Engage in the monumental struggle for the future of Ifri from the pyramids of Khemet to the golden deserts of Maghreb!

7TH SEA

Lands of Gold and Fire

Woe to any who dare despoil the lands of gold and fire
For Ifrians value freedom, and the divine is all too close...

For centuries the foolish have sought to rip the riches from Ifri, but none have been successful...until now. A timeless evil called Bonsam, has partnered with the Atabean Trading Company to exploit the lands of Gold and Fire. Demonic bonsam stones are mined in Mbey, where a broken King serves an unholy combination of evil and despotic greed.

Heroes will find themselves aided in their adventures by the mysterious and powerful Jok, who stand behind their chosen champions. Prepare to battle for the soul of Ifri, from glittering deserts, stunning jungles and the vast open sea.

This book contains material for ***7th Sea: Second Edition*** including new mechanics for Backgrounds, Advantages, Arcana, Stories, Dueling styles and Sorceries. It also includes the five Nations of Ifri:

- **Manden**, a land overflowing with gold, with a keen eye for international diplomacy.
- **Mbey**, a once great nation now controlled by an ancient evil which threatens all of Terra.
- **Maghreb**, whose beloved Blue Queen reigns over a desert land with a fierce soul.
- **Aksum**, where logic combines with sorcery to create a strategic and effective empire.
- **Khemet**, where darkness shrouds an ancient empire and a Prince seeks to bring the light.

A shadow has cast its shape across the glorious lands of Gold and Fire, will you join the fight to dispel it?

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7TH SEA

Lands of Gold and Fire

JOHN WICK PRESENTS A SOURCEBOOK FOR 7TH SEA: SECOND EDITION "LANDS OF GOLD AND FIRE"

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A note from John...

This book was a long haul. I know this even though I had little to do with it. I've been heading up RPG lines since 1996, and every game line has its problem child. In our case, this book was it. Go take a look at the credits page and see the names who worked on this one. There's more than a few. That's because everybody kept pouring their hearts and souls into these pages. They weren't satisfied with good. They wanted great. And that's hard to do. I kept hearing, "rewrites," and "redesign" as great ideas came in to replace good ideas. And once you change part of the puzzle, you have to change the rest of it.

When you see the people on the credits list for this book at conventions, be sure to thank them. They went through a lot to get this book into your hands. They deserve it. And I'll be the first one: to all the people who helped bring Ifri into the world, thank you for everything you did.

With **The Crescent Empire** and **The New World**, we've expanded the palate of Heroes in **7th Sea**. Ifri does the same. The continent Ifri is based on is full of beautiful, amazing stories of heroes and I'm proud we can include them in our game. If you've been waiting for this book to see faces like yours in Terra, you won't be disappointed. Welcome aboard. Drinks are in the captain's cabin at 8. Come as you are. I wouldn't want to see you any other way.

—John Wick

Special thanks

Thank you to all the talented people who made this book happen. I stand in the shadow of creative giants with enough talent to fill ten books on Ifri. I hope our efforts do justice to the source material and the continent.

There are a lot of reasons this book is called **Lands of Gold and Fire**. Gold represents the quality of the talent I had at my disposal. Everyone working on this project poured every effort into it. Fire represents the passion they all infused into the work. I surrounded myself with talented people, hoping to hide what little I did to make this happen. My talent is getting others excited about using their abilities; I'm either Professor X or Flava Flav of game design, you decide.

—Jerry Grayson

When John and I started talking about a **7th Sea** director's cut, we knew we wanted to explore more of Théah. We finally got the chance—and in the process, had the opportunity to help bring out the voices of people who are represented in these works. I'm most grateful to the people who've fought for their representation in games, and for this chance to open that door. Their stories, and their dreams, are the new stories we need in order to broaden our worlds of fantasy. Thanks to my co-developer Jonaya Kemper and to everyone who's added their voices.

—Jesse Heinig

Stories have a certain power to shape our real world. The characters, narratives, and worlds we create are never fully divorced from our own, so you can never be quite sure what your imagination can bring forth. Almost ten years ago, I sat in a college dorm room and ran my first ever TTRPG. It was set in the Crescent Empire, and I never forgot what it was like to create a world in which I was reflected. Fast forward to Jesse Heinig placing Ifri in my hands and asking if I'd want to come along for the ride. Stories have power. Ifri is a dream that has been in my heart forever, its stories are the stories that I craved but never received. My thanks then go to my Grandmother, my Mother, and My Sister, who believed in the power of our stories, and to every ancestor who never had the chance to see themselves and to every person who may pick up this book and find a place where they exist, and they are wanted.

—Jonaya Kemper

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Primus 31, 1666

My name is Brother Karlas Osuna, and I am a priest of the Church of the Prophets. A week ago, Bishop Felix Alvaro de Aquila commanded me to attend him. An audience with such an esteemed personage for such a lowly servant of the Creator as myself made me nervous. Had I unwittingly done something wrong? Had I offended some church official with an offhand comment or perhaps spoke a little too loudly of my interest in science to an Inquisition spy?

I grew up in Castille in on a small island town called Puerto del Sur. A cosmopolitan town, my life was quaint. My father was a merchant, neither wealthy, nor poor. And my mother was a towering beauty from Manden. It is from my mother I learned my love of words, and by the time I was 12 years of age I could speak half a dozen languages with moderate proficiency including the trade tongue of Ifri.

Puerto del Sur, with its proximity to Vaticine city, retained an impressive merchant fleet that allowed me to take to the seas at an early age. It was my love of travel that drew Bishop Alvaro's attention upon me; his Excellency had a task that he believed I was most suited for, given my background and recent journeys in the Pirate Nations.

Mere hours after my audience, I found myself on board a leaky trading brig called Cassiopeia's Favor bound for my mother's homeland, and more specifically the forsaken Kingdom of Mbey. My mission? To map, minster, survey and spy in preparation for what might be a new holy war. The Vaticine Church has heard the suffering of Ifri's people and now sends a son to pave the way for their redemption. At least that is what he said, though I've seen enough of the world to know what he actually meant by the way he rubbed his bejeweled hands together.

Secundus 15, 1666

My first impression of Mbey was the horrific stench of the Bellete docks. I possess a strong stomach, but I nearly lost my weevil-filled ship biscuits to a stench that combined the worst of a tannery crossed with rotting corpses. My second impression was little better; the moist heat hit us like a warm wet rag the moment we passed the harbor walls. Everywhere we walked in Bellete, diseased and wretched beggars flocked behind. The streets thronged with half-dressed men and women and I had to turn my head constantly to hide my blushes. A different land indeed, though I did envy the people as I itched and perspired in my woolen cassock. The rich used great sedan chairs or curtained litters ringed by armed men to travel the streets, and even then, this didn't stop at least a few of the wretched poor from hurling dead animals and rotting fruit at their betters.

The largest building in Bellete, which I first mistook for a cathedral or palace due to its size, is the Nandi Nundi trading house; a place where the foul practice of slavery thrives. Through polite enquiries and a few bribes, I learned that Bellete and the entirety of Mbey is in the grip of twin evils, the Atabean Trading Company, and a powerful crime lord by the name of Bonsam whom the locals treat like Legion himself.

Street vendors plague the city, offering charms and amulets to protect against all manner of evil magic, curses and monsters. I'd say that the people were overly superstitious, but after dark, a strange fog rolled in over the city and what I saw in the clinging greyness made me rethink my position. The streets emptied faster than I would have believed possible and I had fleeting glimpses of something not quite human stalking me. I broke into a run and swore I could hear the sounds of hoofs following me. Terror gripped my heart until, as I rounded a corner, I ran into a long-limbed girl clad in a green and yellow robe. She hissed at me like a serpent and, gripping my forearm, dragged me through a doorway. We sat in dark and silence as the hoofed steps took themselves past our hiding place and beyond.

I honestly believe that I would not be writing this if I hadn't met the woman in green, Isioma. Her eyes were the color of burnished copper and her skin gleamed like oiled mahogany. I swear, she reminded me of someone, but who I couldn't say; perhaps some great warrior from my mother's

bedtime stories or some magi from the ancient tales. Regardless, this woman saved my life and I swore to the Creator that I would return the favor. She seemed amused by my vow, and I confess it hurt a little to be mocked—even so gently—by my savior. She told me that if I was serious about paying back my debt I could meet her outside the city at dawn. With that, she slipped out the door into the dark streets.

Tertius 7, 1666

Where do I start in this country? As I am told, Mbey was once one of the greatest and wealthiest Kingdoms in Ifri. A Kingdom of scholars, wealth and enlightenment. Today Mbey, a far cry from that, sinks further into a deep and malevolent malaise.

Legion is said to have a hold in Mbey. Not an idea of evil, the actual Legion. I would have scoffed myself had I not seen the creature with my own eyes during a procession of the king. She stood behind the king and smiled as the royal train passed through the filthy streets. She seemed to delight in the wails and suffering heard in the distance from the Atabean Trading Company's slave ships.

Tertius 12, 1666

Isioma asked me if I was serious about redeeming my vow to her. I said that as an agent of the Creator I must stand by my word. I asked her if she was some manner of noblewoman for she wore jewelry of gold and people seemed to give her deference. She replied that she was a simple servant of the Jok, a position I took to be some manner of priestly role. Perhaps the Jok are the saints by some other name? Regardless, I made a special note to treat her as I would a fellow member of the cloth.

Leaving Bellete we passed through miles of slave-run plantations where the native peoples toiled in the liquid heat to line the pockets of their masters. I was surprised to see that some of the masters were themselves local. Isioma's head stayed bowed in suppressed anger, or concentration, as we walked down the muddy tracks through the plantation lands, and it was only as we passed under the dark jungle canopy that she raised her head high. We were now in more danger than in the city she told me, this land was cursed by Bonsam; a figure I would later come to associate with Legion.

As we delved into the feverish jungle I began to feel as though I were being boiled alive. Isioma saw my discomfort and offered me a package wrapped in banana leaf. Inside was a long green and yellow tunic not unlike her own. I wanted to protest, but the cloth seemed so light, and my woolen robes chaffed.

Sextus 1, 1666

My heart was filled with trepidation as I took the first steps beyond the cyclopean gates of Nianiba, capital of the Manden Kurfaba. These were my mother's people but what little Isioma had told me of them before her departure left me feeling nervous. This was the mightiest of all the empires of Ifri. Here even the common people were educated as well as any scribe back in Theah. And, here sat the palace of the Mansa, the lord of an empire that once crushed a kingdom by wealth alone. Mansa Kankan is said to be a kind and wise man, devout in his religion and continually suing for peace so that all his people may thrive.

I'm a simple man at heart, and found the city so completely overwhelming that I had to stop at a public fountain and weep for a time. While Bellete putrefied, and festered both physically and spiritually, Nianiba shone with an almost too-bright light. Here were clean streets and happy people. High above the streets I could see countless balconies where people sat to eat meals and enjoy company. In any Thean city, these balconies would block all light to the streets below but here, with the wide thoroughfares, they provided welcome shade.

Sextus 4, 1666

The Mansa's palace rose like an ivory spear from the heart of Nianiba. As I expressed my wonder, the guard assigned to me just smiled and said that this was only his lord's "second best" palace. I have little doubt that the Mansa is the richest man in the world. I was guided to a small antechamber lined with bookshelves

and told to wait. I have never felt such temptation as I did that evening; the shelves held books whose language I could not understand but whose diagrams alone would have made a genius cry. I found early translations of the Holy Scriptures and tomes of natural philosophy that posited notions that I could barely grasp. Oh, I could have spent my life in this room and died a happy man.

A man and woman entered the room shortly after my arrival. I had expected to meet the king as my letters of introduction had requested, but instead I found myself face to face with a sad-looking grandfatherly man and a striking young woman dressed as one of the Alagbato Iya, a group I took to be synonymous with the palace guard. The man politely avoided giving his name but his charming manners and gentle way made me suspect he was a member of the royal family. He probed me about my reasons for traveling to Manden, what I thought of the city and what I had seen of Ifri. He took note of my native garb and asked where I had gotten them. When I explained my journey with Isioma, he seemed pleased but said nothing further on the matter. After an hour of gentle probing, the man left. In that time he easily deflected my questions about meeting the king and left me with the impression that I'd told him much more than I had intended.

Three days later, when I attended an address made from the palace balcony, I realized that this quiet man was the king of the Manden Empire.

Nonus, 1667

I spoke briefly with Bishop Ankmanar of Aksum, receiving a colder than expected welcome from his Excellency. Ankmanar handed me a book bound in iron, refusing to explain it or its contents, saying only that it was to be given to my new master. I assumed he meant Bishop Alvaro but now I am not so sure. I'm pretty sure that the book whispered to me when I tried to peak at the pages.

This land is beautiful and full of ancient stelae—obelisks or towers inscribed with writing and phrases. These tell the history of the Aksum Kingdom and the evolution of religion through pictographs. The newer stelae, constructed after the Second Prophet's arrival and death, detail the Orthodox Church's holy books and captivate readers trying to comprehend the arcane symbols etched into them.

Tertius 30, 1668

I will not write of my time in Djem except to warn others to stay away unless they are prepared to lose their minds and souls to the horrors and beauties they find there. I chanced to meet a toothless Wiseone there who gave me a strange object and bade me to carry it far away to a "place and time I would know."

The shard of blackened rock was bound in three rings of metal that I could not readily identify. The stone itself drew me in; as I stared at it I felt that it stared back at me. The object gave the impression of pulsing movement without actually doing so, and the metal bands that held it seemed to be corroding slightly where they touched it. By the time I managed to tear my eyes from the darkness, the withered man had vanished.

Sextus 2, 1668

I spent three nights desperately fleeing, first Atabean pursuers, and then some nameless thing that hunted me across the plains. I worked passage on boats, tagged along with caravans and spent a lot of time alone, desperately trying to outrun the hell-beasts. I confess that I went a little mad and cannot speak for my actions during this time.

On the banks of the Kwara River I met Captain Kayode Bonsu, a man that could be my twin but for his darker skin and physique hardened by years of sailing. I felt drawn to this pirate and fell into conversation with him as one might a confessor. We spoke of times past and family, he of his father and his life aboard ship, and me of my time in Castille. It wasn't until I showed him a likeness I carry of my mother, and he named her, that we finally realized the truth. I have a brother.

Julius 30, 1668

My brother and I fled to Aksum ahead of a group of monsters that Kayode named Kishi. Near the great city, we chanced upon a holy man called Rada who begged us for help. He told us that dark magic infected a holy site he was charged to protect, showing us his burnt and scarred arms as proof of his attempts to cleanse the evil.

We agreed to aid Rada and he lead us to a nearby cave network to rest before the attempt. I awoke to hear the sorcerer, for that was what he truly was, whispering to a half-man thing that could only be a Kishi. Wakening Kayode we fled deeper into the caves hoping to find some way out. A ravening Kishi leapt upon me as we traversed a narrow ledge and dragged me down into the abyss, but not before I threw my pack to my brother. As I fell, I felt a great sense of relief, as if some weight were lifted from my soul. The dark stone fragment had almost become a literal millstone about my neck. As I plunged into the darkness, I saw a glowing figure reaching out to me in the darkness.

Corantine 4, 1668

Merciful Creator, the figure wasn't a savior but instead the sorcerer Rada. When the dark one realized that I no longer held the stone, he flew into a rage and sent a pack of his Kishi to hunt down Kayode. I pray they fail in their mission. When he finally calmed downv Rada informed me that I was to be sold to "friends" of his from Mbey in the morning. I thank Theus that I never got to meet these friends.

During the night, Rada's body servant, a girl whose name I never caught, placed me in a small boat and sent me on my way. The child never uttered a word and I suspect Rada took her tongue to prevent her from telling his secrets. As I floated away from Rada's sloop I swore I could see her eyes glow like bright orange coals.

Septimus 25, 1668

I walked alone to the City of the Covenant, a place closer to a monastery than a city. In Theah I would expect armed guards and an impassable fortress to protect such treasures, but here the very weight of the place makes thoughts of violence seem impossible.

The wiseone told me to bring the malign stone to Khemet where a boy would take it and slay the owner. This did not sit well with me; who was the owner? Who is this boy that would stain his soul with murder? I had hoped that the priests would deal with this fearsome object but instead they did the one thing I wasn't expecting: they told me to trust in the Jok.

Nonus 5, 1668

After many misadventures and more than a few close scrapes I found myself on a barge bound for the Citadel of Kyber, the seat of royal power in Khemet. I know that few gain entrance to this esteemed fortress-palace but I hope that my mission might allow me to speak, at least briefly, to the young prince. I befriended many of my fellow travelers as I could, knowing that many were also going to the palace and might aid me in my enterprise.

My efforts proved to be in vain when we were attacked by a band of pirates. During the battle, one of the travelers, a boy called Hekeni, tore the throat from a pirate with his fingernails when he thought nobody was watching, then pounced on the pirate captain. I knew with terrible certainty that the boy was one of the dread abonsam and, Theus help me, I choked the life from his body before he could do more harm.

The pirate captain knew me before I spoke, naming me kin to Kayode. My brother had spread the word of my loss and bade others of his brotherhood seek for me, even though he believed me most-likely dead. Kayode and I reunited less than a mile from the gates of Kyber.

Introduction

Welcome to Ifri

The book you hold in your hands contains the secrets of Ifri, a verdant land of wealth, spices, knowledge and peace. Travelers from abroad call this place the Lands of Gold and Fire both because of the scorching heat of its deserts and the fabulous treasures of ivory, precious metals and gems to be found here. Countless adventurers have sought their fortunes here, hoping to exploit the legendary Lands of Gold and Fire for their own ends. However, the Ifrians have not only endured these despoilers, but they have thrived despite their efforts. Visitors from the north remark on how Ifrians have done this with no foreign help—though the people of Ifri, of course, have no doubts about their own abilities. Ifri's sands, plains and jungles are decorated with the bones of those foolish enough to come unprepared.

The griots, who keep the revered tales of the past and hold the wisdom of the ancient gods, say that in the beginning spirits known as the Jok came to the five great Kingdoms and presented them with magnificent seats of power from which to rule. These thrones amplified and exemplified the greatness of Ifri's peoples. Those who question the ancient tales need to look only to Mbey and its lost throne as proof for their veracity. Why the Jok chose to award five thrones and, thus, establish five Kingdoms is unknown—perhaps each promoted a specific virtue, or solidified the influence of a great leader of humanity. Even the griots do not know the whole truth. The Lands of Gold and Fire have prospered together for hundreds of years but today they stand at the very precipice of change…

Although Ifri has experienced war and hardship, it has never known the darkness it faces now. The Bonsam, a timeless evil imprisoned by the Jok for a thousand years, seeps forth from their cage and threatens to twist Ifri into a mockery of all that it holds dear. The ancient protections afforded by the gods falter in this age of foreign intrusion, shattered faith and uncertainty. With each darkened heart, the Bonsam—the personification of wickedness—gains another tiny clawhold on the land.

The uninformed or ignorant Théan might paint Ifri with a single brush as a land filled with heathen savages, steaming jungles and burning deserts. Nothing could be more foolish or dangerous. The peoples and nations of Ifri are as varied as the colors in the iridescent wings of a dragonfly. Let us look now at Ifri's five great Kingdoms:

- **Aksum**, the land of profound peace. Protected by its beloved emperor, the eastern Kingdom cleaves to the teaching of Theus, the Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro Church, a religion as old as the Vaticine faith. Its wise and learned people govern with an almost omnipresent ability. Théans cannot find fault with the priests here despite their alternate view of ecumenical matters.
- **Khemet**, the night-cloaked land. For many years Khemet has vacillated between the light and darkness, but in recent years the country has fallen into a malaise that breeds fear and treachery. What could happen when the most profound and learned Kingdom turns away from the light? The entire continent may fall when this keystone crumbles.
- **Maghreb**, the desert jewel, dazzles those who see it. This wealthy desert Kingdom is a mystery to even the people that call it home. Its ruler, the wise and just Blue Queen, protects it from enemies that nip at its heels like jackals around a dying lion. Foolish are those that consider deserts to be wastelands.
- **Manden Kurufaba** is the golden crown of Ifri, or so its people would have the world believe. The proud and opulent Kingdom believes itself to be the center of all things political and social. Manden does sit upon great wealth, which brought affluence and learning to the land, but can a kingdom thrive on gold alone? In a mercantile Kingdom where wealth can buy you almost anything, greed is the sin of choice. Should Khemet fall, the lords of Manden may drown in baths of molten gold.
- **Mbey**, a Kingdom of abundant wealth, teaching and culture. Once, Ifrians hailed Mbey as an example of what could be when different countries and peoples banded together for common interest. Now Mbey is synonymous with death, evil and decay. From here, the Bonsam sends their wickedness into the world.

Themes of Ifri

Adventures in Ifri have a bit of a different feel than adventures in other parts of the 7th Sea world. Here is an overview.

Epic Conflict

Ifri often wears its heart and soul on its sleeve, drawing Heroes into conflicts that span cities, nations and even the entire continent. It is a land of deadly intrigues, where Heroes stand shoulder to shoulder as stalwarts against corrupt kings, hideous monsters and even the Devil themself.

This applies to the supernatural realm as well. In Ifri, ancient spirits given power by al-Musawwir help a Hero stop blades, sate hungry ghosts, whisper life into his beloved and perform miraculous feats.

Bonsam's malevolent presence spreads like a wave over the lands and on their crest rides the abonsam, their evil servants. These corrupt puppets of Bonsam—demons that appear like men, women and monsters—exult the lie that power elevates them above the rest of humanity, and the station of nobility should be used as a hammer to force others down. The entirety of Ifri serves as the battleground of this conflict between the collective good and the greed of evil.

Piracy and Adventure

A Hero of Ifri concerns herself with personal freedom and the freedom of humanity. She realizes that with her great talents she can be a positive force for change and good in the land. A Hero is not charged with this task but accepts it as a truth that those that can help, should. With the corruption of Bonsam prevalent in some of the highest offices, she turns to methods that may seem outwardly nefarious and therefore deemed an outlaw. The Hero hopes that this sacrifice will bear fruit even if she is not there to see it.

Diplomacy and Intrigue

When the wrong words reach the right ears, worm-tongued Villains twist reason and wisdom. The Great Rulers of Ifri are mired by conspiracy and self-serving courtiers that prey on the insecurities and bureaucracies of its vast lands. When the rulers suffer, so does the land. By aiding the rulers of these great Kingdoms, Heroes may serve the greater good. Where a Queen cannot act, a Hero serves as a proxy. Where an Ori may be afraid to act, a Hero works as their strong right hand.

Exploitation and Exploration

In a land as ancient as Ifri, many secrets are realized and forgotten again. These ancient wisdoms perhaps hold the answer to a new golden age of peace and enlightenment. Rulers sponsor expeditions to find these ancient sites and bring back artifacts and knowledge for the people, though some covet the power and enigmas for themselves.

Foreign interest has also come to the Lands of Gold and Fire to exploit the riches and mysteries that lay hidden in the vast interior. Ultimately these expeditions find ancient horrors at the bottom of pits scabbed over with human misery. Wisdom suggests some secrets must remain hidden, and the light of day should never kiss some entities.

Gold and Fire

The epithet Gold and Fire describes two things: the contrast between the fertile lands and searing deserts on the continent of Ifri, and the duality and potential that lives in every individual.

This sense of duality expresses itself in nearly every abstract concept that an Ifrian values. The excellence of love and romance, for example, can cause many great things to come to pass, or be squandered in an attempt to possess something that should never be owned. An ambition burns in the hearts of an Ifrian and can lead her to climb great heights, or it can be perverted to burn the world around her instead.

