

TEN BURIED BLADES



AN ADVENTURE FOR **GODBOUND**

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BY KEVIN CRAWFORD

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A REGRETTABLE CIRCUMSTANCE

The market town of Gongfang lies on the border of Dulimbai and the Raktian Confederacy, just one of the dozens of minor settlements that line the fast-flowing Dahuang river. The town has stood here for centuries, once a stronghold for suppressing the fractious Raktian subjects of the Regent and later a grudging gateway for traders and merchants from that recently-liberated land.

There is trouble in Gongfang. The town magistrate Li Shu is a paper tiger who hides in his yamen, ruthlessly scourging the populace with his exactions while doing nothing to impede the brigandry of Big Feet Zu, a rich man who reaps profits from many thieving servants. Some wonder if it is bribery that keeps the constables away from Zu's mountain estate, while others would credit the magistrate's cowardice.

In the mountains east of the town Real Man Xiao practices unorthodox rituals in his monastery. Were the mountain sage not licensed by Magistrate Li, he would doubtless be driven away, but it is the royal pleasure that his occult curiosities be indulged. His reckless experiments imperil the lives of his students and risk great calamities for the populace, but none can find his lair high in the mountains unless they are led by his trusted lieutenant.

And deep in the forest around Gongfang, rumor speaks of a new god that has awakened, a god of living gold, one that promises to bring bloody justice for the long suffering of the peasantry. Farmers and fishermen creep into the forest to perform rites on this god's behalf, praying to strange tablets and offering their sons to the deity's service in his hidden temple.

Gongfang cannot stand under its afflictions. The taxes of the magistrate, the banditry of Zu's men, the omens that roll down the flanks of Red Crow Mountain and the chants that rise from the deep forest all promise a terrible fate for the town and its people. The governor in Yizhao cares little for the destiny of one small market town, and the Raktian foreigners to the north would be only too glad to see disaster fall on their despised neighbors. If Gongfang is to be saved, it must be saved by the hands of strangers.

Onto this troubled stage stride the heroes of our story, the mighty Godbound champions who have chanced on Gongfang's misfortune. They alone have the strength to sweep away these troubles with the steel of their mighty blades and the penetrating wisdom of their words. Yet matters are not as simple as they seem in Gongfang. Malefactors may have other reasons for their actions than their outward seeming suggests, and in the end, the heroes may find that a noble resolution requires discernment as well as divine might.

THE SITUATION AT HAND

TEN BURIED BLADES is an adventure for the GODBOUND role-playing game intended for one to four first or second-level Godbound PCs. More potent heroes might be able to sort the town's problems too quickly to make an interesting evening's adventure, but if you've fewer than four PCs, you can adjust the combat encounters with the guidelines on page 144 of the core book.

The adventure revolves around three major figures: **MAGISTRATE LI** the local administrator, **REAL MAN XIAO** and his magical powers, and the newly awakened Khamite eidolon of the dead hero Hazar, known as **THE GOLDEN LORD** to its cult devotees. Each of them have their own largely-incompatible goals, and it's up to the PCs to decide how to deal with their varying ambitions.

To help keep things fresh for the GM, two versions of each of these antagonists are provided, each with different motivations. The Yin version of each is devoted to an internal ambition, something they're trying to accomplish for an inward end. The Yang version has directed their desires outward, and is trying to achieve a goal that will directly interfere with some outside power. The GM can randomly pick between versions for their own campaign, or choose the motives that seem most interesting to them.

TEN BURIED BLADES is intended as a mini-sandbox adventure, and so does not have a particular story line or sequence of events. Certain events are likely to occur regardless of player involvement, but most of what happens in the town and the surrounding wilds will depend on the choices the players make.

SETTING UP

Before running TEN BURIED BLADES for your group, you should read through the adventure and familiarize yourself with its varying moving parts. In particular, you should decide whether to use the Yin or the Yang motivations for each of the major NPCs and you should adjust any NPC combat statistics to match the composition of your pantheon.

Inset notes in the various sections will provide extra GM help for the reader, noting down any particularly relevant Words and the sort of miracles that might be useful. These notes aren't meant to be exhaustive, and a GM should always be ready to let a good idea work for the heroes.

The final section of this document includes some suggestions for transplanting the adventure to a different location in Arcem, should your pantheon be nowhere near Dulimbai. In any case, it's important to ensure that your players are on board with the idea of the adventure before bringing it out. It's all right for them to expect hooks, but they should be ready to follow what they find.



THE TOWN OF GONGFANG

Gongfang is a town of roughly two thousand people near the Raktian border, on the north bank of the Dahuang river. To the east rise lushly green hills and mountains, the largest of which is Red Crow Mountain, and to the west are thick lowland forests. There are a dozen small villages within a day's journey of Gongfang, hamlets of charcoal-burners, woodsmen, and rice farmers that might number a few hundred souls apiece. Like all Dulimbaian towns, Gongfang is fortified with a quarried stone curtain wall shielding its landward side. The city gate is closed at dusk, though a small bribe will get a traveler in.

Gongfang and its surrounding villages are the responsibility of Magistrate Li, the representative of the Regent in the area. Li reports to Governor Jiang in the city of Yizhao to the southeast, with weekly reports going back and forth along the frontier roads. Li lives and works out of the town yamen, the administrative complex that serves as a town hall, courthouse, and holding prison for accused malefactors. He is served by a corps of clerks and constables, the latter being only a thin cut above bandits. Yamen employees are invariably despised by Dulimibaian, who hate their constant petty extortions and corruptions.

Homes in Gongfang form rectangular courts, with a high, windowless wall surrounding an inner courtyard and interior buildings for sleeping, cooking, and storage. The wealthy have separate areas for male and female members of the household, with the female quarters in the back of the compound. Entering the women's quarters is unthinkable for men not married to someone within it, and even husbands are expected to clear out of the bedroom after rising.

Shops face the muddy streets, open-fronted in the warm climate of Dulimbai. Petty merchants and servants might sleep in them overnight, and a patrol of constables roams the streets after dark to apprehend thieves and ruffians. If a conflict arises, treat them as a Small Mob of common soldiers.

There are always a number of foreign traders in Gongfang, mostly Raktians trading furs, uncut gems, or forest products. As such, Gongfang is somewhat more cosmopolitan than most Dulimbaian towns, and many of the locals know enough trade cant to communicate with those who don't speak Modern Ren. Magistrate Li knows several languages, and takes pride in his easy fluency in barbarian tongues.

If it becomes relevant, Gongfang can be treated as a Power 2 faction, with 2 points of Cohesion and a 1d8 action die. It has the Feature "Excellent fortifications and defensive garrison." , and the Problems "Rebellious cult of the Golden Lord: 1", "Big Foot Zu's banditry: 1", and "Real Man Xiao's dangerous experiments: 1". These Problems might well be corrected by the PCs during the adventure.



Entering Gongfang is as simple as walking through the gates or drawing up at the riverside wharf. More flamboyant Godbound might choose to vault or climb the thirty-foot high walls that surround the town. Flashy entrances will draw some alarm from the soldiers on duty, but there are enough strange things in the area that they won't immediately resort to violence.

Gongfang has no functioning Wards, and so the use of divine powers on and in it are unimpeded. Pyrotechnics will draw Real Man Xiao's attention, and substantial military and magical forces can be sent from nearby Yizhao. These forces take two weeks to muster and arrive.

Lodging in Gongfang is relatively abundant, with the Inn of Five Silver Fish catering to foreign visitors in particular. Prices for ordinary goods are low enough that Godbound can likely afford them with pocket change. There is little to be had in Gongfang that would require so much as a single point of Wealth to buy, whether it's their ubiquitous dried river catfish or bribes to the magistrate's doorman.

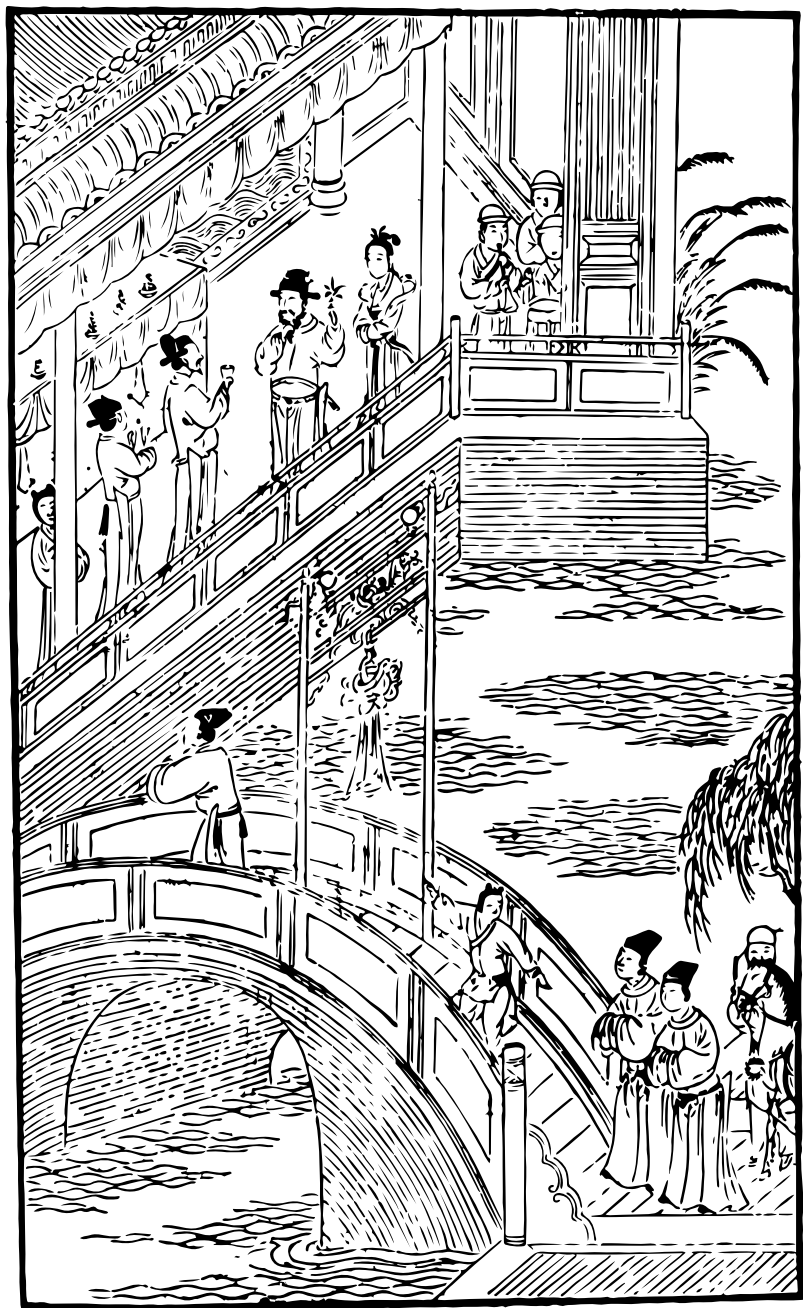
Two street events are provided in the following pages to give easy adventure hooks to the players. You should feel free to throw either of them at the pantheon shortly after their arrival, or let Magistrate Li notice the PCs as potentially useful, deniable catspaws for his own plans.

The players are going to have to pick up on at least some key facts in order to get involved in the situation in Gongfang. They don't need to realize all of them too early, but you should make sure they find out at least some of the following truths.

