside the capital.

Incidentally, the ancient eastern titles of our house again slowly fade from court usage, as do attempts to speak the Zhong Wen tongue, which can still be heard among rural Li Halan. The tongue originated in the Middle Kingdom on Urth but its interstellar speakers absorbed other tongues, rapidly changing it. It almost died out before my house revived it, seeking to replace Church Latin.

Calgirn

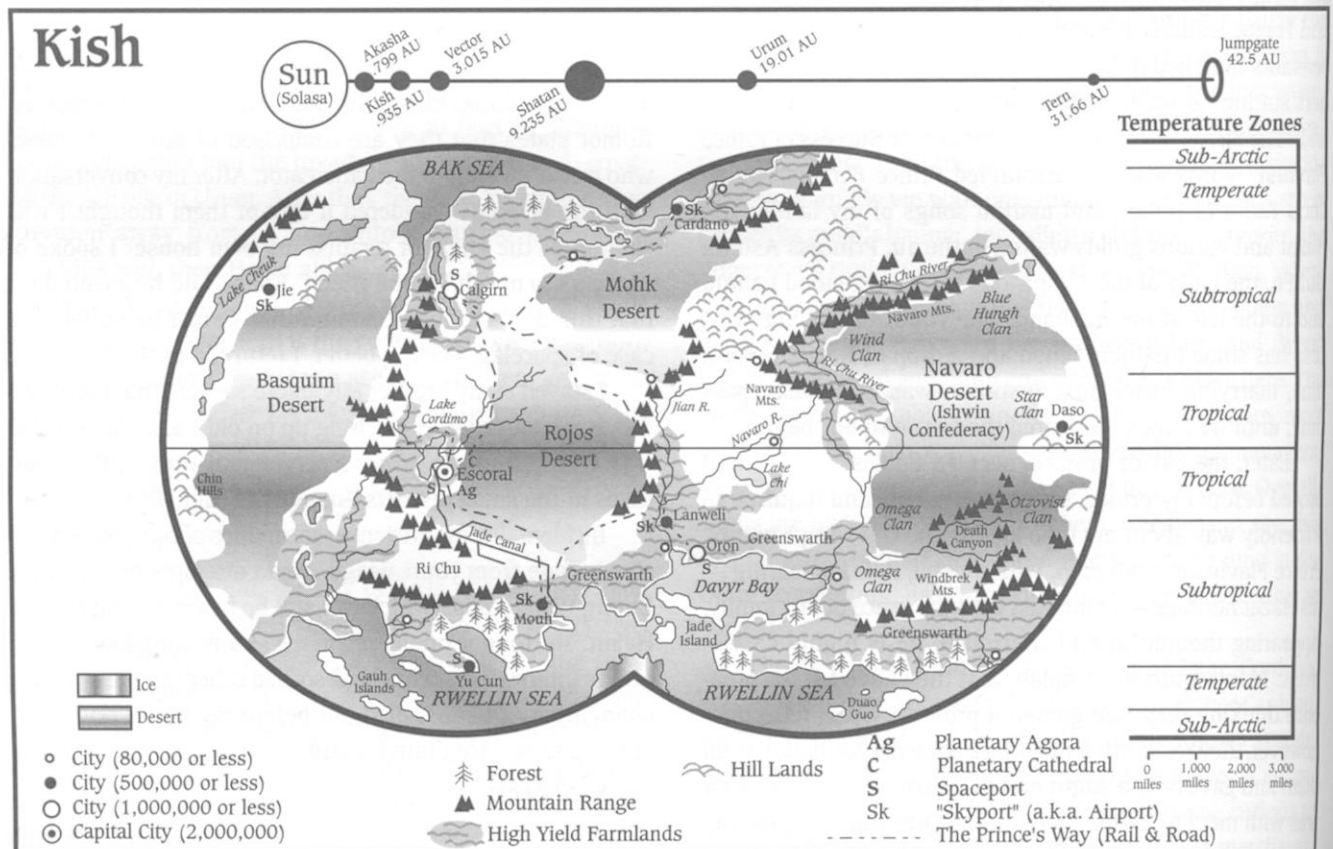
Two days later, I began my tour with Rakai, who was traveling north to Calgirn. We flew above Escoral. Lake

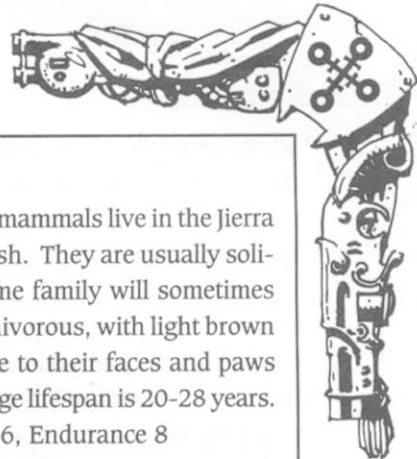


I rather enjoyed the markets, where I saw several Saan clans bartering. The Saan are a fierce mountain people who dwell in the almost-inaccessible northern Jierra Mountains. Small but tough, their origins are lost in antiquity. While they are sons of the Church, they still hold many strange traditions. They are fierce fighters and excellent scouts, able to camouflage themselves and sneak up on foes with amazing skill, the result of their hunting and shamanistic lifestyle. They compose some of the fiercest units in the Li Halan military, including five regiments organized into two divisions under Prince Flavius' personal command. Originally used as shock troops against the Ishwin Confederacy, they are famous for night battles, sneaking up on enemies and slitting throats.

My next journey took me by petrol landcraft over the well-paved Jin Highway. After three days, I took a dirt road into the Navaro Mountains, where there are ore mines and timber farms. Despite occasional small towns and the castle of Count Sung overlooking Blossom Falls, it is a wild region roamed by blood wolves and blue hunghs, marsupial bear-like mammals. Blood wolves can tear a man to pieces. Hunted almost to extinction before the Second Republic, they have since made a comeback. Blue hunghs are highly intelligent but will rarely attack unless provoked, their cubs are threatened, or you are foolish enough to guard your meal against them. Herbivorous mammals, such as the deer-like Tata, are also found here, as are wild dogs and deer, introduced from Urth long ago.

Count Sung is a quiet, studious man who like to contemplates nature. He asked me many questions about wild-life on the worlds I had seen. Beyond Sung's estates is Ishwin territory. I left my landcraft behind and purchased a Pheriza, a "Spitter," and rode the lizard down into the Navaro Desert. Spitters are more reliable than Urth horses on Kish; they were native predators until domesticated by the early settlers. They can be very cantankerous unless you have experience in handling them. Luckily, I did. They are not pretty creatures, but they are practical.





Navaro Desert

I dipped down into the Navaro Desert to see the clan gathering of the Ishwin Confederacy. A free people, they have substituted competitive matches for warfare, although fighting still breaks out at times among their clans. I sat with some family and Church officials in places of honor while their great leaders performed sacred dances. Their numbers are staggering and their costumes bright and colorful. Some of the young men compete in honor matches, representing their nations or clans. Here they fight, sometimes to the death. While the Church has halted these combats on a large scale, and defeated opponents can now request mercy, pride usually forbids such weakness. It is a solemn struggle, and I witnessed two such combats. Rain and plant-blessing dances were also performed. As a representative from the emperor and the prince, I presented their elders with gifts. While they are within the fold of the Church, they still retain some of their old traditions.

The Ishwin Confederacy comprises five clans, the Star Clan, the Otvovist Clan, the Omega Clan, the Wind Clan and the Blue Hungh Clan. Old West Man, the leader of the Wind Clan, explained their place on the Li Halan world to me. "The Great Prince has honored his compact, so we honor him with our bravest warriors. He tries to settle our disputes fairly, and when there have been differences, he has not resorted to the evil ways of his ancestors. Some of our young people like to travel, but the desert eventually calls them home."

Their greatest city is Daso, settled by the more agricultural Star Clan. The Ishwin troops are also fierce warriors with many brave battles behind them. Each clan provides a brigade to Prince Flavius.

Basquin Desert

I visited the Basquin desert, west of the Jierra Mountains. Here, the gushing waters of Hellrock heal many ills. The Church possesses great estates and monasteries here, including a Sanctuary Aeon retreat. Serfs harvest the irrigated lands near the mountains, and in the south several large olive plantations dot the landscape. The Basquim is often visited by painters come to capture the deep red and orange sands found here.

The Greenswarth

I finished my homecoming by visiting the Greenswarth in the south, from where I hail. A green land bordering the southern Rwellin Sea, it is the chief agricultural zone of Kish, where serfs work the great estates that provide millirice, wine, wheat, barley, fruits and vegetables for the planet. Some Obun agriculturalists, who seem to have a way with plants, work on the great estates in places of honor. Oron is the largest city here, on Davyr Bay. A processing center for agriculture, it is also known for its artists and singers. Once a technical giant, it declined after the Second Republic. Oron still produces cheap weaponry and think machines, sanc-

Blue Hungh

These marsupial bearlike mammals live in the Jierra and Navarro Mountains on Kish. They are usually solitary but 2-3 adults of the same family will sometimes forage together. They are omnivorous, with light brown coats and a curious blue tinge to their faces and paws (hence their name). The average lifespan is 20-28 years.

Body: Strength 10, Dexterity 6, Endurance 8

Mind: Wits 3, Perception 6, Tech 0

Natural skills: Dodge 5, Fight 8, Sneak 6, Vigor 8

Weapons: Claws (DMG 3d), Teeth (DMG 2d)

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

tioned by the Church. As for Greenswarth's wildlife, most of the dangerous predators perished long ago. Aquatic reptilian monsters with long saurian necks, called sea lungs, are still found in the ocean.

The southerners are generally a happier people than elsewhere on Kish, not as grim and more civilized. Two other cities, mist-covered Mouh and Lanweli, should receive note. Mouh is a fishing and energy-processing center, with the most relaxed atmosphere on the planet. Lanweli is famous for its dye production, wool, and dairy and beef products. Mouh is ruled by Duchess Meditirina Nu-Gua, Prince Flavius's cousin. Lanweli is ruled by the Tang Li Halan, an old family.

My family has long lived on Jade Isle, on the rich Gaamsang estate. When Old Liu, the cook, saw me arrive, he burst into tears. My ancient father greeted me, trembling: "Thieves have stolen Zebulon's Image," he said, stating that outworlders from Icon, claiming distant kinship, took his hospitality and then stole Cardano's Banner. "They think they were smart, but I believe some had that arrogant Ram-part accent." I was in a quandary. How to avenge my father's honor and recover the holy relic?

Our estates and those of the Yuh Monastery run together, the border marked by a small stream. In my youth, I practiced swordsmanship and archery there with my father's men-at-arms. One day, a former priest, Old Jiang, observed my progress from the monastery across the water. He was a man of integrity, and had resigned as head of the monastery when he wed. The priests let him stay on to perform various duties, tending to the graveyard, fish traps and the like.

Old Jiang told me that a gentleman should be both a warrior and a scholar. My father disagreed, saying that books were for the court and would ruin me. My mother pleaded with him and Jiang promised an education only in the military classics and works of a spiritually uplifting nature. To this, my father consented. The teachings were of a practical nature and I learned much from them. I now sought Jiang's





advice on my quandary and he listened to the account of the theft. "This is a serious thing," he said. "But these thieves were sloppy. And remember, there is no place where espionage goes unpracticed. Go now to Icon."

Taking Jiang's advice, I questioned the household staff closely. Finally Wei, who oversees the tenant farmers, confessed that he had gone into town and drank with some strangers, who asked him about the famous banner, saying that they wished to ask my father for permission to pray before it. My father allows this, as part of a lord's duty. Wei

had given them the location of the shrine room, and was now afraid for his life. I had a hard time suppressing my anger. Finally, I asked him to remember more. He thought that one looked like she was from Rampart, for she had a small hand-held think machine and her behavior was abrupt. He had seen Rampart people before on the mainland. "They smell like plastics," he said. I asked my father not to punish Wei unless I could not recover the banner. Then, with my trusted servant Ban Lu, I prepared to leave.

Icon

*On Icon, the faith of the people blazed
Zebulon saved us from our evil ways*
— Count Yang Li Halan, "The Third Bell"

Faithful Icon embraced the Omega Gospels earlier and stronger than other Li Halan worlds. It was also on Icon that Prince Cardano beheld the Prophet Zebulon in shimmering waves of light, and the real conversion of my family began.

Icon's patron saint is Saint Solius, martyred by Prince Kelniron the Cruel in 4207. The Prince's Ungavorox Red Hawks hunted Solius after his unsuccessful attempt to convert Kelniron and tore him to pieces. Saint Solius's left hand was later found and long venerated among the common people, who attributed miraculous healing to it. Patriarch Nadim later canonized Solius, and his hand is visible today inside a glass reliquary at St. Solius's Cathedral in Brokenshire, north of Fatamer. The serfs use the reliquary to address wrongs, placing petitions and prayers before it.

History

Anunnaki ruins are mute testament that Icon was colonized by an elder star-faring race. Although now stripped of many artifacts, the ghostly ruins of Parjyrr still stand as a haunting reminder of pre-human colonization. Eskatonic Order scholars hold Icon sacred, saying that she is girt by powerful energy emanating from the planet itself. Since the sun is not fading, they state that the system as a whole is one of the most balanced in the Known Worlds. Many Eskatonics believe that Icon was blessed in ages past and is alive, attracting spiritual energies from the more reflective realms.

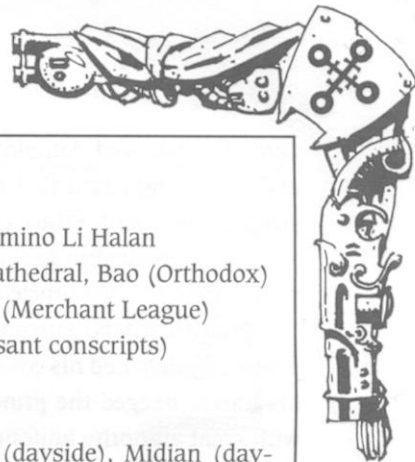
The Iconians point to a monastery on Ithica as the first settlement. Founded, they claim, by some of Zebulon's followers (some even say by Zebulon himself), it was the first of many Icon settlements. The largely unexplored and scarcely populated region attracted the attention of Adriano Li Halan and his son, Lucifer, with the discovery of preadamite ruins and diamond mines. Arriving in force, he

seized the world from the native Four Warlords in 2637.

It is ironic that Icon, and not Midian, first gave an anchor on the Garden Worlds to the Universal Church. The faith was spread in the 30th century among the Twerrid mountaineers by hesychasts, and it swiftly followed the trade routes into the major cities. A splinter sect of Orthodox believers called the Star Brethren settled the northern Ithica continent in the early 31st century. They differed from the Church in their heresy of Panreflection, which stated that there were no hierarchical degrees in the Pancreator's creation, that all reality was an equal reflection of the Pancreator's intent. While these people were later absorbed into the Mother Church, remnants of this odd belief still exist in local folklore. Fatamer, settled by the New Style Muslims, also witnessed an influx of Universalist communities. The mingling of so many religions produced a highly mystical and devout population.

By 3230, the Li Halan founded the city of Bao. Here my house built the Great Palace of the People, a legislative assembly wherein Icon's representatives passed laws. The representatives were usually chosen from the wealthy class and formed a caste — as is so often the case — above the people but below the royalty. Later, during the Second Republic, Icon was the spiritual and philosophical leader of the resistance to Republican rule. Many came here to meditate or worship, away from the technical illusions of the commerce worlds. The Church's St. Alcuin's Theological College drew many great Orthodox opponents of the Republic, the most famous being Archbishop William of Urth.

My family saw the Fall of the Second Republic as an opportune time to enforce their pre-conversion vision upon the masses. "If anyone is so stupid as to think humans seek power for noble ends, they deserve to be devoured by those they worship," stated Prince Tupal. Icon hosted some of the worst decadence in our house's history. Prince Tupal reinstated the Demon Nights of the earlier Li Halan and his



grandson, Kelniron the Cruel (4142-4237), slew his 12 mistresses, each with a different poison. Everything my decadent ancestors did was an attempt to produce a dark aesthetic, a technique to create art out of suffering. From this suffering, vibrations of soul pain were intended to feed the dark gods. I asked the family archivist in Bao, Liu, to explain it to me.

"The decadent Li Halan desired the universe to be divided between gods and monsters," he said, pushing his tomes on a creaky cart. "They were to become the divine gods, breaking free of humanity. The monsters were the serfs, slaves, those they would rule over from their distant palaces, playing with concepts beyond good and evil. They called this dream the Worlds of Ice, or the Way of Ice, *yingh-do*. Through genetic manipulation and the tapping of dark energy fields, they came close to their goal when, thankfully, Zebulon's light poured through." The old archivist sniffed a bit at this, as if finding my inquiries rude and distasteful. It was Kelniron's second son, Duke Nobungana, who briefly conquered Criticorum (4257-4262), taking it from the Decados and socialist-utopian followers of Ahmet the Dragon. Nobungana's heirs continued the martial tradition while the ruling line fell further into decadence.