A Glossary of Ifri Terms

The Lands of Gold and Fire has its own languages and its own cultures, completely different from the norms and expectations of Théans. For some concepts and ideas, the two lands share equivalents, but for others, Ifri stands alone and unique. Here are some of the terms used throughout the book:

Abonsam: A lesser devil, evil or witch. A bad spirit that inhabits a person, or evil thoughts that plague a person. "You have the tongue of an abonsam" is a common phrase.

Animism: A belief that all items and animals have a spirit or supernatural force in them.

Aksum: A Kingdom of Ifri. Known as the Land of the Second Prophet.

Aksumite: A person that originates from the land of Aksum.

Berbera River: The east-flowing great Cardinal River of Ifri moves through the Aksum Empire.

Bonsam: A term for the spirit that embodies the epitome of evil. The Devil.

Cardinal Rivers: The four Great Rivers of Ifri. People say that it takes a thousand individuals standing with their arms outstretched, touching finger to finger to span a Great River's width. Each river is considered an artery of Ifri created by the Jok.

Griot: A member of a class of traveling poets, musicians and storytellers who maintain a tradition of oral history.

Ifri: A fertility goddess of the Maghrebi people. Also, the most commonly used name for the continent.

Iteru River: The north-flowing great Cardinal River of Ifri. The Iteru flows through the lands of Khemet.

Iu-Neserer: Also known as Fire Island or the Island of Flame. The semi-mythical land of the Jok.

Jok: Great spirit beings wiser than all humanity. The Jok are seneschals of humanity and guide through others, the people of Ifri.

Joliba River: The south-flowing great Cardinal River of Ifri.

Khemet: A Kingdom of Ifri. Also known as the Twice-Nighted Land, the Black Land or the Land of the Lonely Queen.

Khemeti: A person from Khemet.

Kurufaba: A term meaning "The Great Assembly of All," the empire, the kingdom.

Kwara River: The west-flowing great Cardinal River of Ifri. The Kwara moves like a snake through the lands of the Manden Kurufaba.

Lands of Gold and Fire, the: Another name for Ifri. Named so because of the spirit and wealth of the continent.

Maghreb: A Kingdom of Ifri. Also known as the Land of the Blue People, Land of the Blue Queen and the Land of the Moon-Blessed Sands.

Manden Kurufaba: A Kingdom of Ifri, also known the Manden Empire, the Land of Gold and Salt, the Golden Flower of Ifri, the Jewel of Ifri or the Land of the High Born.

Mandenka: A person from the Kingdom of Manden.

Mbey: A Kingdom of Ifri. Known also as Mbey the Lost, Thrice-Cursed Mbey or Land of Bonsam.

Mbeyan: A person from the Kingdom of Mbey.

Nommo: The river peoples. The Nommo travel all four of the great Cardinal Rivers.

Ori: Spirits or small gods of the Assanyi religion. The Ori numbers into the thousands.

Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro Church: An Aksum offshoot of the Vaticine Church.

Orun Irin: Also known as Sky metal. A semi-mythical metal given to the people of Ifri by the Jok.

Ras: A noble title equivalent to a Duke.

Sika'Dwa: A royal stool made of gold and Orun Irin. Five stools were created by the Jok and given through their intermediary, the Wiseones, to the five rulers of northern Ifri. The stool signifies power and has various rumored magical powers.

Chapter 1

An Overview of Ifri

AN OVERVIEW OF IFRI

Truths of Ifri

Due to limited contact, Théans have many misconceptions of Ifri.

A Continent, Not a Nation

Ifri, by far larger than Théah, can easily fit the New World and all of Théah in its landmass. The land includes almost every known terrestrial biome and is inhabited by many exotic and unique creatures. One never needs to leave the continent to seek adventure, and a lifetime can be filled with exciting travel within the Lands of Gold and Fire.

As such, it is a mistake to think of Ifri as one country with a homogenous group of people. In fact, the word Ifri is not even the agreed-upon name of the continent, but the one most commonly used by Ifrians. Those from the kingdom of Maghreb might call it Ifriqiya, while Mandenkaw may call it Ifran, which only serves to highlight that Ifri is a land of endless diversity. The people of Ifri do not speak the same language, worship the same gods or use the same social structures. In fact, a variety of tribal groups may be present in any nation.

Théah's Equal in Culture and Technology

Ifri is not populated by solely superstitious stone-age cultures. The cultures and customs may be different, but do not mistake any of the people of the continent for naive, backward or stupid. Just because an Ifrian sits on a low stool, or prefers the floor instead of richly carved chairs, or eats foods from a communal plate using nothing more than his hands, does not mean he is less than or more primitive than his Théan counterpart, just different.

The various peoples of Ifri do not have the same ambitions and goals as the people of Théah and are not dark-skinned analogues. The people have many different desires and hopes beyond the scope of what a Théan may think practical or normal.

Technology and its implementation also differ in the Lands of Gold and Fire. Cities, just as big as the ones in Théah, have many of the same problems, features and challenges. Culturally, the cities organize along different political lines, with different goals, but they are no less developed in their ability to support the citizenry and to create marvelous architecture, gardens and art. When adventuring in Ifri you must remember that "different" is not "inferior."

Certainty, not Faith

Unlike in Théah, Ifri has the luxury of knowing with terrible certainty of the existence of gods. Faith is not something that needs to be sold to the people of the Lands of Gold and Fire. In a land where a divine manifestation can inhabit and speak through a host and where the Devil actually walks in shadows, simple fact replaces faith. To most Ifrians, a Théan is more of a mythical creature than the Jok or the Ori, and in some ways, more alien. An Ifrian can walk out her front door and see the passing of spirits and the manifestations of the supernatural. Not only does she believe in life after death, she experiences it by communing with her long dead ancestors.

Unlike other cultures, an Ifrian lives with the understanding of countless mystic creatures walking beside him. He can see the work of the Jok and Bonsam in his day-to-day life and knows as a certainty that blasphemy, disrespect or toying with the unknown can lead to a dire fate. In Ifri there is no such thing as superstition, only wise precaution.

Likewise, an Ifrian is not conflicted by the worship of many different religions. All faiths hold the same weight to the common Ifrian. She prudently believes in al-Dīn, the Ori, Jok and the great power to change the world, or Ashe. She has no problem believing in al-Musawwir standing side by side with Olodumare, the King of Heaven, creator of the Ori and the world. Perhaps they are one and the same; if not, an Ifrian believes it best to hedge one's bet—and for many, there is no competition in honoring many gods. Though the Vaticine faith has spread to some degree thanks to the work of missionaries, it is likely to become just another thread in Ifri's bright tapestry of faiths.

The Bonsam and the Jok

Bonsam, a force of evil so powerful that they can rightly be called "the Devil," rules from behind the weak king of Mbey, in the shadows of the once great Kingdom. Bonsam seeks to take the pride, cultural identity and strength from the people of Ifri and rule the land from a throne of skulls and suffering. Under a pall of confusion, Bonsam's agents, the *abonsam*, sow distrust, undermine and corrupt. Like a sickness, the abonsam works the Devil's ill will upon the land and weakens an otherwise strong population. These creatures take a myriad of forms and no two are completely alike.

Standing in the way of Bonsam are the Jok and their agents. The Jok have always sought men and women of great destiny and done all in their power to promote them. Never overt, the Jok work from behind the scenes nudging in the right direction those they believe can make a benevolent change in the world. Where Bonsam crawls on their belly biting at the heel of a man and filling his mind with poison, the Jok shine in the distance beckoning a woman forward to greatness even through adversity.

But who or what are the Jok? Otherworldly beings akin to those of Avalon? Perhaps. The last remnants of the Syrneth? Doubtful. Some even say that they are great spirits that have been imbued with power by Theus. All that can be said for certain is that they have a great love for humanity and scour the land for Heroes brave and clever enough to protect Ifri from Bonsam's forces. Whatever they are, the Jok seem to promote the best qualities of humanity. Though they rarely interfere directly, especially in the current day and age, they cast long, flickering lights through the history of all of Ifri, with their protection and guidance setting the path for the people of Ifri to forge brighter destinies.

The Jok guide their champions toward the way of righteousness through actions both covert and overt. Though they assist their chosen allies along this path, the Jok alone cannot stop Bonsam's shadow as it rolls like a cloud across the land. By putting Heroes in the right place, they hope to push back against the evil of Bonsam, allowing the land time to wake from its nightmare so that the golden light of Ifri can shine bright once more. The quest is a worthy one, but can anyone survive it?

The five great Kingdoms must come together and stand as one righteous power or fall separately to be consumed by the greatest evil the world has ever known. If Bonsam has their way they will rob all of Ifri of its identity, its culture, its religions and eventually its collective mind. Only through truth, love and bravery can Bonsam be defeated.

Vultures from the North

There is another plague upon Ifri not of its making, a plague that came across the northern ocean from Théah. Seeking to benefit from the social and political upheaval, the Atabean Trading Company has done more damage in the past decade than Bonsam has done in a century. The organization does everything it can to break the backs of the great Kingdoms and insinuate themselves into their political systems. The chief allies to the Atabean Trading Company are mistrust, fear and confusion. This is something Bonsam also thrives upon, making the ATC the perfect vector to spread their vile infection to Théah and beyond.

Bonded Slavery

Ifri is not immune to slavery, and it exists in all its lowest forms. Most common slavery in Ifri occurred as a product of war. Captured or defeated enemies and civilians are forced to work for a period as a bonded slave. Many others become bonded slaves to pay off debts or to atone for a crime of transgression. Once a set period has passed the bonded slave is free. In some instances, the person enters into an agreement to become a bonded or indentured slave as a financial arrangement, and once the contract has expired she is free to go.

Even as a bonded slave, he still enjoys all the rights as a citizen of his respective nation, and is never treated as mere property. A bonded slave wronged by a person may ask the authorities for reparations and can go on to enjoy places of status in the governments once his service ends.

Bonded slavery is the most common form of slavery in Ifri.

SLAVERY: A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

A Hero in **7th Sea** recognizes slavery as evil and immoral and does not try to apologize or romanticize it. It is a tool of evil used to facilitate sinister agendas. Slavery robs a person of his self-determination, fundamental human rights and attempts to make him less than human—property.

Though we explore the ideas and themes of slavery within this book, we want to be abundantly clear that slavery and the subjugation of any human is wrong. Propagating and indulging in slavery is not Heroic, and characters who do so rank among the worst Villains.

Chattel Slavery

A slave of this variety is considered the property of his owner or master. He is harvested and sold like property and used in whatever way his owner sees fit. Masters acquire a chattel slave in the same manner as a bonded slave but his fate is dire, and his very existence depends on the master's whims. A chattel slave never has any hope of freedom, and his status passes along to his children.

Villainously treated as subhuman commodities, a chattel slave is used until broken and discarded when she no longer serves a productive or practical use. She enjoys no rights, no respite from her suffering and exists to serve masters that only see value in her backbreaking labors.

In Ifri, Mbey, and by extension the Atabean Trading Company, practice chattel slavery.

Julius 4, 1667

The Nommo are a wonderful people, warm and deeply welcoming. They treated me like a lost son when Adebowale asked them to take me up the river to Iu-Neserer, the Island of Flame. The Nommo are often regarded as traders but they are so much more; they provide the peoples of Ifri with unbiased information about other nations, they carry letters and packages to those willing to pay the price and they offer a means of transport for anyone willing to work their passage.

Geography of the Lands of Gold and Fire

One of the most important aspects of Ifri are the Great Rivers that have fed the land for eons. Myths tell of the mythic Jok people cutting the four Great Rivers as they sought a passage to see the world beyond. The rivers are great arteries of life for the denizens of Ifri and revered and respected by its people.

A Creation Myth

Olodumare, also known as the Oba-Orun (King of Heaven), lived in the sky above the world full of endless water called "Omi." One day, Olodumare felt the urge to create the earth. For this task he reached into his heart and pulled forth a spirit and called it Aniyikaye. Olodumare commanded Aniyikaye to perform the work and gave him the materials he needed to do it: a small bag of primordial Ashe, an Iworo'Won (gold chain) and a five-toed hen.

Aniyikaye climbed down the chain for days until he could see the surface of the water. He opened the bag of Ashe and sprinkled the primal material into the water where it roiled, steamed and pushed forth a pile of rich, black earth. Then Aniyikaye dropped the hen onto the land and instructed her to grab the loose dirt with her toes and scatter it across the surface of the primordial Omi.

Satisfied with the work, Aniyikaye ascended to heaven along the Iworo'Won and stood before Olodumare. The King of Heaven next sent his trusted pet, the chameleon, to inspect the work of Aniyikaye and to report back what he had seen. After days down the golden chain and back up again the chameleon testified Aniyikaye's work was solid and true. Pleased, Olodumare named the land, *Ajaka-Katunga*, the "sacred house."

Olodumare decided to retire to a higher heaven. Before he ascended, he distributed his holy Ashe among other Ori he created. The Ori set out to create other elemental forces for Olodumare and build upon Aniyikaye's work. After spreading his divine power across the earth, Olodumare called the Ori back to heaven and gave Aniyikaye Ashe to create humanity.

Aniyikaye returned to earth and with a great hand full of clay formed the ancestors, endowing them with the divine Ashe. From that original creation, we are all descended from the most powerful Ori, Olodumare King of the Sky.

Iteru River

When the Ennead flooded the lands of Khemet, their return from the north carved a huge gorge through the land. The waters of the world rushed in behind them, flowing south until they were turned back by the massive heights of Iu-Neserer. Khemeti say that the Iteru northward current is still merely the flowing of the sea back to where it belongs all these centuries later.

The peoples of Khemet depend upon the Iteru for life-giving water, but it simultaneously causes perpetual discomfort. Aside from seasonal flooding that dislodges families from their homes, destroys crops and unearths the ancient dead, the Iteru

also allows bandits to sail up and down upon it. Furthermore, the Iteru sometimes suddenly turns blood red unpredictably before steaming and boiling. Such manifestations, inimical to life along the banks of the Great River, may be a fleeting curse rising from the underworld sources of this ancient watercourse.

Notable Features

Travelers on the river give pause and heed to the large bay known as Timsah al-Iter. The shores and tributaries that feed this deep-water bay house scores of crocodiles that feed upon both the unwary and the wildlife that drinks from the streams that feed the bay.

Timsah is also rumored to be the home of an ancient crocodile known locally as Sobki. Alternately worshiped and feared, Sobki is ancient and perhaps the largest beast in Ifri. The Timsah has been her home for centuries and many of the crocodiles along the banks are her descendants.

Notched deep into her back is a spearhead made of a material known as sky metal, or Orun Irin. The shaft of the spear has long since rotted away and her scales have begun to grow over the spearhead itself. Some griot claim that this spear is a powerful artifact, but it has never been taken from Sobki. Entrepreneurs occasionally brave the shores of the Timsah to seek out Sobki's discarded scales sought by alchemists and sorcerers alike.

A great warrior known as Apis dwells along the banks of the Iteru. Once a mercenary in the Crescent Empire, Apis retired to Iteru. Known not only for his great strength, but also his generous nature, Apis constructs the numerous shrines and temples along the river's banks. Many of these rarely last a season and get destroyed when the Iteru floods.

Kwara River

Perhaps the widest of the Great Rivers, the Kwara winds its way west through the Manden Empire. So vast that in places the far bank cannot be seen, the Kwara also harbors many spirits, monsters and river goddesses. Many of these mysterious entities are dangerous, and legends abound about the Great River Serpents known as the Mokele-Mbembe and the elephant-killer Emela Ntouka.

Great mists rise from the surface of Kwara, occasionally obscuring sight; called *umphefumlo*, some believe these clouds indicate the presence of any of the multitude of river goddesses. People frequently pray or give offerings to these river goddesses to ensure everything from safe travel to bountiful harvests to abundant fish. However, they can also serve to hide such dangers as hippopotamuses, crocodiles and other monstrous creatures. The attendant goddesses, said to drink in all the other rivers of the world, fuel the great depth and breadth of the Kwara.

Notable Features

The Pool of the Twins lies somewhere along the Kwara. Shrouded in perpetual mists, a traveler finds it hard to tell where the air ends and water begins. He often stumbles into the pool or even wakes up to find it surrounding him. Home to a pair of spirits, the Twins, are generally benign but mischievous. Tales of the Twins seem to indicate that one is male, the other female, one lives beneath the water while the other dwells in the air. Often only one of the Twins appears to an individual and sets before him a task—fetching water from Mokele-Mbembe or a precious stone from a king's treasury. An adventurer who does not complete such tasks often finds time spent on the Kwara very difficult indeed.

Aminata, a Mandenka woman of great virtue, travels from village to village, interceding in disputes between the spirits, ancestors and people of Manden. She does not like to cross to the northern side of the Kwara, instead spending most of her time along the southern villages. She bears a strange scar along one side of her neck. If asked about it, she only replies, "Mbey."

Berbera River

The Berbera flows away from Iu-Neserer and through the lands of the Aksum Kingdom. Like all of the Great Rivers, it is broad and often deep enough for sailing vessels to venture upon. However, the myriad tributaries that feed the Berbera are known for the ubiquitous presence of sandbars, some of which extend out into the Berbera itself. As such, few vessels sailing upon the "River of Good Omens" do so without an Aksumite guide or sailor.

In some places, the Berbera flows through deep gorges. These rapid watercourses are the source of a variety of minor veins of gold. The eastern flood plains fed by the Berbera, fertile and plentiful, provide both crops and fishing for the kingdom and traders alike.

Notable Features

The Serpent Canyons are a series of deep divides through the central mountains. Though the Berbera tends to be deep and slow before the mountains, in their midst it turns into a swiftly flowing current that plunges from the west to the lowlands of the east. Still wide enough for boats and ships to traverse its passages, the Berbera winds and splits through the mountains, and many of the river's courses plunge underground or over steep waterfalls and rapids. There are routes safe for ships and boats through the mountains, but it requires a great deal of skill, daring and knowledge to navigate them safely.

The Hattuu Laga, a band of river pirates, operate on the Berbera. Preying on ships as well as plundering the numerous wrecks that litter the river, the Hattuu travel as far as Khemet. Sometimes disguised as mendicant merchants, the pirates and their leader Abbebe threaten all travelers upon the Berbera.

Joliba River

The Joliba runs from Iu-Neserer into the relatively uncharted fastness of southern Ifri. After plunging through thick jungles and a series of increasingly impressive waterfalls, the Joliba spreads into a huge wetland, branching and being fed by small tributaries from the upland jungles. Here the river spreads out so that it is nearly impossible for outsiders to navigate its marshes, bogs and backwaters. The river grasses stretch high and small hillocks rise above the river which itself fluctuates as if with the tides.

At several times during the year, entire sections of the river seem to turn black and carry a foul smell. The people closest to the river sometimes call this the Vomit of Bonsam, but it typically vanishes after the multitudinous waterfalls churn the Joliba, though the scent carries for miles in the humid air.

Notable Features

The jungle marshes that separate Manden and Aksum are nigh impassable and yet the Joliba flows through them like a grasping hand, fingers outstretched in every direction. Known as the Dambo, these swampy lands appear to be gradually shrinking. Screeching abonsam pour out of the jungle canopy in increasingly common raids against new settlements near the marshes.

A mysterious figure known as Ranivorus haunts the marshes and tributaries of the Joliba. Always seen wearing a huge wooden and ivory mask, some believe that Ranivorus is one of the Jok while others suspect it is an abonsam who fled its master in the north. Those locals who travel back and forth the five great Kingdoms refuse to give the figure a name other than the Mankholi-kholi. Théan explorers and archeologists gave it the moniker Ranivorus, though no one knows who originally decided upon that name. Ranivorus actively seeks to prevent ships traveling down the Joliba from the river of Mokele-Mbembe, often enlisting others to carry out his wishes.

The Tamanrasset Rivers

The Tamanrasset are a series of underground rivers, lakes and caverns beneath northern Ifri. Known often as Ghost Rivers, the Tamanrasset link many of the lands and rivers together underground. The ghosts of ancestors as well as bandits, abonsam, Ori and monsters frequently populate these subterranean water passageways.

The greatest of these is the Lulungwa Mangakatsi. Rumors say that the caverns and lakes and waterways of the Lulungwa travel the length and breadth of Ifri, pulsing slowly with her heartbeat, carrying the soul and power of the land. The Jok certainly believed so and once patrolled the waters of the Lulungwa, carving her walls and ceilings and floors into fantastic forms and teaching early humans to decorate her entrances with tiles and raising sacred sites above.

Bygone legends and stories of the griot claim that one of the Tamanrasset rivers, the Timbavati, once flowed across the heavens filled with starlight, and it plunged to the surface of Ifri and on down into the underworld to provide light for the spirits of the ancestors. However, after the Ennead drew the waters of the world over Ifri, the Timbavati dimmed. When the waters receded, the River of the Stars had vanished and the underworld grew darker. The ancestors now long for light because of the stars' departure.

Maps in the libraries of Manden depict an ancient river flowing from the heart of Khemet towards Iu-Neserer that no longer exists. Many scholars believe such maps to be in error, or to inaccurately display the Iteru. In truth, one of the Tamanrasset ventures from a dark spring beneath the Great

Pyramids and winds south to mingle with the waters beneath Iu-Neserer. The Ennead left behind many tests for the faithful and traps for the unwary along this sacred route to the final home of their people.

The Nommo: The River People

All along the Great Rivers and their tributaries dwell a nomadic people known as the Nommo. A Nommo sails barges and dugout canoes up and down the rivers and adeptly navigates the swirling and dangerous waters that surround Iu-Neserer to transition between the rivers. Typically, she lashes several of her people's great barges together to create a sort of floating city that moves along at a slow pace, barely faster than that of a walk. However, as she sails past other settlements near the banks of the rivers, the populace from those villages trade for items from far away. In turn, she can get a variety of things that the rivers do not provide.

A Nommo is said to never set foot on dry land, instead living out his entire life on the water. He is an expert diver, a renowned fisher and a skillful sailor. The Mandenkaw tell stories that a Nommo is born from water spirits in the depths of the Kwara while the Aksumites see him as a heathen thief tolerated solely for his ability to get trade across the continent however slowly it may travel. The Khemeti claim that a Nommo suffers a curse to never set foot on solid ground, and that if he does so, all the sacred rivers in Ifri will flee their banks and the underworld will rise.

A Nommo frequently conceals her face when dealing with outsiders. Wide-brimmed hats with obscuring beads, carved wooden masks or even just simple veils of cloth are all common. She frequently takes in outcasts and criminals from along the river. She also believes that "one does as one must," and while the Great Rivers provide much, life is still a struggle at times.

Iu-Neserer: The Island of Flame

The Great Rivers all originate at a great confluence of water pouring down from the home of the Jok, the mysterious Island of Flame. Travel to the mythic land is arduous, and boats must be rowed or be pulled up the river. The humid fog thickens such that one can see no further than ten yards beyond the bank of the river. Some say, to travel the upper reaches of any of the Cardinal Rivers is to travel into a dream-like place of mystery and danger.

The Mokele-Mbembe

The wide waters around the Isle of Flame are known as the Mokele-Mbembe, so named for the giant serpent that swims and swirls its waters.

A thick mist smelling of sulfur constantly obscures the swirling river. The caustic miasma hides perils of jutting rocks, rogue logs or serpents and makes the river at best the most treacherous waterway in all the world. Periodically, the waters of the Mokele-Mbembe erupt with columns of flames fed by underwater gas deposits. The flames, hot enough to incinerate anything it encounters, boils the waters, making it especially hard to see or breathe.