REAL MAN XIAO is conducting dark experiments in immortality in his monastery on Red Crow Mountain. The players may learn that Magistrate Li is sending him "students" that never come back, and that finding the monastery is impossible without a special guide.

MAGISTRATE LI is squeezing the locals even more harshly than is usual for an official. He's falsifying land registers and fining people for trifles, begging them or forcing them to "volunteer" their offspring for study under Real Man Xiao. Many suspect he's cooperating with **Big Feet Zu**, a rich rice broker whom everyone knows to employ brigands.

The local peasants are secretly worshipping an illicit god in the forest, one they call "**THE GOLDEN LORD**". The magistrate is worried about this, as such illegal cults are often a prelude to civic unrest. Word among the common folk is that the Golden Lord promises justice for the people afflicted by Magistrate Li's corruption.



MAGISTRATE LI SHU was appointed two years ago as the overseer of Gongfang, and he has not been enjoying his post. An unfortunately reckless memorial to the Regent got him demoted from his former rank to this trifling frontier town, and he's been spending the last two years trying to curry favor with his superior, Governor Jiang of Yizhao, in order to get his support for a transfer to a more civilized position.

Li is a man in the prime of life, a little past thirty, stout as befits his station and whiskered with a lustrous black beard. He wears the finely-embroidered robe of his office and never goes out in public without his sedan chair, a pair of bearers, and a half-dozen burly constables to clear the way and provide such summary thrashings as might be needed.

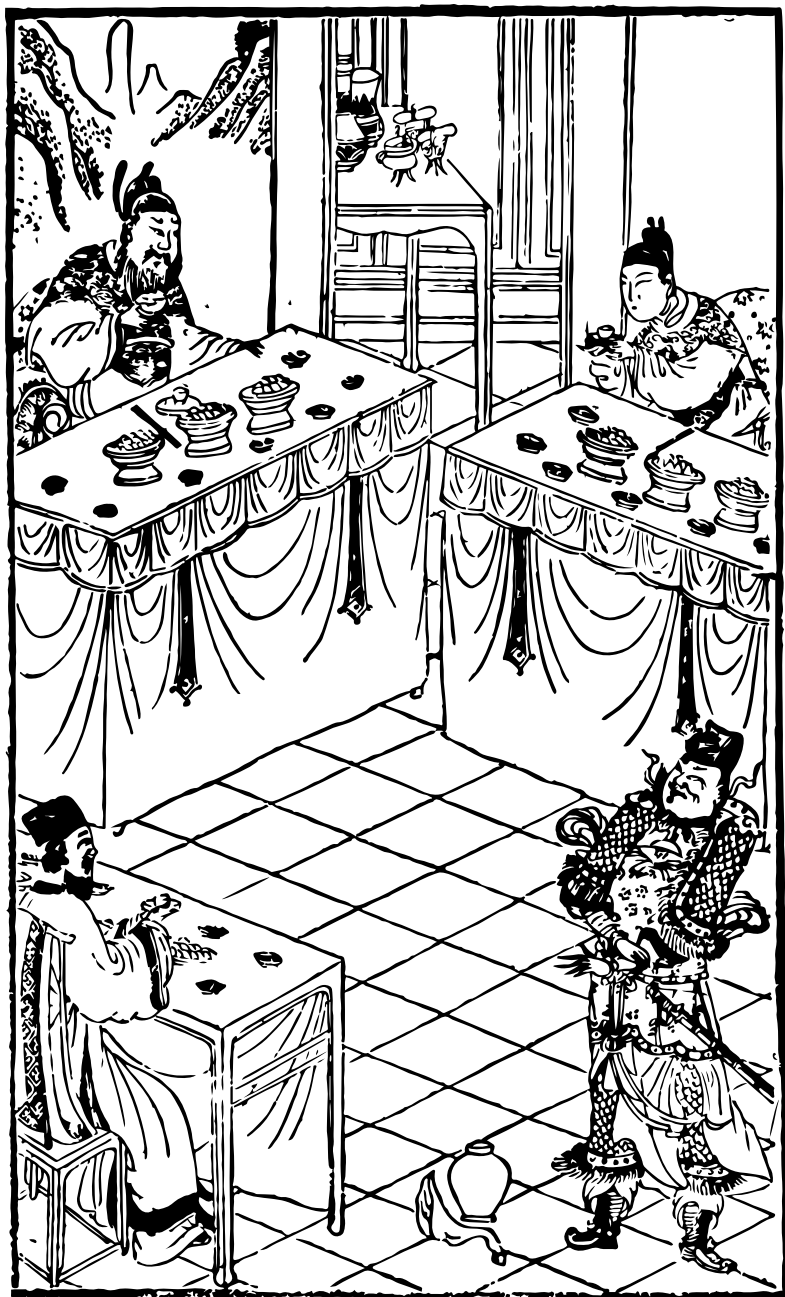
YAMEN GUARDS: A Small Mob of AC 7, 12 HD, +2 attack, 1d8 damage, Morale 9, and 15+ saves. They can Overwhelm one target a round for 1d6 damage if a Hardiness save is failed. If expecting trouble, they become a Large Mob of 24 HD with two attacks.

Li dwells with his family in the Gongfang yamen, his personal quarters lying behind the official audience hall at the front of the yamen courtyard. The magistrate has both a flinty-eyed wife, **MADAME LIAO**, and a new Patrian concubine he's named **PLUM BLOSSOM**. He's proud of the latter's beauty, and flaunts her with unbecoming freeness.

Madame Liao has been unable to give Li any children, and is terrified that Plum Blossom might give the magistrate the son he needs to carry on the family rites. If that happens, there is an excellent chance of her being divorced or simply ignored by her husband. Madame Liao has concealed her fear behind an extravagant kindness toward the new concubine, cossetting her in a fashion most unlike the usual response of a wife. Secretly, she's informed Plum Blossom that Li likes everything about her but her Patrian nose, and so the girl makes a point of wearing a veil over her lower face. Madame Liao is waiting for her husband to comment on it, whereupon she'll tell him that the girl finds his Ren odor repulsive. She's confident that the infuriated magistrate will then cut Plum Blossom's nose off and throw her into the street for her outrageous insult, securing Madame Liao's position.

Aside from his wife and concubine, the magistrate has a half-dozen personal servants hired from the local residents. These cooks, maids, and gardeners are easily bribed in minor matters, and gossip a good deal about how remarkably kind the Madame is to her husband's new concubine, despite his neglect of his own spouse.

MAGISTRATE LI: 3 HD with no skill at combat and saves of 13+. His armor class is 9, and he'll always flee rather than fight. He has 2 points of Effort which he can Commit to automatically succeed on Spirit saves, albeit not other types. He is not unfamiliar with the idea of mind-affecting magic, particularly signs of it in his constabulary.



Li currently faces two major problems, either one of which might work his ruin. He's perfectly willing to enlist the aid of outside agents to solve these issues for him, but will refuse to involve himself in any plan that seems to put him at direct personal risk of disgrace.

First, Li is worried about Real Man Xiao's theurgic experimentation in his monastery on Red Crow Mountain. He's under strict orders from Governor Jiang to supply Xiao with "students" and do nothing to interfere with his work. Some letters to his old friends in the capital have left Li with the suspicion that whatever's going on up there is happening at the direct command of the Regent, but enough peasants have vanished up the mountain that he's starting to have a hard time providing the novice students that Xiao keeps demanding.

Second, Li is being pressed for more tax money, with the exact reason for this motivation depending on whether you use the Yin or Yang version of the magistrate. He's pushing the peasantry fiercely and meddling with the land registers to increase the taxes each family owes. Gongfang is too minor a town to earn an investigation from the royal censors, and Li plans to be out of the place soon. If he squeezes too hard, however, he might ignite a peasant rebellion which would bring ruinous attention from the censorate.

Magistrate Li follows the usual Dulimbaian customs of hospitality, which means he'll give an interview and a modest banquet to any visitor of rank. This includes any Dulimbaian scholar-official or foreign personage of importance. Less important visitors will be fobbed off by the doorman unless a small bribe is offered, and even then Li will listen only long enough to deduce whether or not a petty visitor can be useful.

Li has regular private banquets with Big Feet Zu, sometimes inviting other local magnates or important visitors to participate. Most of these banquets are thinly-veiled threats, demonstrating to the other local figures that Zu and Li are excellent friends, and no help should be expected in resisting Zu's impositions. Other meals are more convivial, where the two conspire with some local who's willing to pay appropriately for favorable court cases or bandit attacks on rivals.

Most of Li's day is taken up in the audience hall, judging the innumerable legal cases that the locals put before him. He's even-handed when bribery's not involved, and very diligent in his work. In criminal cases he can order beatings, fines, or public shaming on his own authority, but serious cases and capital crimes require the Regent's approval of a sentence. In practice, many felons "die in prison" and are shipped to Xiao if they lack wealth or connections.

IF LI IS YIN, he needs money badly to fund his promotion. Governor Jiang is rapacious, and is trying to extract every silver liang possible from Li before he consents to recommend him for a better post. Li is working with Big Feet Zu to wring additional money out of the populace, and is trading the blind eyes of his constables for half of Zu's take. Unbeknownst to Zu, however, Li has decided that one more major bribe should satisfy Jiang, and he intends to get it by betraying his bandit-chief partner and cleaning up the evidence of his corruption.

A Godbound of Wealth could solve Li's problem with a wave of a hand, conjuring the 5 points of Wealth Li needs to bribe Jiang. The magistrate would offer almost any assistance or favor in exchange for so much silver.

The magistrate is looking for strangers willing to assassinate Zu, assuring them that the bandit deserves death, and that Li's seeming cooperation is only because he lacks the strength to deal with him. If these bold foreigners can kill Zu, the magistrate's constables will be able to round up his demoralized men and end his wicked depredations. Of course, such heroes can expect plenty of silver in reward.

Li plans to let these heroes make the attack before sending in his constables in the ensuing confusion. He'll pay the assassins 2 Wealth points worth of silver bars, but advise them to leave the area rapidly, as Zu's "hidden allies" will likely paint them as bandits. Li, of course, will do just that as he confiscates Zu's property, as a story of brigands killing brigands ensures no hard questions will be asked.

IF LI IS YANG, he needs money to pay slavers to supply Real Man Xiao with the necessary "novice students" the theurgist demands. The slave-traders of Yizhao don't know why this country magistrate needs healthy bodies so badly, but they've raised their prices accordingly, and Li is getting desperate. If he fails to supply Xiao with the raw materials he needs it'll be another black mark on his personnel record, meaning he'd be lucky to be assigned to the magistracy of a chicken coop.

He's looking for deniable hirelings to lead a raid on a "rebel camp" using rabble scraped up by Big Feet Zu. This camp is actually of devotees of the Golden Lord, but the details are of no interest to Li. All he cares about is that they're peasants who can be legally enslaved for rebellion, and he knows Governor Jiang won't look too hard at the sentencing paperwork.

If the pantheon agrees to do the work for him, see the section on the Golden Lord for details on the forest camp. Zu will supply a Small Mob of common soldiers as muscle, all of whom will behave despicably toward prisoners. If the prisoners are handed over to Li, he'll pay 2 Wealth in silver bars for them.

The use of Influence in GODBOUND can be a little difficult for some new players to really understand. It's easy for them to forget it's an option, or be confused as to how much they can get away with. For your convenience, here are a list of some Influence uses that might be relevant, assuming the PC has the right Words or Facts to justify them. As usual, allies can contribute their own Influence toward a pantheon-mate's efforts if they can explain how they're helping.