Prince Ustirin the Unspeakable, Kelniron's son and successor (4201-4322), revived the Manja cult and the worship of the Ur-gods begun by Leonardo Demonson. Masquerading as these dark deities, Ustirin Zu Jin Li Halan devoured his enemies while attending to his hunts in his gardens. He was a notable poet, according to the wise innocence of my cousin Rakai, and authored the haunting "Smoke on the Blossom" about the slaying of his mistress Yong Jiau in a fit of uncharacteristic jealousy. It ends: "Below, in the water/ A ripple distorts the moon/ Far off/ The sound of a temple bell/ Chiming alone." The people lived in fear of the Dark Princes (the Dynasty of Seven Demons: Prince Tupal - Princess Desiderdre, 4023-4337), but had little power to turn to save the Church. The dynasty ended with the beautiful and beguiling Princess Desiderdre.

Princess Desiderdre improved the Garden of Seven Pains. Here the human spirit was devoured by dark powers through various musical wind instruments that produced haunting chimes. Desiderdre would listen, attired as a swallowtail butterfly while her servants bathed her in flower nectar. Church pressure finally moved Sanjiro Li Halan, the leader of the Manja cult and a descendent of Nobungana, to action. Sanjiro overthrew the mad princess in a midnight coup and locked her in the Tower of Abomination, where her lone playing on the Obun lute long haunted the countryside. Prince Sanjiro moved the family's practices back into privacy, and studied the dark arts as a serious philosophy rather than a bacchanalian lifestyle.

Sanjiro's branch of the family was more militant than

Icon Traits

Ruler: Grand Duke Maximino Li Halan

Cathedral: St. Lextius Cathedral, Bao (Orthodox)

Agora: Promenade, Bao (Merchant League)

Garrison: 5 (mainly peasant conscripts)

Capitol: Bao

Jumps: 3

Adjacent Worlds: Kish (dayside), Midian (dayside), Ungavorox (nightside), Manitou (nightside)

Solar System: Halo (0.792 AU), Icon (1.0 AU), Conversion (1.892 AU), Angel's Reach (5.097 AU), Fatima (16.037 AU), Sophia (27.37 AU), Maria (48.31 AU), Tara (59.87 AU), Jumpgate (72.3 AU)

Tech: 4

Human population: 512 million (estimated)

Alien population: 700,000 (mainly Obun and Vorox, some Shantor)

Resources: Ur artifacts, petroleum, iron, zinc, gold, lead, timber, cotton, corn, millirice, wheat, barley, fruits, livestock, entertainment, solar equipment, diamonds, resorts

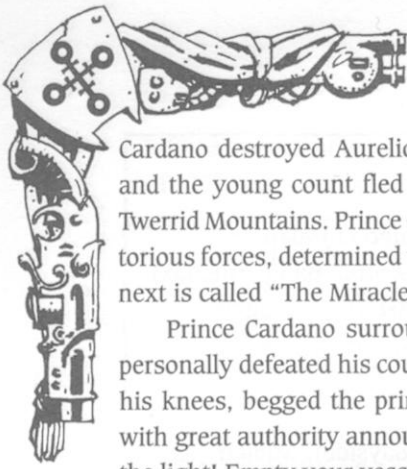
Export: Fruits, livestock, entertainment, corn, cotton, wine, zinc, gold, diamonds, petroleum, timber, Ur artifacts, holy items, iron

Landscape: A pleasant world except for the hot and humid equatorial zone, Icon is heavily forested, with high mountains and broad, fertile plains. Large amounts of rainfall are common in the growing seasons.

the Dynasty of Seven Demons, and again concentrated Li Halan power on war. Sanjiro's heirs were known as the Four Winds Dynasty, descending from Sanjiro to Prince Yamoka, then Prince Julian, and finally to Prince Cardano, who converted the house to the Universal Church of the Celestial Sun. Prince Cardano led our worlds against barbarian incursions. His only joy in life was his mistress, Amorita, an artistic and cultivated woman of rare talent. She alone could sway the cruel councils of Cardano, and she was much beloved by the common people. When Amorita spoke of her desire to join the Eternal Sanctuary of the Amalthean order, to the surprise of many, Cardano let her go, and withdrew into his own councils. His cruelty and crushing taxes, however, spawned an inevitable rebellion. Led by Count Aurelio Li Halan, a distant Icon cousin, it gained support among elements of the military. Soon, Kish and Icon were engulfed in a terrible civil war (4416).

Cardano brutally crushed the rebellion on Kish, hanging 6,000 captured enemies on the streets of Escoral. Next, he moved to Icon, taking charge of the loyalist forces there.





Cardano destroyed Aurelio's army in the Valley of Skulls, and the young count fled into the deep Ur-caverns of the Twerrid Mountains. Prince Cardano pursued, leading his victorious forces, determined to kill the usurper. What followed next is called "The Miracle of Icon."

Prince Cardano surrounded Aurelio's small force and personally defeated his cousin in single combat. Aurelio, on his knees, begged the prince for mercy. Suddenly, a voice with great authority announced itself, saying: "I call you to the light! Empty your vessel!" A blinding vision of Zebulon the Prophet brought Cardano, his family and soldiers to their knees. The image of Zebulon emblazoned itself on banners and metals, and the Prophet sent wave after wave of light through them, and they beheld the Emyprean Flame of the Pancreator. Cardano wept with joy. Seizing his sword, he smashed it on a rock, crying: "We come at last! Forever after my house serves the Pancreator! The Curse is broken!"

Prince Cardano emerged from the caves a changed man. Returning to Kish, he fell before Bishop Amelin and begged forgiveness for the errors of his house. He next began numerous reforms. The Li Halan began providing security, food and health services for all their subjects. Church education was open to all and the University of Kish was founded. Agricultural and economic reforms followed and the crushing taxes were lightened. The population, now given some local representation, welcomed the reforms and grew loyal to their ruling family. Devoting my family to "the Heart of the Prophet," Cardano created the House-Church alliance that remains steadfast and Orthodox to this day. Amorita eventually returned, marrying the prince after his first wife died.

Icon reacted positively to the later rise of Halvor I, Theocrat of the Known Worlds, at a time when my house reached its supreme peak of power. Halvor, the second son of Prince Renaldo the Pentecost, became Bishop of Kish at the young age of 24, and was declared prince of the Li Halan when his brother, Prince Rajmund the Unready, fell in battle against Vuldrok raiders. Halvor wed Lady Avyryl Hawkwood, and was elected Regent of the Known Worlds. Combining the title of Bishop of Kish with prince was unusual in a candidate, but not forbidden.

When Patriarch Wiold IV died, powerful forces from within the Church pushed for Halvor's ascension to Patriarch. A swift election among the Known World bishops and College of Ethicals placed Halvor on the patriarchal dais. For the first time ever, the offices of patriarch and regent were united (4690). Halvor next issued the Decree of Theocratic Succession, stating that the office of regent and patriarch would henceforth be combined. Publicly crowned, Halvor declared himself "Theocrat Halvor I, Patriarch by Grace of the Pancreator and Regent by Grace of the Electors." For five months the Known Worlds, stunned, made no move, as Halvor struck first, leaving his enemies fearful and divided

in council. But Halvor fell into a sudden sickness, sweating blood and falling into raving deliriums (since named Halvor's disease), and wasted away in nine days from a powerful man to a shrunken, withered corpse. No assassin or poison was found, no man or order owed up to the deed. Some claim he died as penance for the earlier sins of my family.

Halvor's allies swiftly proclaimed his young son, Constantine, as Theocrat of the Known Worlds, but the Hawkwoods and Hazat combined forces to oppose him. A new patriarchal election was called and Constantine resigned the office of regent. Conservative elements within the Church hid the Bull of Theocratic Succession, hoping for another Halvor on some future day. On Icon, Halvor is revered as a saint.

Icon's population, subject to proximity with Manitou and the mysterious Vau, are sometimes influenced by those strange beings dwelling across the mist-haunted border. After Cardano's conversion, the house declared a cleansing of alien ideas. One Avestite, Brother Dorjan, became too powerful, stirring the peasantry into destroying those harboring Vau sympathies. So frightened were the authorities of Dorjan's peasant Army of Righteousness that they allowed his cleansing spree to continue, during which an estimated 350,000 perished, notably in the horrible sacking of Rujan (4875).

Starting with small confessionals, Dorjan's list of subversives grew until peasant leaders, Church officials and finally the Li Halan authorities were accused of harboring Vau sympathies. Finally, when Duke Lei Ming Li Halan, the leader of Icon, became implemented in these accusations, the sword fell. Declaring that Brother Dorjan had knowing license with Vau women, he asked Dorjan to publicly cleanse his sins by setting fire to himself. Dorjan refused, but when his followers laid hands on the duke's messengers, the duke's army, disguised as Dorjan's peasant followers, attacked. Seizing Dorjan and brutally slaying the fleeing peasant army, they hauled him off for the crime of seizing a Li Halan messenger. Two months later, in a great open ceremony, Dorjan set himself on fire before the duke to prove his innocence of the charges of sexual congress with the Vau. The duke kicked his burning torso onto the Palace Square, where it broke into ash. Then, taking his favorite concubine, Erianthia, he retired to the palace, a sign that normalcy had returned. Since then, while occasional cleansings have been called, none have really taken hold, thanks to Brother Dorjan's memory.

Solar System

Halo: This planet is named after the halo seen around it from Icon in the winter sky. While it was successfully terraformed during the Second Republic, only a small population of serfs now works its great millirice farms.

Icon: Icon's sole moon of Mandala is smaller than Holy Terra's, and is believed to have been torn from Icon in her



infancy when she was struck by another world.

Conversion: A lifeless, dry world, Conversion once held canals and is believed to have been terraformed by the Anunnaki. Ur ruins still exist here.

Angel's Reach: This orb was once ejected from Fatima, and is sometimes called Fatima's Child. A domed city hosts a military base that has successfully destroyed lethal meteors heading toward Icon on three occasions.

Fatima: Named by the New Style Muslims who landed on Icon, Fatima is a large world with two moons.

Sophia: The planet of wisdom, according to astrologers. A small, cold world with one moon called Kether.

Maria: A water world, although largely frozen. Life has been found in her seas near underwater, volcanic activity.

Tara: A frozen world that is remarkably green due to a unique moss that generates its own energy.

People & Places

Shan Tao and Casaverda

I landed at Shan Tao, a sleepy city with a sleepy spaceport, where chalk boards announced incoming flights. A tall Obun named Verji Thuss, a representative of the planet's ruler, Grand Duke Tan Fou Maximino Li Halan, Prince Flavius's brother, escorted me to the grand duke's palace, complete with honor guard. I later learned that the scholarly Obun advisor was assigned to attend Maximino by Flavius

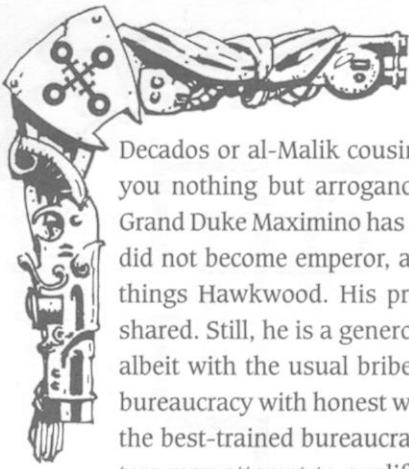
himself, after an embarrassing incident involving a Decados conspiracy discovered at Casaverda. I believe the Obun acted as Flavius's eyes, for Maximino has an unpredictable personality, more prone to the sudden enthusiasms and outbursts of his Hazat blood than the cool, reflective nature of the Li Halan.

In Shan Tao, extreme wealth and poverty met, for guarded estates border peasant shacks of corrugated tin near the great Margesso Sea. It is a tourist spot, favored for its climate. Resorts dot the beaches, and peasants sell various items outside the guarded gates.

Inside the great castle estate of Casaverda I met the grand duke himself, just come from shark hunting. Grand Duke Maximino is powerfully built, and takes pride in his appearance, often wearing his honorary Hazat commander's uniform. He was speaking with a visiting relative of his second wife, Lady Fatima, an al-Malik. Taking me aside, the grand duke said: "Really, writing a book for that Hawkwood upstart about our family. It is unbecoming of a Li Halan knight!" I began to stammer a response when Verji Thuss injected. "Have pity, ruler of blossom-laden Icon, his father has lost one of Cardano's Banners to thieves."

"That Rampart gang, eh?" the duke said. "You know, two banners were stolen from Icon, from gentry families like yours. Well, I'll help you get it back. And one piece of advice: If you must be a Questing Knight, learn from your Hazat,





Decados or al-Malik cousins. Those Hawkwoods can teach you nothing but arrogance." As the emperor knows, the Grand Duke Maximino has never been happy that his brother did not become emperor, and he takes his wrath out on all things Hawkwood. His prejudices, luckily, are not widely shared. Still, he is a generous man, and has ruled Icon well, albeit with the usual bribes until Verji Thuss reformed the bureaucracy with honest workers. The Li Halan worlds have the best-trained bureaucrats, and even serf sons or daughters may attempt to qualify for bureaucratic posts after an intensive two years of testing.

With Dame Chingmy Li Halan, a distant cousin of mine, I explored the grounds. A famed duelist and diplomat, she was resting here before another mission. We entered the Garden of a Thousand Pictograms together. The garden — built with *galisp* from the planet Kordeth — is a maze of shifting plant and shrub pictograms covering two acres. Planted by Countess Katrina Quan Shui Madagan Li Halan a century ago using old Second Republic botanical experiments, the plants constantly shift and form into various pictograms. Famous across the Known Worlds, people have had mystical experiences in these mazes. It is said that, if one meditates in the center, the gardens may shape themselves to answer a question.

We also explored the nearby orchard of a thousand blossoms and a beach where fishermen offered to ferry us to the Jade Islands. A curious relic greeted us, the ghostly form of "The Happy Ancestor." A hologram left over from the Second Republic, the ancestor is a smiling politician soliciting votes. The local peasants give it cakes, thinking it a ghost. No one seems to know the source of the machinery that still projects the hologram.

A week later, I left Duke Maximino's winter court for my tour. Dame Chingmy decided to accompany me (out of boredom with three potential suitors) and we slipped out in the middle of the night, causing the usual scandal. So as not to offend Maximino, we gave Verji Thuss our travel plans and took along three servants, her two and my loyal Ban Lu. We aimed south, renting a dragonfly boat to cross the Jie Ocean, heading for the famously decadent city of Karayan. We soon entered the heavily forested Urtata province.

Urtata

In Urtata, near the Jie Ocean, are many domed examples of the Dymaxion architectural style, believed to have originated among the Vau. This style began in the Apshai Refugee period, toward the end of the Second Republic, when numerous Apshai residents began leaving the Vau/human world due to increased fears of war. These people, bypassing Midian for the most part, found refuge in Urtata, and their wealthy citizens carried their architectural traditions with them. Many large estates were built in the circular, large-

domed style with multiple doors, lined with Vau glyphs. Constructed with ancient technologies, many of these mansions still stand today. The rural Dymaxion tradition is noted for the ornamented dog houses that decorate such plantations. Since only wealthy landowners have the right to own attack dogs under Li Halan law, these are signs of status.

The Apshainghoi, as the refugee's descendants are called, still speak an accented tongue. Many of their folk traditions center on their spring festival, the Gates of Heaven, said to be inspired by Vau ceremonies, although others claim it originated from the Cosmos Carnival. It is a time of masks and reveries, of constant music and parades, not to be missed when one is young. A note to the traveler: the Apshainghoi are a proud people, given to duels of honor, but are also fierce friends once you are accepted among them.

In the back swamp regions, still largely unmapped, black magicians called Hwendoni, who are rumored to practice a debased form of Vau rites, are said to create husks from the unhallowed dead and enslave them for plantation work. While the Church condemns such practices, it is hard to wipe out the secretive cults.

The city of Karayan is famous for gambling, drinking, wrestling, prostitution and music festivals during the pre-holy weeks. After the holy time is over, the populace returns to a strict orthodoxy. These people are both the greatest sinners and the greatest repenters. Ruled by Baron Yao Li Halan, the son of Baroness Auralee Hawkwood, Yao divides Urtata into districts, each with a native headman. The Gronzi clan, an old Asphainghoi family, governs Karayan and holds allegiance to Prince Flavius.

The Apshainghoi needed serfs and workers for their great estates, and so imported many Manitou families. The "Manghoi" swiftly adapted to Icon. Much of the local fruit and packaging industries fell into the control of a few rich Manghoi families, including the Draskhankertsi and Khodijians. When the great blight of 4603-5 wiped out much of the edible fruit, ruining many fortunes, the Khodijians survived through revenues from their great health resort, built in the pine forest region facing the open sea called Crymia. Here the land is free of the languid airs of southern Urtata.

Crymia is a haven from the red fever and creeping ivy diseases of the south. Its pure water springs provide great curative powers, especially from the skin-devouring, parasitical disease called "the burn." Travelers should note that a large insect called a *wudux*, resembling a gigantic dragonfly, carries this disease. It can spread its eggs into the human bloodstream with a single bite. Symptoms of the disease include feelings of nihilism, high fever and a growing loss of one's idealism. If left untreated, the *wudux* larvae hatches and eats the inner organs, destroying the host.

The Manghoi are clan-oriented and largely assimilated

with the neighboring populations, save those in the Pardisio Wood, who tend to keep to their old ways. They are great storytellers and recognize a sort of nobility among themselves. Titles like "duke" and "king" and "prince" are bandied about to denote those in authority, although the Li Halan nobility discourages their use.