Thought to be born with the first of the Jok, or perhaps an Ori that came east and grew too big to easily navigate even the deep waters of the Kwara, Mokele-Mbembe is the progenitor of all the rivers. Big enough to be an inland sea, the waters of Mokele-Mbembe continually swirl and clash creating countless hazards destroying any boat that sails in the deep water or along the shore. Only the Nommo have the secret of navigating the maelstrom safely and they guard that secret as a sacred promise to the Jok.

Many of the peaks give off fumes and vapors and so they are surmounted by gatherings of dense acrid clouds. The swirling waters around the island create rapids and dangers that prevent boats from crossing the expanse of water to the island itself. Griots say that a boat containing one of the sacred Sika'Dwa can forge across the waters and put in at one of several large docks visible from afar. The Wiseones say that it takes not only a Sika'Dwa but also the rightful ruler and bearer of the stool to make the journey.

The Lands of Babi

In the mountains surrounding the Mokele-Mbembe River live countless troops of baboons. Collectively the baboons are known as the Guardians of Babi. The mountainous forest surrounding the sacred island has never been molested for fear of the wild guardians that make this place home.

Some consider them just animals but others know that the large gold and crimson baboons guard the shores of Fire Island and attack those that do not belong there. Deep in the mountains lives Babi himself, a giant baboon king that takes commands from the Jok or counsel from a Wiseone.

An enormous statue of a baboon designates the lands of Babi, standing over 100 feet high, carved from basalt stone and staring endlessly in the direction of the river that feeds through them.

Khemenu

The central caldera of the Fire Mountains hides the last great city of the Jok in northern Ifri, Khemenu, the City of Eight. The inside walls are the color of polished ivory, and the strange geometry of the city at times seems carved directly from solidified clouds. The city itself is at turns beautiful and disturbing, due to the gigantic proportions, unsuited for humans. Doorways are too large, stairs are difficult to climb, windows loom high above, passages end abruptly, and bridges connecting balconies seem too narrow to support their own weight. Seemingly constructed entirely from white quartz, the city is a maze for the uninitiated. Every single wall of the city is engraved and inscribed with pictographs, runes, writings and images, some inlaid with precious stones, silver, gold or Orun Irin. Standing in one of the many plazas of the city, a visitor can gaze around and see the history of the world laid out with stories and song. Moving just a few steps destroys the illusion, but brings forth new ways to see the world. By standing beneath the City's great gates, one can even read the story of the Jok. Only a few of the Jok still in Khemenu know the entire story the city tells, and the structure of the city makes it difficult, if not impossible, to read in any reliable way.

Above the City of Eight is a huge sun disc made of Orun Irin, steel, gold and silver. Sunlight reflects off this disc during the day, shining through many of the city's walls. The carvings and inlays cast shadows onto the polished streets, telling even more stories, many of which are prophesies of times yet to come. At night, the disc continues to shine, almost as brightly as the sun, while throwing gouts of flame high into the sky.

The city itself is huge. Large enough that it could hold many times the number of beings that currently reside within its walls. Most of the empty residences seem only recently vacated, and each of them could easily hold a small host of humans. Each of the currently occupied buildings has a small brazier of Orun Irin with burning coals outside of its door. A small trough of water surrounds these coals. Oddly, the water stays warm, but does not boil, and the coals themselves never extinguish unless taken across the waters surrounding the island. The smoke from these braziers rise over the island in a pale haze that the local Jok can somehow "read" to interpret the number of Jok remaining and roughly where any Jok is at in the City.

Within Iu-Neserer are numerous libraries, repositories and places of study. A Wiseone and his apprentices sometimes journey here to return Orun Irin or to find a piece of information he cannot otherwise learn, for all the secrets of the world and all the worlds beyond are contained among the Jok.

The Jok of Iu-Neserer, much diminished from their numbers in days gone by, still remain a formidable people and stunning to behold. Their leader is an older Jok woman with a name so powerful that it cannot be uttered aloud, nor written down lest tragedy befall. She Who Must Not Be Named frequently wanders the streets of her city wearing a ceremonial mask of Orun Irin.

The Bestiary of Ifri

I have seen what diabolic desires tug people's hearts but until the day I die I will never understand the malevolent pull of pure evil. The land of Ifri is known for its abundant wealth and nobility, but at its heart stirs long forgotten things...bad things, waiting and biding their time.

Some of these creatures walk as humans, while others crawl on their bellies like a beast, but all share a common trait: a hunger for human suffering. These are not myths fabricated to scare willful children, these are horrors beyond imagining set loose upon the land to bring woe, pain and misery to all with a beating mortal heart.

In the small hours of the night, when I wake from a fitful sleep, I check the bolt on my door and make sure the proper wards are in place. I know what stirs beyond the trees of my village; I know what fate awaits me if am not diligent.

—A'isha ibnt Anwar, second in command of Yemoja's Splendor

The Abonsam

Abonsam is Bonsam's answer to the Wiseone, evil agents that walk the earth causing great strife and chaos. As servants of Bonsam these creatures take all manner of forms from immaterial spirits, to great monsters, to human witches. An abonsam wishes only to please his master and as such works to gain worldly power and destroy the servants and creations of the Jok. If an abonsam gets his way all Ifri would resemble the broken Kingdom of Mbey. Wiseones place the abonsam into five orders: Voices, Monsters, Traders, Witches and Thralls. Each order has a purpose within the hierarchy. Not all abonsam follow these orders; the creatures that come from the Stones of Bonsam and who now rule Mbey defy such categorization.

An abonsam's goals match those of her creator; she desires a world filled with pain and suffering trodden under her damned feet. An individual abonsam's approach to her master's final goal may differ with personality and outlook, and she does not always work together with her peers towards this goal. Each abonsam is a twisted, poor reflection of Bonsam's power and malfeasance.

Voices

The most insidious of abonsam are the Voices, these creatures whisper in the ear of peasant and ruler alike, telling him that his spouse is unfaithful, his children conspire against him and that neighbors poison his land. The Voices start as bad dreams and slowly become waking nightmares. Smarter Voices mix truth and lies, warning of actual assassination attempts (often staged by other abonsam) to gain trust, before revealing some great falsehood. Voices serve to corrupt, to sow mistrust and to recruit new abonsam Witches.

Dealing with a Voice is difficult and few people have the power or knowledge necessary to drive her off once she has chosen a victim. A Voice's real power comes from her skill at deception and her ability to move about and spy in immaterial form. She also serves as brokers for those interested in trading services for power.

Monsters

An Abonsam Monster is a simple creature. His purpose is to destroy and to cause terror. Most start life as a mortal or animal, warped and tortured by magic until he knows only hate, rage and a thirst for inflicting suffering. No two Monsters are alike, but all inspire terror and embody the worst Ifri has to offer.

Examples of Monsters include a deformed child whose shredded belly swells with pestilential scarabs, a pack of skinned wolves joined by a web of intestines and a giant black goat whose breath makes land and animals barren. Other forms of abonsam create a Monster by their actions; he can be the product of the madness of inflicted by Voices, a victim of a Trader Pact or a child of Witches.

Traders

An abonsam Trader serves as a channel for Bonsam's power, luring in new servants for her master. When a Chieftain's wife cries out for vengeance for her murdered children, and an orphan has his inheritance stolen, the Trader listens and offers the power to make things right. When a wounded veteran wishes she could be more than a mere beggar or a courtesan dying of plague dreams of riches and power, the Trader offers another path.

A Trader grants power to the powerless and might to make things right, but for a steep price to be paid. The wicked Trader never offers more than she gets from a deal. The Monkey's Paw of legend wishes it could twist desires half as well as a Trader.

A Trader appears to be human but can twist his form to suit those he deals with; he possesses a limited form of telepathy which allows him to see his victim's desires so he chooses a form his victim finds comforting. No matter what form he takes, he always has a monstrous physical trait that he takes care to hide. A Trader does not just click his fingers and right wrongs; he grants twisted powers and shows the victim the easy path. Many abonsam Witches began as Trader Pact victims.

Witches

Abonsam Witches come in two kinds: the living and the dead. In Ifri, if you kill a Witch and fail to perform the proper rituals, she returns as an even more dangerous undead Witch. A Witch is an elite soldier of Bonsam's army; she fights their battles and is the most obvious manifestation of their influence.

A Witch wields dark magic and commands groups of abonsam Thralls to do her bidding. Traders bargain and corrupt, Monsters terrify and destroy, Voices lie and manipulate, while Witches infiltrate and direct. The Witch walks amongst humanity and finds their weaknesses, to use her power to slay while staying hidden, and to act as intermediaries and field commanders for the forces of darkness. A Witch commands potent forces while alive, but this magic only increases after death. An undead Witch must take more care to remain in the shadows, but her necromantic arts more than make up for it.

A Witch of either type favors forming secret organizations and cults to do his bidding. Most Witches were once abonsam Thralls, but some are recruited directly by Bonsam themself for their malicious hearts and talent with magic. When necessary, a Witch (either male and female) can give birth to an abonsam Monster by mating with Bonsam themself, though he rarely does this since the process is draining and fraught with risk.

An abonsam Witch is the smartest of Bonsam's agents, and his witchcraft is the most obvious example of their dark power. A Witch wields his supernatural power and his influence over other abonsam to bring down entire dynasties. A Witch rarely concerns himself with petty Villainy. He acts to destroy and corrupt on a regional scale. A gathering of Witches occurs every few months where they share information and plan for future evil.

Thralls

Abonsam Thralls are the lowest in the hierarchy of evil and are by far the most common servants of Bonsam. He pledges his service to evil in exchange for worldly power, wealth or other concerns. Thralls usually fall under the command of Witches or sometimes other abonsam.

A Thrall has his heart replaced with a tangle of thorns in a grisly ceremony. Should he disobey his masters, the thorns explode from the victim's body the next time he sleeps, ripping him to shreds in the process. Despite the name, Thralls are rarely simple minions. Many are influential merchants, cult leaders and chieftains.

There are no innocent abonsam Thralls. Each one is a malicious and dangerous individual, the worst humanity has to offer. A significant portion of Thralls are actually evil spirits made manifest in human form. Some retain a measure of their spirit powers, making encounters with Thralls always an uncertain affair. A Thrall hopes and prays that he might prove worthy one day to be elevated to another form of abonsam such as a Witch or a Trader.

A Thrall usually has a particular sin or vice which she focuses on. This makes her somewhat predictable and is what drew her toward Bonsam in the first place. A Thrall generally has twin goals; to indulge her vice at the expense of others and to garner enough power to advance in the abonsam hierarchy.

Bonsam

Bonsam is the prime source of evil in Ifri and perhaps the entire world. They are a twisted creature, trapped between the spirit world and the mortal plane. Bonsam feels no mercy, no love nor any positive emotion; they are hatred, rage and malevolence given physical form. The devil's power is fueled by misery, suffering and domination of others.

Unlike the Jok, Bonsam has an actual physical form and cannot dissolve into the spirit plane. They can, however, see and communicate with spirits as they so wish. They also possess seemingly unlimited power to corrupt and despoil. Like the Jok, Bonsam prefers to work through agents, and they frequently grant his minions vile powers. The abonsam are the devil's favorite minions but not only ones; evil humans, monsters and demons all slave themselves to his cause, whether they know it or not.

Bonsam wants to see Ifri and then the world torn down and rebuilt in their image. They want pain and despair to be their kings and queens in a world where Bonsam stands supreme. They want to exploit everyone and everything for their own gain. If Bonsam succeeds in their plans, no mortal will draw breath without wrenching agony nor would a single living creature know a moment's peace. The devil knows that the Jok and other beings stand against them and so makes plans within plans to first weaken and then destroy their enemies.

Few humans have ever laid eyes on Bonsam and lived; those that have describe them differently every time. One man tells of a three-headed fire-breathing goat, another woman speaks of a darkly handsome warrior speaking in honeyed tones. In truth, Bonsam has no true form, only whatever shape they choose to assume at a given moment.

Where did Bonsam come from? Nobody except the Jok know for sure and they refuse to speak of their past. Bonsam themself are anything but quiet on the subject, variously claiming to be a renegade Jok, the last of the Syrneth, a forgotten god, a mortal sorcerer and the last of a race wronged by the Jok. The truth of the matter may never be known.

Bonsam wants only one thing: to turn Ifri and then the entire world into a hell under their dominion. Everything else they do is simply a means to this end. One cannot know the mind of an immortal

spirit-being so the reasons behind this are completely unfathomable to mortals. Each action Bonsam takes forwards this agenda in some way, even if it seems not to. As an immortal, Bonsam thinks and acts in terms of centuries rather than years. Bonsam's worst enemy, their own boundless rage, sometimes causes them to destroy their own plans.

The Black Ship

The Black Ship is a xebec with both lateen sails and oars. The ship, made of bone and sinew, its sails of stretched human flesh, bears a ragged flag dyed blood red with a scorched black half-skull. Beneath the vessel, crab-like legs wave; the Black Ship can use these for traveling over land, from one river to another, seeking new waters. It can also crawl about the sea floor, lurking to ambush other ships.

Formed from the bodies of the damned, it is captained by Inkosazana, a fierce woman whose face has been flayed of its skin. For every righteous captain killed by the crew, a new ship emerges from the depths, manned by the corrupted souls of the defeated crew. Two other ships now fly the bloody flag, a Bonsam fleet in the making.

The ship is crewed by the souls of the dead, twisted by Bonsam and stained by sin. Inkosazana has a standing bargain with each soul aboard—if he brings her nine souls, his own soul may return to the land of the living. She does not tell him that his rebirth will be in the form of an undead zombie. The ravenous crew, their empty souls crying for sustenance, preys upon any ship they encounter in order to fulfill this pact. For this reason, the Black Ship occasionally takes prisoners.

One such prisoner managed to escape with a tale that the Black Ship holds the missing Sika'Dwa of Mbey as well as other treasures such as the Heart of Bonsam, the last Pages of the Second Prophet and the waters of the Mokele-Mbembe.

The ship has been sighted at sea and along the four Cardinal Rivers, moving like a malignant shark looking for new prey.

Dan Ida Hwedo

Ifri plays host to a seemingly endless network of underground caverns. These caverns are not the work of rivers, nor entirely the work of the Jok. An enormous serpentine creature winds her way through these caverns, the creature known as Dan Ida Hwedo.

This godlike python is a being of fertility and change. In her wake, flowers bloom and the land becomes fertile. When she sickens, the land fails and the people starve. The peoples of Ifri travel to the underworld, leaving offerings of food and medicines to attract Dan Ida Hwedo in the hope of gathering the blessings of her passage.

On rare occasions, Dan Ida Hwedo bestows a particularly brave Hero or great healer with one of her scales. These rainbow-colored scales, the size of dinner plates, contain a tiny speck of Dan Ida Hwedo's power. The powerful medicine made from this scale heals even those with deathly wounds and reverses the progress of even the vilest diseases.

Bonsam dearly wishes to capture or slay Dan Ida Hwedo, but the wily worm continues to evade capture. Even now, Bonsam tasks their minions to find a way to lure Dan Ida Hwedo into a trap so that they can accelerate the death of Ifri and finally destroy the Jok.

Legends conflict on Dan Ida Hwedo's origin; some say that she was born of Jok and others claim she is a primal god from before time itself and still others say she is the spirit of Ifri given physical form. The Jok remain silent on the matter, though they have forbidden the Wiseones from interacting with the great python or making use of her scales.

Dan Ida Hwedo rarely converses with mortals, and when she does she uses a sort of wordless empathy which makes questioning her impossible. The great mother serpent's sole agenda seems to be to spread fertility and life throughout the land. *A wound to Dan Ida Hwedo is a wound to Ifri itself.*

Kishi

A traveler in Ifri always asks a stranger approaching her fire at night to show her his back. In Théah one might expect this to be an invitation to have a dagger plunged between your shoulder blades, but in Ifri this gesture simply proves you are not a Kishi come to devour those foolish enough to let you speak.

Kishi appear as beauteous people who speak in golden tones that can charm even the hardest heart. But a Kishi's fine face and body, while a wonder to behold from the front, belies the horror one sees when looking at him from behind. The creature's back consists of hyena's head and body. The head rests on the Kishi's buttocks and the paws drape over his human shoulders and down his legs. When the Kishi feeds, he passes choice morsels behind him to his hyena mouth. Kishi see humanity only as a food source and rarely seek to interact with humans outside of the hunt.

The Kishi is a shapeshifter, capable of transforming into a hyena with a human face sprouting from her back. The human face speaks in sweet words to lure a gullible person from his bed and off the path into the darkness.

Some Kishi can devour the eyes, nose, tongue, ears or skin of a victim to make themselves imperceptible to the associated sense for a time. The creature only takes one sense at a time and usually leaves her victim alive afterwards; no one knows if this mercy is required or simply a means to prolong her victim's suffering. This kind of Kishi stalks isolated villages for months at a time, leaving a trail of mutilated villagers in her wake.

The Kishi are spirits of hunger and fear, existing to spread terror wherever they go. Most Kishi prefer to hunt alone but sometimes they form a pack, terrorizing whole regions. Pack Kishi occasionally work with evil humans if the pack gets to spread suffering and fear as part of the arrangement.

The Jok

The Jok are great spirit-beings that live in the holy mountain in the heart of Iu-Neserer. It was the Jok that taught humanity the skills they needed to rise above animals and claim dominion over the land. Though neither inherently good nor bad, the Jok certainly take a benevolent approach to humanity, sharing their knowledge and bringing them civilization. Where the Jok came from no one can say, but they have done much to elevate the people of Ifri.

In long ages past, the Jok were much more plentiful than they are today. They knew many strange sciences and technologies which they shared with humanity. Untold centuries ago most of the Jok left this mortal plane for an unknown destination. The Jok gathered their belongings in boats and bore a great river around their mountain home, striking off in four directions, thereby creating the Great Rivers of Ifri. Were they fleeing some calamity or marching off to war? No one can say. These travelers never returned, but it was after this time that Bonsam first appeared in the world.

The Jok chooses and teaches the Wiseones. Each Wiseone goes to the Island of Flame where she spends 20 days under the direct tutelage of a Jok mentor disguised behind an ornate wooden mask. The mentor slowly reveals the truth of the world to the would-be Wiseone until finally, when the Jok is satisfied, they lift their mask and reveal the final truth. With this last act, the Wiseone either becomes enlightened or dies on the spot. If she survives, she receives the mask and travels the world beyond to gather knowledge and protect the innocent. Before her death, which she sees in a vision, each Wiseone travels home and recites all that she has to the Jok.

No Jok has left the holy mountain since Bonsam first appeared in Ifri. They still act as mentors and teachers but no longer wander the world as they once did long ago.

The Jok's agenda seems to be to teach and mentor humanity into a new state of enlightenment. To this end, the Jok spread knowledge and engage their agents to combat the forces under Bonsam's command. Nobody knows the exact reason for the Jok's beneficence toward humans and their ultimate goals remain unclear at best.

Scorpion Belly

Scorpion Belly comes at night
Scorpion Belly holds on tight
Scorpion Belly won't let go
Scorpion Belly no no no
—*Children's Song*

Every place has its boogeyman. A story told to scare children. A cautionary tale for those who might stray too far from prescribed virtue. In Mbey, this creature is Scorpion Belly.

His name in life was Sidya, a Nder boy on the cusp of manhood who grew up on the banks of the Mbey River. Sidya betrayed Mbey for a handful of gold when he sneaked across the river and showed a camp of Maghrebi Raiders the best place to cross unseen. The raiders poured across the river into Sidya's village; when they returned, the flanks of their horses were still slick with Nder blood. Sidya extended his hand to receive his reward, but they instead seized him by the wrist, slashed his belly open and poured gold and scorpions in. They then allowed him to return to his village, along the path he had shown the raiders. Each stumbling, pain-wracked step was a dire choice—hold onto his gold, or let out the scorpions.

Whether he ever made it back to his village cannot be known…there were none alive there to say. Perhaps he did, finally succumbing to a hundred scorpion stings as he slumped into his dead mother's arms. Perhaps he did not, weakened by the poison ravaging his body, and he slipped and drowned in the very river he betrayed. Or perhaps he still lives, forever grasping his squirming, squirming belly so his gold will not fall out. The accounting changes from mother to father to elder to child, always at the service of whoever does the telling.

Many claim to have personally encountered Scorpion Belly in the forest or the scrub or along some muddy riverbank, but those were just stories full of show and false bravado. The ones who have truly seen Scorpion Belly speak not at all; since the breaking of the Bonsam Stones, a young man sometimes appears to the weak and beset upon, offering a handful of gold to whoever wants it. Those who accept are taken by his unbreakable grip and the dozens of pale scorpions that rage from the suppurating wound in the man's belly. Their tale is told entirely in screams and then silence.

Portraying Scorpion Belly

Part abonsam monster and part mortal child, he is locked in a cycle of suffering from which he cannot break free. You can play Scorpion Belly as a victim as much as a Villain. Of course, getting close enough to Scorpion Belly to talk to him without being attacked by his little friends might be difficult.

Scorpion Belly is an object lesson to someone contemplating treachery, haunting her dreams and eventually stalking her in the waking world. He offers coin in exchange for acts of betrayal, as if the sins of others will wipe clean his own dark act.

Zombies

There are as many kinds of zombies as there are people, it seems.

The Kap Sevi practice of zombification entails the ritualistic burial of a living person, later exhumed and reanimated. The uses for such a creature are endless—they make extremely pliable servants and are nearly impervious to harm. Most recently, they have found value as liaisons between Ori and the mortal world.

Bonsam has their zombies, too. They are the reanimated corpses of the long dead, given the semblance of life through evil sorcery. Utterly mindless, they serve as the shock troops and servants of their fiendish masters. They are fortunately rare, for Bonsam prefers living slaves to the undead sort.

The final kind are not zombies at all, but something more akin to corporeal ghosts. Free-willed terrors sprouting like diseased fungi from the poisoned soil of Mbey, they pursue their own twisted, enigmatic agendas. Whether these creatures are truly the restless souls of the deceased back for vengeance or merely husks possessed by some fiendish intelligence, one thing is known for sure—they bear little compassion for the living, even those they cared for in life.

Chapter 2

the Manden Kurufaba

THE MANDEN KURUFABA

I, Aïssata Diagho, daughter of Abdoulhamid and Moussa Diagho, a loyal servant of the Ori and a lover of al-Musawwir, am a griot—what you would call a traveling poet. No secrets hide from me anywhere among the arts of speech. I keep the history of a people; the ancient monarchs and epic Heroes live eternal in my mind, which is the memory of all humanity and the voice of the throne.

I praise the Manden Kurufaba as the greatest Nation ever to rise on Terra. Why? Our treasury exceeds every other nation's. The Mansa who rules us is the wealthiest man on Terra, but even the unluckiest slave or beggar never lacks for food, water or medicine. Our client-states of Igodomigodo, Awkar and Xwéda enrich our culture as we enrich theirs. But now, Mansa Kankan embarks on the greatest endeavor of government any head of state has ever undertaken: the International Kurufaba, an assembly of national representatives committed to peace, unity and love across all borders. But as great as we are, this experiment's success depends on your greatness as much if not more. Now attend me, and bear witness to our past, that you may take your place in history…

—Aïssata Diagho of Manden

The Foundation

According to the stories of the griots, the world began at the cities of Ajaka or Katunga—none can agree which. In the beginning, the Ori descended from heaven on a golden chain, but quarreled over who should make the world and who should rule the world. They split into two groups and settled in two cities; but the world was made, and the world was ruled.