Remember that Influence is meant to represent a PC's off-screen efforts and the work they put in when they're not busy adventuring or acting with the rest of the pantheon. If what they're trying to do sounds like something they could hope to accomplish if it were played out, it's probably something they can commit Influence to achieve.

Some PCs will prefer to actually play out their efforts. In this case, no Influence is needed, but you should throw in some appropriate challenge from the GODBOUND core book pages 122-125 that they must overcome to achieve their goal.

Finally, remember that major magical changes or drastic alterations of a place need Dominion to enact. Influence only can do what's naturally possible.

AFFLICT A LOCAL: The PCs might want to use Influence to make life hard for a troublesome NPC, causing business failures, family trouble, or infuriating bad luck. This is usually a 2-point Plausible change for minor afflictions, while it's a 4-point Improbable one for serious troubles. Minor NPCs can be killed this way via hired assassins or off-screen murder, but worthy foes demand in-play attention to their deaths.

CREATE AN INSTITUTION: The PCs might want to start an academy, an irrigation network, a number of hyper-productive farms, or a new tradition of martial valor in Gongfang's people. Assuming the institution isn't a threat to the local authorities, it might be anything from a Plausible 2-point change to an Implausible 4-point or Impossible 8-point change, depending on how wild the alteration is. If Magistrate Li or Big Feet Zu are still around, double the cost as they interfere and try to profit from the institution. The institution will probably crumble if the players withdraw their Influence later; spending an equal amount of Dominion can make them permanent. Impossible Dominion changes usually require expending a celestial shard to cement them, and may require overcoming a challenge to clear away local obstacles to the change. If the institution is meant to be a beneficial Feature for Gongfang, apply the rules for PCs creating new Features with their actions on page 138 of the GODBOUND rulebook.

FORM A CULT: There are enough people in Gongfang to make up two Power 1 cults or one Power 2 cult. PCs who've attained second level can Influence the locals into becoming believers with an investment of 4 Influence as an Improbable change, but their faith won't stick unless the PC keeps the Influence invested, applies Dominion, or does the kind of heroics that would really convince the locals to worship them. If the PC's cult doesn't somehow assimilate their worship of their ancestors, however, treat it as an 8 point Impossible change to convince them to convert.

MAKE GONGFANG PROSPEROUS: Various Words can improve Gongfang's economic state, either with better crops, ample goods, or piles of silver bars. With no interference from others, it's a 2 point Plausible change. If Magistrate Li or Big Feet Zu are still around, it becomes a 4 point Improbable change due to their skimming, and if both are still active, it's an 8 point Impossible change as they engage in an orgy of speculation.

RAISE A REVOLT: Seizing control of Gongfang is an Improbable 4 Influence change if the PCs have the confidence of the local peasants, or an Impossible 8 points if they're brute-forcing the rebellion with mind-control powers or main force. Governor Jiang will send sufficient forces to crush the town in two to four weeks unless the PCs destroy the government forces. In the meanwhile, the townsfolk will obey the PCs as their rightful rulers. They're too poor to offer much, but the PCs can wring 1 point of Wealth out of them every month. This Wealth won't add to existing piles of lucre larger than five points; it's too small to mean much to such vast hoards.

RECRUIT MINIONS: The PCs might decide they need their own gang of thugs, or want to enlist some useful NPC as a reliable ally. If the PCs actually do something that would logically get them this outcome, then they get it without committing Influence. If they want to just deploy the Influence and write in the new minions, it qualifies as a Plausible change if they're offering some inducement that would appeal to their potential servitors, or an Improbable one if they're relying on naked mental or social influence. Raising more than a Small Mob of ordinary toughs is likely to draw unfriendly attention from Magistrate Li.

SUBVERT LOCAL RULE: The pantheon may decide to take over Gongfang in a more discreet way, subverting Magistrate Li or taking control of the local population. As with all changes, if the PCs actually play out their plans at the table and deal with Li's resistance personally, no Influence is needed. If they just want to do it in the background, it qualifies as an 4 point Improbable change if they don't ask Li to do anything self-endangering and an 8 point Impossible one if they want him for a complete puppet.

In the open plaza before the yamen, Magistrate Li is addressing a half-dozen young men and women lined up before him, all of them dressed in white robes and black caps, and all of them looking various degrees of miserable. Behind them are what appear to be their parents and relations, the women weeping quietly into their sleeves, the men stone-faced and grim. Bystanders are avoiding the group.

PCs who stand close enough to overhear will hear Li commending the group for their filial devotion to their parents, and his explanation of how their noble choice to study under the famed scholar Real Man Xiao will doubtless bring them much spiritual merit, even as it liberates their parents from the regrettable burden of overdue taxes. Of course, any of them who think better of their choice is welcome to say so now.

As the group maintains an uneasy silence, the stillness will be disturbed by cries from the shop-fronts on the opposite side of the plaza. A robed woman wreathed in black smoke is descending from the sky, billowing great plumes of shimmering black mist behind her. The bystanders will scatter in terror and the magistrate will be hurried back inside the yamen by his guards.

The smoking woman is screaming something in a voice that is somehow both smoke and sound, the meaning lost entirely in the joining. She waves the sleeves of her white robe as she tries to communicate, growing more and more frustrated and desperate at her inability to impart her meaning. Three rounds after she lands in the plaza, she will charge the yamen gates in blind fury. If the pantheon is standing in front of the yamen, they might well think she's charging them.

Any attempt to strike the girl will be successful, and will result in her exploding into a massive burst of reeking, staining black smoke, leaving only a fouled robe and a few wisps of black hair and pale skin behind. If the PCs don't intervene in her charge, she'll burst with her impact on the gate.

The girl is named Fei Lan, an escaped "student" of Real Man Xiao, one partially transformed into a cloud of tainted yin qi-energy. She escaped the monastery and tried to warn the other students, but the transformation was too far along. Without prompt divine intervention or resurrection, her fate is sealed.

Magistrate Li will not discuss the matter, insisting the girl was merely a hungry ghost from the hills. If questioned, the bystanders will whisper their recognition of her as a student from the last batch sent off.

A Health or Sky miracle could cure the transformation or banish the smoke-change in time to save her. The Sorcery Word's suppressing power could also shut it down, as could a theurgic invocation of dispelling. If saved, she'll be able to remember little of her time in the monastery, but can confirm that Real Man Xiao is conducting experiments in immortality.



While walking down the street the pantheon will notice a pair of burly hooligans brawling with vigorous enthusiasm. The local bystanders will all be doing their best to ignore the two, to the extent of hiding in their shops and pulling their children out of view. Anyone with any knowledge of Dulimbaian habits would find this most unusual, as someone should have tried to separate the two by now, or at least run for the constables to break up the fight.

The brawler getting the best of the fight is **Ji NUMBER THREE**, kicking **OXHEAD PO**. While the two are leveling punches and kicks at each other, the knives at their belts are sheathed, and they don't seem to be trying to inflict lethal violence. If the pantheon doesn't intervene, the two will brawl for a few rounds more before a thunderous punch from Ji flattens Po. Ji will limp off towards a drinking house, and Po will groan piteously for a while before staggering off in the opposite direction.

Both men are ruffians in the service of Big Feet Zu, and they're fighting over which of them is to stand the nightly watch over the slave cages at Zu's estate until the time comes to take them up into the hills to Real Man Xiao's monastery. Both Po and Ji had an interest in the job, but know not to bother Zu over a petty matter of duty rosters. This street brawl was their way of resolving the impasse, and the locals know better than to interfere with it.

If pressed, Po will readily and ruefully explain. A girl in the latest group of slaves bought from Yizhao is from his home village in the south, and he can't bear to think of her being sent up the mountain. Worse still, he thinks Ji has plans for the girl tonight, whereas Po intended to secretly free the girl and run away south with her. If the pantheon is willing to help him get away with the girl, he'll tell them when and where to ambush the slave convoy when it heads up Red Crow Mountain next week. He's telling the truth, as far as it goes.

Ji isn't interested in talking about the topic, and will answer any particularly inquisitive soul with his fists. If somehow persuaded to talk, he'll haltingly admit that he can no longer stand hearing what Po does with the women among the slaves each night. This new batch just arrived, and he's troubled by the way Po looks at one of the girls. He knows the other ruffians in Zu's service would think him a soft-hearted fool if he objected to such sport, so he made Po think he wanted the girl. In truth, Ji has grave qualms about his life since he fled his tax-burdened farm and started serving Zu. He may be willing to betray his master to the pantheon if convinced of their righteousness.

Ji NUMBER THREE: ex-farmer, AC 9, 2 HD, +3 attack, 1d6 damage with knife, Morale 10, and 14+ saves.

OXHEAD PO: disgraced constable, AC 9, 1 HD, +2 attack, 1d6 damage with knife, Morale 9, and 15+ saves.



THE ESTATE OF BIG FEET ZU

Gongfang has few particularly wealthy residents. The border trade with Raktia ought to bring in more silver than it does, but the majority of the profit is skimmed off by **BIG FEET ZU**. Every merchant in Gongfang understands that “incense money” has to be paid to Zu for the privilege of doing business in town. Those who refuse to pay, or those who are suspected of secret deals that don’t involve Zu, can expect to have their shops and farms robbed.

As the magistrate of Gongfang, Magistrate Li is theoretically responsible for these thefts and could be punished if the guilty parties aren’t found and arrested. So long as Li keeps Real Man Xiao supplied with students and Governor Jiang supplied with tax revenue, however, Li will be able to keep blaming Raktian bandits from over the border.

Zu’s walled estate is a comfortable distance outside Gongfang, a mile east of the town in the hilly country in the shadow of Red Crow Mountain. A grand main hall houses the “successful rice broker” himself, while smaller structures house his immediate retainers and substantial stores of rice and other grains. A deep stream flows in front of the estate’s front gate, bridged by a conveniently fragile wooden arch. Zu’s men can have the bridge down in minutes if needed. At the back of the compound, slave cages usually contain a few hapless souls.

Zu always has a substantial number of men on hand, rotating in bands of brigands from the surrounding countryside. Most of these bands aren’t particularly loyal to Zu, but their chiefs pay him protection money so he’ll intervene with Magistrate Li and prevent undue attention from officials. These toughs will fight anyone who attacks the estate, but they’ve got no intention of throwing their lives away.

Zu himself is an elderly man with stained yellow teeth, a short white beard, and the dead eyes of a man utterly indifferent to human suffering. He speaks in a courteous and reasonable manner and is invariably polite to all who encounter him. He retains on his person a fragment of a jade circle which he is confident will protect him from any possible harm. Anyone who looks at the fragment can immediately sense its profound magical power, but only a Godbound or an arcanist would recognize the **CELESTIAL SHARD** for what it is. It offers no protection at all to the bearer, though Zu will refuse to believe this, much to his likely regret.

ZU’S TOUGHS: A Large Mob of AC 7, 24 HD, two +2 attacks, 1d8 damage, Morale 8, and 15+ saves. They can Overwhelm two targets a round for 1d6 damage if a Hardiness save is failed.

Zu himself will die from the first blow aimed at him by a combatant.



The pantheon might choose to directly attack the estate, either to carry out Magistrate Li's betrayal or to further their own righteous vengeance. Unless the pantheon is particularly limited in its combat skills, they're not likely to have a great deal of trouble doing so. Zu's toughs are numerous, but they lack the firepower to take out several prepared Godbound before they're torn apart. Zu himself will hide in his manor, and will seek to escape over the back wall into the forest if the pantheon doesn't take measures to prevent such flight.