In the jungles dwell great creatures, including the chameleon snake, whose venom can kill a person in seconds. It is also home to the Shen-long, the leaping dragons who breathe fire, produced by internal gas. They do not actually fly but stand on two powerful legs that allow them to leap great distances.

Fatamer

I next went to Fatamer, leaving Dame Chingmy in the company of her most recent admirers. It is a mountainous and heavily forested area famous for its Ur relics. Its people are highly friendly and curious, for the most part bronze and brown in appearance. Duke Maximino's daughter, Countess Melissa Shu Miao, rules here. A beautiful young woman, she greeted me on her estate of Tengu. Very studious and less explosive than her famous father, she listened with delight to my tales. The main problem in governing, she explained to me, is that some of the forest people have a mixture of Church and folk beliefs, and this heresy is hard to root out. Recently, two remote clans began warring and it is hard for the authorities to intervene in the backcountry.

Cave of Zebulon's Miracle

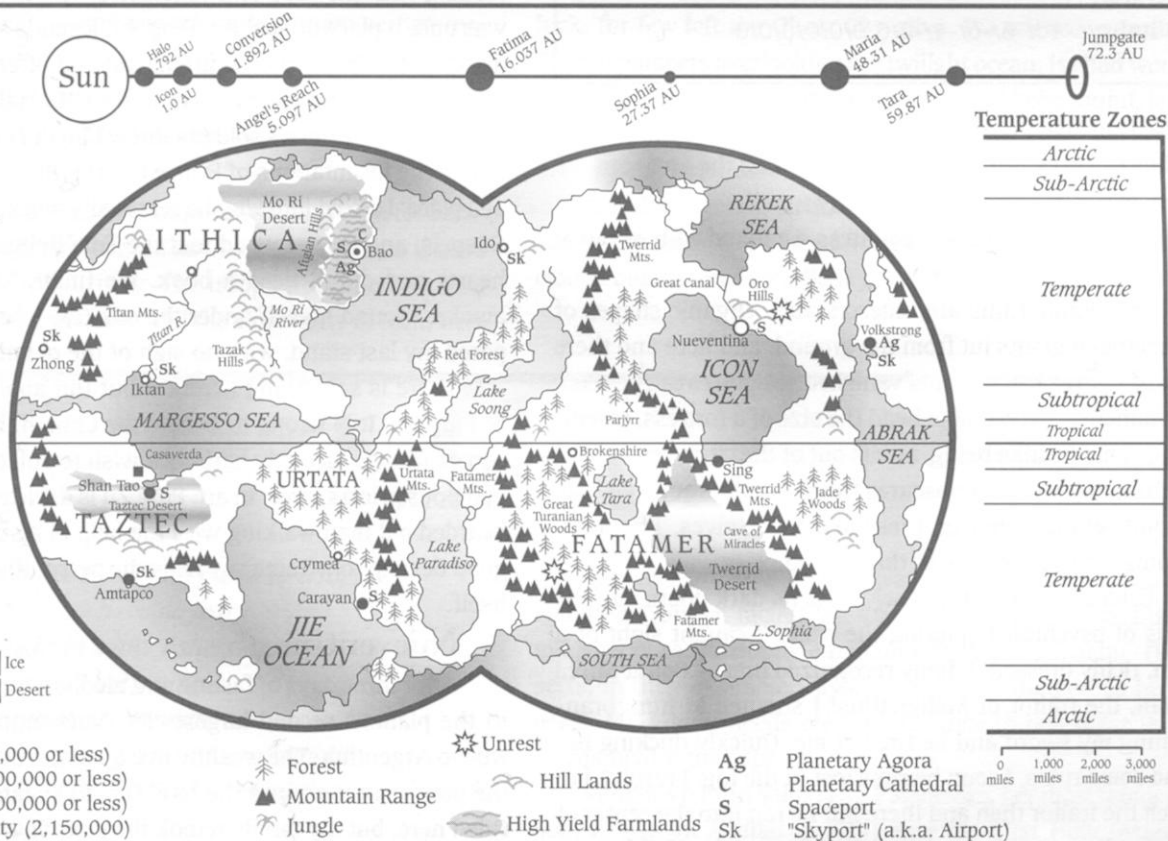
Princess Melissa took me to the holy spot in the Twerrid Mountains where Prince Cardano converted to the Orthodox faith. Pilgrims journey here from offworld. Overwhelmed, I fell down in prayer inside the large cavern where Zebulon the Prophet appeared before my family and saved us. I felt my heart on fire. Countess Melissa also knelt.

Before the Twerrid Mountains lies the great Twerrid Desert, where Cardano's forces were victorious over his cousin Aurelio. You can feel Icon's currents here, Melissa told me, and we prayed into the night, the thousand desert stars about, and indeed I could feel a soft humming through the earth. The following day, the countess informed me that the authorities had chased a suspicious man who had aided the offworlders in stealing banners into the ghostly preadamite ruins of Parjyrr.

Parjyrr and Shan-Xiao Forest

Mixing forbidden science and magic, Prince Ustirin attempted to create a gateway into the unreflective realms using the energies from Parjyrr. So powerful was his rite that it opened a rift, destroying all life within a 400-mile radius, save for the prince himself. The place became cursed, the haunt of demons. Removing the area from all maps, Prince Ustirin placed guard stations about its perimeter. The Eskatonics state that Icon herself is using her energies to slowly heal this sore inflicted upon her. In 600 years the

Icon





Sheng-long

Also known as Icon Leaping Dragons or Icon Salamanders, Sheng-long are about human size with powerful legs that allow them to leap nearly four meters upwards. They are amphibious, hatching their young in the swamps of Urtata and Tebun, and taking to land within five months after birth. They resemble large salamanders. As they grow, they produce scaley armor. Average lifespan is 30-37 years. They can travel both in herds or alone.

Sheng-long have red markings on their stomachs, necks and tails, a colorful display used for mating (males are more colorful and also have yellow frills about their necks). They stand upright, sometimes in tree limbs, looking for prey. Their diet is mainly meat but they also eat swamp grass. Their bodies convert swamp gas to chemical fire, which is emitted in bursts from mouth sacs and ignites in the air. Some animals have developed thick shells for protection against Sheng-long fire.

Body: Strength 7, Dexterity 8, Endurance 7

Mind: Wits 4, Perception 5, Tech 0

Natural skills: Dodge 6, Fight 7, Shoot 7, Vigor 7, Sneak 9

Weapons: Teeth (INIT -1, DMG 3d), Claws (DMG 2d), Firebreath (ROLL DX + Shoot, DMG 5d +3d for three turns after hitting, RNG 6 meters)

Armor: 7d

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

cursed land has shrunken 300 miles in diameter to its present radius of 100 miles. Li Halan troops guard the area, but the perimeter is too large to completely watch.

Saying farewell to the countess, I entered with my loyal servant, Ban Lu.

The titanic ruins are indescribable. Organic shapes of promethean giants jut from the ground, and here and there an odd inscription or hint of vanished sculptures can be seen. An immense, carved blue head the size of a fortress, resembling some godlike being, stares out of the city's center. The fog from the Po River obscures things, and through a white shroud, ghostly images presented themselves, ill-spirits, feeding off the energies of that cursed place.

Eskatonics state that Parjyrr opens dark doors into the souls of psychics. Exploring the ruins, I caught sight of a man, richly dressed. I dimly recognized him — Count Shi Li Halan, the traitor of Malignatus! I shouted at him, brandishing my sword and he fired at me. Quickly ducking behind some ruins, I soon became lost in the fog. I resolved to catch the traitor then and there but he ran into the center of the swirling energies and vanished from sight. Had he sto-

len Cardano's Banner? The ruins are said to connect various physical and spiritual worlds, for those who can use them. Legends name these paths Yun Wu, the Road of Mist. It is whispered that the pre-conversion princes had mastered these dark pathways.

Three shapes appeared in the fog, taller than any human, leathery beings, gaunt and elongated, covered head to toe with multiple eyes. They set upon me with demonic strength and I hacked at them. They bled burning, green liquid. I realized that they were what the local peasantry named Hun-Gui, and feared they would eventually defeat me, for they are corrupted spiritual entities, immaterial in origin. I ran but I could hear them call after me in gibbering tongues, mocking my voice and the voices of my loved ones.

I fled the Ghost City pursued by these demons. My servant Ban Lu and I were out of luck, for our lasers did them little injury. We sought to make a final stand at the edge of the Shan-Xiao Forest, my back to an old oak, sword in hand. I prayed to the Pancreator to accept my worthless soul in the halls of my mighty ancestors, then braced myself. They came, demon beaks and tongues of fire, but then suddenly halted. An old man appeared, waving his staff at them, casting great theurgical energies in their direction. They melted back in the direction of the city.

"I am Ping Zu," the old man said, and led us to an ancient cottage surrounded by pools of bright goldfish. I asked him if he was the Ping Zu of legend, and he merely smiled, feeding us some soup and vegetables. The city, he claimed, was once a place of healing. Ping Zu, legends say, knew the danger that Prince Ustirin attempted and offered to plant a holy tree there for the protection of the Li Halan and common folk. The prince's soldiers threw him out of Parjyrr and, due to the incantations of Prince Ustirin, the city became an evil place. I asked him why he reportedly mocked the Omega Gospels, and he answered that the True Religion was in all hearts and didn't need a book. We finally slept. When I awoke, I found myself under the oak tree where I had prepared my last stand, with no sign of the old man.

There is something heretical but fun about the legend of Ping Zu. It is wrong to debate the Church, but each person sometimes secretly harbors a wish to pull the wool over pompous priests' eyes. In art, Ping Zu is depicted as a white-bearded old man walking with the help of a stick. That is a good description. Some say he is the personification of Icon itself.

Nueventina

After three days of fasting and meditative prayer, I went to the planet's second largest city, Nueventina, originally Nuevo Argentina. The wealthy live up in the Oro hills, while the poor cluster around the bay. For 200 years the Muster ruled here, but my family retook the place in a bloody siege in 4979 with the aid of Hazat advisors. The Muster left a



mess that the Li Halan social services are still sorting out. The city formerly attracted runaway serfs seeking freeman status or recruitment in the Muster. Gangs of children and dogs still run wild here, and the mercenary Nung recruit heavily from the urban poor, filling the niche left by the Muster. When I walked down the streets, the peasants bowed to me, parting like water before a ship, recognizing me as one of the Illustrious Family of Supreme Merit. Some touched the hem of my robe for good luck.

Rich ranchers bring their goods to the city. Lord Mayor Jin Li Halan showed off the tanneries, canning factories and millirice packaging plants. There are still pro-League guerrillas in the hills, supported by some of the wealthy, who chaff under the heavier taxation of my family. Ironically, my house has hired the Muster to hunt them down.

I inquired if Duke Maximino's reforms helped the city. Jin shrugged. "More children are in schools, but it's hard to convince their parents not to have them working by age seven." While some high officials have been imprisoned for bribery, it is very much a way of life here, a remnant from the League days. Grand Duke Maximino and the Church leaders have begun to open more free granaries to feed the poor and Maximino has implemented a long-term plan called the Three Seeds. This is an attempt at creating a more stabilized local economy that will bring prosperity to the streets. There are hopeful signs. The old Rojos historic district is coming back to affluence.

The popular soap opera, "Nobles Also Weep," is filmed in Nueventina. The commoners love it. Certain serf stereotypes — including the wise, motherly maid and the helpful young manager — are shown in positive lights, often saving their lords from neglectful mistakes.

Bao

The capital city of Bao is impressive, with high fortress-like buildings towering behind its Obsidian Gate. Bao is alive with commerce and activity. The troops from the Fort Icon garrison come here on leave and the University of Icon, with

its theological and agricultural schools, is located here. Old Second Republic buildings dwarf the streets in giant, haphazard geometric shapes, while the younger buildings are stained red, and are built lower, many in the Ascendancy style with numerous, stylized turrets. The Li Halan palace, once the old ziggurat parliament, overlooks the magnificent gardens that surround the Royal City. This is where Duke Maximino rules as governor.

The entertainment is surprisingly sophisticated here, with master storytellers and poets aplenty. There is little vice save near the North Entrance, in the offworld ghetto named Progress Village, a run-down Second Republic experiment in inexpensive housing. No one remembers how it got its name and it is spoken without irony. The Bao Zoo and Botanical Gardens, built about the artificially constructed Swan Autumn Lakes, are pleasing to the eye.

Archbishop Artemis Pan-Gu Li Halan is an older man, conservative in thought and deed but possessing inner warmth. I was to interview him on the Church's progress, about the real conversions in the south, the spread of more zealous priests to rural areas, the rooting out of heresies and the like, but I found myself talking about my experiences in the Ghost City.

The archbishop suggested I pray over a holy relic for cleansing and showed me the Star Map of St. Paulus, given to guide those on dark journeys. I went to the St. Lextius Cathedral and prayed. The archbishop later met me after my long meditations and remarked that I was blessed with good luck, for few left the Ghost City alive. We walked onto the Church parapets overlooking the twilight ocean. He had word from Duke Maximino that some papers had been found, left by the Banner robbers. They were notes, inscribed in codes used by the heretical Rampart sect of the Zhi-Su.

A forlorn feeling struck me. I watched the wind ripple across the sad waves of the Shou Ocean. Night fell and heavy clouds obscured the starlit sky.

Midian

*Midian's fish are sweet and prone to error
When young, they have no fear
And get caught in many fishers' traps
The old do not tell the young,
Having moved to deeper waters
Every year the young return to get caught*

— Poet Zi Chun (4663-4747), reworking one of Urth's notables, Su Tung P'o

Midian stands as the Stalwart Guardian of the Mist-Haunted Frontier, facing the Vau threat on Apshai and the vile sins of technosophy emanating from Leagueheim. The serfs, in their excitable ways, are prone to dangerous heresies. My family needs eternal vigilance to pull these evil weeds before they spread.

Midian's patron saint is St. Palamedes, her most famous son. It was on Midian in 2851 that the First Holy Synod declared Palamedes Alecto the first Patriarch of the Univer-



Midian Traits

Ruler: Duke Augustus Zhu Li Halan

Cathedral: St. Palamedes Cathedral, Santo Aleto (Orthodox)

Agora: Fu Street, Saiwuhn (Li Halan/Merchant League)

Garrison: 7

Capital: Saiwuhn

Jumps: 3

Adjacent worlds: Leagueheim (dayside), Icon (nightside), Apschai (nightside)

Solar system: Fen-Hong (0.265 AU), Tai Bai (0.423 AU), Midian (1.087 AU), Lian (3.864 AU), Magyar (9.672 AU), Kalevala (16.234 AU), Jumpgate (33.4 AU)

Tech: 4 (6 in Lyonesse)

Human population: 670 million (21 million in Lyonesse)

Alien population: 3 million (mainly Obun in Saiwuhn)

Resources: Forests, fossil fuels, metal ore, agricultural products

Exports: Wood, aluminum, telecommunications equipment, think machines, transportation and parts, sugar, alcohol, millirice, wheat, human labor, textiles, seafood, weapons

Landscape: Temperate and mountainous in the north and extreme south, Midian receives abundant rainfall. A mini-ice age has led to colder poles. Zujan, surrounded by mountains and lush jungles, is semi-tropical.

sal Church. His most famous miracle remains the opening of the Ukar Jumpgate. The site of his birth is still venerated, now hosting a cathedral in the Urth style, the Church of St. Palamedes' Nativity. Paintings of his nativity can be found everywhere, depicting his soldier father holding up the young babe, who looks at the light (the symbol of that great man's life) pouring in from an octagon-shaped window (prefiguring the Church he will one day found). The most famous version is by the Midian genius, Julian Basilio (4815-4868).

History

Discovered around 2490, Midian was settled by many factions, the most powerful of which were the Rosendorfs, an aristocratic-mercantile family originating from the Rhine Valley region on Urth. Midian suffered 300 years of warfare under the conquests of King Wilhelm Rosendorf (2687-99) and his descendants. These wars eventually saw the destruction of the Rosendorfs and the emergence of the Aleptos and tyrant city-states, as well as the republican Barrow clan. The first patriarch, Palamedes Aleto, spent his young man-

hood battling these shifting alliances until the Prophet's Message converted him to a higher calling. Although he was not one of the Prophet's earliest followers, Palamedes was a great aid to Zebulon, organizing his followers, bringing in supplies and standardizing travel itineraries.

When Zebulon disappeared in 2849 on his journey to the Vau, Palamedes rallied the downhearted followers and built the Universal Church of the Celestial Sun around the Prophet's message. Although he soon moved the young Church's headquarters to Urth from Midian, he donated some of his Midian lands to the new faith, upon which was later built St. Aleto's Monastery. One of Midian's many proud claims is "Mother of the Church."

The Barrow clan became the leader of the Democratic Northern League, an alliance of small mercantile republics centered on the Lyonesse continent. The Aleptos, along with the tyrant-states, resented their technological and mercantile wealth, and formed the Orthodox Unionists. They began an 11-year war against the technically superior Northern League. For eight years, the swift Lyonesse sky-ships pursued hit-and-run tactics deep into Unionist territory, but the vast Unionist armies pushed northward. Finally, after the disastrous Battle of Vout, the Northern League, facing invasion, turned to Prince Leonardo Li Halan for aid.