The Awkari founded the first great empire in the land we now call the Manden Kurufaba, a collection of cultures and states that stand together. Settlers streamed west out of the Crescent Empire, especially after the Second Prophet's martyrdom. They introduced Ifri to the Prophets' wisdom and founded a city, al-Ghāba, with towering institutions of learning and prayer. Whereas the people of Manden had before relied on the oral history kept by griots, the newcomers advocated the written word, sealing their agreements with ink on parchment or paper. It was strange to many, but accepted.

The Rise of Kings

Among the *nyamakalaw*, the artisans, was a master *numu*, a blacksmith, named Sumanguru Kanté. Initiated into the sorcerous mysteries, he exceeded any demiurge's abilities who had yet lived by studying unto the very ends of magical thought and practice; even the most exalted crafters of legend, he surpassed.

He wished to overthrow the caste system dividing Mandenka from Mandenka…but not to make everyone equal; no, Sumanguru Kanté wanted to rule the empire himself. To achieve this, he betrayed his people by dealing with fell powers from beyond this world. He sacrificed nine tribes' chieftains to them and wore their skins as garments. In return, their flayed flesh rendered him invincible against any mortal weapon, until such time as some clever individual figured out his weakness. Spears bounced off his chest as if off rocks, and he could snatch arrows out of the air or roar at bullets to make them fly back in the opposite direction. Thus empowered, he besieged and overthrew Awkar's decaying throne. His soldiers defaced monuments, cast down university towers and burned any library book that did not please them.

Meanwhile, in the land of Manden, the king had just died. His diviner, or *iyalawo*, determined that of his several wives and sons, Mari-Djata would succeed him. This was a scandal, as Mari-Djata's mother was strong, but considered ugly, a veritable crime among people who often judge worth by appearance. The scandal deepened as Mari-Djata was born without the ability to use his legs well. His joints, constantly in danger of slipping out, made walking more than a few steps difficult without leaning on a crook.

Nevertheless, he insisted on studying the art of war like his forebears. He learned to wield saber, spear, javelin and bow. His core and arms were as strong as anyone's, and he could bend bows no one else could. He memorized all of military science from the ancients' strategies to cutting-edge tactics and could innovate at them without peer in war games. Yet one thing eluded him: Mari Djata could not ride.

One auspicious day, Mari-Djata said to his officers, "Fix me into a horse's saddle. I will join the fray."

His officers could not keep from laughter. "Forgive us, sire, but you can barely move your legs. How will you command your horse?"

"I'll figure it out," Mari-Djata replied. "But in case I fail, take the best horses for yourself. I shall deal with your leavings."

In the royal paddock was a Katabi mare no one could ride. The strongest equestrian tried everything to control her, but she grew angry and intractable at every command. But Mari-Djata, tied into her saddle, began to communicate using his hands and his voice rather than his legs. To the officers' amazement, the mare responded dutifully. Mari-Djata realized she had a soft mouth and answered only to slight touches. Soon, he could ride with the best, his subtle technique spreading throughout Western Ifri. Despite his new skill, every time he met Sumanguru Kanté in battle, he could overcome Sumanguru's armies but never defeat their leader.

Downfall

Annoyed by his troop's defeat, Sumanguru Kanté deployed a crew of witches to tempt and attack Mari-Djata, telling them not to return before overcoming the young king. They set a trap for him by plundering his crops, but instead of chasing them off, he went among them and inquired after their health, insisting they take as much food as they needed. Struck by the young king's politeness, they switched sides, telling the king of Sumanguru's weakness: he had sworn never to harm a white rooster. The next time they met in battle, Mari-Djata shot Sumanguru with an arrow tipped with a rooster's spur. In an instant, Sumanguru's powers were undone, and Mari-Djata chased him across the countryside. Sumanguru disappeared into Koulikoro Mountain and was never seen again, though many a storyteller believes he remains there…biding his time and waiting to attack.

The First Kurufaba

Mari-Djata called a council meeting, a *kurufaba*. Four rulers and four griots sat together in the throne room which had once held Sumanguru Kanté's fetishes and familiars, laying the foundation for an empire that has stood for four hundred years.

Mari-Djata had no interest in ruling his neighbors through military force; he wanted to become indispensable to them. Awkar had a robust trade network and spiritual depth, but remained vulnerable to invasion. Xwéda, overgrown with sacred forest, had few resources, but could offer a defensible border and military acumen. Igodomigodo had a well-organized government and a strong military, but was prideful and vulnerable to tyrannical rulers. Manden itself had access to rich resources, but lacked the cultural and government institutions of the other states.

Through the Kurufaba, though, the four states could cover for one another's weaknesses and share their strengths. By sharing and relying on each other, the chiefs of the four states believed that the Manden Kurufaba would stand forever.

Adventures in Manden

Manden is a coalition of wealthy states with a grand experiment in international diplomacy. Here, more so than any of the other Kingdoms of Ifri, Heroes engage in politics, intrigue and scheming. Though abonsam do hide in the shadows and threaten the safety of the people, in Manden such horrors are few and far between. Much more common are threats of internal discord. Member states of Manden look for weakness and opportunities to seize control of the Kurufaba away from the central Manden State. Dignitaries from foreign lands across the seas vie for lucrative trade contracts, while working to erode the laws and protections of the land that prevent exploitation. Secret rendezvous and hidden assignations are the order of the day (and night)—Heroes used to the courtly wiles of Montaigne quickly find Manden just as grand, but the stakes are even greater because the international coalition of countries looking to trade tin Ifri means that the outcome of such intrigue affects not just one country, but the world!

Manden can provide a locale more restful than the tragic Khemet or the horrors in Mbey. In this land, Heroes find rest, succor and hospitality. Behind this stability, of course, is constant tension. Local laborers, unhappy about the flood of refugees from the east, resent paying taxes to support outsiders. Soldiers from the Igodomigodo state agitate for military action against Manden's neighbors, or even plot to overthrow the current monarch. And, of course, the Atabean Trading Company and the diplomats from Montaigne, Vodacce and the Vendel League all pressure the Kurufaba for more concessions, more treasures and more control over the coast.

A Hero in Manden must think on her feet. Responding to a challenge from a warrior-noble may require skill at arms, but navigating the diplomatic affairs and international intrigues require a great deal of cunning. A Hero thrown into the midst of these negotiations may be responsible for preventing an outbreak of war that could consume all the nations of the world, with only the international councils of Manden able to stop it!

Playing a Hero from Manden

A Hero from Manden enjoys a high standard of living and a wealthy culture, which gives him many opportunities to pursue art, crafts and hobbies. Though there are distinct social strata, people are not forbidden from practicing different trades.

Manden's Heroes are likely to be multicultural, or to have exposure to many outside visitors, either due to moving in diplomatic circles or seeing travelers (or refugees!) from other nations. While justly proud of his Kurufaba's wealth and culture, a Manden Hero can also be generous and driven to aid the less fortunate. A Manden Hero might be…

- A griot, a kind of traveling poet and storyteller, who carries news, spreads hope among the downtrodden and always has a piece of useful information from legends
- An Igodomigodoese warrior, trained in a long fighting tradition that excels in mounted combat and longs for glory
- A priest of the Ori, who venerates the 401 ancient spirits of the Kurufaba and serves as an intercessor when those spirits inhabit the living and share their powers with their host bodies
- A *sofa*, a serf-soldier, serving for the greater glory and security of the Kurufaba but yearning for freedom
- A demigod child of the Ori, born of a dalliance between mortal and spirit, with great capabilities but also a mysterious destiny to fulfill
- An attendant at the International Kurufaba, who has learned the politics of the many nations and learned secrets that could shape world peace—or lead to a war that crosses the seas

Social Strata

Caste and Social Organization

Any nation's people say family is important to them, but in Manden, family ties thoroughly into public as well as private life. Should you find yourself in a job interview, your prospective employer interrogates you about your family life, your relationships and how they relate to your education, as much as about your job history. This mindset also underlies familial dynasties' importance in government and professions. You can choose what you want to do with your own life, but your parents and your clan has the responsibility to teach you the trade that is your birthright and your family history.

Every Mandenka individual belongs to a trade caste, formed around a set of related professions in the age before Mari-Djata. Although the caste system fosters some oppressive power dynamics, a Mandenka nevertheless takes pride in his caste's history and technical expertise. Castes fall into three tiers in descending order of prestige, each with one or more castes within its ranks.

- **Horonw (Nobility):** Traditional roles include farmers, ranchers, hunters and fishers, but now includes Dīnist clerics and professional soldiers
- **Nyamakalaw (Artisans):** Numuw (smiths), griots (bards), garankéw (leatherworkers) and funéw (mendicant Dīnist preachers)
- **Jonow (Serfs):** Servants and the dispossessed, including sofas (serf-soldiers)

Castes tend not to intermarry with other castes, since mixed-caste couples must choose one or the other to belong to, a matter of great social inconvenience. No taboo exists on members of one caste practicing a trade associated with another caste. Many griots have day jobs as leatherworkers rather than bards with no opposition from the leatherworker caste, members of all castes farm and hunt and so on. Unlike Théah, where powerful guilds might hoard knowledge and prevent people from practicing trades without sanction, a Mandenka freely pursues her own hobbies and trades.

Horonw: Noble Castes

Historically, all castes providing food—farmers, hunters, fishers and ranchers—made up the horonw. These are the Kurufaba's nobility, for if someone must rely on you for every bite of food, you are their suzerain. Every tribal chief is a horon.

Controversially, the new professional warrior class (not including the sofas), full-time merchants and the Dīnist clergy have also become horonw during the past hundred years. Previously, older Mandenka castes performed those jobs as an adjunct to their primary calling. Their sudden appearance in Mandenka public life—and their elevation to society's highest ranks—confuses and vexes the nyamakalaw and jonow.

A Hero who is a horon may be an important merchant or come from a family with prestigious farms. She can be skilled in hunting or even be knowledgeable in the arts of war.

Nyamakalaw: the Artisan Castes

The name "nyamakala" literally means "manipulators of nyama," a pervasive universal energy analogous to the Igodomigodoese *ase*. While formally equal in social standing, individual artisan castes may have greater or lesser influence: numuw enjoy great political influence and griots occupy a privileged position in government, whereas society looks down upon an often-poor funé and reduces him to doing odd jobs in order to make ends meet. Each caste's most advanced masters practice a sorcerous version of their craft.

Numuw, the Smiths

The numuw are the most politically powerful nyamakalaw. You cannot take political actions without martial power to back it up, but you cannot make war without numuw to forge your spearheads and craft your muskets. Ògún, the Ori of iron, firearms and war, is the numuw's patron. Legend says he sent the numuw Fanta Traoré on a pilgrimage to Cathay to learn gunsmithing secrets.

A Hero from the numuw knows intricately the weapons of war, as well as how to mend and create life's most necessary objects: nails, buckets, horseshoes and farming tools.

GLOSSARY OF MANDENKA TERMS

Note that the -w suffix denotes plural and is pronounced as "[u]."

Alagbato Iya: the royal guards of the Manden Mansa. The guard consists solely of elite women warriors.

Horonw: landowner and farmers. Nobility of the Kurufaba of Manden.

Jonow: Mandenka serfs, the lowest caste.

Mansa: a title meaning the supreme ruler of the Manden Kurufaba.

Nyamakalaw: artisans of the Mandenka people.

Oba: a ruler in the Kurufaba of Manden.

Sofas: serf-soldiers of the Manden people.

Griots, the Bards

A griot is an orator, singer and instrumentalist charged with memorizing and reciting libraries' worth of information concerning history, politics, public life and other important ideas (as well as everyday frivolities and enjoyments). While every caste has traditional songs and dances, a griot specializes in learning other castes' songs and dances in addition to her own. She uses many instruments, but is most famous for the balafon, a large xylophone made of hollow gourds. Most balafons are too large to carry around safely and comfortably, so every village has a balafon in the music house at its center. Inordinately poor settlements (a mostly distant memory in Manden, but still) are described as "lacking even a balafon to accompany a griot." Together with a Dīnist clergy member, a griot forms the backbone of Mandenka education.

A Hero from the griots could be an apprentice or full griot who travels the land while protecting and teaching culture and history through an oral tradition.

Garankéw, the Leatherworkers

All classes weave, dye and sew, but leatherwork traditionally falls to the garankéw's duty. Leather goods are crucial to many walks of Mandenka life; the garankéw manufacture all the tack for the horses, the light leather armor more popular than metal in this hot

climate, shoes, quivers for arrows and the like. The garankéw are the most numerous nyamakalaw.

A Hero who is a garanké can mend and create beautiful and sturdy leather goods with little effort, and may have a particular specialty that has run in her family for hundreds of years.

Funéw, the Gyrovagues

The funéw are traveling Dīnist preachers. The caste's specialty—spreading knowledge about al-Dīn in parts of the Kurufaba farther away from big city mosques and madrasas—though essential to public life, is not at all lucrative, relying on the vicissitudes of public generosity. In order to make ends meet, a funé spends most of her time doing odd jobs or filling in for castes lacking representation in a certain area. Funéw also guide pilgrimages to the Crescent Empire, a duty far easier before Ifri's northwestern coast became extremely dangerous for sailing. Unlike all the other castes, funéw do not contribute troops to the Manden army because of their commitment to al-Dīn; this situation doesn't help the funéw's prestige with the other castes.

A Hero who is a funé may be poor in wealth, but generous of spirit. Usually good at many varied tasks due to her itinerant life, she may be skilled at mending horseshoes, storytelling and light leatherwork.

Jonow: Servant Caste

Jonow are the lowest caste. Other languages sometimes gloss "jono" as "slave," although jonow experience a wide variety of lifestyles and have many inalienable legal rights. Socially dispossessed or unmoored individuals, without connection to a better-established caste, fall into this category. Jonow status is by default hereditary, although a jono can exit his status into one of the other classes through martial heroism, saving a great deal of money or distinguished service to the government.

A Hero who is a jono can dream of a better life after his service to the government, or could perhaps be running a side business in order to save for his freedom.

Sofas, the Serf-Soldiers

Early in Manden's history, when warfare usually meant skirmishes between small numbers of well-trained combatants, a jono never got involved in direct combat, though she still went to war as an officer's servant, cook, porter and as other support staff. After all, for a mere jono to kill a proud warrior was considered unthinkable and unbearable.

But the last clash between Mari-Djata and Sumanguru Kanté proved the efficacy of massive armies, which eventually became Kurufaba military doctrine's cornerstone. This battle led to the large-scale jonow conscription, and the creation of a new subdivision of the servitor caste: the sofas or serf-soldiers.

A sofa receives little training by default. Some horon hands him a cheap spear or bow, tells him which officer to follow and sends him off to die on behalf of someone more important. Sofas are also an exception to Manden's love of specialization: the brass might order sofa sections to hold the line against a cavalry charge, rain arrows onto enemy formations and fortifications or construct makeshift ramparts for musketeers, all during the same battle. These haphazard assignments mean the majority of sofas are not particularly adept at any combat role. But the rare veteran section of sofas can become invaluable to a Mandenka war effort. Sections which can handle any combat role make longer campaigns viable. They react better than any other troops to the unexpected.

A jono might crave the opportunity to distinguish herself in battle, dreaming of a Heroic moment catapulting her into horon status as a professional warrior. But such accolades are few and far between. In general, a jono dreads the thought of conscription and death in battle for a cause he may not care about. His master also does not relish the appropriation of her workers. Mass sofa desertions, while punishable by execution, remains common, especially in an era when slavery to the Atabean Trading Company—a fate generally considered worse than death—is more likely for a sofa than for any other soldier.

A Hero who is a sofa can be escaping military conscription, may be moderately skilled in many weapons or a leader of her own section thinking about desertion.

Customs & Culture

Family is important, but in Manden, culture ties inextricably to clan identity. A person from Manden makes many personal decisions about what kind of work she likes to do, or whom she wishes to marry, in conference with her family. If a Hero makes bad decisions, she loses face. Manden can be a difficult place for many free spirits, who flee to academia, the Dīnist priesthood or foreign trade to get away from familial expectations. All genders practice polygamy, considered an important way to balance familial and personal priorities in marriage. Occasionally a single spouse may placate a family, and so they will not pressure to find additional spouses for their child.

Large public parties and festivals regarding trade, religious or family subjects occur once every week or two. At these festivals, everyone sings or dances to the extent of their ability. The Mandenkaw eagerly include all of their people and also honor their history. As such certain dances, especially those evoking Mari-Djata, are explicitly designed for someone with physical disabilities that might hinder her participation in other dances.

Some music and dances lie in one caste's or another's particular purview, and only griots master the most technically demanding pieces, but social songs and dances tend to be easy to pick up. A Hero at a Manden gathering quickly gets taught songs and dances patiently and diligently, and Mandenkaw may be extremely confused (and ignore all protestations) if she tries to avoid singing or moving. The collective joy is so great that if that Hero had overindulged in any one dish at a feast, she would be hard pressed to try every single dish in town.

One of the most distinct features of a Mandenka gathering includes the possession of partygoers by the spirits of Ori or their ancestors, which can occur at a religiously charged festival. These spirits mostly select a person who grew up with Assanyi in his life, but on occasion they nab a visitor for some ineffable reason—in which case, it feels like being skipped forward in time, when the spirit leaves and the possessed comes to (probably significantly more inebriated).

Be advised that a person possessed is in fact who he says he is. Mariam the farm girl, when possessed, is not "Mariam pretending to be King Jakuta." He is King Jakuta, and everyone present (especially Jakuta) will be confused and offended if you treat him like Mariam the farm girl. This is considered a matter of politeness, not faith. Faith is for al-Dīn.

Clothing

Clothing in Manden, a sumptuous affair, delights the senses. The wealth of Manden means that most of the citizenry dresses in fine fabrics that a ruler herself might consider among her wardrobe. People of all genders cover their bodies in caftan-like garments called a *grandmuba*. The garments are billowy and give the effect of the Mandenkaw being utterly graceful. These garments come in various bright colors, and some are made of specially waxed cotton which comes in a large variety of patterns and can be threaded with gold.

Headwear is especially important, with various braids and shapes being adorned with jewels and shell. A Mandenka also wears a beautiful and elaborate headscarf tied intricately and often matching his grandmuba.

Long, soft skirts are also popular in Manden. Usually, these skirts are white, with a brightly colored scarf or pleat running lengthwise down the middle.

Because of Manden's great wealth, foreign fabric is imported for the wealthy. Just like the high courts in Théah, one can see here silk and velvet brought from far abroad at great cost—though only among the most affluent of the Mandenkaw.

Unlike many other countries, the people of Manden are cosmopolitan and quick to become blasé about foreign garb. A traveler from Vodacce or Castille expecting the local folk to gawk at her "foreign fashions" may be quite surprised to note that the Mandenkaw have already seen those fashions, and may even recognize that she is already a year out of date!

Language

Mande is the primary language of Manden and the native language of the Mandenka people. Like the neighboring languages Awkari and Xwéda, it belongs to the Mande branch of the Kwara language family. Mande dialects vary geographically and between rural and urban areas.

Religion

To understand religion (and, in fact, all of society) in Manden, you must understand *nyama*. The word "nyama" refers to a living energy inhabiting nearly everything. Nyama can be positive or negative, light or dark, active or passive. Sometimes spoken of as if a physical substance, Mandenkaw really sees nyama as an abstraction rather than a thing you could conceivably cut open a person or animal to find.

Metaphysically speaking, any interaction with the world or with others can be described in nyama terms. The artisan caste interacts with nyama through crafts and the like. A sorcerer, however, is feared and sometimes mistrusted for her power to interact with nyama directly and literally. A Mandenka sorcerer frequently hides her practice from all others save immediate family members and other initiates in her sorcerous society.

Mandenkaw also believe each individual human has two souls, a *ni* and a *dya*. The ni comes from Heaven and returns to the sky upon death, whereas the dya—which can leave the body and wander around during sleep—can remain in the area where death occurred until someone goes out of his way to propitiate it with sacrifices. The dya then metamorphoses into an ancestor-spirit, whom descendants can evoke and petition for information or advice.

As Mandenka ideas mixed with al-Dīn and with Assanyi originating in Igodomigodo, the concepts of ni and dya gained extra significance. Nowadays, many Mandenkaw who practice both al-Dīn and Assanyi religion say that the ni comes from al-Musawwir and returns to the Creator upon death, whereas the dya, a creation of the Ori, represents the part of the self which their three patron Ori claim at birth.

Serving the Ori

The native religion of the Manden Kurufaba is service to the Ori. The oldest religious traditions of Ifri maintain that the world began at Ajaka-Katunga, capital of Igodomigodo. There, Aniyikaye of Igodomigodo descended from Heaven on a golden chain to spread the surface of the world across the face of the waters. He reigned there over Ori and human alike, and the Ori who descended after him dispersed across Ifri to take up residence in the sea, the rivers and everywhere in the land from the cola nuts used in divination to the diseases that infected humans.

When a human is born, three Ori claim his dya, committing to watch over and influence that person's life. If the Ori do not show up in person (and if they do, it is always three of them and always in order), the diviner throws cola nuts to determine which Ori are connected to the child.

The Ori remain present in daily life through festivals and possession. When propitiated regularly with sacrifices of food, liquor and other comestibles, the Ori, as well as the dya spirits of ancestors, appear at festivals in response to sacred music and song to possess dancers, dispense wisdom and party.

It is important to note, as well, that the Ori often take a deeply personal interest in human lives. Certain Ori do more than just possess and chat with a human—they engage in dalliances with him, leaving demigods scattered throughout Manden in general (and Igodomigodo especially). It does not happen often, but it definitely happens—and often leaves a confused child to grow up suffused with the ase of the gods flowing in her veins. The royal families of Ajaka and Katunga also claim direct lineage from the Ori, each one claiming to be the 401st of the 401 Ori. The Igodomigodo Secession resulted because of one particularly vibrant member of the royal dynasty asserting his divine right to rule not only Igodomigodo, but also the world.

The Ori are Ifri, and have always been. They always will be. And yet…

MANDENKAW AL-DĪN

A Mandenka will tell you that he follows al-Dīn if you ask him, though Dīnist practices remains consistent only in the cities. Rural Dīnists tend to have idiosyncratic practices drawn from funé traditions. Many Dīnist practices are widespread in Manden—public drunkenness is almost completely unknown, there are regular prayers in the direction of the Prophet Khalil's place of death, most Mandenkaw aspire to a pilgrimage to the Crescent, etc.—but the disapproval of excessive magic is most often ignored in Manden.

Serving al-Musawwir

The state religion of the Manden Kurufaba is al-Dīn, the faith as set forth by the First and Second Prophets. With a significant proportion of its founders coming from far to the east, Awkar was the first West Ifrian state to set al-Dīn as the state religion. At first, the strange and insistent faith of the Awkari isolated them from their neighbors. Awkar's privileged position with regard to cross-desert trade, however—and that the Dīnist clergy did not really care what other practices an adherent engaged in as long as she was a good Dīnists as well—convinced Awkar's neighbors to open their arms once more.

The Manden Kurufaba and the Kingdom of Khemet once had an important relationship based on pilgrimage routes. To reach key pilgrimage sites, Mandenka Dīnists must either sail north and east along the coast, or travel overland via caravan through Maghreb and then Khemet. The sea pilgrimage is far more expensive as well as more dangerous due to pirate attacks. Now that the Atabean Trading Company dominates the Mbeyan coast, pilgrim ships have become the slavers' favorite target.