If Zu's toughs are defeated or fail a Morale check, most of the survivors will scatter, but several dozen of them will take the opportunity to loot their former employer and burn down his manor. Fires will be started immediately and the blood-maddened bandits will begin spitefully murdering the slaves in the pens if the pantheon doesn't stop them. If the pantheon isn't in a position to see the slave pens, they might not even realize what's happening until it's too late. One slave will die each round until all are dead. If Oxhead Po's countrywoman is still in the cages, she'll die on the third round after the bandits break.

There will be three main groups active after the bandits rout. One group will be setting buildings on fire out of spite and in hopes of causing a distraction. Another will be breaking in the main hall's doors to loot it, and a third will be killing the slaves to ensure they can't give evidence. The PCs should be given the chance to perform whatever actions or miracles they think will resolve the situation, assuming they're aware of what's going on and care to stop it.

If the PCs choose to use violence, don't bother rolling an attack; the bandits are too demoralized to offer meaningful resistance. For other miracles, assume the bandits fail any relevant saving throws. Each group requires that the pantheon do two useful things to drive them off or prevent their actions. This may be two PCs both doing something useful to stop the group, or it may be one PC doing something for two rounds, or any other combination. Once enough has been done to stop a group, the bandits involved are fled, dead, or cowering in surrender at the GM's discretion.

The bandits all know Zu is working with Li, but none have hard proof. If the manor and grounds are looted by the pantheon, they'll plunder 2 Wealth points worth of easily-portable silver bars and jewelry. If they have at least a cart's worth of available transportation and an hour to plunder an unburnt manor, they can salvage a total of 5 Wealth points worth of portables, heavy strings of copper cash coins, and art objects. If Zu is allowed to slip away into the forest, he'll have carried his portable money with him. If the loot is shown in Gongfang, half of it will be sought for return by its rightful owners.

IF ZU'S MOTIVATION IS YIN, he not only knows the details of Real Man Xiao's research into immortality, he's actively backing the sage in order to take advantage of the resulting magic. By supplying Xiao with extra "students", the sage has condescended to send Zu several vials of foul-tasting medicine, assuring the man that the contents will prolong his life considerably.

Any physician, theurge or low magic master who sees the bottle or smells the medicine will be able to tell that the "sacred medicine" that Xiao has sent Zu is nothing more than a drug for erectile dysfunction. If convinced of this, Zu will be enraged, and will gladly assist the PCs in taking vengeance on the Real Man. Zu handles the slave shipments to the monastery on Red Crow Mountain, and can easily arrange for the PCs to be taken along as guards by the theurge's lieutenant Perfected Woman Wen when she comes to guide the slave convoy to the hidden monastery.

IF ZU'S MOTIVATION IS YANG, he's living in terror of the Golden Lord, and is trying his best to stamp out worship of the new god. Too many of his victims are murmuring of the deity's impending vengeance against the wicked and corrupt, and Zu is pragmatic enough to know that he and Magistrate Li will be at the top of the divine retribution list.

Normally, Zu would dismiss such talk as the useless whining of peasants, but recent events have convinced him of the very real danger. A bandit crew in Zu's employ stumbled over a forest camp of Golden Lord devotees, only to have the Flayed Monks smash the gang and leave a lone cowering survivor to bring back word of the massacre. Whether the Golden Lord is a true god or not, Zu is convinced that his disciples have enough sorcerous power to present a serious problem.

As a consequence, Zu will be eager to find agents willing to investigate the Golden Lord's cult, preferably a disposable group of outsiders who would have little reason to be sympathetic to the peasants. He's willing to offer favors and silver for the service, including agreeing to slip the pantheon into Real Man Xiao's monastery with next week's slave shipment.

Of course, Zu expects most of his agents to die horribly, so he'd much rather send minions he can afford to lose. If Magistrate Li is also of a Yang motivation and hires PCs to capture "rebels" in the forest, Zu will quietly ensure that the Small Mob of toughs sent along with the pantheon is composed entirely of troublemakers and incompetents he would like to see dead. If they come back alive, he's likely to handle the pantheon very cautiously.

THE MONASTERY OF REAL MAN XIAO

Dulimbai has always known various mountain sages and eccentric hermits, all practicing the esoteric principles known as “the Tao” in their own way. The official principles of the Regency are firmly planted in the ancient Li-magic of the Made God known as the True King, but the Taoists have been too useful over the centuries to dismiss their practices entirely.

REAL MAN XIAO is a powerful Taoist mountain sage who has been installed on Red Crow Mountain by the Regent’s personal order. It’s almost a Dulimbaian tradition for a Regent to show interest in the Taoist magics of immortality, but these ambitions so rarely come to fruition that few take them seriously. As far as the administrators in the capital are concerned, Real Man Xiao is just another entry in the ledgers at the Ministry of Rites, and the Regent himself has actually forgotten that he ever ordered that Xiao be accommodated.

Xiao is glad to take advantage of his anonymity. Despite the best efforts of a two-century lifespan, he is being pursued by the inevitability of death, and his magics were beginning to fail him. Only through the steady supply of “students” from Magistrate Li is he able to fend off the thrusts of impatient Death and preserve his corporeal frame.

These students provide Xiao with the fuel he needs for progressively more exotic and dangerous theurgic experiments. A more skilled theurgist would know enough to never risk the kind of ominous meddling that Xiao is performing on Red Crow Mountain, but Xiao is just naive enough and just desperate enough to perform forbidden rites and unpredictable rituals.

In order to ensure the undisturbed serenity of his monastery, Real Man Xiao has performed mighty rituals of confusion and bafflement that ensure that no outside intruder can reach the monastery unescorted. His chief lieutenant, **PERFECTED WOMAN WEN**, is the only one he has entrusted with the secret Yu-step shuffle that can bypass the protective wards.

Currently, Real Man Xiao is dependent on the SHIJIE theurgic ritual for prolonging his life, conducting ceremonial burials in which his Taoist ritual sword is encoffined in his place. Normally, only one such Shijie rite would be necessary or possible, but Xiao’s death is so pressing and so long-delayed that he has been forced to perform ten of these rituals over the past two years, with the failures requiring substantial student sacrifice to salvage the magic.

The students are kept in mortal terror of Xiao’s magical powers, though the theurgist promises that the most clever and obedient of his pupils will eventually partake of his arcane might. This is, of course, a complete lie.



Xiao's monastery is near the crown of Red Crow Mountain, a day's journey east of Gongfang through heavily-forested foothills. Elders of the town remember it as a simple shrine to the god of the mountain for many years until it was sacked by Raktian raiders and never rebuilt. Real Man Xiao arrived two years ago and arranged for its restoration, paying with silver bars stamped with the chops of silversmiths from the capital. Since then, the monastery has become impossible to find. The few locals who dared seek it out found themselves going in circles and oppressed with feelings of uncanny dread.

Every month, a new batch of students is sent up the mountain by Magistrate Li or Big Feet Zu's men. These students are either slaves bought in Yizhao or local youths who've "volunteered" in order to win forgiveness for their parents' tax arrears or other crimes. Occasionally a condemned criminal is sent along with them. A half-dozen guards escort the students on the journey, all of them with the statistics of common soldiers.

Leading these groups is **PERFECTED WOMAN WEN**, Xiao's trusted lieutenant, pupil, and lover. Wen is eager to supplant her master, but for now contents herself with supporting his research in hopes of assassinating him and claiming the secrets for herself once the time is right. She plans to slip pounded rice flour into this meals, poisoning the Taoist master with the Five Grains inimical to his longevity practices.

Wen has been taught the secret Yu-step shuffle that can penetrate the wards around the monastery. To a casual observer, it simply looks like Wen is limping at certain points in the journey, and perhaps wandering slightly from the path. A theurgist or one bound to the Sorcery or Knowledge Words would recognize the ritual significance of her motions, however, and would identify their meaning and purpose. Anyone who mimics these Yu-steps can likewise bypass it.

Red Crow Mountain is a subtly uncanny peak, known for the occasional sightings of ravens with blood-red plumage. Those barred by the wards will find themselves traveling in circles, progressively more oppressed by a sense of futility and confusion. Powers that prevent mental influence can dispel the lingering dread, but penetrating the spatial wards requires magic of divine strength, whether that of a gift, a theurgic invocation, or some innate Word.

Those who seek the monastery will be unable to find it without a miracle of Journeying or some way to suppress the divine strength of the magical effect that prevents outsiders from finding the place. If a miracle is used to pierce the veil, Real Man Xiao will instantly sense its disruption and be forewarned that some mighty power is ascending to his home.



The Monastery of the Imperishable Way on Red Crow Mountain has been lavishly improved by Real Man Xiao's mystical powers, transformed from a humble mountain-god shrine into a splendid seat of mystical enlightenment. The natural geomantic energies of the site have been carefully cultivated by the theurgist, and made to bring forth magnificently elegant art and architecture for the important structures.

Despite this, any Dulimbaian PC, theurgist, or Godbound with the Knowledge Word will be able to tell that something is very wrong about the monastery at the first glance. A proper Dulimbaian Taoist monastery may have beautiful art and architecture, but the mood of such places revolves around a feeling of quiet and spiritual calm. The painted walls of the Monastery of the Imperishable Way, with their gold-colored calligraphy and sweeping tiled eaves, impart only a feeling of restless energy and of almost-frantic striving. The dissonance is jarring to those familiar with other monasteries of the tradition.

While the monastery is impressive, its wooden buildings are as susceptible to fire or Fertility wood-bending as any other structure. Real Man Xiao will fight to defend the site and the ritual swords buried there, but he will prefer to flee south into the Regency rather than face his immediate destruction.

While a detailed monastery layout is unimportant to demigods, there are several locations in the site that might draw player interest should they seek to infiltrate or assault the place.

THE GATE: A large, non-magical double door of wood and iron is set in a natural stone wall fifteen feet high. The wall runs around the monastery compound, forming a square approximately three hundred feet on a side. A pair of students are on duty to open and close the door, but they are careless, and will open it to almost any voice from the other side, thinking it one of Big Feet Zu's men.

THE GARDEN PATHS: Slabs of rough-edged rock form pathways through the winding maze of greenery and stones that lies beyond the gate. The line of sight is blocked beyond twenty or thirty feet.

COVERED PIT: Off the garden pathway to the left, several trays of pungently-fragrant orchids cover a bamboo frame. The corpse-stink of the blossoms partially conceals the stench of the dozens of corpses piled in the pit beneath the frame. The deceased are those unfortunate students sacrificed by Xiao are a stopgap to save his failing immortality rituals. The students suspect this happens, but have no proof.

GINKGO PAVILION: A small hexagonal pavilion is fashioned with six slim, living ginkgos as corner pillars. A green courtyard spreads around it, with the other monastery buildings surrounding it.

HALL OF THE PURE AND QUIET THREE: This rectangular worship hall is on the far side of the courtyard, its broad side facing the pavilion. Within are three idols of shifting shape, austere Ren elders in red, blue, and yellow warping and transforming into stones, liquid waves, and curling clouds. Use of elemental Words near the hall can be fueled by the idols, with each providing one free Effort to a wielder before they shatter. Real Man Xiao will take advantage of this if possible, while Godbound will realize the possibility as soon as they start to tap their elemental Words.