Prince Leonardo responded by crushing the Orthodox Unionists in a brilliant, three-year war. Naming himself "Protector of Midian," Leonardo carved large family estates from the vanquished tyrants' lands. To the people of Lyonesse, he proved most generous, allowing them to retain their democratic constitution as long as they swore an oath of loyalty to House Li Halan. This tradition continues to this day; Lyonesse is still ruled by representative notions of government but under my house's watchful eye. They supply the Favored of Heaven with the technical base for the house's weaponry, navies and communications equipment.

Other technical centers rose and fell, but only Lyonesse remains, the loyal, technological jewel in the Li Halan crown. This is due to the founding of the great technical schools, the University of Lyonesse and the Interstellar Technology Institute, where science, mathematics and engineering were kept alive after the Fall. Despite the dangers of technoscopy, my family knew that some technology must be preserved to maintain order.

During the Second Republic, Markain the Magnificent (ruled 3796-3829) began my family's drive to supreme power through bribes and blackmail, eventually gaining dictatorial power by severing most Republican control from our worlds. Titling himself "Prince of Kish, Icon and Midian, and Lord of the Outer Hegemony," he endured the snickers of the Republican elites while building up his forces. His ceaseless efforts paid off for his descendants. Toward the end of the Second Republic, as loyalty grew toward House Li Halan,



a story appeared called "Duty." It tells of a young man who feels paranoid and empty, wondering about the meaning of life. He finds solace in one of the Li Halan loyalty movements aimed at the young. The character realizes that the loyalty movement channels his anger and feelings of inferiority at "the enemies of the Li Halan." The story's author was later assassinated.

To be honest, these times confuse me. How could anyone feel "empty" when the Church has set our lives to duty? I often forget that those were days of declining faith and technical magic. It is like watching too many of those magic lantern displays they show in the cities; one gets listless and bored.

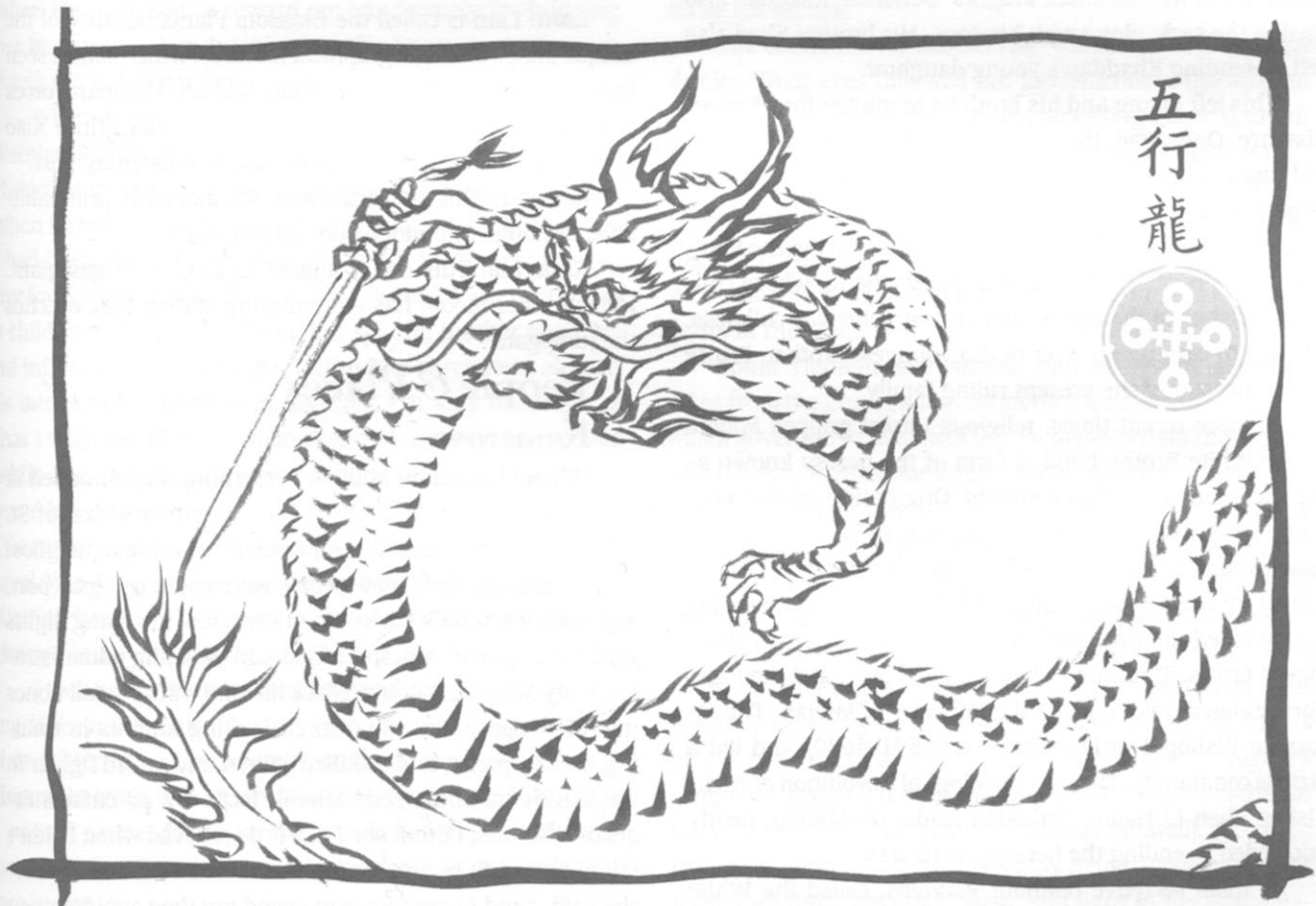
The Fall of the Second Republic on Midian saw the trade routes suffer, initiating a sudden panic in the banks. My family shored up confidence by artificially propping up some key industries, but the financial drain was great. Arable lands were leased to families through generational contracts. With trained royal agriculturalists, Midian soon thrived anew. Emperor Vladimir Alecto had relatives here, but after his sudden death, my family aided in the purge of the Alectos. No heir of Vladimir would thrive on Li Halan soil.

The famous "Midian Dynasty" began with Prince Constantine, the son of Theocrat Halvor I and Lady Avryl Hawkwood. Constantine inherited his father's titles of theocrat, but due to overwhelming opposition, he returned to

the Garden Worlds. Many feared the influence of the "Three Cousins" on Constantine during his troubled regency, but when he took power at eighteen, he had his bodyguard slay the unscrupulous Count Su and his brothers. Preferring Midian to Kish, he built the Dreaming Palace in Midian's old city of Saiwuhn. A vast cultural shift was already taking place on Midian. Poets, scientists and intellectuals came from Kish and Icon for the climate, but also for the opportunities available here. The great landscape painters revived the older style of simplifying their subject matter and Li Halan poetry reached its highest mark.

Those who feared Constantine would be an overly pious man like his father were surprised by his liberal attitudes towards matters of faith. He relaxed the orthodox laws and the older, traditional house names began to reappear, shedding the interstellar titles. Constantine took the title Prince Wu-Se-Yun, the Cloud of Five-Fold Happiness, to encourage such titles. The Li Halan ways blended with Midian's native culture to produce the highest flowering of the arts on the Garden Worlds.

The famous, haunting painting of the Third Concubine, covering her face and seemingly walking over a lotus pond, is a beautiful reminder of that time. Created by an unknown artist, the lovely woman, suggested by simple lines, seems too pure for the world, an illusion evaporating before the rising eastern sun.





Even the stoic military mellowed. Li Halan knights gathered at midnight outings to contemplate the moon's reflection in willow-shrouded garden ponds, displaying a culture given over to aestheticism and contemplation of form. It was a period of dreaming masques, poetry and art societies, a relaxation from warfare, a golden summer of synthesis and rest.

Constantine's daughter, Princess Qiang-Wei, wed twice, first to Count Farouk al-Malik and then to a distant cousin, Count Hikado, upon Farouk's death. Her sons were the famous Five Princes. The first two, Khaddan and Shad, possessed al-Malik blood; the last three, Chang, Tursen and Xiao, were the sons of Count Hikado. Poets in later days attributed Khaddan and Shad with "outside" influences, half-foreigners in the Garden Worlds, while Chang, Tursen and Xiao were depicted as virtuous sons of the people and faith. The princess's reign was troubled by incursions from Rampart, as its guilds enforced unfair trade treaties and seized certain cities.

Her son, Prince Khaddan, urged on by his three younger brothers, finally took to war against Rampart. The Rampart guilds, calling on their great financial resources, raised an army of mercenaries that stormed Kemerovo, leaving 300,000 dead in their wake. Li Halan knights, contemplating the moon's reflection and vying for poetry contests, were no match for the hardened warriors who beset them, and the flower of the "aesthetic knights" perished. Khaddan also died in the sack, along with his sons. His brother Shad also fell, defending Khaddan's young daughter.

This left Chang and his brothers to muster forces of resistance. Only Xiao, the youngest brother, who lived in the old capital of Escoral on Kish, had the training and military experience needed to raise and command great armies. Gathering forces from Icon and Kish, he struck, driving the Rampart invaders out of the Dreaming City. Chang, whose children perished in the attack, and Tursen, who was childless, decided to turn power over to the youngest brother, Prince Xiao, ancestor of the present ruling family.

In more recent times, religious unrest gripped Midian as the White Brotherhood, a form of the heresy known as the Incarnatism, gained converts. Originating on Gwyneth with Father Zerek Mezentius, who was rightly slain by the Hawkwood authorities in 4203, the Incarnates were welcomed by the pre-conversion Li Halan. After Cardano, my family aided the Universal Church in correcting their theological errors. This was a slow, arduous task, and the Eight Corrections did not take hold in all parts of Midian. The Incarnate Bishop Thurlow survived (4591-4680) and led a sizable community. The later Theological Revolution of Archbishop Chen Li Halan, Orthodox leader on Midian, nearly succeeded in ending the heresy (4815-21).

A small secretive remnant survived, called the White

Brotherhood, which revived Incarnate heresy during the Emperor Wars. Three Li Halan knights slew the Incarnate leader, Annika Dominikas, on Malignatius. My brother was one of them. The vile sin of the Incarnatism nonetheless proves to be a tough weed. Bishop Lucan, their Midian leader, is in hiding with a price on his head. Anyone who discovers his whereabouts is instructed to contact the Li Halan authorities immediately.

Elsewhere, guerilla combat against rebels continues in the more remote Zujan regions, and other heretical religious groups sprout in places, especially in the deep south, where life is hard.

Solar System

Xi-he: Midian's sun is affected by the fading suns phenomenon. A medium size star, she seems to be aging rapidly.

Fen-Hong: The pink world, those born under its ascendancy make great lovers. Fen-Hong is too hot for colonization. She is called Tai-Bai's little sister.

Tai-Bai: Recently, the Li Halan and Merchant League began mining terraformed Tai-Bai. She has a population of 1.5 million under the rule of Baroness Meng Li Halan. She is too warm in the equatorial regions, so her colonies dot the extreme north and south.

Midian: Midian's moon is Peng-Lai, hosting a military base. The Woman in the Moon is said to be playing a lyre.

Lian: Lian is called the Blossom Planet because of the unique shape of its geographical features, which can be seen from space. Slightly smaller than Midian, Rampart forces claimed it 300 years ago. It was retaken under Prince Xiao and remains a fortified Li Halan base and listening post.

Magyar: This gas giant with six moons is uninhabitable, although two moons do contain water.

Kalavala: This orb is almost as large as a gas giant. Helsinki, her moon, has a monitoring station that watches the jumpgate.

People & Places

Kemerovo

When I landed on Midian, everything was shrouded in a thick mist. I could barely see the great Cathedral of St. Mantius, which overshadows Kemerovo, an opaque ghost hiding from her flock. Few people were about the spaceport, and serfs with chalk sticks languidly wrote incoming flights under the gaze of a bespectacled and yawning administrator. Lady Mireille D'Rouge Glace met me with a small honor guard, composed mostly of tired-looking knights in training. Young, pretty, and a skilled painter and sword fighter in the Jian-do tradition, Lady Mireille lacks few potential suitors or admirers. I think she felt a little relieved when I didn't fall in love with her on the spot. "We can be friends then," she said, "and I won't have to spend my time avoiding you



with imaginary engagements." Naturally, the more I ignored her, the more she pursued me and the more I wanted her to pursue me. She met me in the stead of her friend, Kemerovo's ruler, Duchess Fativa Li Halan, who was away at her Holy Terran estates. Lady Mireille hails from Rampart, and was paying a visit.

The streets of Kemerovo are narrow, its buildings cluttered. She is named the Dreaming City for the beauty of her parks and the submerged third of the city on the Zao Chen River. Here stands the Church of Kemerovo's Martyrs, where many were buried after the Rampart massacre. An eternal flame marks the sacred Hill of the Slaughtered, above a great stone pyramid erected over the dead. Kemerovo, once ruled by various tyrants, now finds herself under Li Halan protection. I spent three days before parting from Lady Mireille, but we made arrangements to meet again.

Baron Inami's Estate

Outside Kemerovo are the rural estates of Baron Inami Li Halan. A powerful, hard man, his star was rising until one of his knights slew an old friend of Duke Maximino's in a drunken fury. He agreed to meet with me due to my Kish connections and to question me about the non-Garden Worlds. He wished to know if I had heard of his sister, Erian. I answered with old news, saying she had reportedly been in Hazat space with her confessor and some companions. The baron nodded, and said that we could be useful to each other. He promised to reward me handsomely for bringing her in or killing her. Inami was quite frank about it, as we drank tea in his gardens.

It is rumored that he tried to kill Erian after their father disinherited her. I gather he has had little success with the Hidden Martyrs in this matter. I was noncommittal and vague when he returned to this wearisome topic, and indeed, since I had been the victim of slander myself, I felt some sympathy for the sister of such a monster. Indeed, I knew Erian as a child, and the idea of giving her spiteful brother any useful information revolted me. I think the baron sees all men as mirrors of himself — in his eyes, I'm sure he imagines that I wish to kill my own brother and combine our estates while begging Prince Flavius for promotion. I was glad to leave his estates, which are well fortified. (Against whom? The rumor of his sister's shadow?) His major allies are mid-level Tian-long who have a not-so secret society called the Rising Phoenix. They meet every so often, get drunk, exchange oaths and impregnate the servants.

I took a caravan over the Shuijiao Shengyin, the Dreaming Hills, a dry, oak-forested region where the serfs swear that subterranean, preadamite artifacts cause wanderers to dream. In truth, I did have strange dreams in this region as I passed near a destroyed fleshsynth factory, recently captured by the Church on raids against outlawed body-part producers.

Zujan

Zujan is the shadow of Lyonesse, and is extremely backwards and poor. Under her semitropical skies all life appears to be illusion. All efforts are vain, all is maya, unreal. The red latta bark is chewed by the multitudes, producing hallucinations. Thus Zujan herself becomes a collective dream-state.

In the city of Svarbandun, under tropical trees, beggars are everywhere and people die in the streets. I witnessed 11-year old children being sold openly as slaves. Thievery is a way of life. Five years ago, my family moved into Zujan in force, driving out the local gentry, the clannish Matyas and Javak. Their supporters still fight us in the hills. A space bombardment destroyed Eyodha, the city of the Javak clan, and with it the majority of their forces.

I asked the Li Halan Governor, Count Vladamir Meng, about conditions. "Well, this was an al-Malik fief until the Emperor Wars, when the Matyas and Javak overthrew old Fasil with our aid. But they attempted to undersell the League with slave labor factories, and the Church took an interest in the welfare of the people. We came in to restore order." Why we wanted to aid the League I couldn't grasp, but Vladimir laughed. "Really, we gave them concessions here, on Ungavorox and elsewhere. Don't be naive, cousin. Why else would they give only lip service to our seizure of Rampart? Our later deals were too profitable for them, and profitable for us, too."

The count waved two serving women over to pour us drinks. Their eyes followed our movements in the languid Zujan style, taking in everything, accessing every strength and weakness. "There are many of them and so few of us," he lamented, looking down from the balcony over the huddled masses that he must inevitably feed. I understood his point. Zujan has a way of swallowing you in its dream. At night, the perfume and sweat from a thousand bodies wafts in the wind.

Count Vladimir is an affable man, somewhat stout. He rules from the Coral Palace, formerly the residency of the al-Malik governor. Retainers of the old dynasty fight the Matyas and Javak as well as our forces, so the province is extremely volatile. Al-Malik rule was concerned with profit, guarding sugar and uranium interests, and the rulers encouraged slave-plantation conditions. It is dangerous to go toward the Amari Mountains, where much of the unrest takes place.

The first Li Halan granaries have now opened in the province, but even my family's famed generosity to the poor is sorely taxed by so many people here. Count Vladimir's plan is to aid the local cotton industry to stabilize the region's economy, along with reintroducing small, local industries to the villages — self-sufficient activities the al-Malik destroyed to protect their monopolies on many items. Incidentally, the former al-Malik governor, Fasil, still lives in his island es-



tate of Mût, bemoaning his loss and crying to anyone who will listen. He is allowed to stay, a king without a throne.

Svarbandun is filled with choking smog; everybody drives primitive petrol vehicles. The city has its rich district, the Coral City, and the Avenue of Fates, with its great market. On the whole, Zujan is very poor, ever followed by her attendant handmaidens of crime and prostitution. The villages are somewhat primitive but family ties remains strong, and the Orthodoxy of the masses is very real, if somewhat fatalistic. Slavery is slowly become scarcer. The cultural activities are rather poor for a traveling aristocrat. Here and there, vestiges remain of former ruling families, like fantastic oases in the desert. The poor Zujan folk possess colorful dances and music, and are somewhat more productive than the sons of their former rulers, who are sinking into early senility.