So, overland is the only safe route. It is long, hot and uncomfortable, but worth it for the faithful. A Mandenka pilgrim has a great deal of disposable income, so feeding, housing and entertaining her bolsters any local economy through which a pilgrim regularly passes. The river folk called the Nommo earn handsomely leading pilgrims on many legs of this journey.

Many Mandenkaw see the Crescent Empire as the paragon of human culture, learning and achievement. This perspective is evident in the origin stories of Mari-Djata's family as well as al-Ghāba and the former Awkar Empire. It is more than a little unrealistic and more than a little unfair to the West Ifrian traditions underlying Manden's most successful policies and qualities: Manden systems of government, martial arts, music, dance and artwork are all natively derived. Nevertheless, everything Crescent is associated with riches, learning and high status.

Foreigners, especially Théans or Crescents, sometimes find the parallel belief systems confusing, but the average Mandenka finds that the Ori and al-Musawwir occupy different spaces in his life. Al-Dīn is the religion of government, public ceremony and (much of) higher learning. The Ori are the religion of family, the home, private gatherings, medicine and sorcery. They did not contradict one another because they addressed fundamentally different parts of life, the same way that, for example, religion and occupation might be.

Nevertheless, conflict still happens, much of it having to do with the dynamics of sorcery. One of the more contentious effects of Manden's Crescentophilia is the primacy al-Dīn has taken over Assanyi. A small yet vocal minority of Dīnist elites has begun to adhere to a new, hard-line form of al-Dīn which eschews any and all other religious practices as witchcraft. Many of these hardliners occupy the highest circles of society and government, and have the ear of the Mansa himself. So a Dīnist purist may insist that while she can overlook or cooperate with many other religious practices, active support for sorcery encourages others to ignore Dīnist beliefs about the practice in moderation. The significant local fear of witchcraft feeds into this purism. On the other hand, there is a saying every Mandenka asks but no one ever answers, "Of al-Musawwir and the Ori, whose way is king and whose is queen?"

> We offloaded our "cargo" a few leagues outside of Djem. We could see the glittering lights of the Ghost Fires and hear the rhythmic beating of drums. Gulema and A'isha unwrapped the "cargo" and he stood and thanked us. I'm not sure why the Wiseone wanted to travel in this manner. All he said was to wait further upriver and a new member of our crew would soon join us. I told the Wiseone that only I, the captain, Kayode Bonsu says who can join the crew of the Yemoja! He smiled and said, "And the captain will."
>
> —Captain Kayode Bonsu, 1668

Government

To maintain its vast dominion and complex economy, the Manden Kurufaba employs an elaborate bureaucracy derived from Igodomigodo's governmental organization. Critics deride the system as paternalistic and stifling, but it is effective.

The highest authority in the Manden Kurufaba is the **Mansa,** a hereditary office reaching back to Mari-Djata. From her throne in the Federal Palace in Nianiba, the Mansa reigns supreme over every person and place in the Kurufaba, claiming divine right both as a descendant of al-Musawwir's champion Mari-Djata and, via intermarriage with the family of the *Alaafin* of Igodomigodo, descent from the Ori themselves. That throne is one of the sacred stools which the Jok gave to humans to signify their support.

While the Mansa enjoys absolute authority, he relies heavily on delegation to competent subordinates. The Mansa's personal household or staff includes:

- The Captain of the Alagbato Iya, the royal guard
- The castellan of the Federal Palace, responsible for keeping the palace running and entertaining Mansa and visiting dignitaries
- The palace treasurer
- The palace imam, a Dīnist chaplain
- The palace babalawo (male) or iyalawo (female), a diviner in the Assanyi tradition
- The Mansa's spouses and consorts (themselves prohibited from engaging in polygamy, unlike nearly all other Mandenkaw)
- The palace griot

The Mansa also has a cabinet:

- The Field Marshal, commander-in-chief of the Kurufaba's forces
- The Commerce Minister
- The Secretary of State, in charge of foreign affairs
- The Secretary of Education
- The Minister of Agriculture, also representing the horonw
- The Minister of Artisans, also representing the nyamakalaw
- The Jonow Tribune

While the Mansa reigns supreme over the cabinet, certain laws allow a cabinet minister to overrule the Mansa's decision in matters of his own expertise. This kind of veto can be contentious, to say the least.

On the same level as the cabinet, but with different responsibilities, are the four states' rulers. The Mansa generally hands off the rule of the state of Manden to a *baale*, or viceroy, a custom copied from Igodomigodo. The baale is technically an appointed position, although family lineage's importance in politics and power throughout the Kurufaba means that political dynasties often dominate the office of baale. The rulers of the other three states are the *Ahosu* of Xwéda, the Alaafin of Igodomigodo, and the Sultan of Awkar, each of whom maintains an idiosyncratic government over their own dominion.

- Reigning over a smaller population than the other sovereigns, the Ahosu rules Xwéda comparatively directly with little bureaucracy, fewer go-betweens. All Xwédans are the Ahosu's direct vassals.
- The Alaafin of Igodomigodo has an elaborate bureaucracy and delegation system which looks much like the Kurufaba's government on a somewhat smaller scale.
- Before Sumanguru Kanté conquered Awkar, the Sultan of Awkar, technically a vassal of the Caliph of the Crescent Empire, practically speaking had almost no formal governmental contact with the Crescent. Since Sumanguru, the Sultanate has been relatively weak, dependent on the Manden government to operate. The Sultan, the most important cog in the local machine, is still a cog, however.

The Mansa appoints a vizier to "advise" each of these three rulers. The vizier keeps an eye on the operations, reports any funny business to the Mansa and puts pressure on the ruler to make choices which benefit the federation outside her state in general and the Mansa in particular.

The Kurufaba also has a chieftains' assembly which meets once a year during the winter. A chieftain, whether from clan or tribe, in every state in the

federation, both large and small, must either attend the assembly or send his griot on his behalf if he wishes to be heard in government. The state rulers as well as each caste's elders are represented here.

As you may have noticed, this system is complicated as hell. A Mandenka loves to specialize, and her system of government reflects her tendency to divide tasks among experts to ensure each one is carried out to its fullest extent. Efficiency is not the problem; this government is probably the most efficient way possible to administer a sprawling federation full of distinct ethnic and national identities. No, the problem is that most levels of government have little in the way of checks and balances. If a governor is incompetent, that is not that big a problem: enough leadership above her and enough support staff below her exist that she will probably figure out what she ought to be doing before long. But if a governor is corrupt, duplicitous or evil? Now we have an issue.

Except where law specifically limits her power (and it doesn't often), a governor has absolute authority over everyone below her. It seldom happens, but a governor has the prerogative to put you in front of a firing squad if you fail or displease her—or if you oppose her goals or discover some crime she commits, and she finds a way to pin something on you.

The Refugee Crisis

By most Terran standards, the Manden Kurufaba is a great place to live. The Kurufaba is staggeringly wealthy, to the point where even the poorest slave probably will not starve to death. But conflicts in Mbey and Khemet have generated thousands of displaced people who have flooded across Manden's borders.

These refugees experience pushback from every stratum of Mandenka society. By default, a refugee winds up in the jonow caste. Enough money and food exists for him, but he remains a third-class citizen nonetheless. Even someone with advanced vocational training or higher education often struggles for acceptance into nyamakalaw or horonw circles; after all, a griot may make her living as a leatherworker, but that does not make her garankéw. Since he provides food for the entire society, a horon, frustrated he has to work harder and contribute more in order to feed refugees, generally sees them as freeloaders who have not yet proven Manden needs to support them.

The International Kurufaba

Mansa Kankan has situated Manden's grandest experiment, the International Kurufaba, at Igodomigodo's capital and the legendary origin of the world, Ajaka-Katunga. The International Kurufaba's purpose is to unite world governments behind Kankan's goal: ending war on Terra. Peace on Terra is a lofty goal and the idealistic Mansa has focused his efforts on ending war as an acceptable continuation of politics.

The Meeting Hall

The Kurufaba meets in a grand fortified compound straddling the Kongola River, a great tributary of the Kwara River, that divides Ajaka and Katunga. A bird's-eye view of the compound reveals that the winding outer walls and inner citadel form the *adinkra* symbol *bi-nka-bi*, which represents an end to infighting. All adinkra symbols are concepts which represent a truth. The bi-nka-bi can also be seen on Manden's flag.

In between the outer walls, thick and crenellated with guards and mounted guns, are gardens and plazas dotted with miniature villages housing national delegates. The central meeting hall is an amphitheater large enough for all the nations which currently have delegates at the International.

Kurufaba Delegates

Mandenka custom, which allows a griot or similar "champion" to speak on behalf of a dignitary, rules International Kurufaba discussions. A personable Hero can worm his way into a delegate's entourage of aides, lobbyists, advisors, spies and sycophants with ease. A Hero who catches a delegate's eye through charisma, competence or national allegiance finds herself dragooned into research, oratory or espionage on that delegate's behalf in exchange for juicy political favors, not to mention the satisfaction of knowing she did the right thing.

The Kingdom of Aksum

Aksum's delegate, **Lord Isaiah Iskinder**, belongs to the Skia secret police. Bitwoven Nebiat gave him exactly one mission: keep peace between Aksum and Manden by any means necessary. Loyal to a fault, Isaiah has played his role dangerously, maintaining a network of spies which keeps tabs on Mandenka

troop movements and military developments. If Manden in fact secretly plans to break the peace, this information is crucial. If Manden does not, Isaiah's snooping just might start that process if found out.

Aksum's issue of greatest import is, unsurprisingly, **a permanent end to war**. The threat of Mandenka invasion, while so far unsuccessful, wracks Aksumites with stress and doubt. Aksum is the International Kurufaba's staunchest champion of its basic goal.

The Kingdom of Maghreb

Maghreb's delegate is **Lady Lunja al-Barqahi**. Her cousin is Queen Tasa Noumidia, the Blue Queen of Maghreb. The Blue Queen, busy with more pressing matters, cannot decide whether Mansa Kankan's experiment is an ineffectual conglomerate of figureheads or cover for some kind of trap. So Lady Lunja handles this diplomatic experiment as an olive branch—or, depending upon whom you ask, as a nonessential honorarium.

Barely eighteen, this young noblewoman from a coastal cadet branch of the Noumidia dynasty, wide-eyed with excitement, wishes to get her feet wet in international diplomacy (and indulge in the fancy foreign food and lavish parties which go with it). Steeped in warlike Amazigh history and folkways from birth, neither the Blue Queen nor Lady Lunja has overmuch faith in the Kurufaba's foundational concept of nonviolence, but they willingly entertain the subject as long as no one asks any Maghrebi to put down her sword. Further complicating matters, Lunja also secretly idolizes the northern pirate chief Mar Veraci, and spent most of her childhood collaborating with other noble youths her age on voluminous anthologies of swashbuckling fiction about the corsair Hero. One or two of these anthologies have slipped into Veraci's hands; a letter of greeting from Veraci heads via caravan towards Lunja's apartments at the International Kurufaba, the beginning of a correspondence Veraci hopes will gain her influence over Lunja. She seems like a good kid, and Governess Veraci wishes her well, but that is politics. She's gotta learn somehow…

If Veraci thinks Hero worship blinds the young diplomat, the Governess has to think again. Lady Lunja is romantic, not foolish. She has done her homework and met with the queen's top advisors for intense research and preparation before departing for Igodomigodo. The issue which matters most to Maghreb right now is **Ifri presenting a united front to Théah**. Maghreb has watched events unfold in neighboring Mbey with some concern; the Atabean Trading Company has gained cachet with alarming ease. They worry that if Montaigne and Vodacce worked together to divide the Ifrian powers from one another, they could do to the northern coastline what the Company did to Mbey.

The Manden Kurufaba

Manden's delegate is **Prince Adegoke**, Mansa Kankan's adoptive younger brother. Adegoke's professed allegiance to his brother's lofty goals hides his true goal of re-establishing Igodomigodo's empire using the International Kurufaba's resources.

The linchpin of Adegoke's plan is **the formation of an International Peacekeeping Force** under the International Kurufaba's direct control. Adegoke may have ill intentions for the Force, but he has presented a logical theory behind it: until such time as all nations agree to lay down their arms, the International Kurufaba should have a way to strike back against unrepentant Villains. Manden, which would wind up supplying at least half the ground troops for such a host, voices the most support and opposition to this proposal.

The Kingdom of Mbey

Mbey's delegate is **Mandagan**. This demon disguised as a human devoured the original delegate whom Bour Ba Ighodalo sent to the International Kurufaba and stole her identity.

Mandagan's shapeshifting abilities have allowed her to infiltrate the offices of every delegate in the International Kurufaba. She knows everyone's secrets, weaknesses and skeletons in the closet, though she has yet to capitalize on them. She is, after all, a very old demon; she has not had this much fun in centuries.

Mbey has yet to push hard on any issues in the International Kurufaba. Mandagan instead prefers to play the power broker, currying a delegate's favor on one proposition or another in order to get him indebted to her. It is yet to be seen if her addiction to human flesh, and the constant replacement of workers, might expose her for what she really is.

The Kingdom of Khemet

Khemet's delegate is **Mayaneta of the House of Talthos**. A former priestess of the goddess Seknephet, the lioness goddess of bounty and creativity, Mayaneta was a third daughter of a Most High (noble) family. Due to her charisma and gifts at communication, her family forced her to join the Eubayd (the priesthood) so as to not pose a political threat to her older siblings.

When her older siblings were assassinated, though, her family bribed her superiors so they could pull her from the priesthood and make her Queen Twosret's delegate (and thereby get in good with the queen). An artist at heart, with musical talents that charm Mandenka politicians, Mayaneta excels at, but hates, her job. Mayaneta knows all about Twosret's forays into slave dealing and does not trust the queen at all; she spends a good deal of her free time coming up with escape routes and safe houses in case it all comes crashing down around her.

Mayaneta stresses the issues of **international food trade** and **humanitarian relief** to counteract the famine that lack of sunlight has brought to the Black Land. Facilitating international trade, even with suspicious places like Montaigne, may be the Khemeti people's only hope for survival.

The Sho'noh'kah'ta'neh'ta of Quanahlotye

Mansa Kankan went to great lengths to get the interest of the Sho'noh'kah'ta'neh'ta, a political organization from across the western sea in the land of Quanahlotye. The Sho'noh'kah'ta'neh'ta, or "Great Peace," is a kurufaba several hundred years old with a similar mission as Manden's International Kurufaba.

The Sho'noh'kah'ta'neh'ta's delegate is **Sagoyewatha**, an elderly veteran of the Sho'noh'kah'ta'neh'ta's longhouse of debate. Sagoyewatha's cynical, misanthropic outlook on politics and the concept of international councils contrast sharply with Mansa Kankan's own high-minded idealism.

A shrewd and ruthless negotiator, Sagoyewatha has five decades of political experience in the most sophisticated and cutthroat forum for political debate in the known world. He moved to Manden with his family to get involved in the International Kurufaba as a way to keep himself busy during his retirement, which should tell you something about how intense his former job was.

The Sho'noh'kah'ta'neh'ta has yet to put any irons in the International Kurufaba's fire; they are content to become wealthy selling rich Mandenka fur coats and hats for those chilly desert nights. Sagoyewatha watches, waits and mentors other delegates. His teenage children take reports to the Sho'noh'kah'ta'neh'ta longhouse on their frequent visits home.

Jaragua

Jaragua's representative is **Lieutenant Colonel Anaïca Proulx**. Jaragua, an Atabean Sea island nation, recently kicked out the Atabean Trading Company with a heroic slave revolt against impossible odds. Many a Jaraguan slave from the Ifrian kingdoms, mostly Manden and Mbey, have sailed back across the sea to his homeland…only to find vengeful Company ships on the lookout for him.

Proulx, a decorated veteran of Jaragua's Mawon guerrilla army, joined Jaragua's diplomatic corps upon mustering out, but Company saboteurs and assassins have dogged her every step as she traveled from place to place trying to convince someone that Jaragua existed. As the International Kurufaba's newest arrival, she knows that danger lurks even in her own retinue. Can she convince the Kurufaba to recognize her and her nascent Nation?

Jaragua's priority is simple: **international recognition as a sovereign nation**. The Company's propagandists have stifled nearly all the evidence on this side of the ocean that Jaragua exists, let alone revolted successfully against their rule. Lieutenant Colonel Proulx hopes to buck that trend, but she needs a lot of help.

Montaigne

Montaigne's delegate is **Lucien de Forbin.** Forbin, the fourth son of a noble family, serves as a double agent working both for l'Empereur and for the Atabean Trading Company—though the Company pays him much better and reaps its reward in loyalty. He got his start running an Atabean prison colony, but his morbid interest in occult power led him to promise a demon regular payments of human souls in reward for career advancement.

Until his recent reassignment, this sociopathic Villain answered directly to Chief Procurement Officer Flemming Rudd, convincing Ifrian leaders to try their hands at slave trading. The Company has not yet discovered he skims slaves to sacrifice to fell powers, but Monsieur de Forbin is not that worried they might be upset. They will probably just want him to cut them in on it, right?

Montaigne talks a big game at the Kurufaba about trans-oceanic unity, because the Nation really wants **unrestricted access to the Ifrian coastline**. Some Ifrian delegates correctly suspect that Forbin's rhetoric about free trade may set l'Empereur up to colonize their coastlines.

The Crescent Empire

The Crescent Empire's delegate is **Noa bat Elisheva M'Shevet Yedha**. Lady Noa, an elder businesswoman from the Yachidi homeland of Sarmion, has succeeded in enterprises from horse breeding to shipping. She relishes this opportunity to give back to the empire which has treated her and her family so well. Like many Crescents, she enjoys social prestige and admiration in Manden, which suits her fine as a delegate; in her line of work, she is used to giving orders and having everyone around snap to it.

The Crescent Empire's priority in the International Kurufaba is **maintaining pilgrimage routes**. One of al-Dīn's Five Sacred Duties, 'isrā' or pilgrimage,

TROUBLE IN THE KURUFABA

Recently, Olu Fayomi, the oldest son and new chief of the wealthy Fayomi Clan, making him a member of the Horonw, came to the Kurufaba with a grave accusation: There were Atabean slavers in Manden crossing the borders with Mbeyan help, and they were not to be tolerated.

Renowned warriors rumored to be blessed by the Ori, Olu Fayomi and his sister Lola were traveling to a wedding between clans when they were set up by slavers close to the border. Both of them slayed the attackers with their machetes, but a few of their traveling companions, including Lola's husband, did not make it.

When he was accused of lying, Olu had his sister toss two hemp bags into the center of the floor: The heads of the attackers. In addition to this he held up a shard of black stone, the remnants of a broken Bonsam stone.

This sent the Kurufaba into an uproar, but Olu and Lola Fayomi stood their ground. Now the Kurufaba debates within itself, are they trying to tear Manden apart, or save it?

encourages Dīnists to visit Dīnists who live far away. Mandenkaw generally travel to the Prophet Khalil's martyrdom site in the small Crescent state of Thaj. The pilgrimage routes stimulate the economy of every region through which they travel, ensuring cultural and spiritual unity between disparate lands. But the Crescent Empire has already seen pilgrims' numbers drop off thanks to the Atabean Trading Company, the war between Aksum and Manden, and the crisis in Khemet.

Education

The Manden Kurufaba is the world's richest nation. The people may have exhausted the gold and salt fields that originally propelled them to this status, but centuries of prudent investment and carefully husbanded trade keep the treasury steadily outgrowing both inflation and foreign competitors. Manden's welfare state ensures no Kurufaba citizen ever lacks for education, healthcare, shelter or nutrition. Well-to-do Mandenkaw also make up the world's largest market for luxury goods, the more exotic in origin the better.

Manden has excellent public education based on public involvement, but a relatively low literacy rate except in Awkar. Most villages and towns rely on the family, griot and funéw to teach important information to children. The family is responsible for taking time out of their day to teach a child her caste traditions, from trade skills to traditional songs and dances she performs at public gatherings. Basic clothier knowledge—weaving, sewing, dyeing—is also a universal skill, especially since textiles are important trade items.

Until the university level, mathematics, religious studies and other disciplines are taught entirely verbally and somatically. Song, dance and advanced mnemonic techniques take reference books' place. A Mandenka generally learns to read and write if she goes on to a higher level of education, in the Dīnist university. The languages of Manden are generally transcribed using Katabic script together with Awkari adinkra glyphs.

Currency

Manden uses a square gold coin representing the four great states coming together. One side of the coin is struck the "Boa Me Na Me Mmoa Wo," the adinkra for cooperation and interdependence. On the other side appears a likeness of the Mansa Kankan in profile.

The manufacture, casting and regulation of the coins is centralized in the fortified river island of Traore, 20 miles from the capital of Nianiba. The fortress town's sole purpose is the translation of raw gold into coins. The population is highly restricted and controlled in their comings and goings.

While other Kingdoms in Ifri may reject the notion of bank notes or foreign currency, Manden welcomes such trade. A coin made of gold or silver still buys goods even in a country village; the villagers simply shrug and accept it for the weight of its metal. Bank notes and paper currency, such as the kind sometimes issued by the Vendel League, can be cashed with nobles and wealthy merchants in the large cities. Master craftspeople recognize and accept such trade, and a jewelcrafter of Manden happily displays her magnificent wares for export to distant coasts. Visitors expecting to trade in sheep and goats get quickly corrected and reminded that Manden did not become the wealthiest nation on Terra by engaging only in simple barter.

Military

While professional standing armies are gaining more popularity due to the Mandenka love of specialization, historically every caste provided troops to the Manden army. Before the Kurufaba, each individual region handled its own military organization. Now, engaging in regular martial training and supplying troops nets castes huge tax breaks. Generally, mounted officers come from the horonw, musketeers and other heavy infantry from the numuw, communications officers from the griots and noncombat support troops from the jonow. Hunters form elite scout and skirmisher units armed with envenomed arrows and javelins. The great mass of troops are archers armed with simple and easy-to-fix bows who arc arrows into their enemies from above.

While they have access to elite infantry and cavalry, Mandenka strategy does not rely on them, usually

only committing these precious human resources to extremely specific tasks. They tend instead to rely heavily on force of numbers and superior logistics. They have a large Kurufaba with a huge population and vast quantities of gold to back it up. Centuries of successful trade have made complicated problems of logistics and provisioning child's play for top Mandenka brass. These situations make certain types of warfare more viable for Manden than for others. For example, while any commander with a lick of sense does everything she can to avoid besieging a fortified encampment or walled city, a Mandenka commander aggressively prosecutes sieges. He settles in a safe distance away and ensures that his troops have more food, water, medicine and time than their foes, with Igodomigodo heavy cavalry guarding the supply lines. After a long wait, he prepares siege ladders and towers and storms the city, usually with the Xwéda Elephant Hunters first into the fray.

While Xwédans and Igodomigodoese share a lot of culture, religion, history and a border with southern Mbey, they have also fought one another over everything you could conceivably fight over since the beginning of time. Mbey, Xwéda and Igodomigodo have raided, robbed and burned one another and their possessions over cattle theft, border control, clan-on-clan antagonism, "stolen" boyfriends, personal revenge—everything except religion. Defensively, Xwéda has been most successful of the three: its swamps, jungles and bad attitude historically make it a low conquest priority. Offensively, Igodomigodo has been most successful: its famed cavalry shines at conquering new lands, and its government excels at administering them, although it less consistently keeps new possessions.