HALL OF THE CELESTIAL MASTER: To the west of the Pure and Quiet Three, a somewhat smaller rectangular hall houses Real Man Xiao's quarters and those of Perfected Woman Wen. Xiao keeps the silk scroll manuals for three theurgic invocations of the Gate in his quarters: **COMMUNICATE WITH THE INNER GODS**, **FRAGRANCE OF THE HEAVENLY KITCHEN**, and **RITE OF THE BURIED BLADE**, all described later in the adventure.

GARDEN OF GOLDEN BLOSSOMS: This "garden" at the rear of the monastery is a graveyard for ten modest grave-mounds, the freshest of them still bare earth. Buried in each is an ornately-carved sandalwood coffin which contains nothing but a Taoist priest's ritual sword. Each of these swords can serve as an arcane connection to Real Man Xiao. If the graves are disturbed, Xiao will need to recover the swords and rebury them within fourteen days if he's not to wither away. He has an infallible sense of their location, but the destruction of any of them will doom him.

STUDENT BARRACKS: The second-largest structure in the monastery after the Hall of the Pure and Quiet Three, this rectangular building is full of shoddy beds, makeshift dining arrangements, and extremely flammable bamboo furnishings. Students not on work details, study sessions, or "personal service" to Xiao or Wen are restricted to the barracks.

STUDY HALL: This open pavilion is stocked with a number of carved tablets, small altars, and other necessary implements of ritual and study. Throughout the day, various groups of students are assigned to "study" here. Perfected Woman Wen sets them to pointless, repetitious practice, as few of the "volunteers" are even literate. The more clever realize the uselessness of their study.

XIAO'S STUDENTS: Two Small Mobs of AC 9, 12 HD, one +1 attack, 1d6 damage, Morale 7, and 15+ saves. They can Overwhelm one target a round for 1d6 damage if a Hardiness save is failed.

The students are terrified of Xiao's wrath, but will only fight in his presence.

REAL MAN XIAO is a shrunken man in ostentatiously white robes with a cloth hat wrapped about his balding head and a wispy black beard waving in the perpetual sourceless breeze that surrounds him. While of an obviously advanced age, he moves with an almost manic vigor and makes a point of flaunting his untiring stamina.

In truth, Real Man Xiao is a two hundred year old failure. While his earlier years were marked by his remarkable magical talent and an uncommon degree of diplomatic cunning, he never truly embraced the Taoist principles of simplicity, sincerity, and artless sagehood. Xiao drifted from monastery to monastery, inevitably dissatisfied with the life he found in each, always reaching for more than the Tao allowed.

Eventually, he acquired such a bad reputation among his fellows that he was forced to take up the hermit lifestyle that more cultivated Taoists embraced out of choice. Out in the mountains and forests, he stubbornly utilized his magical talents in unorthodox and forbidden ways, cultivating his inner qi with techniques that never would have been permitted in the monasteries.

One reason for this forbiddance was the extreme danger Xiao courted with his arts. Nine out of every ten practitioners of these unorthodox arts face death in their pursuit, but Xiao was one of the lucky ones and attained in a stroke the sort of powers that only the most gifted and disciplined adepts could command. Of course, there were certain unfortunate side effects and deleterious consequences to this cheated enlightenment, but Xiao was willing to make that bargain.

Unfortunately, Xiao now finds himself paying the price for that recklessness. With each season, his body becomes more frail and his qi, his vital essence, more tenuous. He can no longer progress in orthodox ways, and must resort to greater and greater acts of theurgic daring simply to keep the life he has. Rather than risk the censure of his peers, he has withdrawn from them entirely.

Two years ago, certain vile favors to a powerful southern official won him a sinecure position as an immortality researcher for the Regent. Such a position is largely ceremonial and without expected results, but Xiao took advantage of the royal rescript to set up his own "monastery" on the lightly-populated border. In the two years since, he has used the royal writ to compel more and more "volunteers" from the locals to fuel his dubious existence.

The Regent has completely forgotten about Xiao's existence, much to the sorcerer's satisfaction. If a serious investigation by the royal censors were to be undertaken he'd almost certainly be beheaded for his crimes and vendications. So long as he restricts his depredations to the peasants of a trivial border town, however, Xiao's dark experiments are certain to continue unchecked.

真人蕭



REAL MAN XIAO has seized tremendous personal power through forbidden exercises of internal alchemy, but it's left him dependent almost entirely on his magical powers for his continuing existence. His unaugmented body is relatively frail, and he can't handle much damage that gets past his powers.

Xiao will always invoke the **UNBREAKABLE** gift as a miracle the first time he's hurt in a round, thus rendering him immune to that physical injury and to any other physical harm until the start of his next turn. The first time this happens, he'll spend his entire round taunting the PCs. Xiao will continue to use Unbreakable every round he's hit until he's down to 3 or fewer Effort points, after which he'll only use Unbreakable when a hit would take him out.

Physical and tangible damage sources can't hurt him while he's under the effects of this gift, but mental, emotional, or spiritual attacks cut straight through his Endurance Word defenses. If injured by such a hit, he'll use a miracle to invoke **VITAL FURNACE** on his turn, instantly healing any damage suffered in the prior round. If the PCs can drop 8 hit dice worth of this type of damage on him before his turn comes up, however, he'll go down before he can heal himself.

Xiao fights in a blustering, overconfident fashion, trying to overawe his foes. His qi blasts are treated as electrical attacks with a 60' range. He'll fight on the ground until he feels seriously threatened, and will then take to the air with the **SAPPHIRE WINGS** gift. Doing so requires him to Commit Effort to the gift, however, so if his reserves are drained by repeated use of Unbreakable or Vital Furnace, he'll have to land. As one bound to Sky, he is unharmed by falling.

At some point in the fight, Xiao will likely trigger **THE CLOUDS BELOW** as a miracle, creating a huge fog bank of stinking, tainted qi that blinds his enemies, causing a -4 penalty to melee hits and rendering ranged combat

impossible for those without special senses. Powerful winds or large-scale fire attacks will clear off the mist.

Xiao will fly away if seriously threatened unless confronted in his monastery. He will fight desperately there, as the loss of the buried swords there would spell his doom; he will, however, try to cut a deal with his assailants, offering theurgic instruction or anything else he can imagine in exchange for his life.

REAL MAN XIAO: HD 8, AC 6, Two attacks at +10/1d6 straight damage qi blast, Move 60' fly or 30' run, Saves 11+, Effort 5. Bound to the Words of Health, Endurance, and Sky, and can take two actions per round. Decrease his attacks or actions if the pantheon numbers fewer than 4 PCs as per the guidelines on p. 144 of the **GODBOUND** core book.

See the **GODBOUND** pages below for the gifts that Real Man Xiao uses.

Unbreakable: p. 39

Vital Furnace: p. 42

Sapphire Wings: p. 50

The Clouds Below: p. 50

IF XIAO'S MOTIVATION IS YIN, he has mystically sensed the tremendous power of the pantheon and is desperately afraid of them. He will make a point of inviting them to the monastery, sending Perfected Woman Wen to guide them, and spin an earnest tale of the monstrous Golden Lord in the forest, and how the false deity's sendings are killing his hapless and much-beloved students. If only mighty heroes like the PCs could go and slay this foul abomination....

His students will be kept out of sight, save for a few coached in maintaining the story. Xiao doesn't know where the Golden Lord is, exactly, but can tell the PCs about the forest camps and the Flayed Monks. If the PCs do manage to slay the Golden Lord, he will commend their splendid might, write them a congratulatory poem, and try to get them to move along before he has to sacrifice more students in a Shijie rite. If the PCs attack him, he'll fight back desperately, for without the monastery's students as ritual fodder he knows his fate is sealed.

IF XIAO'S MOTIVATION IS YANG, he's brashly confident that he can do away with these troublemaking godlings, and then use their bodies as components in a new longevity elixir.

As soon as the PCs enter Gongfang, he'll sense their tremendous innate power. At his first opportunity, he'll contact Magistrate Li and try to get him to put the PCs in a good position for an ambush, such as sending them to "arrest rebels" in a forest clearing that allows Xiao the full use of his powers. Xiao will make a direct attack initially to feel out the PCs, saving his Effort for defensive effects and retreating back to the monastery once he's measured the heroes. Attempts to pursue him back into the mountains will fail unless the PCs use a miracle of Journeying or know the secret Yu-step shuffle that bypasses the wards.

Once he knows more about the PCs' powers, he'll instruct Perfected Woman Wen to play the role of an abused and fearful maiden-pupil who's slipped away from her awful master to seek the aid of the heroes. She'll willingly lead them back up the mountain through the ward, where Real Man Xiao and his terrified students will be awaiting to ambush them on favorable ground.

Xiao expects Wen to immediately backstab the heroes once the ambush is sprung, but Wen has different ideas. She'll cower and wail in noncommittal fashion unless it appears that Xiao is clearly winning or obviously losing. Only then will she strike to aid the side that seems most likely to win. She will save some Effort at all times for personal escape or use of necessary Deception miracles to counter PC powers of truth-discerning.

PERFECTED WOMAN WEN is a cold-blooded and ruthlessly ambitious young Taoist nun who aspires to the same immortality that has enraptured her master. Unlike Xiao, however, Wen is far less reckless and much less inclined to meddle with the dangerous theurgic practices that have won Xiao so much power and longevity. Wen values her own life far too much to run the risks necessary to bind that kind of power.

Instead, Wen is secretly cultivating foreign arts she's picked up from a grimoire acquired from a refugee Ancalian sorcerer. This tome promises wonderful rewards to the diligent student, and she spends much time in the forest practicing the meditations and ritual invocations necessary to attune the arts. Even now, she's discovered herself acquiring an incredible facility with lies and deception, and she's eager to progress.

In reality, the book is a dangerous codex of vile sorcery, and the refugee she dealt with was actually a cultist of the Poxed Court of Uncreated. Wen's damnation is no less assured than Xiao's if she does not immediately abandon her powers. At some level, she realizes this is the case, as no sorcerous adept would attain powers like hers without a lifetime of labor unless dark powers were involved. For now, she resolutely refuses to admit to herself that anything might be wrong.

Wen will avoid combat if at all possible, using her Deception powers to turn invisible and flee if necessary. Her gifts render her immune to any magical attempt to detect lies or plumb her true thoughts, and she can provide fake readings to any such power that will match her assumed cover story.

The nun has a thoroughly contemptuous regard for the male sex, and delights in playing the role of a hapless damsel forced into a cruel servitude to Real Man Xiao, pitching her act particularly toward the most heroic-looking male in a pantheon. She enjoys getting herself into deniable trouble, if only to watch her "hero" risk himself to get her out again. She has a sharp animosity toward other women that manifests in a supercilious arrogance toward them.

Currently, Wen wants Xiao dead. He was useful to her as long as he held out the prospect of theurgic knowledge and potential longevity-magic, but now that she has the tome she has no further need of him and his disgusting

desires for her. She'll put up with him for now, but she's plotting to slip some rice powder into his meals of nuts, vegetables, and fungi. With his body tainted by the corrupting effects of one of the Five Grains forbidden to a Taoist adept, he's certain to die the next time he conducts a FRAGRANCE OF THE HEAVENLY KITCHEN ritual to impress the students.

PERFECTED WOMAN WEN: HD 7, AC 6, One attack at +7/1d6 ritual sword, Move 30' run, Saves 12+, Effort 3. Bound to the Word of Deception.



THE CULT OF THE GOLDEN LORD

Long, long ago, the Ren people of Dulimbai were still an invading force from over the southern ocean, and the ancient Akeh of the Polyarchy of Kham still ruled this land. A mighty champion-exemplar of the Khamite ideotribes, Hazar the Golden, led a ferocious resistance from the mountains near Yizhao. Alas, great Hazar perished at last before the armies of the Ren.