A warning: The Midian gakko cat, with its fierce fangs and claws, is a real terror, prowling the jungles in this region.

Torbec is a small city, long under Li Halan rule, and rather civil and orderly. Here the famous Torbec orchards provide aesthetically pleasing gardens of rolling hills and bright flowering trees. The area is noted for its beautiful robes and fashion as well as wines, and is directly governed by Prince Flavius through his representative, Sir Micho.

Justinian Fiefs

North of Zujan are two small Justinian holdings, Redwood and Voro, ruled by Marquis Argus and the willful Dame Octavia. I met with them, as they are kin through my mother. Theirs is a country existence, and they feel a sense of wounded pride at having lost so much, falling from a major noble family. Some resent marriages into other noble houses. "Some in my family look at what the Li Halan inherited through marriage with us," Dame Octavia said. "Seeing you, they are reminded of it. Somehow, you get all the lands."

"A Li Halan custom," I answered.

A new in-law, Sir Evan Hawkwood, seemed glad to have my company. "Really, these people have long memories, most of them bitter," he confessed on our hunting expedition.

St. Palamedes Monastery

Leaving my Justinian kinsmen, I went to St. Palamedes Monastery, said to be the largest monastic retreat in the Known Worlds. Built on land donated by St. Palamedes himself, the monastery now houses over 1,000 souls. The acting archivist, Sister Tangella, led me to the famous archives, where I researched much of the planet's history. The monastery's wine is famous, as are its crops. The reliquary holds a piece of Zebulon's Shirt, and the brothers told me there was a recent attempt to steal it. Telling of my experiences, the head brother, Lisenius, decided to contact others who could help me.

St. Palamedes Cathedral and Santo Aleto

I next went to St. Palamedes Cathedral, in the small city of Santo Aleto on Church land. Two churches thrive in this small, walled rural town, where, legend has it, St. Palamedes was born. After visiting the ancient Church of St. Palamedes's Nativity, I arrived at the great St. Palamedes Cathedral, the scene of Palamedes's Ascendancy. Here Archbishop Mezenzikes, recently come to his title upon the death of Archbishop Ch'en Li Halan, greeted me.

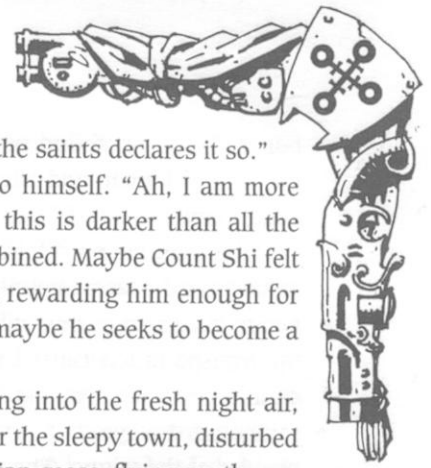
Thin and gaunt with wild white air, the austere archbishop is a rarity on the Li Halan worlds, a non-family planetary Church leader. Authoritative rather than charismatic, he was interested in the Questing Knights' recent explorations of the severed worlds, and wondered what sort of faiths had sprouted out there, far from the Church's guiding lamps. He takes keen interest in heretical splinters from the Omega Gospels, and wondered if such folk can be brought back into the fold without a crusade.

"Nonetheless, it would be economically and politically wise for Alexius to back a crusade," he said while drinking wine. "He could send the energy of his rival houses into battle while reaping the territorial rewards." The archbishop spoke of recently closing illegal-tech sweatshops on Zujan. A man of politics and whispers, it is said that he spins many webs. His servants call him the "old wizard," a sign of respect for his political skills.

I found an Ukar in his service, an unusual choice for a high Church leader. More unusual, this Ukar, called Glam, was a Scraver. "I worked for the old man before," Glam told me. "When he offered to bring me back with my family for a three-year contract, I agreed." Glam only chuckled when I asked his duties. "Oh, I'm a curator," he replied, and the archbishop laughed at this cryptic reference. Mezenzikes then took me by the elbow and showed me to the balcony. The Ukar guarded the doorway from his attendant priests.

"Presumably your superiors will read your notes," he said. "Hopefully, someone will inform the patriarch. His servants have acted too slowly and I am moving without instruction. Write that a new Zebulon sect has appeared from Manitou, that corrupted Vau world. It is a primitive sect, without any of our glorious history." Here he produced a most bitter laugh. "No martyrdoms, schisms, or conversions by laser fire with them. Oh, but their simple tenet of faith makes our weighty cathedral seem pompous and somehow unclean by comparison."

Presently, he continued. "I have questioned them, and they believe some sort of catastrophe is occurring in Vau space. They speak like Eskatonics, but I get their gist. They have a camp near Byrs. I must attend to these half-heathens. As if administrating my eternal flock did not cause enough cares...."



Archbishop Mezenzikis is concerned about slave labor in Zujan and is the first archbishop in memory making serious moves to halt it, working with my family in this matter. I spoke of my quest for Cardano's Banners and he said that he had already heard of my plight. "There is a faith on Ram-part called Zhi-Su," he said. "It does not care much for the Pancreator and is completely blasphemous. I am holding a member in my jail who attempted to steal a holy icon from my old Church in Vespers, the Reflective Eye of St. Xing the Serene. I will take you to interview him."

In a jail smelling of hay and mildew, we met the Ram-part prisoner. He fell to his knees before us. One of the guards jabbed him with an electronic stick and he began talking. He sobbed that a Li Halan noble led his sect in taking the items. With a slap from the archbishop, he elaborated: "I think he is going to use their energy to feed to the darkness." It seems like Count Shi Li Halan, who betrayed me long ago on Malignatius, is attempting to sacrifice the images of the Prophet to the lords of the Unreflective Realms. "Is such a thing possible?" I whispered aloud.

"The horrendous sin of *obscurus pascare* speaks of feeding the Dark Powers with the Light," the archbishop said. "Allowing the dark to spread like a detestable virus into the light. However..." Mezenzikis grew silent in thought, then added: "This is theurgically difficult, for the darkness is dense and the holy energy of the Empyrian Flame is alive, vibra-

tory. At least, the testimony of the saints declares it so."

The archbishop chuckled to himself. "Ah, I am more politician than theologian, but this is darker than all the heretical groups on Midian combined. Maybe Count Shi felt slighted by the Decados for not rewarding him enough for his betrayal of Malignatius. Or maybe he seeks to become a dark god himself."

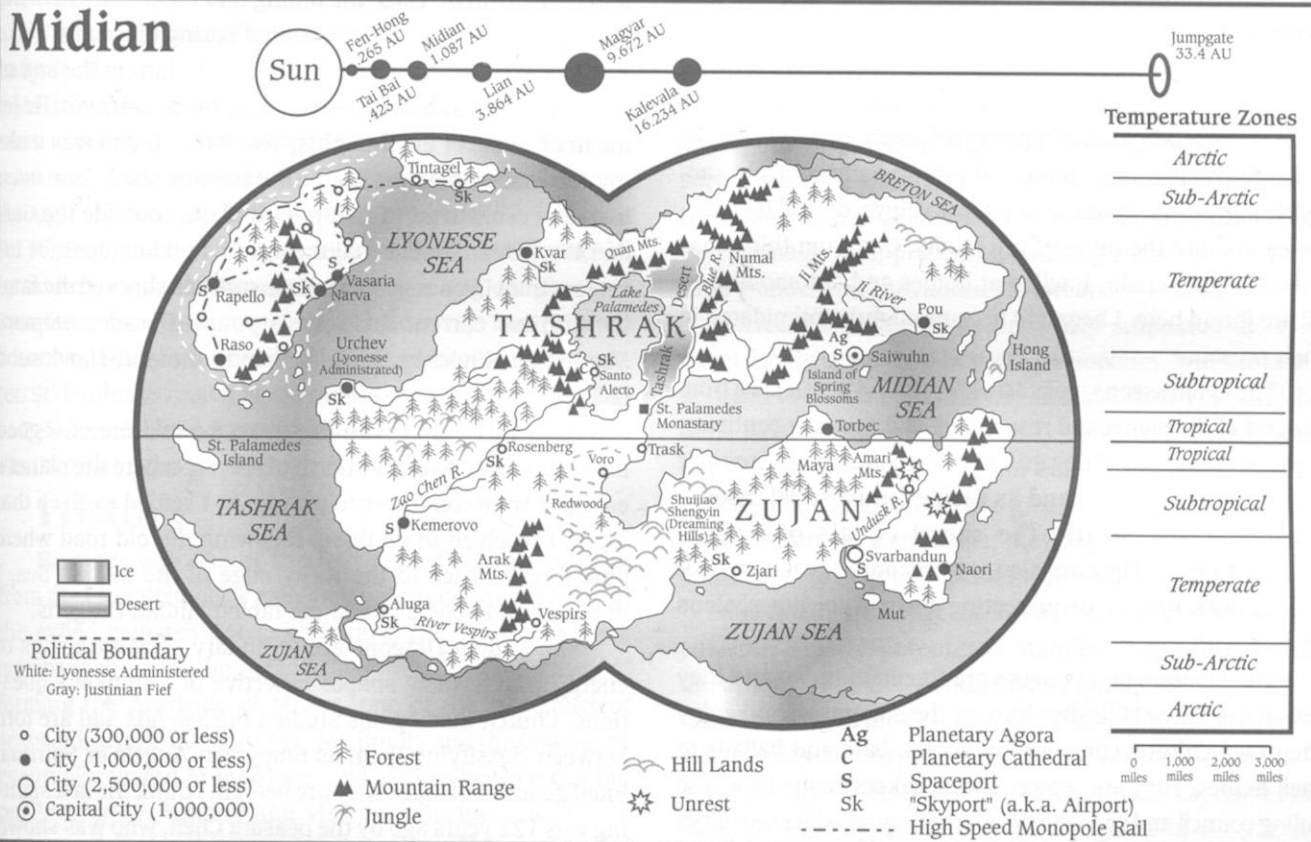
With that, we left, ascending into the fresh night air, where a million stars shown over the sleepy town, disturbed only by the sad honking of Midian geese, flying south.

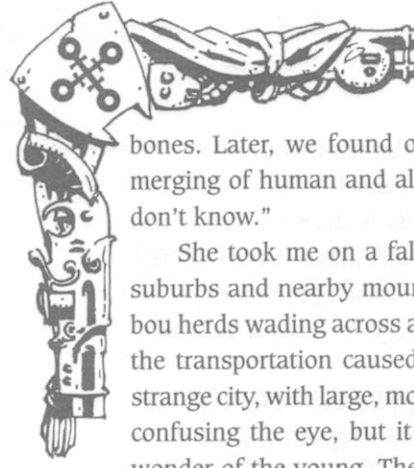
Lyonesse

Lyonesse was shown to me by First Minister Eldwyd's aide, Councilor Melusina Le Blanc, heiress to one of the ruling Lyonesse families. She is rumored to be the First Minister's mistress as well, but I think it is the other way around. Lyonesse is rich and clean with a temperate climate. The capital of Vasaria is a wonder. Its glistening white towers and starscrapers grow from a managed forest of pine and elm on a 20 mile long island at the mouth of the St. Lextius River.

I saw the First Minister's Palace and the Parliament, an ancient building where internal matters are still debated. I felt as if I had stepped back into Second Republic days. But no, Melusina assured me, the city was even more of a technical wonder then. "As a child, my friends and I played in the ruins of the old Helix labs, where we used to dig up

Midian





bones. Later, we found out they were products from the merging of human and alien genes. For what purpose, we don't know."

She took me on a falcon train, which rushed into the suburbs and nearby mountains, where we witnessed caribou herds wading across a lake. The speed and efficiency of the transportation caused my head to swim. Vasaria is a strange city, with large, moving advertisements on holosigns confusing the eye, but it is very clean and possesses the wonder of the young. The current fashion has close fitting suits for men while women wear bright red dresses, loose fitting and a little risqué by my family's standards.

Lyonesse retains its constitution but acknowledges Li Halan rule, and thus keeps many of its ancient freedoms. Prince Flavius is the ruler of Lyonesse — the province is the fief of the prince, not the territory of the planetary governor. The standard of living is high here and freemen live in a style unseen anywhere else in the Garden Worlds, save perhaps Avaneir on Rampart. First Minister Eldwyd showed me the famous canals and districts from his palace. The island's land rises to the Eagle Heights, where the Li Halan Ying Palace, Prince Flavius's local residence, oversees all.

The Church here is theologically Hinayanist but is practically Mahayanist in practice. Due to the high standard of living, faith becomes more an aesthetic than a necessary salve. However, Lyonesse is immune to the heresies that sweep the rest of the world and her coffers enrich the Church. In return, the Church turns a blind eye to Lyonesse's idiosyncrasies. This immunity from the strange idolatries that sweep the peasantry is due to the "Lyonesse way of life." This doctrine preaches individual freedom but actually encourages a subtle form of herding cohesion, making all alike through competition, channeled into socially controlled activities. Lyonesse contains the great shipyards and tech factories that are the pride of my family. Quantum think machines, digital credit, intelligent homes and automobiles — all are found here. I began to become slightly intimidated in their presence.

The Lyonesseans realize their profound differences from the rest of the planet and respond by making their continent a planet unto itself. They are ruled less harshly due to their valued technical skills, and its people form a social caste — technocrats — nearly the social equals of League guildsmembers. They are also, surprisingly, loyal, aware of my family's history of protecting them from the zealous southerners.

The laborers on Lyonesse are freemen. In Vasaria they live in the Three Hills district near the shipyards, and enjoy their own culture, composed of sports, bars and ballads to their heroes. They are allowed two Speakers on the Lyonesse ruling council and can veto measures they consider too harsh on the working class (these powers were hard won and not

easily-granted). Ironically, they look to my family to protect them from the abuses of the wealthy Lyonesseans, and so we act as arbiters.

Among the wealthiest Lyonesseans are the Astoria and the Le Blanc families. I had the pleasure to meet Hether Astoria, the self-proclaimed reigning queen of Lyonesse society, at a ball given on her estate. She summed up the Lyonesse position quite well: "We want the prince to be personally distant but his power near, to keep the Zujan rabble in line. Oh, but I fear I've quite given the game away."

Lyonesse has an ideal rail and road system, connecting the continent in swift fashion, and also rules Urchev on the mainland, as a reward for their support during the earlier wars with Rampart. Serfs from the continent try to flee here, but Lyonesse does not accept many, for they undercut working class wages. It is a sensitive political matter.

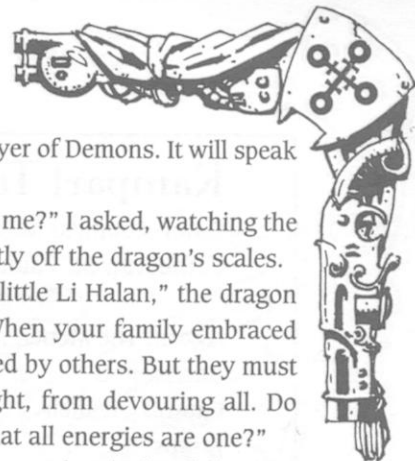
I visited Lyonesse's other city, Rapello. She hugs the shore of the Breton Sea and produces many weapons, including the Mantius Crusader-X tank, as well as lighter firearms. Her other industry is ore processing and harvesting. Huge millirice fields are artificially grown under great domes, capable of feeding millions.

Saiwuhn

I left Lyonesse for Saiwuhn, Midian's capital, an old city made beautiful by time and neglect. Old Second Republic buildings, overgrown with ivy and housing great shops, greet the visitor on Fu Street. A thousand small boats ferry visitors to the Dragon Isles, the dining and theater district. The governor's palace is on the Island of Spring Blossoms. Duke Augustus Zhu Li Halan, governor of Midian, is the son of Prince Flavius, and is known for his judicial fairness. He let me in on some of his thoughts. Yes, Baron Inami was making too many enemies. As for the baron's sister, one must wait and see whether Erian proves herself outside the Garden Worlds. Zujan is a major concern, and he hopes for investors from Lyonesse. Duke Augustus has shocked the family with his current mistress, a young Decados woman, Marquessa Ninochka, popular among the anti-Hawkwood faction.

After three days with the duke, he told me of a good meditation spot two days north of the city where the planet's energies were conducive to prayer. As I settled to sleep that night, I resolved to go there, following the old road where pine forests reach to the rocky edge of the Midian Sea. I dreamed and beheld one of the fabled Midian Dragons.

The Midian Dragons are legendary sentient beings of energy who assume shapes reflective of a thinker's questions. Church theologians studied the legends and are torn between classifying them as Empyrean Angels or Spiritual Intelligences. All agree they are benign. I think the last sighting was 122 years ago by the peasant Chen, who was shown to a shipwreck containing a valuable preadamite artifact,



which he used to purchase his family's freedom. The dragons bring good luck, usually cleansing people of evil influences. Since my trip to Icon, I had felt a slow waning of my energies and considered contacting an Amalthean healer. I now found myself walking the hills above the ocean, listening to the surf and contemplating my evening prayers. Suddenly, a great golden dragon emerged from the sea.