The Atabean Trading Company and the slave trade have changed this age-old conflict's face. Now all the fights on the border are over one thing: slaves. And Manden is losing. For all the strength of Xwéda's and Igodomigodo's martial tradition, the raids against Manden draws out the army specifically so soldiers can be captured and enslaved—playing into the aggressive, proactive Mandenka military doctrine's weaknesses. Many of the Manden Army's best and bravest soldiers have fallen into Company clutches.

What's Next?

Manden's military research division is attached to the Imperial University in Nianiba. A researcher's experiments rely on evidence Mandenka scouts and spies have gathered from across the world. To improve the archers' efficacy, she studies Avalon's longbows and Anatol Ayh's composite constructions. To improve the siege machines, she studies Cathayan and Castillian designs. To improve Mandenka tactics, she researches the flexible infantry formations of Nahuacan Alliance and the guerrillas of Quanahlotye. But the most important frontier for Manden is developing sea power.

While Manden's land forces are massive, its merchant marine remains limited, especially compared to titans like the Amazigh to the north. Théan goods tend not to command particularly good prices in Manden, with the exception of curiosities like metal armor (not the most useful kind of outfit given the local weather). But the appearance of Odisean traders bringing unheard-of goods from faraway places like Aztlan has stoked Manden traders' curiosity about what riches may lie across the sea. The Mansa has hired Odisean shipwrights to oversee the construction of a massive treasure fleet of modern galleons, and also wishes to buy large numbers of outmoded galleys and galleasses on the cheap.

Unfortunately, newly purchased ships still have to get through the Atabean Trading Company's blockades off the Mbey coast. The Vendel League skirmishes with them, but Manden has no guarantee the League considers it profitable to keep fighting. Building their own fleet will take much longer, even going at the hardest pace money can buy—while the Company already has access to modern port facilities in Mbey.

Mandenka Names

Common Male Names

Abdou, Bakary, Ebrima, Filijee, Kebba, Momodou, Nfansu, Ousman, Saikou, Sulayman, Yoro

Common Female Names

Aminata, Bintu, Fanta, Filijee, Ida, Khadijatu, Mariama, Nyima, Satang, Satou, Sukai

Notable Locations of Manden

The Manden Kurufaba covers four ancient states: **Awkar** in the northeast, **Xwéda** in the northwest, **Igodomigodo** in the north center, and **Manden** itself (which historians refer to as Manden State) in the south.

Awkar

A landlocked region in the south of the Ubari Desert and west of the Aksum Kingdom, Awkar is Manden's gateway to the markets, peoples and ideas of North and East Ifri as well as the Crescent Empire. Awkari tradition maintains that the Dīnist missionary Zinat bint Ziya, companion of the Prophet Khalil, arrived from far-off Katab to found Awkar's first and greatest city, al-Ghāba, also known as the Citadel of Letters for its ancient university complex.

The Awkari Dominion was the first great power to conquer the region, until the ruling Ziyaid dynasty squandered its military resources failing to protect their lands from Kel Tagelmust raiders in the north. Then the sorcerer-king Sumanguru Kanté, leader of a restive vassal region's powerful blacksmith clan, rose up and took al-Ghāba from the Ziyaids in a bloody coup that left many grand mosques and universities in chaos and ruin. The last battle of Mari-Djata's war to unify the Manden Kurufaba was the siege of al-Ghāba, ending when Xwédan *gbeto* (elephant hunters) infiltrated the city and silently assassinated Sumanguru's top brass in the night.

In the war's aftermath, Mari-Djata reinvigorated Awkar's trade. He rebuilt al-Ghāba and invited Kel Tagelmust leaders there, where they saw a show of force in the form of the new Manden military. Then he negotiated a deal which cut them into the gold and salt trade crossing the Ubari Desert as long as they protected his trade caravans and the Golden River from raiders.

Now, as a tributary rather than an imperial capital, Awkar possesses more influence than it ever had as an empire. It remains the gateway between Manden and the northeast, with traders carrying Manden music, dance, poetry and crafts back and forth across the desert and into the Crescent. Al-Ghāba and Nianiba remain locked in a rivalry over which is the most cosmopolitan city in the Kurufaba, but al-Ghāba has the advantage of foreign trade providing an influx of Amazigh, Aksumite, Khemeti and Crescent people and ideas to balance out Nianiba's staggering wealth.

The Awkari are the best educated of all the Mandenkaw, with al-Ghāba's ancient temple-library complex the oldest and the largest in the world. Al-Ghāba has a 100 percent literacy rate, more books per capita than any other city on Terra and free education through the university level. Awkari people have a reputation elsewhere in Manden as haughty and elitist, disdaining the "common" service to the Ori and belittling Mandenkaw who studied with village griot and funéw instead of in Dīnist universities and mosques. The Awkari penchant for sealing deals with written contracts, as opposed to verbal agreements in a griot's presence, sows confusion and mistrust among other Mandenkaw.

The Mad Library of al-Ghāba

The world's largest library rises from al-Ghāba's center. Its minarets, domes, towers, flying buttresses and skyways spiral into the sky and the surrounding city. Yet grime clouds its crystal windows. The gardens are overgrown, full of wild animals and fountains choked with algae. Adinkra glyphs glow on the walls, wards against the pulsing, whispering power straining from within. The Mad Library stands as a testament to the dangers posed by the written word, human ambition and the unchecked power of library science.

A century ago, a library science experiment went wrong. In the central rotunda, al-Ghāba's universities' head librarians attempted to transcribe a storybook about a mischievous spider spirit into adinkra glyphs. To focus so much power in a single tome was hubris of the highest degree. Of course, the trickster meddled with the procedure. The resulting explosion transformed simple words into mantras and spells, magical information into magical energy and written ideas into reality. The librarians apotheosed instantly, ni souls ascending to some library beyond while their dya became bookwraiths haunting this one.

The books reshape the library around them into exaggerated crossovers of their stories. Angels, jinn, dragons and ghilan infest the religion and mythology wing. In the romance section's smoky, sultry red light district, succubae and tuberculosis-wracked courtesans angst or sing to wandering readers. The philosophy section hosts the most improbable debates that never happened, as Numanari orators match wits against Nahuacan poets and Cathayan politicians.

Visitors to the Library should follow these rules:

- **Do not speak above a whisper.** It is the quickest way to attract monsters, rogue books, bookwyrms or worst of all, librarians.
- **No running.** See rule #1.
- **No food or drink near the books.** Many sharp-jawed books have snapped shut on an arm after smelling food or, when fed, have revealed that they incubate dangerous spirits.
- **No open flames.** The magical energy suffusing the Library transforms flames into jinn, tiny mischievous beings of smokeless fire.
- **No unattended children or pets, except in the designated Children's Area.** A child who wanders into the Library's darkness becomes a protagonist in some story deadly to parents.
- **Return any book you take out before the due date.** Removing a book creates a loophole in the Library's magical wards, allowing a bookwraith to escape and pursue you until you return the book and pay a late fee. This fee is a Story with a number of Steps based on how late your book is, usually hunting some enemy or donating a dangerously rare book. Destroy a Mad Library book, and a bookwyrm drags you back to the Library to become a bookwraith yourself.

The slow, silent **bookwraiths** wear robes stitched from pages torn out of books. They are immensely strong, implacable and nearly indestructible. Wound one and it knits itself together from nearby books (and becomes even angrier at you for making it destroy books). Every bookwraith innately knows every library book's location.

Somewhere on the mezzanine, a twisted tree grows from a rug, extending branches towards the ceiling's brass-ribbed crystal curve. When starlight shines through, clockwork sparrows and chameleons in the branches whirr to life. Plush hares and wildcats amongst the pillows sit up, move and talk. The tree bark's whorls and knots resolve into a craggy face. Wind-up soldiers patrol the perimeter, defending the salon against adults who disturb the peace. The **Children's Corner** calls out to neglected children throughout the city. If a child makes it through the Library's dangers—and children often have a better

OTHER MANDENKAW ON AWKARI

"It's hubris and disrespect, that's what it is. Up there in their ivory towers, they genuinely believe they're a better class of people than the rest of us, because they're more Dīnist than you and they don't really care about the Ori. They definitely aren't rude—no, their manners are always perfect—but you get this creeping feeling that they're looking at the shrine in your house and thinking 'what superstitious nonsense.' Sure, I serve the Ori, and I learned al-Dīn from a funé instead of a visiting lecturer from the Crescent, but that doesn't make me any less al-Musawwir-fearing than a snooty Awkari. And all that writing can't be good for your memory."

—Aïssata Diagho of Manden

chance at doing so—she finds comfort and safety at the Corner. Here, a tale of meat and vegetables nourishes as well as a real meal. But no child older than 12 years can remain here; toy soldiers with their popguns escort her out once she comes of age.

The **stacks** form honeycombs of tessellated reading rooms lit by luminescent fungi or glowing fish swimming through the air. Some books are comprehensible: others seemingly random series of words or phrases, or endless strings of letters and symbols real and imagined. Every combination of characters possible lies somewhere among the shadowed galleries. Explorers lost in this maze may emerge in entirely different libraries elsewhere in the world.

Xwéda

Xwéda is the smallest, sparsest-populated Manden state. Occupying much of the Kurufaba's coastline, Xwéda's coast features salt marshes and lagoons replete with huge crocodiles. Rivers trace inland through sacred riparian forests, boasting plant life uniquely adapted to the wetlands' flooding and draining. The rainforests shelter some of Ifri's fiercest game, including the side-striped jackal, warthoga, leoparda, hippopotamuses, bush elephants and honey badgers. With scarce farmland, Xwédans rely heavily on hunting and fishing.

Mbeyan slave raiders and Igodomigodoese conquering armies have often struck into Xwédan forests, hoping to seize the state's navigable rivers and precious ports. But Xwéda's rough country breeds tough people. Drawn from the ranks of their hunters, Xwédan scouts and infantry are stealthy and shrewd, experts in using dense cover, forested terrain and amphibious assaults to take down larger enemies just like they would a leopard. They quickly adopted the musket, taking pride in the fact that "a Xwédan hunter rarely needs to reload." The best of the best are the gbeto. Originally the Xwédan king's personal guard and hunting entourage, this all-female corps nowadays turns up anywhere the Kurufaba needs them—often, when and where they are least expected.

Xwéda's economy lags behind Manden's other states. The ports see a lot of business, but the Atabean Trading Company has monopolized much of the sea trade here. Xwéda's crown tries to limit the Company's influence, but President George Rourke uses unmarked ships secretly contracted to him to evade the Ahosu's notice. Moreover, what economic bounty the coast enjoys rarely trickles inland to the heartland's hunters, fishers and subsistence farmers.

Xwéda relies on imported food and economic aid from elsewhere in Manden. The stark income disparity between Xwédans and other Mandenkaw sows dissent between provinces. Mansa Kankan has gently suggested clearcutting some of the Xwédan sacred forest for much-needed farming and grazing land, but the Ahosu abhors the suggestion—and suspects Mansa Kankan really wants the timber for the treasure fleet he has been building in Xwéda's ports. It remains to be seen whether the Mansa's new shipyards will stimulate Xwéda's economy, or merely make other provinces' richest merchants and nobles richer.

Xwéda's capital and the Kurufaba's largest port is Arrada, on the northern coastline. Here, massive mangroves climb skyward out of the salt marsh. Wooden structures wind between and around their trunks. Ahosu Mazidath of Xwéda lives on an island in the city center. Her royal compound boasts acacia-thorn walls, mounted guns, a barracks and training ground, a reception hall for visiting diplomats and Mazidath's personal residence: a well-maintained but ancient structure of stone, mud and wood, beautifully adorned with bas-reliefs but a stark contrast to the surrounding refined, modern structures. For many centuries, they remained a historical curiosity, while the Ahosu lived and received visitors elsewhere: but Mazidath likes them. She says they keep her humble—and encourage visitors to underestimate her.

A large Odisean factory also rises from an island further out towards the sea, housing many Théan

OTHER MANDENKAW ON XWÉDANS

"I don't know whether to feel sorry for them or disgusted by them. Or both. Can you imagine living like that? Spending your whole life in the jungle, surrounded by tsetse flies and hippopotami? Hunting for every meal while the jungle itself hunts you? I don't understand why anyone would stay there...but ugh, I don't want them moving here to the city either. Still, so much of our tax money goes to feeding them and bailing them out of their miserable, savage lives that I don't understand why they resent us just for living well. The least they can do is fight our enemies for us...this statement is off the record, isn't it?"

—Fadia al-Ghābi of Awkar

visitors. The Explorer's Society and the Vendel League each have properties in this fortified compound. The factory adjoins a modern shipyard which the Kurufaba government has built on an Odisean model. Here, thousands of jonow and nyamakalaw toil around the clock for handsome wages, under the watchful tutelage of Captain Kunto da Rosa's Théan shipwrights.

Igodomigodo

Had things gone ever so slightly differently, you would be reading right now about the Igodomigodo Kurufaba.

Igodomigodo sits in the north-center of the Manden Kurufaba. It is landlocked, bordering Xwéda to the west, and Awkar to the east. Before Mari-Djata, the Igodomigodoese had every reason to think their state destined to conquer all Ifri. They built their capital city on the very spot where the Ori first descended from the sky to create the earth. However, according to local belief, conflict cursed Igodomigodo from the first moments. The second Ori to descend the golden chain quarreled over the responsibilities on the new earth: who would make the humans, who would give up godhood to rule the new world, who would make the laws, who would receive what kind of worship. The other Ori began to (or despaired that they might have to) take sides, but before they could come to blows, one of the two first Ori left to found his own city somewhere else.

That was at the beginning of time. Ever since then, the cities of Ajaka and Katunga have coexisted in tense equilibrium. Each has a line of Alaafin who claim al-Musawwir's divine mandate. Each has grown in size, power, wealth and military might. Each has controlled a network of vassal states, clans and tribes using an elaborately defined, documented and streamlined bureaucracy. And on some level, each has done so to spite the other. Igodomigodo's royal governments were famed for something rare: an efficient bureaucracy. An elaborate clockwork system comprises everyone in power from the royal families to their government appointees to their tax collectors to their intelligence service. This system eventually became the current Kurufaba government's basis.

At Mari-Djata's first Chieftains' Council, the Alaafin of Katunga pledged allegiance to Mari-Djata on behalf of all Igodomigodoese tribes. The Alaafin of Ajaka, who also claimed dominion over all Igodomigodo, disputed Katunga's decision. While the Imperial throne traces Igodomigodo's participation in the imperial experiment back to this point, practically speaking Igodomigodo actually joined the Kurufaba as a full member only 130 years ago. Thus ended a long period called the Igodomigodo Secession, during which a god-king seized control of both Ajaka and Katunga, combined them into the single large metropolis Ajaka-Katunga and militarized the country, attacking both the surrounding Manden regions and Mbey. The Kurufaba only regained control of Igodomigodo when internal strife ended his rule in a fiery magical accident.

Igodomigodoese people have a reputation as overbearing, aggressive wonks. Everyone remembers their cavalry charges and frequent wars of conquest. Even in times of peace and cooperation, the smug and superior attitude of Igodomigodoese cavalry riding through your town on their way to pacify bandits or border incursions does not always make them many friends.

Igodomigodo has been renowned for thousands of years for its sculpture. Stylized wooden sculptures of religious subjects such as Ori as well as extremely realistic bronze sculptures of rulers and war heroes are particularly well known. The bronzes are made

OTHER MANDENKAW ON THE IGODOMIGODOESE

"Everyone knows no Xwédan backs down from a fight, but we don't go looking for them either. Those Igodomigodoese, though, I think they genuinely enjoy war. It creeps me out. Last time I served on border patrol, this Igodomigodoese kid rode up to me on a big horse and cheerfully asked me the story of how I lost my arm. Cheerfully! She thought it was a great conversation starter! That's what you get when you raise your children on stories of how great your state is because of how many people you trampled under your horse's hooves so you could take their cattle. The whole 'well the Ori founded our capital themselves and that's why we're so great' outlook doesn't help, either. Look, I'm grateful they figured out how to organize a government, I really am, because otherwise I don't know how this Kurufaba could hold together. I still wish they would calm the hell down over there."

—Lieutenant Visesegan of the Gbeto

using the lost-wax method: the caster pours molten bronze into a wax mold with a heat-proof core that melts off after casting, resulting in a hollow metal final form with precise details to make it easily recognizable as a specific real person.

Manden State

The Manden Kurufaba's sovereign state varies between flat savanna, semi-desert regions and rolling hills. It is arid and often difficult to farm. Although the river valleys following the Kwara and other major navigable rivers are fertile, that does not make the physical circumstances of Manden State interesting. The really interesting part is gold.

For some reason, the Manden State has the known world's richest gold fields, even centuries after its heyday. Historically, whether you mined the rocky hills or panned in the river, Manden was the best place to mine gold. But that is not all. Manden's hills and caves yield diamonds, copper, bauxite, iron, limestone, silver and salt. These resources have made even the arid regions of Manden spectacularly profitable with the rise of international trade in Ifri.

A single unbroken (if complicated) dynasty has always brought forth the Mansa of Manden, a high monarch who owns all the Kurufaba's land and natural resources. The Mansa apportions shares in the mines and other Manden natural resources to chieftains who come from the agricultural or pastoral nobility, the horonw.

Mari-Djata joining the four states in harmony catapulted the Manden Kurufaba to the forefront of West Ifrian trade. Gold and salt began to flow along major rivers and caravan routes, enriching not only the Kurufaba but also the surrounding kingdoms. The Kurufaba implemented a dual gold and salt standard to standardize wealth throughout the federation and reorganized the government on the model of its (sometime) vassal state Igodomigodo.

Over time, though, the Kurufaba has come to look less like a federation and more like an empire. Power has centralized around the Mansa's throne. The city of Nianiba attests to this change. This capital city lies far to the south, amidst the ancient gold fields. Towering stone and gold statues overlook the streets, laid out in a neat grid so the city itself forms a perfect square. As the city grows, concentric square walls rise outside the existing ones, filling with offices, houses and monuments, each layer richer and more lavish than the last. The center square houses the Mansa's palace and the Alagbato Iya, his personal guard: the "Guardian Mothers." This elite section of the Xwédan Gbeto was redirected to Nianiba during the reign of a male Mansa who liked the idea of a personal guard of highly trained wives. He immediately found he could not be so free as he wanted with an entire troop of deadly women trained since age ten in facing down threats.

OTHER MANDENKAW ON MANDEN STATE MANDENKAW

"When Igodomigodo seceded during the reign of Jakuta, it was a bad time in a lot of ways, but all that war and suffering and strife made a lot of Igodomigodoese feel like they were part of something mythical, something royal and imperial. Then it ended with Jakuta accidentally burning his own house down and then dying mysteriously in the forest.

Manden put economic pressure on until we gave in and came back to the Kurufaba. So much for Igodomigodoese martial Heroism! But a lot of folks, warriors especially, miss the days of Jakuta—or how they think the days of Jakuta must have been. I try to stay neutral, but if the state seceded again...I don't like to think too hard about what I would do. What's Manden going to do about it? Throw money at the problem? I doubt they'll show up to fix it themselves."

—Professor Adisa of the Royal Madrasa of Ajaka

Current Relations

The Kingdom of Aksum

With his brother on pilgrimage, Prince Adegoke attacked Aksum for five pointless years in a vain attempt to win himself glory. Mansa Kankan returned from the Crescent extolling nonviolence and mercy. Kankan immediately sued for peace with Aksum, arranging a marriage between his son, Maghan Kon Fatta, and the princess Le'elt Mehret. It seems that peace between the two kingdoms has finally come, but rumors say the princess may be less keen on the match than she appears. Adegoke's agitation against Aksum may have a second chance.

The Kingdom of Maghreb

The Manden Kurufaba's trade network relies on Maghreb's enthusiastic participation. Mandenkaw eagerly consume Maghrebi goods, especially northern fashions, jewelry, leatherwork and swords. Many Mansas over the years have longed to add the Maghreb to the Manden Kurufaba, but the Maghrebi monarchs have politely refused such requests. Conquest would harm the caravan economy and is therefore out of the question. Mansa Kankan sees the International Kurufaba as a chance to realize past generations' dreams of unity.

The Kingdom of Khemet

Modern Khemet has become a darker and more dangerous place—literally. The shortening of the days unnerves some, and many pilgrims just…do not come back from their journey through the Black Land. Many Mandenkaw, especially more devout Dīnists, see Khemet as a growing threat which someone must crack down on sooner or later.

The Kingdom of Mbey

To Mandenkaw concerned about Mbeyan aggression, now is the worst time in history for a Mansa to remove military action as a political tool. Mbey's intrusion onto Manden lands means that those who fight are often destined to become slaves. In the hardest-hit Xwédan and Igodomigodoese border regions, where people usually take military problems into their own hands (but no longer can to the same extent without the Mansa's permission), locals call for the Mansa to declare war on Mbey and turn all of Manden's wealth and numbers to crushing the slave trade's heartland.

The Crescent Empire

Historically, the Crescent has been an important partner in trade and pilgrimage. Every year, many Mandenkaw boarded ships to sail north around Mbey and Amazigh and past Khemet to disembark in the Crescent Empire and head for important pilgrimage sites. Many treasure ships also followed this route to carry mineral resources, handicrafts and other trade goods to the Crescent in spite of the constant threat of pirates. Over the past two decades, though, the North Coast Route has become more profitable and less dangerous.

The Atabean Trading Company

The guy from Avalon? Yeah, he sent a lot of letters asking to meet and talk guinea fowl—didn't even send a griot, can you believe that? We told him, via griot like civilized human beings, that he'd have to get in line and there were a lot of people ahead of him, but maybe he didn't like that. Does he think we don't know he enslaves Ifrians? Mbey is right next to us. We're also pretty sure he pays pirates to attack our waters. This is not the foundation of a successful business relationship.

— anonymous source within Mansa Kankan's household

The Vendel League

The Vendel League is no stranger to sending trade delegations to really far-off places. The first Vendel delegation arrived in Xwéda about 150 years ago. They purchased a great deal of fancy local clothing and spent a long time touring Arrada before journeying to the interior to meet the Mansa. Their skald's skill and versatility particularly impressed the Mandenkaw.

The War of the Cross set back Vendel-Manden trade relations a good deal, by threatening southbound trading vessels through the Widow's Sea. As soon as the war ended, trade resumed, but the Atabean Trading Company has kept it from reaching its prior levels. The Company and the Vendel League have effectively been in a trade war since the Company broke away from the Vendel League in 1648. This trade war has turned hot in the waters off West Ifri. The Vendel merchant navy and the Company's contracted pirates clash repeatedly in coastal waters. Dozens of ships on both sides have sunk, dozens of crews enslaved. Manden of course favors the Vendel League, but lacks a fleet to support them.

MANSA KANKAN

"What use is gold if your people are hungry and ill educated? Feed them, educate them, and raise them up in fields of peace. Then you may start to be a wise ruler."

Mansa Kankan

The current scion of Mari-Djata's imperial dynasty is a devout Dīnist, a devoted family man, a good businessman and the richest human ever to live. His pilgrimage to the site of the Prophet Khalil's death sent economic shockwaves through every settlement through which he passed, as his charitable donations often exceeded entire countries' net worth. The pilgrimage sent shockwaves through the Mansa's own soul as well. As he traveled, he and his Dīnist teachers studied further the ideas of love and nonviolence central to al-Dīn. What did it mean, he wondered, to devote oneself to peace and to eschew all violence that is not defensive?