Yet a relic remained of him. This relic was an ideoforn eidolon, a construct of magical force patterned on the champion's heroic soul. The Khamites created many such eidolons to magnify the glory of their heroes, albeit the great majority were destroyed during the war or decayed into nothingness in the centuries since. In the hills north of Gongfang, however, one of these eidolons has stirred.

It was chance that led to the discovery of the eidolon's ancient repository, a mere happenstance that led a bitter old man, Crooked Zhong the charcoal-burner, to find the concealed tunnel mouth that led into the eidolon's presence. The intrusion of a Ren "invader" triggered the repository-tomb's awakening protocols and revived the eidolon from its long slumber. The construct realized that a vast amount of time had passed since it slept, and came to understand that its beloved Polyarchy had been dead for a thousand years. Indeed, Hazar's native ideotribe had been exterminated entirely.

In the eidolon's rage and anguish, the terrified old charcoal-burner could understand only the glowing god's fury against the Regent and the scholar-lords of Dulimbai. Zhong was a man of resentments and repining against Magistrate Li for his grasping ways, and thought little better of Governor Jiang. Interpreting the eidolon's rage against the elite as a sign of divine fury at their corrupt ways, Crooked Zhong joyfully pledged himself as a loyal slave of **THE GOLDEN LORD** in working his vengeance upon the wicked and corrupt.

The Golden Lord's grief did not blind it to present possibilities. Whether to rebuild its lost ideotribe or directly avenge itself on Dulimbai's people, it would need servants and support. It understood little of the modern age, and its nature as a construct limited its ability to adapt. Zhong would gather believers for it, and in exchange, the Golden Lord would teach these acolytes its secret arts.

The eidolon has used Zhong as a mouthpiece to gather in other charcoal-burners, poor peasants, half-bandit vagabonds, and similar marginal souls. Its intentions likely have little to do with the good of its worshipers and everything to do with its revolt against Dulimbai's new masters. Deep in the forest, camps of devotees are marshaling for rebellion, plotting and preparing for a glorious uprising in the name of their new and shining god.



Rather than risk the exposure of the Golden Lord's hidden temple, most of the eidolon's followers are scattered in several forest camps north of Gongfang. These hidden camps and their crude huts rarely house more than two dozen men, women, and children. Each camp always includes at least two or three **FLAYED MONKS** to serve as teachers, trainers, and enforcers for the cult.

The monks instruct the devotees in an exotic, simplified version of the Golden Lord's doctrine of "Unfettered Will", teaching them to overcome their personal afflictions and disregard their suffering in this corrupted world. Their original will is the font of wisdom and serenity, and by embracing one's inner resolve, external troubles may be dispatched or readily dismissed. Those who are faithful to the Golden Lord and who are of untainted inner resolve will be made invincible in battle, whereupon they may gloriously crush the corrupt officialdom that has tormented them for so long. Death in combat simply means that the devotee's faith or will was not quite so perfect as it should have been.

More importantly to Magistrate Li, the monks are also teaching the cultists martial techniques and organizing them for military action. Their tutelage lacks the supernatural efficaciousness of their master's teachings, but they're still whipping the peasants into a dangerously competent militia. The cultists aren't ready to act just yet, but with another year of organizing they'll be able to field a force that could take Gongfang and even threaten Yizhao.

Gifted and determined peasants are allowed to seek greater service to the Golden Lord in his hidden temple. Such postulants are blindfolded and guided by the Flayed Monks to the temple, where they are permitted to worship the deity directly. If the eidolon thinks them a suitable pupil for instruction, they will be permitted to become a Flayed Monk over the course of a year's brutal training. Those who live are sent forth to minister to other camps in the forest.

Cultists occasionally risk visits to Gongfang to acquire necessities or secretly preach their faith to other downtrodden locals. Those in the camps survive on rice sent by sympathizers and bundles of "sacred flesh" sent from the temple. The meat is said to be provided miraculously by the Golden Lord, and that is true, in a fashion; the excised flesh of his monks is restored by a magical chamber in the temple, allowing them to nourish their flock in a literal sense.

FLAYED MONK: AC 7, 6 HD, two +7 attacks, 1d8 damage, Morale 11, and 12+ saves. Disciples of the Lesser Strife of the Torment Defied.

CULTISTS: A Small Mob of AC 9, 12 HD, one +1 attack, 1d6 damage, Morale 10, and 15+ saves. These cultists include many women and children, and will scatter if the monks fall.



The “temple” of the Golden Lord was originally the underground genesis crèche for the ideoform-eidolon, one dug out rapidly in the last days of the Polyarchy’s control of the southern regions. Its entrance is located a half-day’s walk to the northeast of Gongfang, in the thickly-forested, rugged foothills of the mountains. The moss-veiled passage that leads into the tunnels is almost impossible to find if divine powers aren’t employed or some Flayed Monk is persuaded to give directions. These pain-ignoring acolytes are impossible to torture or threaten, but they can be tricked or bewitched into compliance.

The temple lacks the usual elaborate decoration of Khamite architecture, with smooth stone walls and a floor lightly textured in cross-hatched lines for better footing. The chambers are lit by low golden emergency lights that shine from blisters of yellow glass. There are no external guards on the temple entrance, for fear of their discovery.

Novice monks who have yet to master the lesser Strife of Torment Defied are common in the temple’s halls, as are lesser believers who tend to work around the shrine. They’re never in substantial groups unless the cultists are expecting trouble, in which case they’ll qualify as Small Mobs like those at the forest camps. If encountered alone or in small groups, it’s not even worth running a combat round for them unless the players haven’t had the chance to see just how overwhelming their PCs are against normal humans.

Believers will immediately run to alert the Golden Lord of intruders, reaching their master 2d6 rounds after they flee. If the PCs encounter a few cultists at a time, they may not get the chance to run, but a Small Mob will always have a few succeed in bringing word if the PCs don’t take some measure to prevent it in the first round of combat.

If the Golden Lord thinks the PCs have a real chance to defeat it due to its own observations or reports from escapees, it will give orders to its minions based on its motivation. If the Golden Lord’s motivation is Yin, it will order all of its minions in the temple to slay the infidels, the command booming through the halls. The NPCs will form two Small Mobs that will lay into the PCs with fanatical zeal, and almost certainly be slaughtered. That’s fine with a Yin Golden Lord; it wants its Ren believers dead before it tries to slip past the PCs and flee to new grounds.

If the Golden Lord has a Yang motivation, it will command its believers to “save the holy scriptures”. A Small Mob of faithful will try to flee with the sacred relics in the temple library, while the Golden Lord and another Small Mob stand and die to try to buy them time to escape. A Yang Golden Lord wants its ideotribe’s beliefs to survive at all costs, and will act accordingly.

The difficulty of finding the Golden Lord will depend on the pantheon's resources. If they have some way of directly identifying the god's location, pick one place from the list below; they have to pass through it in order to get to the inner sanctum. If they have to explore the temple to find the eidolon, pick 1d4 locations below for them to deal with before they stumble on the sanctum.

Most of the locations below will have occupants at most hours, either a few students or laborers or a Small Mob if the temple is on alert. The Golden Lord's hunchback priest, **CROOKED ZHONG**, is almost always at his side when not out recruiting others. Treat Zhong as a Flayed Monk in combat.

CULT BARRACKS: Both aspiring Flayed Monks and ordinary cult laborers sleep here in this long chamber, their possessions nonexistent.

INNER SANCTUM: The genesis crèche was the site of the Golden Lord's slow assembly, a completion too late to be of any use for its creators. This broad, dome-shaped chamber is dominated by a waist-high marble pillar on which the Lord commonly sits in a lotus position, surrounded by offerings of flowers, wine, and food. The walls are covered with burnt-out Khamite sigils praising the soul of the hero Hazar, and the air smells of incense and scorched steel.

OSSEOUS LIBRARY: The room is dominated by a wall of several dozen skulls covered in tiny Ancient Khamite script of inlaid gold. Several skulls are missing. Together, the script spells out the harshly austere doctrine of the Unfettered Will, though the teachings are more philosophical than practical. Still, they can unlock enough knowledge of the lesser Strife of the Torment Defied to allow for training in it at usual costs.

RECOVERY ROOM: Once a site for congealing the eidolon's physical body, the Golden Lord has repurposed this medical chamber's lenses and healing glows. Any normal mortal who basks in the radiance here regains one hit die per round, even regrowing lost tissue and limbs. Lack of maintenance and subtle misalignments in the relics induce cancer that will be fatal within a decade in all such users, however. Mobs heal four HD per round in this room. Godbound and other mighty entities are unaffected.

STOREROOM: Rice and dried river carp are stacked here, the provisions offering the bare minimum necessary for human survival. Dried human flesh is in one set of baskets, the byproduct of training in the lesser Strife and the temple's recovery room.

STUDY HALL: This chamber is filled with makeshift torture devices of bamboo, hemp cords, and flensing knives. A Flayed Monk is always here, "teaching" several desperately determined novices.

THE GOLDEN LORD is an ancient Khamite thoughtform-eidolon, a construct of soul-energy patterned on the mighty spirit of a Akeh hero. It is not a living creature, nor does it possess a soul, but it can react, think, and plan much as the original hero Hazar could. It is fundamentally limited in its creativity and flexibility, however, and it simply cannot be anything other than the Khamite hero-warrior that Hazar was. This limitation is desperately frustrating to it.

THE GOLDEN LORD:
HD 18, AC 3, One attack at +10/1d8 straight damage punch, Move 60' run, Saves 8+, Effort 3. Bound to the Word of Passion and partial adept of the True Strife of the Torment Defied.

The Golden Lord appears to be a massive, dark-skinned Akeh man with regal features and a body covered with gilded scars that glow with yellow radiance. Embedded in its sternum is a **CELESTIAL SHARD** in the shape of a golden cog. Its power is obvious to Godbound onlookers, though it cannot be removed without destroying the eidolon.

The eidolon practices a defective, partial version of the True Strife of the Torment Defied. In particular, he's got the advantages of the **FLESH OF INVIOLEATE WILL** technique, which means the first hit that would drop him to zero hit points instead leaves him with only one. His **SERPENT-ARMED STRIKES** also allow him to automatically hit once per fight on an attack that would otherwise miss.

The Golden Lord has a limited pool of Effort, and will use it on two different miracles. For the first, as an On Turn power, he'll emanate a terrifying fixity of purpose that intimidates his foes. Enemies must make Spirit saving throws or be unable to attack him during their next round. For the second, as an Instant he'll infuse his cultists with maniacal fury directed at his foes, allowing a Mob or an individual to keep fighting for a round after being brought to zero hit points.

The Golden Lord has a good armor class, lots of hit dice, and a technique that lets it survive the first hit that would drop him. It's lacking in extra attacks or extra actions, however, so a pantheon with good defensive abilities can frustrate its punches long enough to wear it down. It also lacks special movement options, and if forced to engaged range attackers it will throw stones for 1d6 straight damage at +8 to hit. It can hit anything in sight.

Aside from its combat abilities, the eidolon's bond with Passion allows it to infuse its acolytes with an inhuman dedication to their training and focus. Such discipline allows Flayed Monks to master the lesser Strife of the Torment Defied in a matter of seasons, and occasional divine visitations to its cultists help keep them dedicated to the god and diligent in their militia training.