It appeared like a second sun. I do not know how to describe its size, but the wisdom-master flew before me and smiled. "Little Li Halan, I have come to put you in balance," he said, breathing a white flame that blinded me but left me feeling strong. "You are now cleansed of the Ghost City. I will now show you how to recover Zebulon's images."

I bowed low and the dragon produced a golden sword, plucked from one of its sharp scales. "The sword will lead you to Zebulon's image. It possesses a high spiritual intelli-

gence and is named Da Dao, Slayer of Demons. It will speak to you in dreams and visions."

"Why have you so honored me?" I asked, watching the sinking pink sun reflect brilliantly off the dragon's scales.

"I came to restore balance, little Li Halan," the dragon answered with good humor. "When your family embraced the Light, the Darkness was filled by others. But they must be kept from devouring the Light, from devouring all. Do you understand, little knight, that all energies are one?"

With that the great golden dragon laughed and shot into the sky, a radiance of blinding light, before sinking like an enormous sparkling gem into the ocean. I listened to the wind sweep through the grass, and studied the golden sword. Then I awoke, in Saiwuhn. It had been a curious dream! But I felt better, and I found a golden sword by my side.

Rampart

Rampart, that plaything of the wise

Wondrous like a Ravenna jewel to behold

But beware — to catch, to hold, to seize her bold

Like serpent wisdom, she cuts like ice

— Robero Craxton, *Ananotto, Love's Temperate Sway*
(Act One)

The patron saint of Rampart is St. Paulus. It was originally St. Kynon, due to the political leanings of the Rampart royalists. The people preferred St. Paulus. In 4727, privateers under the flag of Rampart's leaders stole St. Paulus's remains from Gwynneth and paraded them in triumph through Avaneir, where they were placed in the newly built St. Paulus Cathedral. The saint's remains are still watched by an honor guard composed of the sons and daughters of Rampart's most esteemed families. Even my family is too wise to attempt to censor the people's passions in this matter. St. Paulus is remembered for his unremitting friendship to Zebulon. He was the only follower to hear the Prophet's First Sermon (*Omega Gospels*, Paulus 3:12-16).

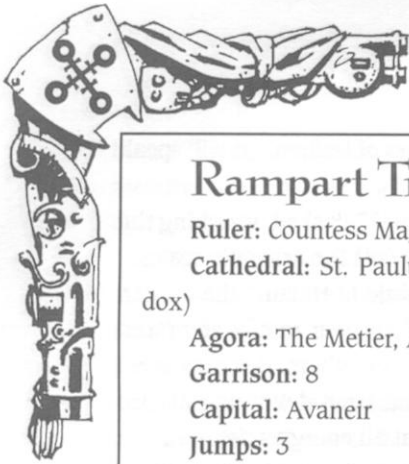
History

Rampart was one of the first settled worlds to break from the First Republic's zaibatsu, becoming the province of the exiled zaibatsu Consiglio family. The Consiglios were merchant princes who spread their wealth into education, forming the Academy of Muses, one of the most ancient seats of learning outside Urth. My family and the Consiglios eventually united in marriage, and Veneto became our fief on Rampart. A healing and vision-producing plant called luhk was found in the unexplored regions of Verona. One of

the advance contact team, a mathematician-xenologist named Lodovico Lorenzeto, drank the alchemically prepared luhk sap and was seized by an indescribable prophecy. Writing his fantastic oracle down in mathematical formula, Lorenzeto declared that Rampart was to lead the universe in education and government, becoming the capital of a new republic which would rule the stars for thousands of years, preventing a collapse of stellar civilization into barbarism.

Lorenzeto's Manifest Prophecy was taken seriously. His colleagues formed support cells and sent Lorenzeto-inspired societies, called Associations, across Rampart. These colonies, composed of brilliant scientists and technocrats, fared exceptionally well, producing amazing machinery, agricultural wonders and advanced tech weaponry. The Consiglios supported the Associations until they surpassed the merchant family in wealth and trade monopolies. War broke out between the Consiglios and the Associations. The Associations won, seizing the capital city of Padua, where Prince Bartolomeo Consiglio was slain during the sack of the city (3103). Installing Lorenzeto's great-grandson, Tomasso the Academician, as their leader, they began implementing the Manifest Prophecy on a planetwide scale.

My family, retaining the last of the Consiglio blood, held power in Veneto. Lorenzeto's Manifest Prophecy called for the uniting of all the worlds into a republic, which later occurred, although the first sign of the fallibility of Lorenzeto's vision was here displayed. It was Byzantium Secundus — not Rampart — that became the Republic's capital world. Rampart lost support due to the arrogance of its citizens, who were convinced that only the "Rampart Way" was cor-



Rampart Traits

Ruler: Countess Magu Li Halan

Cathedral: St. Paulus Cathedral, Avaneir (Orthodox)

Agora: The Metier, Avaneir (independent guilds)

Garrison: 8

Capital: Avaneir

Jumps: 3

Adjacent worlds: Kish (dayside), Grail (dayside), Apshai (nightside), Pandemonium (nightside)

Solar system: Rampart (1.12 AU), the Devil's Belt meteor field (3.267 AU), Aeneas (6.011 AU), Tiers Monde (9.003 AU), Gargantua (16.207 AU), Lux (27.137 AU), Kray's Watch (41.33 AU), Jumpgate (62.33 AU)

Tech: 7

Human population: 423 million

Alien population: 4 million (mainly Obun, Ukar and Etyri)

Resources: Forests, lead, zinc, tin, copper, seafood, agriculture, oil, uranium

Exports: Technical equipment, electronic equipment, think machines, tech weaponry, chemicals, textiles, processed foods, ships, plywood, pulp, medical equipment, synthetic body parts, machine tools, transport equipment, entertainment, magic lanterns, cotton, clothing

Landscape: A pleasant world, Rampart was in the grips of a minor ice age when it was discovered. Terraforming ended this, but in 4770 the ice began to advance again. The world is temperate and cool for the most part. Its mountains tend to rise higher than those of Holy Terra, and the primitive mammalian life discovered here leads scientists to believe it is a younger world. An age of reptiles, similar to the Mesozoic, seemed to come to an end only 4-6 million years ago, and the mammal life, while greatly divergent from Urth's, is still relatively small.

rect, and the shortsightedness of its politicians, who had solutions for everyone's problems but their own.

After the Fall of the Second Republic, Rampart was claimed by a small noble family, the D'Rouge Glace, whose origins go back to the Marseilles region on Urth. This family, working with the Peltan Oligarchy, managed to maintain civil order and the food shipments from nearby Grange, until that world — now known as Pandemonium — was lost. However, around 4050, the D'Rouge Glace clan committed an unspeakable crime. Rumors state that they attempted something forbidden under Church law, perhaps in

the area of bioengineering. At least, that's what Baroness Damita Glace states publicly, although she told me privately that I, as a Li Halan, would better understand her family's curse.

An educated guess: They summoned powers from the unreflective Qlippoths. Soon after, Baron Gascon D'Rouge Glace had two children, Apollo and Artemis, both born with deep red skin and — some whisper — extraordinary abilities. This was a visible mark of the family's sins. The Church imposed a ban on Rampart exports and declared the Glace clan heretical. The local guilds began plotting. Soon, other noble families refused to recognize the D'Rouge Glace as royalty. The Li Halan is the only family that still does.

To this day, every fourth generation D'Rouge Glace child is born with the curse, which has also expanded outside the family via peasant mistresses and lovers. Here and there, you can see a crimson-skinned man repairing a bridge or a scarlet woman hanging up the wash. The recently deceased Count Marlon was crimson skinned. His granddaughter, Mireille, thankfully, is not.

Li Halan rule replaced D'Rouge Glace rule. With the loss of the Grange jumpgate, famine wracked the world and the Academians — remnants of the Associations that once followed Tomasso the Academician — again seized power (4112). My family retreated to Veneto. They were pre-conversion Li Halan, and their reputation spurred Rampart's fearful Academician rulers to seek allies against them, eventually joining the Merchant League for protection in 4322. Like a ghost of the Second Republic, Rampart spread her mercantile fingers everywhere.

Duchess Ji Li Halan drank the alchemical luhk sap and beheld a vision of herself as a celestial ruler. Calling herself the Stellar Sophia, Duchess Ji Li Halan led a revolt that toppled the Academician Dracio from power (4399). She ruled wisely for a time, but the Church took a dim view of the whole affair. Condemned by the Church and the League, and facing revolt from most segments of Rampart's population, she took offworld asylum in Prince Julian's court. When the League retook Rampart, the Luhk plant was hunted to extinction.

I should add a footnote in Rampart's favor: Let us not forget that Rampart's Dr. Lusignan, using forgotten scientific methods, discovered the cure for the Green Death plague that swept the Known Worlds from 4616-23. Lusignan's cure saved millions of lives.

When Cardano Li Halan converted to Zebulon's Church, tensions between Rampart and the Garden Worlds grew. Alas, in the long reign of Constantine Li Halan, the strength of our orthodox revolution ebbed and our worlds weakened, a price we paid for the hubris of Theocrat Halvor. Only the technologically rich fief of Lyonesse could compete with Rampart, and it was Lyonesse's tech alone that kept Ram-

Holovid!

Jun Kugatsu's

Empyrean Saga 3

SACRED SOLDIER
MANTIUS



part at bay from our worlds. It is easy now to forget how advanced Rampart was. They were able to seize cities on Midian, Apshai and Grail with little fear. Indeed, its citizens spoke openly of creating the Third Republic — that forbidden dream of dreams. They had the technology, the advanced cyborg troops and Changed humans, all ready for conquest. What happened?

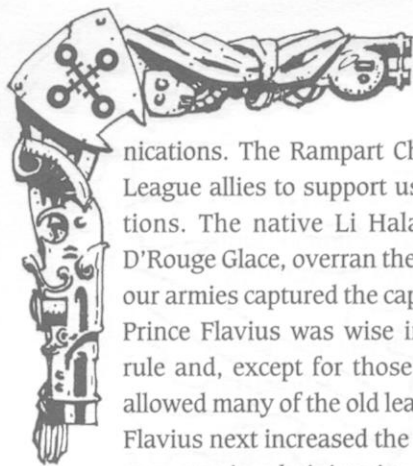
An asteroid named Kung-1, discovered by two amateur astrologers, half a mile across in size, suddenly appeared near their moon of Centurion on June 22, 4715 (Urth calendar) — “K-Day.” Rampart had shut down their AMS (Asteroid Monitoring Stations), placing the small AMS budget into the military, which was more concerned with monitoring the jumpgates. A thermonuclear device launched from Rampart struck the asteroid as it entered the planet’s gravity well, but a chunk an eighth of a mile in size broke off and fell, striking with hundreds of thousands of megatons of power. Slamming into and destroying New London, it caused such earthquakes that the great cities of Rio Azul and Vasilgrad fell into ruins. The dust cloud from the impact blocked the sun for seven years. Seventeen million people perished in the worldwide earthquakes, another 37 million in the famines that followed. Rampart had to be fed from offworld sources. Although she was slowly restored, her technical base never quite recovered. Some Church theologians saw asteroid Kung-1 as the Pancreator’s punishment on

technosophists.

During Prince Xiao’s reign my family strengthened its forces and retook many of the Rampart-ruled holdings on Midian. We aided our kinsmen on Rampart and supported the Charioteers Guild during the Rampart civil war that further weakened the planet (4801-13). In 4950, due to Academic influence in the League, Rampart became democratic. Radical elements rose in her legislature, and the Church became alarmed. My family in particular found the growth of anarchistic principles in the Rampart population disquieting, especially the extremist voices in the Rampart Democratic Alliance.

During the Emperor Wars, many powers eyed Rampart. All factions stood against each other. Strange alliances made at midnight melted before the dawn. Our spies, using information leaked by the Decados, discovered bioengineering experiments conducted by Rampart guilds, unethical under Church law. Serfs captured from our Veneto fiefs were victims of these experiments. It seemed the Decados preferred Li Halan rule to League rule on Rampart, or else they wanted to divert us while they struck Malignatius. Sometimes a viper speaks truth.

With Zebulon’s Word on our side, we invaded to forever end the menace of technosophy. Our large armies overran the Leagues’ positions and our Lyonesse forces bombarded their airfields from space, scrambling their commu-



nications. The Rampart Charioteers broke from their local League allies to support us, helping to capture key institutions. The native Li Halan, allied with the Church and D'Rouge Glace, overran the southern part of the planet while our armies captured the capital. Rampart swiftly capitulated. Prince Flavius was wise in not imposing an overly harsh rule and, except for those involved in forbidden research, allowed many of the old leadership to simply retire. The wise Flavius next increased the authority of the Church, a necessary step in administering a population that had long lived in a moral half-light of the Pancreator's truths.

Some resistance to our rule has been felt, especially after the enforcement of the Ten Edicts codifying the social structure. A guerilla movement, the Rampart Resistance, resists us in the Ceremanique Mountains. Also, the heretical religion known as Zhi-Su is found in some rural areas. The Church is attempting to correct this heresy.

I repeat what is written in the *Codex Morbi*: "Zhi-Su began as a philosophical attempt to bridge the gap between plant and animal consciousness, to return to the primal state before the various life kingdoms split from one another. It is anti-hierarchical, even anti-creator, believing that all things arise from nothing, called *Wu*, a concept actually signifying a state beyond the duality of nothing and something. Second Republic merchants spread this heresy from Manitou and Apshai — worlds ruled by the Vau — and it flourished under the rulership of the pre-conversion Li Halan. Zhi-Su practices involve a complex set of yogas and meditations meant to develop the proper alignment of one's energies and sensitivities with the energy in one's environment. Practitioners attempt to "resonate" with spiraling patterning fields, energies emitted by all things, seen as a set of interconnecting circles. Zhi-Su is animistic, considering everything to be alive. Its tenets are somewhat similar in concept to the Hironem's Sas Kanasu energy."

Cells of Zhi-Su practitioners survived long under my family's rule, until the conversion of Cardano, when attempts began to bring its practitioners within the fold of the Church. This was successful on Midian, but most of the Rampart practitioners left the Li Halan fiefs for the relative safety of the League lands. My family now moves against these rebels, who often aid the Rampart Resistance (RR). With the help of the Church, we have declared this heresy "dark learning" (*hsüan-hsüeh*) for its denial of the Pancreator and Zebulon's gospels. We have imprisoned their leader, Pi, and are rooting them out in the rural areas in which they hide.

Solar System

Esperance: Rampart's sun seems to suffer from the fading suns phenomenon. In the years before the Fall, it expanded and swallowed the small planet of Normandy before shrinking again to its previous size.

Rampart: Now the closest remaining planet to the sun, Rampart has one moon, Chevalier, which was occupied by the Li Halan before their planetary invasion.

Devil's Belt: The Devil's Belt is made up of thousands of fragments from the destroyed planet of Sisyphus. It was here that Kung-1 appeared, undetected among the debris. By the time it left the Devil's Belt, it was too late to save Rampart from its misery. Some piracy continues here today, although much of it was destroyed recently with the capture of Black Death Bou and his fleet of privateers.

Aeneas: The city of New Rome was destroyed in the Rampart civil war, leaving New Carthage as the only domed city on Aeneas. Mining still takes place here, and the Li Halan Admiral Koxinga now rules the city.

Tiers Monde: This world hosts life in its oceans, and sea-farming takes place near the underwater warm springs. Oro'ym scouts recently discovered the ruins of an underwater Anunnaki city. My family is now investigating further.

Gargantua: This gas giant has two moons, Draco and Kraken, both with active volcanoes.

Lux: Lux reflects light in a curious way. A minor gas giant, two of her five moons host monitoring posts.

Kray's Watch: An operating Second Republic-era monitoring and guard station watches the jumpgate from this small world. The station stills runs on old technology, although Rampart no longer possesses the technical know-how to repair it should something break down. The Li Halan Lyonesse Guard is now stationed here.

People & Places

Veneto

Li Halan nobles still dwell in their ancient fiefs in Veneto, overlooking the beautiful, southern Veneto Sea. After Cardano's conversion, refugees from my family who refused to give up the old ways arrived here to escape the new Li Halan-Church alliance. Hence, the Rampart Li Halan are somewhat of embarrassment to nobles from the other Garden Worlds. They still hold — even the most pious ones — to quaint traditions that, if left unchecked, can lead to murky spiritual paths.

Veneto is free from strife. Its pleasant, mild climate is ideal for farming and grazing. Millirice grows well here. Baroness Zhao-Jun, who aided in the house's reclamation of the world, rules from Hai-tang, a small city, somewhat high tech by most Li Halan standards. Upon my arrival, she showed me her prize apple orchards. In some areas, wild apple trees have overrun ancient villages, producing the famous blue apples found in the region.

"It is quiet here," she said. "Up north, our family contends with rebellions, but this is to be expected. Many lawless brigands made Rampart their base until our civilizing influence conquered them. Now, we are plucking these weeds from our newest Garden World."



Acadia

I next went to the estate of our allies, the D'Rouge Glace, rulers of Acadia Province. The Baroness Damita invited me to dinner and questioned me about my travels. Her daughter, Lady Mireille, commented on our tour of Kemerovo. In truth, I was glad to be back in her company. After dinner, her mother went to inspect some newly arrived supplies from the capital, and we were alone. Mireille greeted me demurely, with a sly smile, and said I was just in time for her study of the classics. For some reason her servants were gone and she asked me to share her chair. She opened a famous book by the epic poet Gokala, *The Romance of Tahir and Sakuntala*, and read the famous seduction scene at the masked festival of Girivaja, where the two lovers are reunited. We got no further with our reading that evening.