Kankan returned to Nianiba with a proclamation that shocked his realm: the Manden Kurufaba no longer considers offensive war a viable diplomatic solution. The Kurufaba's army now remains active as a purely defensive force.

Kankan's religious and cultural predilections suit Manden and Awkar just fine, but the more martially inclined Xwéda and Igodomigodo are less confident about this new turn. Those states have seen the face of Mbeyan aggression and lost people to the Atabean slave trade. Moreover, they know defensive war cannot stop the attacks. Both Ahosu Mazidath of Xwéda and Regent Enitan of Igodomigodo have voiced doubts, but Mansa Kankan remains adamant: if Xwéda and Igodomigodo want to keep receiving financial support, they must obey his new mandate.

Story Hooks

- Mansa Kankan received a vision of bloodshed and death at the next International Kurufaba meeting, next week. He strongly believes that the dream will come true if he does not find the traitor in their midst. Can the Hero save the empire from treachery?
- A Hero's sailing prowess is renowned, and Mansa Kankan has a proposition for him. He needs one fast ship able to get past the Atabean Trading Company's ships while carrying a message to a ship waiting on the other side. If the Hero can relay the message unscathed and in secret, he will be richly rewarded…and perhaps save all of Ifri.

Youssou Sende

If Manden's people could only have one voice to represent them, that voice would be the beautiful songs of Youssou Sende. She is the most well-known griot in all Manden, favored by Mansa Kankan and the Ori. People say that the Ori blessed her as a child with the ability to remember everything anything she hears with perfect clarity, and she is so beloved, that while everyone gets three Ori to watch over them, Sende got *four*.

As a griot, Sende has the capability to recall the history of her people, taught to her in an unbroken chain through her grandmothers. She wanders village to city and back, collecting tales and teaching fellow griots. Their stories become a part of Sende's memory, and one by one her collective memory grows with individual Mandenkaw's stories. These individuals become legends, and these legends and tales give hope, laughter and strength to the people at their lowest.

Like many Mandenkaw who live close to Mbey, Sende understands loss. She was sent to sing at the birth of Aksum's princess Mehret. The Ori asked her to wait one day before she went home. She did as they asked, and when she returned she found that her entire village was captured or killed by Mbeyan slavers. The Ori saved her life, but she fears her family may be lost. She knows her time is limited, and so she hopes and prays that the Ori will repay her work by bringing back her daughter or sending her an apprentice to carry on her lineage.

Story Hooks

- While Sende entertains a wedding feast the Heroes, she is possessed by the Ori Oshun. When she sees one of the Heroes, she hands her a single cowrie shell necklace from around her neck. When the possession ends, Sende tells the Hero she has been chosen by the Ori to follow the path of the griot as her successor. Will she heed the call of the Ori?
- The Heroes are on a mission to protect villages on the border for Mansa Kankan. They capture a soldier from Mbey who claims to be originally from Manden and conscripted to military. She carries a small doll that resembles Sende and asks the Heroes for help returning to her mother.

YOUSSOU SENDE

"There is no better weapon than stories. How many swords can inspire, break chains, heal, and teach the folly of war all at once?"

PRINCE ADEGOKE

"A clever man does not hope for his destiny to be handed to him. He waits and acts, but most importantly...he listens."

STRENGTH	INFLUENCE	RANK
3	9	12

Prince Adegoke

Mansa Kankan's younger brother is a hostage, "adopted" from a cadet branch of Ajaka-Katunga's royal family in the Igodomigodo Secession's aftermath. Even in the lap of luxury, Adegoke was always dissatisfied. He knew he stood second to Mansa Kankan at best, a bargaining chip at worst. Adegoke spent his childhood never trusting anyone except Omobolanle, his best friend.

Omobolanle only appears to Adegoke, and has always been there for him. Adegoke realized Omobolanle differed from humans—a wraith, perhaps, or a jinn. But Omobolanle remains the only one sympathetic to his plan to overthrow the Mansa and usurp the Sika'Dwa stool on Igodomigodo's behalf.

During Mansa Kankan's long absence, Prince Adegoke attacked the Kingdom of Aksum in hopes of getting enough military and public support to steal the throne from his adoptive brother. The war was supposed to be quick and easy, but Manden's generals refused to divert troops from the Mbey border. Instead Adegoke chose to match wits against Aksum to show off his genius generalship. But Aksum's math-emagicians foretold all of Adegoke's surprise attacks and cunning traps. Mandenka armies, lacking their customary overwhelming numbers, struggled for five years to gain any ground against Aksumites.

Despite these setbacks, Mansa Kankan trusts Adegoke completely, and trusts the Iya as well, not knowing he has seduced their leader. Omobolanle has gifted Adegoke with a serpent's tongue. Adegoke currently works on converting the rest of the Iya to his cause, preparing for a palace coup or an International Kurufaba takeover—whichever he can affect first.

Story Hooks

- Prince Adegoke's lover, Captain Izegbe of the Alagbato Iya, suspects he only courts her to harm the Kurufaba. She made an ultimatum: marriage or breakup. While he finds ways to convince her, she comes to the Heroes for aid in finding out if what she suspects is true.
- A serving girl named Jawaroo is possessed by an Ori during a festival held in the compound. Now she can see and hear Omobolanle. Jawaroo thinks Omobolanle might hurt her if he discovers her new ability. As a Hero finishes up a quest for the Mansa, she begs him for help.

Kunto da Rosa

Mansa Kankan and Queen Mazidath rejoiced to find a Théan shipwright with Xwédan ancestry willing to oversee the Manden Kurufaba's new shipyards. Captain da Rosa is the daughter of an Odisean master shipwright and a Xwédan sailor. When the Mansa hired her, she already had decades of experience working for Castille's crown. They offered her a large salary to work exclusively for the Kurufaba in Arrada. But they did not know the Atabean Trading Company already had Captain da Rosa on their payroll.

Originally, the Company wanted a mole within the Rex Castilium's shipyards to update them as to whether Castille was constructing a new Armada, perhaps meant for Atabean deployment. But the Company offered to augment her (already staggering) salary if she operated as a double agent within Manden.

Captain da Rosa is a good shipwright, but her professional pride ranks a distant second to her greed. She is addicted to money.

Captain da Rosa started out doing her genuine best to build the Kurufaba quality craft, but now she has gotten the order for sabotage. The supervisors who work directly for her, also on the Company payroll, build tiny weaknesses into ships which the Company can exploit. But someone in her organization works against her. Mandenka jonow and nyamakalaw working under her have started to catch and correct the "mistakes." The mole now has her own mole to contend with.

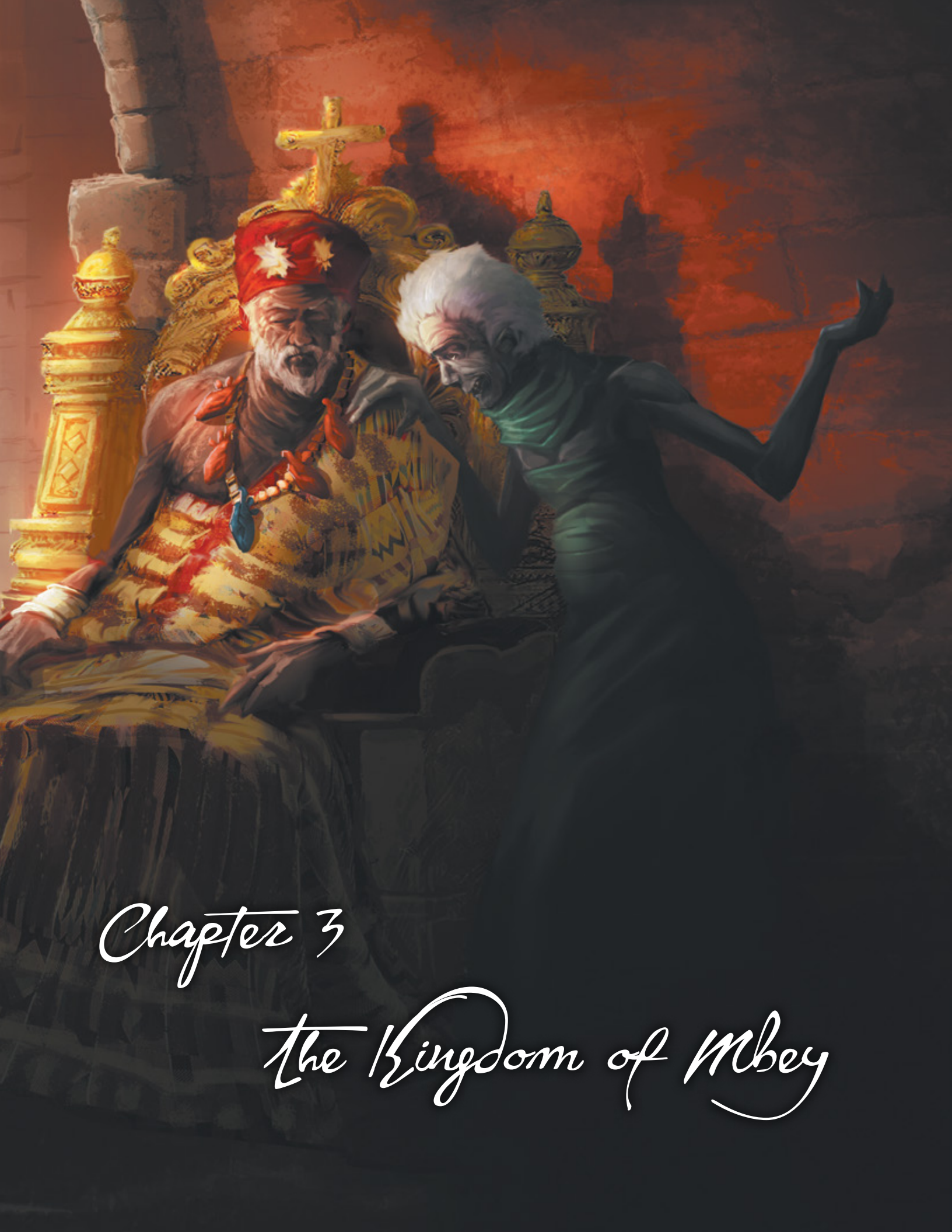
Story Hooks

- Captain da Rosa has taken a medical leave of absence after the weight of her choices precipitated a nervous breakdown. The person temporarily filling her shoes has uncovered evidence of her predecessor's treachery, but comes to the Heroes doubtful. How could da Rosa betray her people? Is it possible that this is just an effort to frame the illustrious Captain?
- A Hero comes across the mole's identity—but it turns out that Bonsam, not altruism, has motivated him. The mole prepares to wreak havoc on Manden's peace by suggesting that the Queen knew of da Rosa's traitorous nature all along. Can the Hero tease out what is true and what is a Bonsam trick before everything comes to light?

KUNTO DA ROSA, THE BETRAYER CAPTAIN

"Gold is not warm, true. But it does not rust, does not lie, and when you are old it does not remind you of your youth. I will take the sea and gold, and you can have the rest."

STRENGTH	INFLUENCE	RANK
4	10	14



Chapter 3

the Kingdom of Mbey

THE KINGDOM OF MBEY

The Twice-Ascendant Empire of Mbey is a study in evil both supernatural and human. Fallen from greatness, it has clawed its way back to significance, at the expense of its soul. One might be tempted to call their plight a cautionary tale, but the truth is that the story is still being written with the blood of its people as ink. The devil lives there, you see, and he's not leaving anytime soon.

—*Khadija Azawad, historian*

Of the five Kingdoms of Ifri, Mbey has the truest claim to empire, for it possesses not one land, but six. The name "Mbey" correctly refers to the empire's central-most kingdom—a land of thick rainforests tucked away in a shallow basin, where the bour ba makes his palace and oversees the affairs of his westerly vassal kingdoms. The Bour Ba of Mbey has ruled since time immemorial, being one of the five blessed by the Jok and gifted with a divine Sika'Dwa stool. The kingdoms of Nder, Mboul, Diourbel, Gelwaar and Kahone, recognizing the mandate implicit in the Joks' gift, pledged themselves to Mbey, and their unity remained unbroken from that point forward.

At its height, the Empire of Mbey cast its shadow over all Ifri. None could compete with the wealth, glory or indefatigable spirit of its many peoples. Each of its kingdoms retained a fierce, independent identity including the cavalry of Diourbel, famous for the breeding of horses unlike any elsewhere in Ifri; Kahone's Second People, wrestler-warriors sometimes called *simb*, the "false lions"; the seafarers of Mboul with their unrivaled sail craft and navigation;

the wise-folk of Nder who preserved the northern border against trespass through careful diplomacy and ancient magics; and finally, the hardy folk of Gelwaar who kept watch over the Fields of Bonsam and thus guarded the world against Evil—and yet their loyalty to their bour ba was unswerving. Mbey's rivals referred to it as the *kingdom of kingdoms* with a sort of reverent, yet envious awe, both because it was literally several kingdoms bound by common cause and because it represented an ideal others could only grasp at.

The tolerant attitude of the bour ba and the way he was chosen allowed for such magnificence. One who sits upon the Sika'Dwa stool in Mbey must always embody the empire's three great virtues of *thiossane*: gracious mien, generous spirit and steady temperament. Traditionally, the bour ba must be born in Mbey but his appointment was made not hereditarily but by the *kangam* (lead notables) of the five vassal kingdoms. Theirs may have been the truest meritocracy mortals ever achieved—not perfect, as no human thing ever is, but achieving a spiritual grandeur unknown to people before or since.

And the first bour ba did not limit his vision to the borders of his own kingdom. In Khemet, he beheld great architectural wonders. In the Crescent Empire he learned of science and medicine and in both he saw the great ships built by the pale people from the strange northern continent of Théah. He seduced these people with tales of gold and the wonders of the Ifri interior, bringing them to his court and growing Lougua into a metropolis seemingly out of place and out of time. Such progressiveness was only normal in Mbey, where the blending of disparate cultures gave rise to philosophy, craft and art unseen elsewhere in the civilized world and from there bled down into their politics and religion.

Perhaps the most profound crime in all of history, then, is the corruption of Mbey. What wonders might the world have beheld had it been allowed to persist? What evil might have been contained if the Stones of Bonsam had remained unmolested? Blame for this crime falls largely upon the Atabean Trading Company, as well as the Théan Nation of Montaigne, but we may not forget that blame also lies at the feet of Bour Ba Ighodalo, the mad king of Mbey, broken by the shame of his own failed sovereignty.

The Fall of Mbey

The Atabean Trading Company achieved in months what centuries had found impossible: the fostering of greed and animosity between Mbey and its vassal kingdoms. No small feat, it involved duplicity of the highest sort—Company agents impersonating people of the various coastal realms, sowing seeds of suspicion and distrust. The Company first raided in the guise of Mboulan pirates, with whom they shared a mutual interest in sea craft and with whom they, in the months prior, had blended their fleets through trade. Attacked up and down the coasts of Mbey, Nder petitioned first for aid from the bour ba. Diplomatic rejoinders were made, but the raids only increased. Mboul officially proclaimed its innocence and while its ambassadors sat in counsel with the bour ba in Lougua, sussing out the truth of the matter, Diourbel's soldiers chose a more decisive course of action. They assassinated their brak, the bour ba's official governor from Lougua, and sent their cavalry across the southern border of Mboul, massacring village after village of innocents in retribution for attacks along its shores. The Atabean Trading Company had successfully set fire to the pure heart of Mbey and from that point forward, they merely needed to stoke it.

Civil war erupted as the kingdom of kingdoms splintered apart. Only Nder remained neutral, abstaining from the exploding hostilities, but in the absence of allies, they found themselves suddenly crushed between Maghreb to the north, raiding across the Mbey River and the battlefront to the south which frequently over-spilled into their fields and villages. The Nder were dying and not slowly.

For months Mbey tore itself apart while the Company exploited the chaos with mercenary precision. As profitable as it was, though, they saw opportunity for even greater gain from a Mbey united under their purview. A weak Mbey merely presented its belly to both Maghreb and Manden—an untenable situation the Company would rather not be caught up in, most especially given their nefarious interest in Manden's hidden gold fields. A Mbey under their fist, however, provided a staging ground, an army and a source of endless wealth. So, they offered their mercenary army to the bour ba for a simple fee: the Sika'Dwa stool—the very symbol of his sovereignty. The bour ba, being no fool, refused their offer.

What ensued was the Siege of Lougua. Under normal circumstances, a small mercenary army, comprised mostly of Théans and the restive slaves they had taken, would never have stood a chance in the sweltering rainforests of Mbey's misty interior. But with the rest of the Kingdom in chaos, the beleaguered city could expect no help forthcoming. And while Bour Ba Ighodalo's resolve was unflagging, that of the foreign merchants—who comprised more than half of Lougua's permanent population—was somewhat less steely and the Company knew it. In the fourth week of the siege, after hunger and sickness had begun to set in, they offered free passage home to any man, woman or child who delivered to them the much-revered Sika'Dwa stool.

At that moment, Bour Ba Ighodalo looked down from his palace and knew that Lougua was no longer his. He, like his predecessors, had allowed foreigners free rein and they had betrayed his hospitality. And though it grieved him, he saw that to do nothing meant the loss of Mbey itself. So, he gathered around him his most loyal soldiers, the Ninth Guard, and sent them into the Louguan night to murder every foreigner in their beds, sparing only the teachers at the university and the children, all of whom he threw into the dungeons. It was the greatest violation of thiossane ever enacted by a sitting bour ba and the single bloodiest night in Lougua's history.

When their father's atrocities became known to them, Bour Ba Ighodalo's twin sons were overcome with shame. Their father had violated the ancient custom of thiossane and murdered his welcomed guests, people they had known as friends, in their sleep. One son was angry and sought to punish his father for the crime against ancient tradition. The other, wracked with guilt, only wanted to spare his father from further humiliation. Together they removed the Sika'Dwa stool from the square in which it had always sat and presented it to the Company commander. He thanked them politely for their good sense and then had them thrown in chains for good measure. Before Bour Ba Ighodalo even knew what happened, his sons were en route to Belleté to be sold, thrown into the cargo hold of a ship and disappeared from Mbey entirely. True to their word, though, the Company lifted their siege and all hostilities ceased. Even the civil war that raged between the coastal provinces faded, no longer stoked by the Company provocateurs.

Still, to call Mbey a unified empire is correct only in the most legalistic of senses. Tensions simmered. Thousands were dead. And the Company had stripped every bit of pride and power from Bour Ba Ighodalo.

Unbelievably, the worst was yet to come.

Without the Sika'Dwa stool, Bour Ba Ighodalo possessed no right to rule. With his armies depleted fighting each other, he had no way of expelling the Company from his land, nor any hope of ever recovering what was taken from him. Without the Sika'Dwa stool, Mbey could never be whole again; without his sons, neither could he. The greatest empire the world had ever known had been broken and it happened under his watch. Could the Jok have been wrong? Did the kangam err in choosing him? The doubt and shame were too much to bear.

It would be cleaner and nicer to say that Bour Ba Ighodalo came to do what he did next because of some prophecy. (By his decree, a griot relates the story as such, though she knows it to be false.) The hand of fate serves as an excellent scapegoat for unpleasant truths, after all. Even madness provides a kinder lie. As with all great temptations, you may resist it a hundred days, but on the hundred-and-first your resolve may flag and when it does, you succumb. For Bour Ba Ighodalo, it took but three days as the idea turned itself over and over within his mind, growing with each revolution. On the fourth day, he summoned the Ninth Guard and sent them secretly into the west. They passed over into Gelwaar in the night, set upon the guards of the Fields of Bonsam in utter blackness and before sunrise had found the first of Bonsam's Stones. Most of their number had been slain by the Field's wardens, but those who survived undertook the task put to them by their king with stone-faced silence. By dawn, they had pried the black monolith from the ground and were en route back to Lougua. Their path was fraught with pursuing Gelwaar wardens and exorcists, but the Ninth Guard were nothing if not single-mindedly devoted to their king. Only one survived, but he did so with the stone in his possession.

The next morning, Bour Ba Ighodalo summoned the five bours of his vassal kingdoms from their mansions. When they arrived, a stranger greeted them—a seemingly fragile woman, her age indeterminate, of a slick oily complexion unseen in any Ifrian. Her limbs were

spindly like a spider, and her belly was distended and overripe. This horror introduced herself as Chitendu, a name unlike any in either the languages of the First or Second People's, and she informed them that they must pledge anew their loyalty to Bour Ba Ighodalo. A necessary precaution, she told them, given the events of the recent siege. The affairs of that day are known only to those five, Bour Ba Ighodalo and the mysterious Chitendu, though in the days after its conclusion, the bour ba took to wearing a long leather thong around his neck, along which hung five still-beating hearts.

After that, Mbey again united, though not with the spirit of its former self. A malaise now manifests as a kind of sadness or a kind of cruelty.

Gelwaar reluctantly relinquished the Fields of Bonsam to the bour ba, who with great effort began excavating and moving them to Lougua. To facilitate such dramatic labor, he pursued the enslavement of his Maghreb and Manden neighbors with renewed vigor, an effort the Company was more than glad to aid. Even now the excavation continues and new, uncovered Stones of Bonsam are transported to the bour ba's palace immediately. Those who return from those deliveries—and not everyone does—speak of mad things: a jungle that burns but never consumes, a throne of shattered Bonsam Stone, men and women in the marketplace with the aspect of the dead, the glinting eyes of always watchful Chitendu who is obscured by a cloud of flies and the ever-present beating of those damnable hearts Bour Ba Ighodalo wears about his throat.

If one good thing can be said of this recent turn of events, it is that Mbey's relationship with the Atabean Trading Company has shifted subtly in Bour Ba Ighodalo's favor. For a fleeting second, he struggled under their thumb, and now they can hardly put a finger on how or why that is no longer the case. Mbey trades with them more enthusiastically than ever—slaves for gold and guns. Perhaps that enthusiasm is the telltale sign; Bour Ba Ighodalo does not behave like a man deprived of all his sons or his symbol of his sovereignty, but rather as someone possessed. His motives and ambitions are inscrutable, but ask a Company agent to say who exploits whom in their arrangement...well, she still says she clearly stands in the superior position, but she knows in her heart it is a lie.

The Land of Mbey

For 300 miles Mbey claws at the western ocean before finally yielding its grasp to Manden in the south. The width of its inland bite is 200 miles, and though the landmass is half the size of its nearest rivals, it has dominated both. Until this generation, Mbey had reigned supreme along the western coast, with its enemies seething against its boarders. Now the border holds only nightmares for their enemies as they are dragged kicking and screaming into the humid night.

Mbey's northern and easternmost borders are delineated by the long curve of the Mbey River as it flows up from the southern mountains, eventually disgorging itself in the bay of Mbey. Its southern border extends westward along the Kahone River, which traces its origins to the southern mountains as well. Crowded along the coast between these bounding waterways are the five vassal kingdoms of Mbey. From north to south, the five vassal kingdoms of Mbey are Nder, Mboul, Diourbel, Gelwaar and Kahone. Mbey itself lies cradled in the arms of the mountains at its most southerly and easterly point. The demarcation, immediately known to travelers from the change of elevation, gives way to the sudden presence of a dank misty rainforest that encompasses the senses.