IF THE GOLDEN LORD'S MOTIVATION IS YIN, it's trying to revive Hazar's dead ideotribe out of Dulimbaian converts. The core of the ideotribe's identity was its adherence to the doctrine of the Unfettered Will. Unfortunately, as a mere eidolon, the Golden Lord isn't really capable of teaching this doctrine in its complete form. It was patterned after Hazar in the prime of his prowess, and has mastered none of the steps the ancient champion took to become the man he was.

As such, the Golden Lord is fumbling its way forward, struggling with its own limited nature and partial understanding of Unfettered Will. It's training the cultists for martial action both to prepare them to withstand Dulimbaian countermeasures and as the first steps on the road toward mastery of the Unfettered Will, but it really has no clear idea of how to enlighten them. If the PCs can find or plausibly promise to find the lost texts of the ideotribe, there's very little it won't do in return. It will fight to its destruction to preserve its cult, however, as they're the only hope it has of resurrecting Hazar's long-lost ideology.

IF THE GOLDEN LORD'S MOTIVATION IS YANG, it's consumed with an unquenchable hatred for the Dulimbaians as murderers of Hazar's people and unforgivable invaders of ancient Kham. It's teaching its Flayed Monks the lesser Strife of the Torment Defied simply for the pleasure of the torture involved in mastering it, and it takes a positively human pleasure in the suffering and sacrifices of its cultists. It meters its blessings and favors carefully, ensuring that any petitioner pays dearly for the help they receive.

It's currently regimenting its believers into militia units and guerrilla combatants not out of any sincere belief that they'll succeed in a peasant rebellion, but expressly to ignite a bloody, useless, and long-lasting conflict on Dulimbai's northern border. Ideally, its peasant troops will manage a few good massacres on the frontier before Governor Jiang is able to marshal effective resistance. Once the believers are broken as a standing military force, it intends to lead them into vicious insurgent warfare that will accomplish nothing more than generations of pointless bloodshed.

As such, it will spend its acolyte's lives like water to slow down or hinder PC assailants, and will not stand and fight unless trapped by the heroes. Its first priority will always be self-preservation, the better to get away and found a new cult somewhere else in Dulimbai and set up additional believers for a horrible fate. If it can link up with the Patrians on the western border, the eidolon will gladly cooperate with them to kill the detestable Ren.

RUNNING THE ADVENTURE

Running TEN BURIED BLADES isn't difficult, but there are a few factors a GM needs to keep in mind that are specific to GODBOUND. Many of the traditional fantasy RPG tropes and reactions that players tend to have don't apply to Godbound heroes, and the GM needs to be ready to deal with that. Sometimes you may even need to prompt your players with the possibilities.

A GM can begin the adventure in classic style, introducing the players to Gongfang, dropping the Smoking Maiden encounter on them to make it clear that something's going wrong and that Magistrate Li is somehow involved. Before they have a chance to deal with Big Feet Zu, toss in the Brawling Bullies encounter to give them a chance to learn about the slave situation at Zu's estate, and potentially pick up a minion NPC in Ji Number Three.

PCs are likely to be sought out by Magistrate Li to handle some dirty work for him, either assassinating Zu or seizing "rebels" in the forest. The magistrate is a hardened political veteran, but if the PCs have the right Words or conduct the right investigation, they might well blow open his real circumstances. There's no need to fight this; even if the PCs get the whole story, they still have to decide what to do about Li and the other troublemakers around Gongfang.

The players might start a large-scale brawl with Li's constables or other locals. A combat-oriented party of first level Godbound will certainly be able to thrash any reasonable number of normal men, and even a more pacifistic group can probably smash any opposition Gongfang can present. There's no need to make these "hard fights". Let players discover just how fearsome their PCs are, and that an entire town really can't do anything to stop them if they decide to bust things up.

Do warn them that any dramatic disruption will likely bring repercussions from Yizhao in a couple of weeks, once the governor learns of an uprising and marshals a force to repel the "rebel demons". The governor can pull together a Vast Mob of soldiers, several minor heroes, and a skilled mage or two; probably enough to drive off the players unless they're combat-optimized. If the pantheon busts up that army as well, they'll start drawing attention from the Regent himself. If negotiations seem impossible, elite Eldritch war-hermits, Li-empowered heroes, and other major troubleshooters will be aimed at them. A mid-level Godbound pantheon could probably beat them, but novices are apt to be outmatched.

CAUSING A RUCKUS

The pantheon might end up in effective control of Gongfang. So long as Magistrate Li keeps sending reports and tax money to Governor Jiang in Yizhao, the Regency may not even realize that anything is wrong. Even if Jiang does understand that the PCs are now the true powers in town, he may decide that the best way to avoid censure is to keep quiet about things and continue passing the taxes on to the capital. He'll only send in the troops if he can no longer maintain a facade of law-abiding orderliness.

The PCs might also take over Real Man Xiao's monastery or the temple of the Golden Lord. In the former case, the confusion zone around the monastery will continue to work until someone substantially destroys or defaces the major buildings on the monastery's grounds. If the PCs are careful not to share the secret of the Yu-step shuffle that bypasses the wards and if Real Man Xiao and Perfected Woman Wen are both no longer available for comment, they may have an excellent degree of privacy in the monastery. The Regent would have to send in an adept with the right theurgic dispelling invocations to crack the effect, and the Regency hasn't got many of those available.

In all cases, the Dulimbaian government will do their best to avoid conflict with the pantheon if at all practical. They already have the Patrians to deal with, and once the pantheon's power is established the Regent is much more likely to try to bribe or co-opt them into the fight with his ancestral foes. He'll only respond with direct force if the PCs openly revolt against his rule in Dulimbai or try to carve off entirely independent fiefs of their own.

The PCs should be able to apply Influence fairly freely to Gongfang. Magistrate Li has no special resources to resist them, and the town has no functioning Wards, so normal costs and difficulties apply. The same is the case with Influence involving the farming villages around Gongfang or the wilderness areas between them. Changes that impinge on Yizhao will bring a quick response from Governor Jiang.

Influence or Dominion changes that interfere with Real Man Xiao or the Golden Lord will be hindered by them, however. Both qualify as Resistance 4 opponents, so four points would be added to the scope of any change before multiplying by the difficulty. A Plausible change that affected Gongfang and its environs but that impinged on one or both of them would thus cost 6 points instead of 2; 2 for the scope, plus 4 for the resistance, times 1 for a Plausible change. Even if the change is opposed by both entities, the Resistance is still only 4.

There are two celestial shards that can be seized from Gongfang's environs: one held by Big Feet Zu, and one embedded in the Golden Lord's chest. As with all celestial shards, Godbound will recognize the precious fragments on sight, and will feel their latent power if they get within fifty feet of one. Godbound who have no scholarly knowledge of the shards will still get the impression that these fragments are extremely important, and have an intuitive grasp of their uses.

In terms of experience points, every Godbound who participates in the adventure should get one point per play session. If the pantheon resolves the situation in Gongfang in a way that could reasonably be called "successful", then they get another point. For Dominion, you can give PCs one point per session, plus one more if they're using their Influence or Words to create changes or outcomes in line with their divine portfolio.

Several sites in the adventure have portable amounts of Wealth. Magistrate Li will offer rewards for assistance, Big Feet Zu's estate is worth looting, and the Golden Lord has valuable trinkets in his temple. There are no particularly fabulous troves to be had, however, and you should generally avoid passing out more than 5 Wealth points total in the adventure. Any loot accumulated beyond that point just stacks up into the five existing points of plunder.

Presumably, the heroes will eventually resolve the situation with Real Man Xiao and the Golden Lord. Direct combat against these powers is a likely outcome for many pantheons, but others might find cause to deal with them more diplomatically. If these local powers are left alive, they'll continue to pursue their ambitions, though any eventual success might lie outside the time frame of the campaign.

If Real Man Xiao is killed, Magistrate Li will do his best to tie the matter up quietly. He'll willfully ignore evidence, bury reports, and preferably blame the death on Xiao's tragic experiments. He has no desire to get into a conflict with any beings capable of killing Xiao.

If the Golden Lord is slain, his priests and monks will scatter and his peasant cultists will lapse into despair. They'll be ripe for recruiting to a new cult if some new deity can provide real benefit to their lives.

If the pantheon takes over Gongfang or otherwise establishes a power base in the area, Governor Jiang in Yizhao will try to co-opt them into the local power structure as "assistant magistrates". So long as the PCs at least pretend to play along and continue to remit taxes, they'll have a largely free hand in the area. Open rebellion will bring inevitable pushback, however.

CONVERSION NOTES

If it's impractical to plant the pantheon in Dulimbai, you can convert this adventure's setting to a more convenient location. Just a few key elements need to be adjusted for the new location.

Magistrate Li needs to be a town mayor, chief bureaucrat, petty lordling, or other local official. He needs to report to some greater official, be that a feudal lord or a higher bureau chief. He also needs to be vulnerable to pressure from the PCs and others, so avoid making him too personally formidable.

Big Feet Zu might be a mob boss, tribal chief, sinister oligarch, or some other figure of nominally respectable profession and practical immunity to the law. His toughs might be gangsters, bandits, or thuggish employees.

Real Man Xiao and Perfected Woman Wen are wizards or mad scientists, depending on the locale. Either they're being backed by some high-ranking noble or official, or else they're too scary for the local powers to oppose.

The Golden Lord can be an abandoned pre-Shattering combat golem of a long-forgotten war, one bearing grudges that might make no sense to modern inhabitants. He's offering something the local populace wants badly, be it justice, magical power, or hidden wealth.

Combat statistics and magical powers for the various NPCs can be left largely intact. Real Man Xiao's abilities may derive from sinister theotechnical expertise rather than elaborate theurgic rites, but they boil down to the same basic powers. By the same token, wealth rewards, experience points, and Dominion awards can be left as written.

The consequences of flamboyant Influence use or open seizure of the town may also vary, depending on the local political situation. If the larger polity has a major problem to deal with, like Dulimbai's never-ending war with Patria, the powers that be may prefer to simply assimilate the town's new rulers and recognize their influence in exchange for their loyalty and assistance. This is particularly likely if dislodging the PCs looks to be much more expensive than the cost of bringing them into the power structure.

Open rebellion against a region's ruler is almost inevitably going to bring some sort of counterattack, unless the ruler is completely convinced that it's a lost cause. If you set this adventure in some area where there really is no dominant hegemon, there might not be anyone in the area strong enough to object to a united pantheon's newly-declared independence. If a ruler does move against them, they're unlikely to do so until they've carefully assessed the pantheon and developed a plan more sophisticated than mass charges.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The following is a short summary of the more consequential NPCs in the adventure, along with some cues for pronouncing their names. Dulimbaian names can be hard for some Western players to remember or distinguish; it can often be useful to add epithets or titles to them to help the players keep them straight.

On the opposite page, a selection of random NPCs is offered to help you stock any bit players or bystanders you might need for your game. All of these bit players are treated as ordinary humans, with no combat statistics that a Godbound hero is obliged to worry about.

BIG FEET ZU (“zoo”), a rice broker who employs bandits for extortion.

CROOKED ZHONG (“chong”), a charcoal-burner, now the Golden Lord’s priest.

Fei Lan (“fay lahn”), a “volunteer” who escaped Real Man Xiao’s monastery.

THE GOLDEN LORD, a Khamite ideofom-golem masquerading as a god.

GOVERNOR JIANG OF YIZHAO (“jyang”/“eechow”), Magistrate Li’s superior who has little patience for trouble out of Gongfang.