The next day Lady Mireille insisted that she accompany me to Vasilgrad. Her mother refused, and I left with my servant, sadder for the loss of her company. We went to the ruins of Vasilgrad, destroyed by the meteor Kung-1. A small section of the city survived and today produces think-machines and artificial body parts, but it is a ghost of its former glory. The allegedly corrupt Mayor Weywyrd Waneshift runs the city, but he is thankfully in our pay.

Other families have estates on Rampart. Sir Soueif, an al-Malik, controls the small town of Susa, which is said to harbor rebels. Our troops surround it, making Sir Soueif a prisoner in his own fief, an outlaw in our lands but free in his. The Torensens have a few estates in the capital; they are rather apolitical and oriented more towards aesthetic concerns. Count William Hawkwod owns vineyards and a large, rural estate outside Veneto. A loyal son of the Church, he is glad my family stopped the planet's rampant tech experimentation but fears we are excessive.

League lands include the vast Bogyor Plain, given to the Charioteers for aiding us in the conquest. The Muster has a recruiting station in old Sa'frya, a city largely destroyed by Kung-1. Captain Steven "the Norman" McCullough runs the city. "We get a lot of recruits here," he said. "Former rebels trying to get offworld. Criminals. Pirates. This was a real frontier planet before your family took over." The captain is leaving soon himself, taking new recruits to fight the Kurgans.

Rio Azul

A city with a broad, low skyline, Rio Azul was given to the Church after our conquest. I met Archbishop Su Tung Li Halan years ago, at the meeting between the emperor and Prince Flavius. Even then he was notorious for his long rambling speeches excoriating the ancient Urth menace of Pan-Capitalism, which is alive and well on Rampart. Then, at age 87, he was still somewhat approachable, although hard of hearing. Today, I found him amiable but largely incoherent. Our conversation need not be recorded here, lest read-

ers stampede to more exciting tasks, such as praying for each soul lost in the Symbiot Wars.

Young Bishop Erasmus Chu Li Halan is being primed to succeed him. "It is exasperating," Erasmus said over a light lunch. "He addresses holograms and house plants on the need to pray thrice daily. Clearly, the last act in the old grandee's life is lingering too long for the audience's taste." Or the bishop's, for that matter. He must tend to the hard tasks of administration, rooting out heresies and guiding the Church on this former League world.

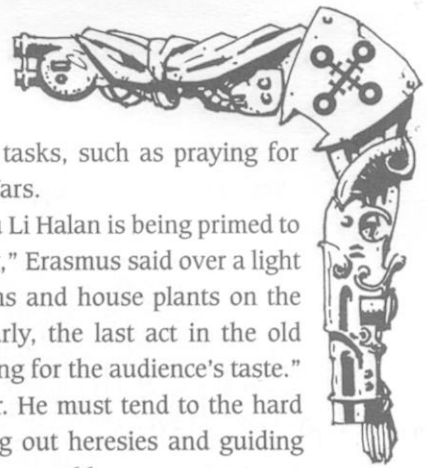
Avaneir

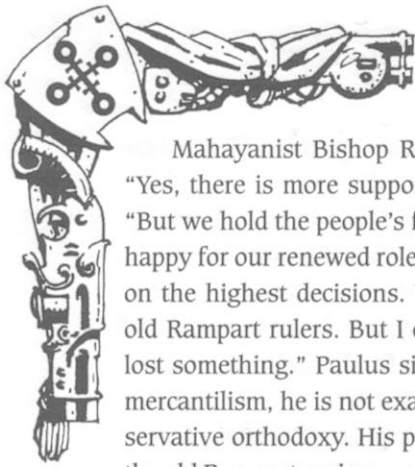
I next went with Mireille and Ban Lu to Rampart's capital city, Avaneir. Its architecture is an ever-changing spectrum of color, responding to the collective emotional moods of her two million citizens. The buildings alter their colors, temperatures and even architectural features depending on the nearby populace's emotional state. These tall, ornate structures, constructed with enduring Second Republic technology, are seemingly alive. They are mainly palaces of glass and maxicrete, with think machine brains the size of minuscule cells connected in a vast synapse pattern. Some even emit trace gases into the air to make people happier or more productive. Avaneir, in short, makes Lyonesse seem slightly primitive.

She is divided into three sections: The great business district of Metier, the governing quarter of Perchoir Loi, and the wealthy residential district of the Colline, on the hills overlooking the city. The working class comes in from Padua by train and ferry. Padua, the ancient capital, is slowly sinking into the Sagesse Sea, whose waters rose when Kung-1 hit the world. Some great palaces line the Roi Canal, and the old architecture is beautiful. The last Academician ruler of Rampart, Birac, has retired to a Padua palace. He is free to move about, a ghost of his former self. I saw him walking his little dog, followed by a bored bodyguard.

My family rules from the Radieux Palace, the former estate of the Academians. Countess Magu Li Halan is wise in leaving Avaneir largely intact in its old customs and my family's hand is not openly heavy here. Some taxes were lifted to gain working class and managerial support, and local elections are allowed continue. The pro-Li Halan candidate, Rene Pierpont, recently won with his campaign of "Back to Business Normalcy."

"I have shown support to the Charioteers and home guilds, giving them tax incentives," the countess said, looking over the city skyline. "It is best to divide and conquer — an old adage, but one proving remarkably successful." I asked her to elaborate. "In the cities, we decrease the old tax burden, creating a new merchant class loyal to us. The countryside — ah, that is another matter." The countess made only oblique references to "installing the Nine-Fold Truths," but in certain rural areas, an active rebellion continues.





Mahayanist Bishop Rollo Paulus took the long view. "Yes, there is more support for the Church now," he said. "But we hold the people's faith through a sort of trust. I am happy for our renewed role in governing, in being consulted on the highest decisions. We had such problems with the old Rampart rulers. But I can't help thinking Rampart has lost something." Paulus sighed. Long a critic of Rampart's mercantilism, he is not exactly happy with my house's conservative orthodoxy. His popularity, as the sole survivor of the old Rampart regime, seems to have increased among the people. Academician Birac is retired, and the wartime coalition government is no more. Only he remains. "Maybe the blend of Rampart's technical mercantilism with your family's faith will produce a better tomorrow. But we have to move carefully and prune the garden, not tear it up by its roots." Clearly, the man is not happy in the past or present.

I eventually met with Pierre Birac, former Academician and Rampart Reeve leader. A slender, bald man, Birac now sits on several boards, runs a small bank and writes his memoirs, a lengthy, ponderous affair no one will read. Had he died during the conquest, he would have been a martyr. My family stripped him of that option by letting him live. Many of his own people seem embarrassed by his continued presence among the living. He resisted my family as best he could until the Coalition Government took power to continue the war. Called back just before the defeat, he signed the accords surrendering the world. Birac is still a sharp dresser. During his days in power he was something of a trend-setting celebrity.

"Who did it?" he mused over a light salad with his favorite mineral water. "Your family will never let it out, but the Doge on Leagueheim gave the green light for the invasion, even aided it. I know old Gailbreath's thinking. I was a challenge to his leadership as Leaguemeister, and had gained many allies among the guilds during the Emperor Wars. There was a civil war here between Rampart's guilds and the Doge's loyalists. Many local representatives here still remember Gailbreath calling us rebels and traitors, claiming I was attempting to create the Third Republic. These representatives bear a strong grudge, which is why I suspect the League hasn't tried to take us back." Here he sighed. I reminded him about the unstable elements of his society.

"Oh, you mean the people," he smiled. "Yes, we were getting too democratic. A true elective democracy was growing. The Church and royalists were against it, as was the Doge. Since 4960, the RDA (Rampart Democratic Alliance) gained considerable power. The parties mentioned viewed this with hostility. You came, of course, for the technology," he said, waving his hand at me, indicating my family. "Well, we're back to a scarce democracy under your watchful eye, purged of radical elements. The Doge and your family are working hand-in-hand running some of our former guilds."

Birac lives in an old Padua palace, largely empty save for dog hair. His longtime mistress, Rosette, has left him. The death of his daughter, Amarante, in a starship accident last year, has also left him very solemn.

Carllion

Mireille and I, along with faithful Ban Lu, went to the Biochime lab ruins in the small town of Carllion. The place is now guarded by General Peng Li Halan's Red Dragon troops. He is one of our better generals, of the Midian branch, a vassal loyal to Count Gijan Li Halan. The local guilds performed illegal bioengineering here to create a race of warrior-monsters. This place was targeted on the first day of the invasion. Our forces blasted some labs from space and our troops seized most installations. The lab's masters had taken serfs from our Veneto fiefs and experimented upon them. We settled the survivors in Villedemi, where those poor souls now live out their lives, far from humanity. Dr. Ostor, the head of the labs, was hanged with his assistants. Many of his altered soldiers were slain in the battle, but not all of them.

Ombre Forest

General Peng said that the Ombre Forest contained many of the altered people. "The dangerous ones we call the Children of Yue, the Moon's Offspring," Peng said. "They are enhanced with altered animal and human genes, and possess great senses of smell, eyesight and touch. Some are like wolves, some hawks, and a few are like dragons. They carry modern weapons. The previous commander, General Tanaka, was surrounded in the woods at Etat D'ame and had to be airlifted out. It was a disaster, with 5,000 slain, but it was kept secret."

The general took us on a tour of the pacified woods. A few of the Children of Yue had come over to his side and I had the strange privilege of having a man with a leopard face scout ahead of me. I asked General Peng what his strategy was.

"To pardon those who lay down arms and give them settlements to live in, and to halt the massacres my predecessor performed in burning their villages," he answered. "General Tanaka believed they were monsters without souls and so could be killed with impunity. The sad thing is, they are human, with souls. Less reflective due to the horrific experiments done to them, but human nonetheless. The worst of them are the enhanced soldiers. Some have come over, but a dedicated few have allied with outlaw bioengineers and the Rampart Resistance. These are the enemies we fight. Aside from the bioengineers, most would be pardoned if they laid down their arms. We have taken their capital of Etat D'ame and their armies are breaking up into guerilla bands."

Just then, ahead of us, a gazelle-like creature with human looking eyes and limbs shot out in front of us. The

general sighed. "They also reverted humans back to animals."

Indeed, these woods were filled with altered human-apes, gazelles and even predatory animals resembling marsupial cats. "The normal livestock was driven from the region over the course of the last few centuries. It leaves me with a quandary: Should I kill the mutants and reintroduce the native species or let them stay and declare this a preserve after they lay down arms? Thankfully, most of the advanced gene-splicing techniques were lost when Kung-1 struck the world. Nonetheless, they preserved enough here to create these freakish soldiers."

Later, over tea, the general politely questioned me about the Questing Knights and my travels. He became more animated on the subject of Midian, remarking on the feud between Baron Inami and his sister: "If family history has taught us anything, it is that we can be vicious and needlessly cruel."

The general's intelligence was formidable. When I told him of my oath to recover Cardano's Banners and how information implicated the Zhi-Su sect, he pointed to Parlsburg as the center of their rebellion, noting that the area is known for many Zhi-Su followers.

I did not wish to place Mireille in any danger and so I left while she slept. With faithful Ban Lu, I continued on that night. I left Mireille a poem, although not a good one

(unlike Rakai, I am not a poet). Mercifully, I shall not repeat it here.

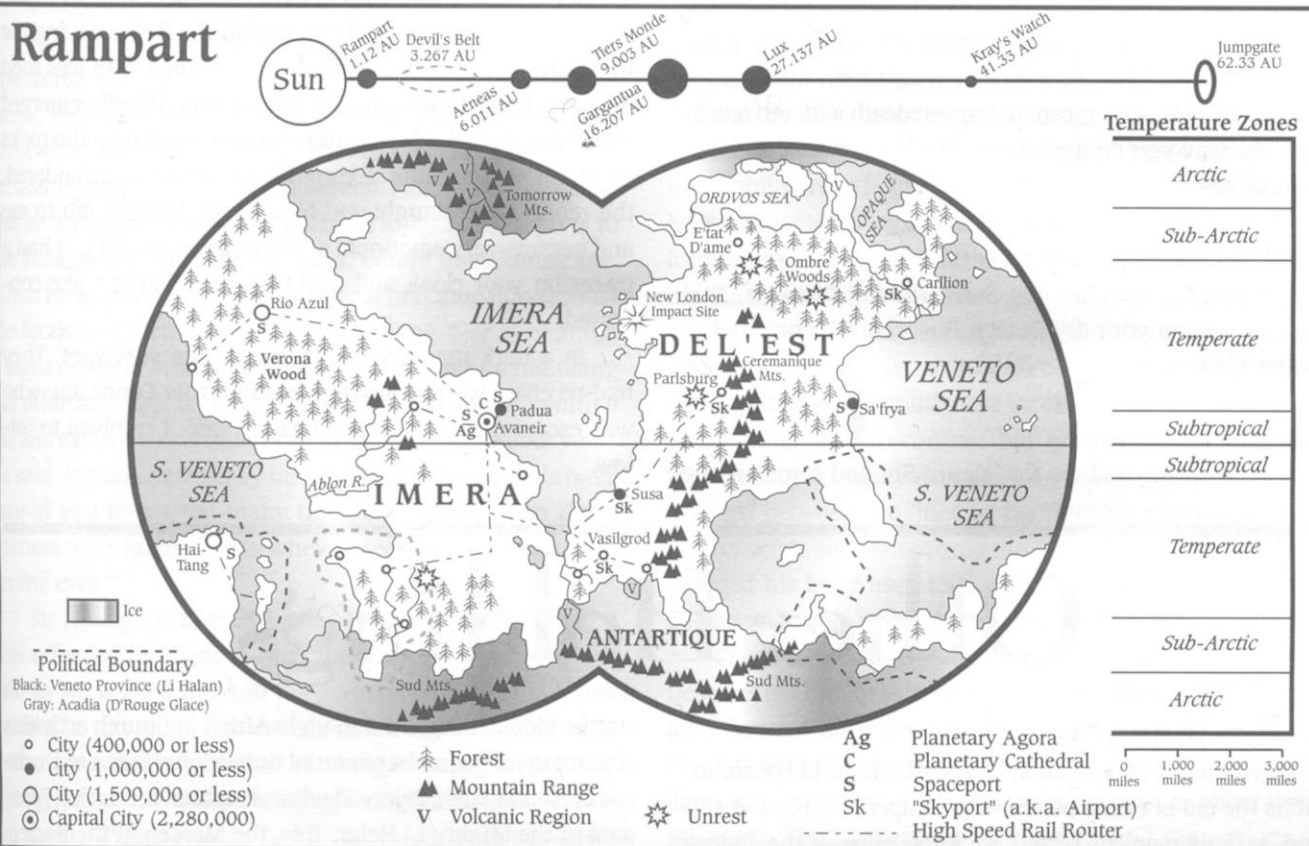
Parlsburg

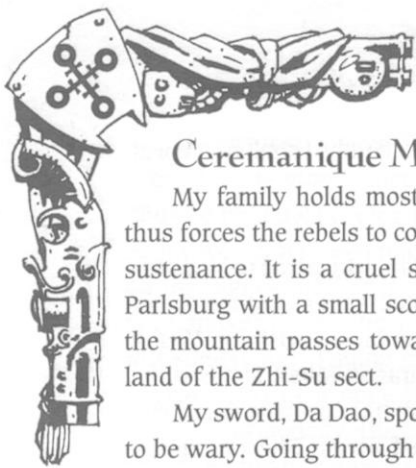
Marquessa Claudia Ibis Li Halan, whispered to be a bastard granddaughter of Princess Melissa, greeted me at her recently liberated command post outside Parlsburg. Young and beautiful in her ceremonial dragon robes, she is ruthless with the rebels. Her Vorox commandos have raised entire villages in the RR-controlled areas. She pursues a scorched-earth policy, with her air support dropping dragonfire on enemy-controlled forests.

"General Ping is a good man," she said as she directed the execution of seven rebel leaders by having their limbs chopped off one by one. "Age, however, has softened him. I have found that a poison snake only respects the dragon's foot." Then, looking at me somewhat embarrassed, she said, "Ah, forgive my cliches, Sir Piao. I find I am prone to them when I am not properly reflecting."

The executions were retaliations for the slaying of a minor Li Halan knight, Sir Hiro, on his wedding day. "We have the factories running again in Parlsburg," she exclaimed. "It is a grimy industrial town, not a place for sonnets or people of taste like ourselves." When I mentioned my quest, she pointed me toward the Ceremanique Mountains. "That vile sect has its stronghold there. We have pacified the lowlands, but I will send guides with you."

Rampart





Ceremanique Mountains

My family holds most of the lowlands and lakes and thus forces the rebels to come down from the highlands for sustenance. It is a cruel stratagem, but it works. We left Parlsburg with a small scouting force of 50, traveling into the mountain passes toward Lake Lendemain, the heartland of the Zhi-Su sect.