Ji NUMBER THREE (“jee”), a not-entirely-vile thug in Big Feet Zu’s employ.

MADAME LIAO (“leeow”), Magistrate Li’s conniving and childless wife.

MAGISTRATE SHU LI OF GONGFANG (“lee shoo”/“kongfahng”), a discontented magistrate who seeks to elevate himself out of this hopeless backwater.

OXHEAD PO (“poh”), a sadistic brute in Zu’s employ who seeks to flee south.

PERFECTED WOMAN WEN (“wehn”), Xiao’s lover-pupil, plotting his death.

PLUM BLOSSOM, Magistrate Li’s new Patrian concubine, beautiful and naive.

REAL MAN XIAO (“shao”), a desperate Taoist theurge who has meddled in forbidden practices to gain power and extend his failing life, sacrificing “volunteer” students procured from Gongfang to overcome Shijie-ritual errors.

AUNTIE WEI, a middle-aged matchmaker who knows every private scandal in Gongfang. Fat, beaming, and unctuous.

BLUE-BUTTON MEI, an elderly seller of ribbons, notions, and trinkets. She has justification for getting into any house's female quarters, and often serves as a go-between for "private meetings" at the local shrine. Cultivates an air of doddering harmlessness, but has a sharp mind.

FENG THE INVINCIBLE, a young hooligan born with a strange dislocation of destiny; he always loses every fight he ever gets in, but due to some chance turn of events he never suffers serious injury. Only an appropriate divine miracle can overcome this fated survival.

FISHMONGER CHIN, rancid seller of river catfish, pesters strangers incessantly to buy a fish, if only to make the reeking young man go away. Seems totally oblivious to physical threats or dangers.

IVAN SZABO, a fur trader from Raktia who privately hates all Dulimbaians for their former conquest of his homeland. Will quietly help anyone who seems to be hurting them.

MARIKA TOTH, a half-Raktian prostitute both beautiful and bitter. Has contacts among many of Gongfang's elite, but desperately wants to leave both Dulimbai and Raktia, as she is accepted in neither place.

MOTHER HAO, a plump, sweet-mannered old procuress who keeps a house with her "daughters" inside town. Actually as heartless as any street pimp, and deals information to Big Feet Zu about likely marks or trouble. Her slave girls are terrified of her wrath; she sells the troublemakers to Xiao.

OLD FATHER LU, the oldest man in Gongfang at 107 years of age, astonishingly spry, gives oracular warnings and sage counsel that is always plausible yet catastrophically wrong. Locals pretend to hang on his every word but then discreetly ignore his advice.

RED CAP HONG, a skinny Taoist priest who sells folk-magic cures, lucky talismans, and exorcisms. Knows what Real Man Xiao is trying to do and can guess at his powers, but is too afraid to be seen opposing him.

VENERABLE WAN, a middle-aged priest with a patchy beard responsible for tending the shrine to Gongfang's ancestral founders. His daughter was taken by Xiao as a "volunteer" and he is desperate to recover her, or at least learn her fate. He is greatly respected by the common folk of the town.

XIA MING, a beautiful and tubercular young woman of good family, morbidly obsessed with her inevitable early death. Writes bad poetry, and is eager to do something important or romantically dramatic before she dies.

XIANG THE AXE, a burly woodcutter who knows the location of many camps of Golden Lord devotees. Won't willingly talk unless he gets drunk.

NEW THEURGIC INVOCATIONS

COMMUNICATE WITH THE INNER GODS

This invocation of the Gate allows the theurgist to interrogate the “gods” of a person’s inner organs, diagnosing any mundane or magical illnesses. If the theurgist has a Fact related to Dulimbaian occult education, they can also deduce the necessary rituals and offerings required to put a disordered body back into internal harmony. The GM should roll 1d4 to determine how many Wealth points worth of offerings are necessary to cure the sicknesses; on a 4, the internal gods cannot be appeased by this invocation. This spell cannot cure hit point loss, but it can overcome any sickness or disease of less than divine potency. Once cured, the subject is forever immune to that disease.

FRAGRANCE OF THE HEAVENLY KITCHEN

A Taoist rite of spiritual nourishment, this invocation of the Gate summons forth the surpassingly delicious scent of the celestial kitchens of the gods. All who participate in the rite are fed by the fragrance, becoming sated in food and drink for a full week, with the invocation affecting up to a hundred participants. These persons must have completely abstained from all cereal foods for a week before participating in the rite, however, or no benefit is gained. If the theurgist himself has tainted his body with grain, he must make a save versus Hardiness or be lethally poisoned by the fragrance. He cannot spend Effort to auto-succeed on this save, and any native poison immunities are ignored.

RITE OF THE BURIED BLADE

A practice known as “Shijie” among the Taoists of Dulimbai, this invocation of the Gate redirects a theurge’s impending death to their sword or clothing. The ritual cannot be cast quickly, and requires a full day’s reverent funeral for the token. The caster is then cured of any non-divine sicknesses or infirmities and guaranteed another ten years of sturdy good health. Use of this invocation more than once is risky, however; each successive casting requires a Constitution check at a penalty equal to the caster’s age divided by twenty, rounded up. On a failure, the caster dies during the ritual. Even this failure can be negated if a sufficient number of human sacrifices are available, one for every twenty years of the caster’s age. The rite is flawed if this emergency exigence is necessary, however, and the caster’s death is postponed only for one season instead of ten years. Repeated failures with this ritual tends to produce extremely unfortunate side-effects on the theurgist and their surroundings.



THE STRIFE OF THE TORMENT DEFIED

The Strife of the Torment Defied embodies the struggle between pain and clarity, the conflict between a retreat from agony and an unflinching advance into the teeth of terrible suffering. Adepts of this Strife transcend the limits of human endurance and deny the power of pain to turn them from their purpose.

The Strife of the Torment Defied cannot be used in armor, as such flinching from injury is contrary to its teachings. By the same token, weapon use is forbidden with this art, as many of its attack techniques revolve around bodily movements and contortions that are reliant on the adept's own form.

Supernatural pupils of the True Strife begin their learning by mastering MIND OVER MAIMING. They may learn the other techniques in whatever order they wish, but they must have mastered all five earlier gifts before they can attain to the final art, FLESH OF INVIOULATE WILL.

Rules for learning and using the Strife are in the GODBOUND deluxe book.

THE ARROW OF RED AND WHITE

ACTION

Commit Effort for the scene. The adept pushes their body past its fleshly limits, manipulating their musculature to shatter their own bones and violently expel the fragments. The first blast made in a scene is an attack with a range of 200 feet, inflicting 1d6 plus the adept's level in straight damage points on a hit and half that on a miss, rounded up. For the remainder of the scene the adept's unarmed attacks have a 200 foot range, albeit they do normal damage. The adept is not hindered or significantly harmed by the use of this power.

THE CLARITY OF PAIN

INSTANT

When the adept fails a Spirit save to resist mental influence, they may instantly inflict 1d6 straight damage on themselves to treat the save as a success. Repeated use of this ability in the same scene cumulatively increases the damage by one die; thus, the second use would inflict 2d6, and so on.

FLESH OF INVIOULATE WILL

CONSTANT

The adept's overwhelming determination can shrug off even lethal injuries. The first time in a scene they are reduced below one hit point by a physical injury, they are instead left with one hit point. Furthermore, after every battle the adept regains one hit point per level as they adjust to their newly-damaged form. This "healing" can't cure damage inflicted by mental or spiritual harms or injuries received before the most recent fight.

MIND OVER MAIMING

CONSTANT

The adept gains an invincible imperviousness to physical pain, remaining aware of its existence and sources but untroubled by it. They cannot lose the use of a limb by any injury that does not physically remove it, and they do not die at zero hit points unless further damage is administered. While at zero hit points, they can continue to move up to 30' per round, but their AC becomes 9, they cannot perform any physical exertion, and they cannot Commit Effort.

MOCKING THE SPEAR

CONSTANT

The adept's casual contempt for pain and injury leaves them extremely difficult to disable. Their armor class becomes 3, and they can ignore damage from physical weapons that roll 1d6 or smaller normal damage dice. The need to face the harm without flinching makes it impossible to gain the benefit of shields or a Dexterity bonus to this armor class, however.

SERPENT-ARMED STRIKES

ON TURN

Commit Effort. The adept's control of their body allows them to move and strike in ways that would be prohibitively painful or awkward for other combatants, making their blows difficult to predict. Their unarmed combat damage becomes 1d10, and once per fight they can turn a failed hit roll into an automatic success. As an Instant, the adept may Commit Effort for the scene to escape any physical constraints or grapples through impossible contortions.

THE LESSER STRIFE

While the lesser strife is thought lost in the present day, it is possible that the secrets still survive among some ascetic Akeh martial traditions.

INITIATE: The practitioner can ignore any mundane source of pain. They are immune to infection and their wounds never worsen with neglect. Their unarmed attacks inflict 1d8 damage.

DISCIPLE: The practitioner can continue fighting for one round after being reduced to zero hit points. Even afterwards, they can speak or can crawl at half their usual move rate unless a coup de grace is administered or their bodies are torn apart by a killing blow. They cannot perform other actions or Commit Effort while at zero hit points.

MASTER: The first physical injury in a scene that would kill the master instead leaves him with one hit point. To onlookers, the injury appears to still be inflicted but the master largely ignores its effects.

THE WAY OF PURE PETITIONS

There are dozens of different Low Magic traditions in Dulimbaian Taoism, some with only a handful of practitioners. The Way of Pure Petitions is one that focuses on composing memorials to Heaven in elaborate ritual script, by which an adept can produce luck, banish evil spirits, and cure diseases. Red Cap Hong in the town of Gongfang is an adept in this art, and other low-ranking practitioners can be found in any city. Masters and archmages of the path are only ever found in monasteries or remote hermitages.

Practitioners have particular powers over “evil spirits”, which include undead, spirits, and summoned creatures. Banished evil spirits disintegrate or are sent back to their home realm. Initiates cannot use their powers spontaneously but may prepare their written memorials and consecrate swords beforehand. A mortal may benefit from only one luck-granting memorial at a time.

Initiates of Pure Petitions have strict dietary taboos. Any consumption of cereal grains or grain-derived foods denies them their powers for a full month.

APPRENTICE: The student of the Tao is versed in identifying and treating diseases and the composition of beautiful calligraphy. They are treated as having a Fact relevant to these pursuits. They may prepare a memorial to sense the presence of concealed evil spirits within one hundred paces.

ADEPT: An adept can write memorials that grant mortals a free reroll on any one roll they make in the next week. They can brandish a ritually-prepared sword to automatically banish a visible evil spirit with 4 or fewer hit dice. They have charms to cure any minor, non-dangerous disease.

MASTER: They can invoke a prepared ritual blade to grant themselves or a target an invulnerable defense against a specific evil spirit with 8 or fewer hit dice, so long as they take no hostile action against the creature. They can scribe a memorial that will grant a mortal an automatic success or maximum roll on any one roll of their choice they make in the next week. They can cure even dangerous and life-threatening diseases, but not magical ones. They can invoke a prepared memorial to indefinitely command any evil spirit with 4 or fewer hit dice if the creature fails a Spirit save.

ARCHMAGE: The archmage's memorials can be invoked to indefinitely command evil spirits with 8 or fewer hit dice. Their preparations can cure even magical diseases, albeit not divinely-inflicted ones. They know the arts of longevity; as long as they do not consume cereal foods, they will live to be one hundred and twenty years old in hale good health.