My sword, Da Dao, spoke to me in a vision, warning me to be wary. Going through Belle Pass, we were set upon by dark beings — living shadows — but my sword tore them to ribbons and they fled, screaming, dissolving like mist. Later that night, we encountered an old man who said he had a message for me. He was of the Zhi-Su. We parleyed and I was taken blindfolded to a cave high up in the mountains. There an old Zhi-Su leader, Ching, removed my blindfold. Standing next to him was a young woman, wrapped in gold robes, with a curious medallion around her neck.

"You came for the banners, but they are gone," Ching said. "Count Shi promised us that we could perform a Rite of Peace upon them, thus bringing harmony between our practitioners, the Church and your family. But he wanted them for darker ends, and left with seven banners, sending demons to halt our attempts to recapture them. Some of these shadows waylaid you this day. We know that you also seek him, and instructed our agents to aid you. Shi means to feed the banners to the Dark and thus upset the universal balance. We believe he fled to Malignatus.

"We have few priests who are not hidden by supporters," she answered, almost telepathically anticipating my next questions. "This includes two sympathetic members of your family. We never meant to harvest death with our teachings, the way you do against us. We instead tried to plant seeds of peace. My name is Green Spring. I am the honored leader of many priests, and I am kept safe here. I know your Church fears us. Once, early on, it was not so. Do you think that everything Zebulon, the Sun Drinking Blossom, said was recorded in your dry Omega Gospels? We come not to shatter his message but to fulfill it."

She then drank a curious tea with me, and I saw some wisdom in her words.

Green Spring told me that Count Shi had come among

them to learn certain secrets. "His mind was hidden from me," Green Spring said, "but I finally guessed his secret. He is in league with dark energies, and seeks to nourish them to unfold his own power. I see that the Great Dragon of Fortuitous Intelligence has blessed you. I know you will follow the correct path. For this reason alone, feeling the dragon's tremendous wisdom about you, I allow you to leave. Go now, Seed Carrier. But know that the hills are alive with many factions, not just the gentle followers of Zhi-Su."

I left the meeting with a sad feeling about this war against the Zhi-Su, and resolved to tell Prince Flavius of what transpired here. Many Zhi-Su practice a strange Church/Zhi-Su mix. I cannot believe that they are altogether unreflective. Perhaps the College of Ethicals should study the matter. But I kept such thoughts to myself then. To speak moderation in a warzone is to be labeled a traitor. Extremists, usually after wreaking much evil, eventually lose the favor of heaven, and a more moderate faction comes to play. Like the strange dragon said, all balances out.

On the way back, rebels of the Rampart Resistance attacked us. They announced themselves with explosives and their sharp shooters slew five of us before we took cover behind the nearby granite rocks. Outnumbered, I hoped for nightfall to aid us in our escape, for they jammed our communication signals. These were terrorists who resisted the cultivation and Universal laws of Harmony that my family now offered, pirates and mercenaries enamored of anarchy. Late in the afternoon, they attacked our position in force.

I said my prayers and engaged in the fight, slaying the RR leader with my sword. Then, as we stood with less than 30 men, three troop hoppers landed and Mireille emerged with her royal guards, pinning the rebels between the rocks and their escape route. Except for the 12 who surrendered, the rebels were slaughtered to the last. Mireille ran to me and became very emotional at our reunion, as did I. "I had a tracer on your cloak and could hear the battle," she confessed.

In a dark mood, we interrogated the survivors. They had received word of my movements from Count Shi, who was escaping Rampart on a League ship. I resolved to follow.

Other Holdings

Byzantium Secundus



My family's ambassador, Count Alrich Jiu Li Halan, inhabits the old Li Halan palace in the Imperial capital. A solemn, serious man, he tested my knowledge of the Omega Gospels and finally approved of me — a tedious process, not

unlike bloodletting. So tied up is Alrich in Church activities that many of his ambassadorial duties have fallen to Duchess Crescentia Meih, Prince Flavius' daughter, the Spring Blossom of the Mighty Li Halan Tree, the Maiden of the Butterflies, who has taken up residence in her Aunt Fativa's pal-



ace. Arriving from Holy Terra with 100 guards and 300 servants, she intends to spend time in the capital of the non-Garden Worlds before returning to Kish.

Only 21-years old, the duchess has created quite a stir at court and is surprisingly knowledgeable about politics, like her father. "Uncle Maximino warned me about the Imperial Court," she told me. "It is like a great dance, where the attention is always shifting, so the eye must be trained to witness seven things at once." Duchess Cresenthia Meih is kept under the careful eye of her advisor, Tazzun Toj. Her distant cousin on Cadiz, Celestra, caused a diplomatic incident, but the young duchess is more subtle than her critics realize. She was the first to take up the cause in defense of my name, and for that I owe her my eternal loyalty. At court she is polite and demure, and her traditional Li Halan dresses have created quite a fashion stir in Imperial circles. She is also a talented landscape painter, as well as an accomplished musician and singer, although she only performs for close friends.

Earl Hikado rules over a vast palace on eastern Aldaia, thankfully in the mountainous uplands and not the mosquito-laden west. A perfect host, he has little to fear from the Cametons, Byzantium Secundus's embittered native royalty. "They cause trouble from time to time, but the people are better treated under us. Hence, we have good intelligence on their plans," he said while feeding some of his deer. Earl Hikado is on good terms with the emperor.

Ungavorox

The Vorox homeworld is under my house's protection. The Vorox led me to their King, Kummanga. A powerful Vorox, he is extremely savvy on political matters. He is also somewhat independent, a trait that has not endured him to certain elements of the Most Serene Family of Illustrious Merit. "I wanted to meet the Li Halan knight who reports to the Hawkwood Emperor," he said, before questioning me. When he was done, I asked him about his campaign against the ferals and their leader, Kagong Kagong. "He is nothing, a night predator who hides by day. We'll bait him out using his pride and rage as meat." King Kummanga then sniffed me and said a curious thing. "There is something about you," he said, looking quizzically into my eyes. "Your travels have caused you to see too many things, to break down those barriers your family holds when it sees the world through serene eyes."

Sir Huang Zu Li Halan rules Ru-Yi, a pleasant fief. "I was offended by them at first, but they grow on you," he said as we walked through his gardens observing goldfish darting in tiny ponds in the afternoon light. "The League leases some lands here, and the king is happy with that." He sighed, saying that Kummanga sought alliances outside our family. Prince Flavius has been accommodating — to a point. There is recent talk of supplanting the king, and my

family has begun to back the loyal Kabrannagu as a possible replacement.

I next went to Wu Tuo Bang, the estate of Baron Tiberius Wu Lin Li Halan. His estates run up against the feral-haunted jungles and war ever shadows his fiefs. Long ago, my family raised the Vorox to civilization from their feral ways, removing their poison claws in the process. The feral Vorox suffer no such ritual and some say this has given them an unfair advantage in the wars against their noble cousins, our friends whom we are sworn to protect. "I sent some ambassadors to the feral leader, Kagong Kagong," Wu Lin told me, as we walked past an honor guard of Vorox and Li Halan knights. "He promptly ate them. On one level, you can sympathize with him — diplomacy is tedious and dull. I doubt, however, that our ambassadors were very tasty."

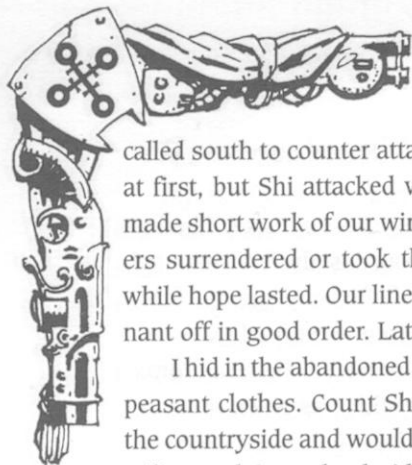
Malignatius

I was on Malignatius during the Emperor Wars when the Decados attacked. I applied military lessons taught to me by my old teacher, Jiang. During negotiated ceasefires, we would watch the Decados soldiers from our watchtowers as they sang and drank around their campfires. Occasionally, one would run off with a serving wench and fornicate quite openly before our forward posts. With such disgraceful behavior, many of us began to fear for our livestock. Given the chance, would these shameless barbarians rape our prize-bred winter steeds? Discussing this, we decided some moral lessons were in order. We began sending messages from the Omega Gospels through our loudspeakers but the shameless peasants flung feces back at us like zoo monkeys.

One day, we caught a young Decados soldier, wrapped in the thick white furs of a winter scout. I was called in to interrogate him. He said his name was Grigori and that he had gotten lost in a snow storm after urinating, wandering into our territory by accident. I did not believe him, knowing the reputation of Decados spies, but I realized the reality and dreariness of war. When all the world is white and you go out to piss, you can easily get lost. He eventually stopped talking and eating, and soon died like a sick dog, curled up under a blanket. To confuse our enemies, I planted false messages on his body exaggerating our strength and had it dragged between the lines in the freezing night and shot. Sure enough, the shot roused the Decados sentries and they dragged his body back to their lines. When their treacherous attack came, it struck in the south.

Count Shi, who was our leader, let them in. How the Decados got him to turn traitor, I do not know. I ordered our men forward once word came of Shi's treachery. We took the opposing Decados encampment and I seized their intelligence officer's papers. They recorded everything about their prisoners: Their beliefs, social standing and connections. I thought this was useful to know. Two days later, we were





called south to counter attack Count Shi. We gained ground at first, but Shi attacked with monstrous snow tanks that made short work of our winter cavalry. The other commanders surrendered or took their own lives. I decided to live while hope lasted. Our line was shattered, but I drew a remnant off in good order. Later, we dispersed for safety.

I hid in the abandoned village of Shun, dressing in warm peasant clothes. Count Shi's men caught me while looting the countryside and would have slain me, but for a Decados military advisor who decided to question me first. I revealed that I was from a large merchant family, the Shung, and had converted to the Incarnate faith. I was exiled to Malignatius by the cruel Li Halan authorities, but I dreamed of leading a revolt on Midian. The Decados fell for it. I knew, reading their interrogation forms, that they were looking for ways to disrupt the Garden Worlds. I was given passage offworld on a neutral Amalthean ship and so escaped.

Count Shi disgraced the reputation of those knights who attached themselves to his command. After the Emperor Wars, a cloud of disfavor fell over me. Several told me I was suspected as a Decados spy. How else, it was suggested, could I escape Malignatius? The intelligence services shadowed my movements. My retainers once shot a man who sneaked onto my estate with the intention of killing me. I fought and killed a gentleman soldier who openly accused me of being a traitor. Even worse, one day I witnessed a visiting businessman struck by a supply truck in the capital, and rushed with my servants to help him. As ill luck would have it, he was attached to a Decados trade delegation, and I was seen aiding the injured man. I began fasting and praying to escape this curse of ill fortune. Finally, my sympathetic cousin, Rakai, suggested I fall back on my military training and join the Questing Knights.

I apologize for the long story, but it explains just how things were on Malignatius: cold and crazy. It was long a Li Halan world, although a scarcely populated one. Its loss hurts our pride, not our wealth, for the planet is poor in resources. When the Decados stole the world from us, they did not expel those with estates, displaying their liberal generosity in dealing with defeated enemies — a sort of propaganda ploy used to quell the fears of the other royal families during the Emperor Wars. Some Li Halan still live there on their estates and small fiefs, but the Decados now govern the planet. New splinter sects, breaking from Mother Church, sweep the world with furious passions, alternatively ignored and encouraged by the bored Decados governors.

My party, with Mireille, landed on Malignatius. We carried a letter responding to certain trade proposals offered by the Decados, to be given to their representative, Sir Yuri, a negotiator of some skill. Rakai had helped me cloak my visit as a diplomatic one; if the Decados knew my real motives, they didn't hinder me. They were tired of Shi, and told me

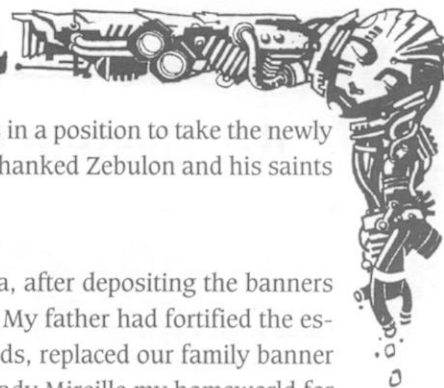
he had landed here but was detained from entering his fief by heavy storms. After Cardano's conversion, Malignatius was a refuge for many of the Li Halan followers of the Old Gods. Due to its inhospitable climate and remoteness, the old beliefs were tolerated here if their practitioners kept their opinions to themselves, preventing dishonor to the Church. Manja, an alteration of Ukari death rituals, is still practiced here by some of my less than pious relatives. While the Ukari perform rites to keep ancestral spirits away from the shores of the living, my decadent brethren changed the rituals to summon departed ancestral spirits, turning a religious rite into a necromancy cult.

Countess Amita Li Halan, who has vast estates on Malignatius and other Li Halan worlds, resides here in the province of Llangh. Her small province yields the greatest amount of produce on the frozen planet. Corn, rice, wheat and other crops are raised in abundance. Her serfs whisper that she is in league with the spirits of the earth and water. However it is done, it is a wonder. She agreed, via our common cousin Rakai, to aid me. She is old but wise, and the Decados fear her for it is rumored that she is the greatest living practitioner of Manja. Her cats followed us everywhere, an army of shimmering shadows. The countess informed me that the banners had fallen into the traitor's hands. I will not divulge how she acquired that information.

I went on with my entourage to Chahn, the northern fief held by the traitor Count Shi. Chahn is mountainous, with some sheltered vales where peasants eke out a living in the eternal winter. Yaks and various domesticated winter mammals dwell here, and the whole place smells of yak butter and yak hides. We hired some guides — four thieves in trouble with the law — and promised them off-world passage in exchange for aid. They told me they had spotted the count's entourage earlier, riding towards the Old Ox Pass, the only pass between the mountains from the distant skyport, a perfect place for ambush. We overcame Shi's six guards in their hut while they drank bitter beer during a storm. Our prey soon arrived.

Count Shi came on horseback displaying one of Cardano's Banners, a small guard about him. No doubt he was hurrying to escape the Decados authorities and hide his plunder. The storm aided him. My thieves — excellent sharpshooters — picked off his heralds while my guards tore into his force's flanks. The assault was sudden and well executed. Before he could rally, I challenged him to a duel.

He looked at me through the snow and then attempted to ride me down. One of my men shot his mount and he slid into a snowbank. Since he had thus forfeited honor, I attacked, his sword parrying my blade. I studied his movements, noting the way he positioned his arms behind his sword and how he unknowingly placed most of his weight on his left leg. I saw how I could unbalance him.



With a feinted kick and a swift double strike, I cut him down. His end was swift.

I left his corpse unburied and took Cardano's Banners with honor. Mireille made short work of a fleeing guard, and our battle was won. We lost one man and another was injured in the thigh. We then melted back through the secret ways from which we had come, with our guides leading us to Takpo.

Baron Augustus Zhang, lord of Takpo, rules the third largest Li Halan fief on Malignatius. The baron is Orthodox in belief and unhappy with Decados rule, but has remained for the sake of his serfs and the Church. Indeed, his Horace Cathedral is impressive, standing over the small town of N'gal. The baron is also something of a conservationist, and protects endangered Malignatius wildlife. He rules over 9,000 serfs and is on speaking terms with the Decados, though the two are not overly friendly. Zhang showed me great kindness and managed to later get us offworld.

Our local Decados representative, Sir Yuri, took my word that Count Shi was dead but showed little interest in the banners, probably thinking the entire affair ridiculous. "There are more banners," he said, referring to the other holy banners created during Cardano's conversion. "Why did you go to such lengths to recover these?"

"They are emblems of the unbreakable faith we place in the Pancreator. For my family, our banner is a personal sign that, like all men, we may stray from the Omega Gospels but we still place our loyalty in Zebulon's message, no matter what the personal cost," I answered, expecting him to understand. He remained bewildered, as if I was a curious undersea creature suddenly brought to light. He sighed wistfully, but being a noble, he understood about family honor

and reputation. Since he was in a position to take the newly rescued banners from me, I thanked Zebulon and his saints for such mercy.

Holy Terra

I next went to Holy Terra, after depositing the banners in a secure location on Kish. My father had fortified the estate and, with trembling hands, replaced our family banner while we prayed. I showed Lady Mireille my homeworld for two weeks before parting; duty called her back to Rampart. It was a sad day for both of us, and I suddenly realized that I would no longer be as reckless as I was before. The thought of Mireille anchored me to calmer horizons.

On Holy Terra we hold some fiefs granted to us by the Universal Church of the Celestial Sun as a sign of merit and, I suspect, to counter the other noble holdings there. In our ancient region of Chi'an, we have a large fief held by the Duchess Fativa Li Halan. Incidentally, Duchess Fativa also controls land on Icon, Midian, Byzantium Secundus, Kish, Criticorum and Shaprut. She is Prince Flavius' sister, but prefers her Holy Terra estates to her Garden Worlds ones. She allowed me to visit the Great Wall, where our Urth ancestors endeavored to protect their Middle Kingdom from the northern barbarians.

Others

We have large estates on Shaprut, in Viedha, and palaces on Cadiz, but they are outside the scope of this report. I have had word from Rampart and I must now return. Lady Mireille D'Rouge Glace has just given birth to a crimson little boy, our son. I shall ask the Church to solemnize our sacred union. It is said that the baby, who his mother calls Soliel, looks in wonder at the gold sword I presented her. A good omen.