Nder, the northern-most kingdom, is a crooked finger of land nestled amid the green fields of the Mbey River Valley. The smallest of Mbey's vassal kingdoms, it is also its most vital. The river's flood plain irrigates the fields along its banks twice a year, making it the very breadbasket of Mbey. Unfortunately for the hungry people of Mbey, Nder seems to have vanished. The day the Bonsam Fields were turned over, a thick, dense fog covered the entire area. One may march towards the vassal kingdom, but will simply find herself where she was before she started, as if she had traveled in a great loop. Rumors about Nder's disappearance abound, with some saying that recent resistance to the bour ba comes from the now invisible people of Nder. Many whisper that this was a desperate act by their people, whose strange connection to their land and their spiritual magic created the disappearance. No matter how the trickery was achieved, Nder's vanishing puts pressure on the other vassal kingdoms to provide for Mbey.

Where Nder becomes **Mboul** was unclear before the vanishing, but most agree that by the time the savannah gives way to the forest, you have crossed from one into the other. The trees are Mbey's life; Nder was the heart of its commerce, but Mboul was its richest kingdom. Its ready supply of lumber easily converted into sea crafts, and for more than a century Mboul, and therefore Mbey, was the maritime power of Ifri. Their ships connected all Mbey's coastal powers, making possible the promise of empire. Their magnificent presence were a common sight in ports as far away as Khemet. When the Atabean Trading Company first encountered Mbeyans, it was with Mboul abroad.

South of the River Valley's lip that marks the southern edge of Mboul lies the kingdom of **Gelwaar**. In contrast to its sister kingdom of Diourbel, Gelwaar is the least hospitable of Mbey's vassal kingdoms. Only its shores, where the ocean's rains touch, grow green. If a traveler goes inland a few miles, then she finds that Gelwaar becomes a sandy, rocky expanse, all but uninhabitable. This is just as well, for the chief landmark of that sparse, flat land are massive black monoliths known as the Stones of Bonsam. Here in ages past, the Jok defeated Bonsam and their devils, incarcerating each where it fell in an ominous ebon obelisk. In some places these rocks cluster so thick as to be an impenetrable wall, while elsewhere one might see but one or two for miles at a time.

If you go the east, where the last Stone of Bonsam juts up jagged and crooked from the ground and then further yet, until it is no longer visible on the horizon, you stand in **Diourbel**. Almost immediately you find grass, but otherwise, it is much like Gelwaar: a flat, occasionally difficult expanse, ideally suited for the grazing and running of the fabulous horses for which Diourbel is known. The hardy stallions are unlike any found elsewhere in Ifri, save perhaps those few coursers the northern Kingdoms inherited from the Crescent Empire.

The border between Gelwaar and **Kahone** is the most defined of all. Mighty rivers, a large gulf and a string of lakes marks the division. Other than that, no change in elevation, nor even a perceptible change in climate separates one from the other. Both share the same dense rainforest that swallows the southern half of Mbey all the way to the misty edge of Manden. Ask any native the difference between Gelwaar and Kahone and you get the same answer: Kahone is the land "in the south where the Second People reside." Which is to say, you know where you are by the people you share company with and in the middle lands where the First and Second People come together like tributaries of a river, you may very well be in both lands at once. This was more common in generations past, before the arrival of the Atabean Trading Company; since the founding of their colony at the mouth of the Kahone River, the Second People have found themselves often predated upon by the slavers, triggering a displacement to match their ages-old escape from Maghreb. Now the jungle reclaims abandoned villages as Kahone increasingly becomes The Kingdom That Was rather than the Kingdom That Is.

The beating heart of the empire is Mbey itself, lying in a great depression, shielded on two sides from Maghreb by the great arms of the Mbey Mountains. Once this was a land of perpetual mists, the great fogs rolling off its many falls and rivers unable to escape the basin and its dense rainforest canopy. Since the breaking of the Bonsam Stones, though, the jungle burns—perpetually on fire—and where once there were mists, scalding steam clings and vents. Only beasts that can survive these fiery environs live among the trees now and many things can be found lurking here not seen elsewhere in Ifri, or indeed…the world. The natives have fled to the capital of Lougua, where the grace of their bour ba shields them from burning death. A Mbeyan who claims to know such things say that death would be preferable, but she never speaks it above a whisper for fear of what might be listening.

Adventures in Mbey

The Devil walks in Mbey! The streets are filled with demons and minions of imperialism, while the people suffer under their yoke. Even would-be saviors must tread carefully, for the Atabean Trading Company has sown such discord that trust is a hard-won commodity, worth more than gold.

The obvious great adventure in Mbey is to overthrow Bonsam and return the Kingdom to the glory of the Jok, but such an undertaking is a massive one. Heroes from within need to foster new lines of support and a new relationship between the six kingdoms, while Heroes from without undermine the Atabean Trading Company and thereby create an opportunity for the country to throw off the shackles of greed, misery and foreign oppression. Such a revolution is a long time in coming and a mighty tale to tell!

In the meantime, of course, there are many other ways for Heroes to fight the wickedness that rots the heart of Mbey. Abonsam openly cavort and relish their vices; banishing these demons is an important step in protecting people. Slavery, guided by human greed and viciousness, tears apart families and consumes the weakest of the poor, who cry out for a guardian to free them from bondage. The ever-burning jungle must somehow be cleansed and returned to glorious nature—a task well-suited to Heroes with ties to the living world or with power over the elements. And, of course, while the Atabean Trading Company holds sway over all of this, its agents are (for the most part) still only human, and they can be fought with wit and steel.

Playing a Hero from Mbey

Mbey desperately needs Heroes, and few today hear the call. The loss of the Sika'Dwa stool and the power of the Stones of Bonsam means that devils influence the minds of the people, and even someone untouched often falls into wicked ways of her own volition, living as she does in a world surrounded with evil. Heroes from Mbey might be…

- A Gelwaar exorcist, one of the last few who can drive abonsam out of bodies that they possess, on the run because the demon-spirits kill anyone known to have such power
- A tam-tam drummer and storyteller who travels from village to village to remind people of their history, foster ties between neighbors and rekindle the fires of unity for the kingdoms
- A former Company agent who has turned against the Trading Company and now seeks to free slaves, thwart the Company's schemes and cast off the influence of imperialist invaders
- A liberated slave working to free others from the chattel markets of Mbey
- A historian who hopes to track down the lost Sika'Dwa stool and, with it, return legitimacy and truth to the rulership of Mbey
- A rooi heks, who shoulders Corruption in the service of good and uses that power to disrupt the world.

GLOSSARY OF MBEYAN TERMS

Assanyi: a religion of Mbey populated with godlike spirits called the Ori. The Ori are said to hear the prayers and act upon them as they see fit.

Bour: a local king of Mbey under the high king, the bour ba.

Bour Ba: the ruler of Mbey. The high king that rules over the five vassal kingdoms of Mbey.

Brak: a leader amongst kangam, chosen by reputation and consensus. The bour ba also has five brak advising him on the governance of each of the vassal kingdoms.

Kangam: a Mbeyan term meaning a notable person. Not a noble but someone that people greatly respect.

First People: the descendants of Mbey's original inhabitants.

Njaay: the national language of Mbey.

Second People: peoples directly descended from Maghrebi nomads who settled in Mbey, and have intermingled with the First People.

Thiossane: a Mbeyan word that means history, culture and tradition.

Social Strata

Mbey's most fundamental social division is that of commoner and kangam. The former represents the vast majority of Mbeyan people, just as you would expect, though subtle distinctions exist between those who labor and those who practice a craft. And in principle, a kangam is no different—he performs the same works or practices the same crafts as any commoner. What distinguishes a kangam from his peers is the respect he receives. Indeed, the term "kangam" means "most notable." He is, in a sense, the nobility of Mbey, yet no Théan native would recognize this kind of nobility. A kangam does not live apart from his fellows, nor does he necessarily possess more wealth, and his status is neither inherited nor formally elected.

Becoming kangam depends on trust—when an individual demonstrates great wisdom and skill, such that her peers turn to her for guidance time and again, she is kangam. The process is so informal, that a kangam may not realize her status until she gets called upon to fulfill a formal function of her role, such as helping to select a new bour. This meritocracy comes with little fanfare or reward—more responsibility without commensurate financial gain, where one's civic duty rather than personal ambition or greed drives that responsibility. Which is not to say kangam receive no rewards at all; this position born from the respect of others means that kangam are cared for and treated well by all.

Above the kangam are the bour and brak. The bour and brak are equals, in theory. Elsewhere, a bour might be termed kings, but the word "ambassador" fits better. A bour is native to the realm over which he rules and each of the five vassal kingdoms has its own honorific for this position—in Nder, this man is called the *Bour*, in Diourbel the *Teny*, in Mboul the *Damel*, in Gelwaar the *Balam* and in Kahone the *Laman*. As semipermanent members of the bour ba's court, they spend as much time in Lougua as in their homeland.

Conversely, the five brak, chosen by the bour ba from the most trusted kangam, are sent to live in his vassal kingdoms, where they officially represent his interests in those kingdoms. Once held by those chosen among their peoples, today, they have all been replaced by abonsam, who wear the former brak's faces. The **bour** advise the bour ba on the customs and needs of their people and the **brak** assist the bour ba's coastal holdings in matters of defense and other interests of state. In this way, each vassal kingdom receives adequate representation in the bour ba's court, and the bour ba always has a hand in the goings on in his faraway lands, though current events have upset that balance considerably.

There is one other class of note within Mbey—that of a slave. In one form or another, slavery has existed in Mbey for as far back as the griots' stories go. The practice of capturing one's enemies—and Mbey is surrounded by them—and pressing them into labor or battle is as old as war. With the arrival of Atabean Trading Company, though, slavery became a business, with humans at the product. It is no longer limited only to Mbey's enemies; the Second People of Mbey are often peddled in the Company flesh markets, but even First People may find themselves on the slaver's block as punishment for a vast array of increasingly petty crimes.

Gender in Mbey

Mbey subscribes to a distinction in gender and gender roles—one in which women are largely dependent upon men. Despite tradition conspiring against any woman becoming bour ba or bour (a tradition that a few wish to see changed), a woman is no less essential to the prosperity of her village and no less likely to be kangam than men. In villages where day-to-day concerns demand action and the noblest position one can hold is a natural extension of one's value to others, gender roles are less strict. Even more true for the Second People of Mbey, whose lineage traces directly back to Maghreb, they recognize a matrilineal queen as well as a patrilineal king.

Mbey also has a tradition of gender nonconformance. A man who has no male heirs might designate his daughter as a "male daughter" and raise her as a man. Similarly, a man might take on the role of a "male wife" or a woman might take wives of her own. These gender role changes happen both due to a person taking on a role for which he feels comfortable, and from the social need for him to occupy a position that "traditionally" goes to another gender. Such roles are seen as a necessary means to help society function, and individuals who take on these roles often have a commensurate rise in station—a wife who takes other wives, for instance, gains the status of being a wealthy provider and family head. Of course, Bonsam's influence means that these people increasingly suffer distrust and persecution, a trend that heralds increasing instability in Mbey.

Customs & Culture

The people of Mbey are principally of two ethnic stocks: the First People of Mbey and the Second People of Mbey.

The First People are the descendants of Mbey's original inhabitants who first clustered around its warm coastal waters and made homes here. They flourished in this agreeable climate, and with time spread both north and south along its coasts, as well as into its interior, sometimes displacing other tribes, more often than not, peacefully blending with them. Where they saw an opportunity, the First People adopted and adapted their culture, taking up new skills like animal husbandry, woodworking and even the potent spiritual magic of the northern Nder tribes. Though they saw themselves as one people, they even adopted names to distinguish their regional differences—Nder, Gelwaar, Diourbel and Mboul.

In time, they came to a great basin deep in the heart of the rainforests. Mountains shielded it from their enemies from north to south, while great spurs opened to the very heart of their lands, like arms extending an embrace. The tribes that dwelt here called the basin, Mbey. Here the First People settled in the village of Lougua. At the time, Lougua was provincial, of minor importance and virtually unknown to any outside Mbey itself. That changed with the coming of the Jok and the gifting of the Sika'Dwa stool, after which Mbey became an empire and Lougua its seat.

The Second People came to Mbey as refugees from the north, driven from their ancestral homes in Maghreb. The shorter, lighter skinned people also brought their own religion. The First People worshipped a thousand spirits and gods; the Second People revered but one. They often spoke of Prophets and those who know of such things point to the influence of the Crescent Empire, itself so prevalent in Maghreb. Their vast diaspora carried them to the utter south of Mbey and may very well have taken them to Manden and beyond, but for the emissaries of the bour ba who met them upon the banks of the great southern river and extended to them sanctuary. So the Second People, tired and homesick, put down their packs on the banks of that river and forever after claimed it theirs, which they called Kahone.

Any traveler in the Kingdom must remember that in the whole history of Mbey, the First People and Second People were always equals. The distinction of "First" and "Second" merely notes chronology—those who came first and those who came second—without implication of class or privilege. This equality changed with the arrival of the Atabean Trading Company and took deeper root with the breaking of the Bonsam Stones. While most people know that Mbey's raids into Manden and Maghreb to secure slaves has tarnished relations with its neighbors, little if anything is said by Ifrians of Bour Ba Ighodalo's surrender of the Second People to the foreigners' depredations. This dual Villainy has turned the Second People of Mbey into true second-class citizens. Despite living in Mbey for centuries, the Second People remembered the feeling of this persecution in their bones, and so spared little time in taking up their packs again. The southward migration has begun anew, as if it never truly ended. Where exactly they will find their true home is unknown.

Clothing

In Mbey society, people still separate clothing along gender lines, with some fluidity between them. The dominant clothing item is a *boubou*: a loose fitting, wide sleeved, cotton tunic. Depending on the purpose of the boubou, it may be elaborately embroidered with rich threads and patterns in a variety of colors.

A woman often ties a matching headscarf or turban to match her boubou in various sculptural styles to complement her face. Footwear includes plain open leather sandals or closed, pointed ones, as well as rich and colorful sandals with elaborate decoration as befitting the occasion and wealth of the person.

Clothing in Mbey is often colorful, and even the fragmentary remnants worn by the poor often bear bright dyes of many hues. Color has no gender preference, and both men and women enjoy the wide range of many colors, often in lines or patterns woven vertically into the boubou.

Thiossane

For ages, a Mbeyan shared a bond of cultural identity unlike any elsewhere in the world. Six kingdoms under one banner, each unique and yet each very much a part of Mbey. She called this deep-rooted bond thiossane, which meant "history, tradition and culture." As much as anything, Bour Ba Ighodalo's breaking of thiossane betrayed Mbey, though a person does her best to maintain the honored tradition, even when her king does not.

The first and strongest unit of thiossane is the family. The nominal head of the household, at least among the First People of Mbey, is the father and husband, though he serves as both lord and servant. While his word is law, he is not beyond reproach; any of his wives may counsel him and failure on his part to consider wise counsel may yield dire consequences from his extended social circles within a village. Among the Second People, the mother-wife and father-husband divides this role equally, each counseling the other, but carrying final authority over matters particular to their gender—daughters, households and fields, and sons, politics, hunting and trade respectively.

Large families are considered a sign of prosperity, for only a wealthy person can provide for many mouths. But this overlaps with the next most vital element of thiossane—the village. Villages are extensions of the family; large communities may seem prosperous, but only if the individual members are vigorous and well-cared for. Because of this, villages often share the responsibilities of childcare, of working the fields or maintaining the homes and of trade with other communities or outside elements. This too is part of thiossane.

The leaders among any village are the kangam, the "most notables." When there is a problem, the kangams' voices are given most weight. And when one who is not kangam speaks wisely often enough, such that everyone knows her voice can be trusted, the village elevates her to kangam.

Most villages have strong ties to other nearby villages through the tradition of intermarriage. Marriages tend to be arranged, and while the bride-to-be or groom-to-be may express opinions on the matter, the final decision always belongs to their parents. The groom's family makes the proposal to the bride's—in the form of an offer of foodstuffs (kola nuts are common). Acceptance of the offer signals a period of courtship, which may last as little as days or as much as several months and culminates in a marriage ceremony that takes the form of "moving day," as the bride moves from her home to the home of her new husband. Part of this ceremony includes the transfer of goods from one family to another, completing the offer that initiated the marriage. And this too is part of thiossane.

A Typical Day

The workday begins with the people of the village gathering to greet each other for the day. Messages of thankfulness are sent to the Ori. If someone is missing, people seek him out. If another needs help in her activities for that day, the village makes sure she receives that help. Then everyone returns to their respective duties.

A worker takes his midday meal with his family, before returning to whatever chores remain for the afternoon. The evening meal, however, is a social affair. For those who wish to join in, and such participation is not mandatory, song and dance precede a large meal, after which more song and dance eventually gives way to the telling of stories and perhaps the settling of conflicts, should such things be required. An ancestor is invited in and a bowl of water is set out for her, in case she is thirsty from her travels. The evening never finishes without final words lifted to the Ori. An example of a common prayer is "If you are pleased with us this night, may you watch over our families as we sleep." The tone of these gatherings may vary from ribald to somber—indeed, the latter is more likely in these troubled days than the former—but regardless, the village comes together to share in its community.

Language

Njaay is the primary language of the Kingdom of Mbey and the native language of the Mbeyan people. Like the neighboring languages Nder and Gelwaar, it belongs to the Njaayan branch of the Kwara language family. Njaay dialects vary geographically and between rural and urban areas.

Food

The typical Mbeyan diet consists of proteins like fish and chicken (or in the wealthier households, goat and sheep), paired with millet, fonio, Ifri rice, nuts (peanuts and kola), Ifri groundnut (bambara bean), cabbage, onions, peppers or carrots. Sauces are popular, particularly spicy ones or red sauces made from tomatoes. The baobab tree, a staple for many villages, produces leaves, fruit and seeds used in all manner of foods, from soups to sauces to flour. The dika, another such tree, grows mostly in the wild and produces a sweet mango-like fruit whose seeds are both edible and invaluable as a source of oil. Sorghum, a common crop grown in the drier inland regions of Mbey, functions as cereal, a sweetener and feed for livestock. Apart from slaves and gold, sorghum is the one true export the Company trades fairly for in Belleté.

Extensive trade with the foreigners means you can find exotic Théan foods throughout Mbey, particularly in the larger towns, or any place an Company ship has made port.

Art and Music

Storytelling, music and performance art are cornerstones of village social life.

Every village has several storytellers, usually an elder member, whose body has betrayed her when it comes to menial labor. A storyteller spends her mornings with the youngest children, instructing them in the ways and history of Mbey. In the evenings, she takes prominent roles in the village gatherings, recounting great tales of legend and myth for the amusement of all and providing historical counsel to the kangam when deliberating upon matters of political importance. She is a teacher and entertainer and historian, all in one.

Music and dance are the province of all. Every child of Mbey learns the traditional songs and dance of his village, as well as his kingdom, from even before he can walk or speak. Most learn to play instruments as well if only to use his body for percussion by slapping, stamping and the like. The tam-tam drum is the most popular instrument in all Mbey and every village has at least accomplished master, as well as an apprentice.

THE TRAVELING MUSICIAN

In this dark time, trust is at a premium, and travelers are always watched askance—and, in some of the most dangerous parts of Mbey, may be at risk to be kidnapped and sold into slavery. But music still has a powerful hold on the soul, and the musician and storyteller can stir the spirit; and the traveling musician, who goes from village to village and reminds people of their history and their kinship, has two great weapons at her disposal: the power to shame the people, so that they reject the evils that they have previously embraced; and the power to elevate the people, to inspire them to great and magnificent deeds.

While a lone traveler (or a small group) finds it difficult to make her way across Mbey, and constantly suffers suspicion, a traveling musician can always find a way to make friends. The call of the tam-tam drum, the thrilling sound of a rattle followed by the refrain of a favorite story, brings children running to listen, and when the children come the parents soon follow. A song or story that stirs hearts also opens doors. While the musician must still be cautious, this social currency clears the way for trade of goods and information. A traveler who otherwise has to sleep on the side of the road may find that she can barter for a warm bed of hay and a bite to eat.

Of course, this has its risks as well—abonsam have ears too, after all. But the greatest storyteller can, according to legend, drive back the abonsam with her renditions of hope and the fire of human passions. Certainly a musician of great skill and conviction could *convince* an abonsam of this and cause it to flee...power perceived is power achieved.

Religion

Religion in Mbey is, much like its people, a mélange of overlapping practices, beliefs and dogma.

The oldest of these is animism. The earliest Ifri people saw spirits in all things—the lion, the wind, the banyan tree—and the tribes that settled the coast of Mbey were no different. Their relationship with these spirits was rarely reverential; Ifri is as fierce as it is beautiful, frequently both at the same time, with little that could be done to placate its spirits when they were angry. But a person could know the spirits and seek to coexist with them. These beliefs never yielded to the introduction of new faiths and are even now considered a simple matter of fact—we are surrounded by spirits and to ignore them is foolhardy.

Mbey's greatest formal practitioners of animism were the Nder. Where others sought merely to coexist with the capricious forces around them, the Nder aspired to something more—alliance.

Legends tell of Nder shamans bringing floods to destroy their armies, hence the nickname "Drowning Lands," and outsiders whisper of ancient pacts forged between them and the spirits of the hundred rivers that thread their way through the kingdom. Some wonder how, with such naked power, the Nder could ever have been conquered by Mbey and theorize that this same power allows them to seal their borders against the new totalitarianism of the bour ba.

Ancestor cults are similarly common throughout Mbey, for it stands to reason that if everything has a spirit, then the spirits of the dead—particularly beloved relatives—are predisposed to look kindly upon their still-living descendants. Such beliefs rarely organize into worship; rather, a Mbeyan simply assumes that her ancestors dwell near her always and treats them with the same respect she treats any living loved one, friend or villager. She accomplishes this by sharing food and particularly water; being dead is thirsty work to the Mbeyan mind.

The unification of Mbey under one ruler also brought with it the religion of Assanyi. Like their Manden neighbors to the south, the people of Mbey came to depend upon the Thousand Small Gods called the Ori. For the clear majority of its history, no distinction appeared between the practice of Assanyi in Mbey as compared to Manden; the mortals offered supplication to the Ori and in exchange, the Ori carried messages to the Great God on behalf of the people.

With the rise of Bonsam, though, things have changed. A Mbeyan, reluctant to speak to the Ori directly now, fears evil spirits overhearing and perverting her prayers. In most places, she simply goes without, calling upon the Ori only in times of desperate need and sometimes, not even then. Others have found a more drastic means of making their will known in the realms beyond—by attempting to commune witht he dead. Such measures are desperate in their own way, for the dead are unpredictable allies, but in the war against ultimate evil, the typical Mbeyan takes what he can get.

The Second People of Mbey are emigrants from Maghreb and with them came that Kingdom's gods. Like the Maghrebi, the goddess Cyre is a dominant figure in the lives of the Second People and thus, they are by far the most egalitarian of Mbey's people when it comes to gender. The beasts of the savannah, particularly the lion and the gazelle, are important symbols of life, death and renewal to the Second People. The warrior-sect of the simb—the false lions—are both religious and warrior figures.

These traditions speak to a better time for Mbey, a memory of its glorious past, but the last decidedly belongs to its troubled present. The practice of abonsam worship has flourished among those willing to truck with the vile spirits, and now in these disastrous times the Villains and malcontents no longer fear to show their faces

Sorcery

The once rich magical traditions of Mbey have largely been eradicated. The strange animism of Nder has vanished along with the people of that kingdom. The exorcists of Gelwaar, those responsible for guarding the Stones of Bonsam and protecting Mbey's citizens from evil infestation, have one by one been hunted down and assassinated. The warrior Kahone, who channel the might of lion and the speed of a gazelle, have led their people south to the relative safety of Manden's borders. Filling these voids now is the unwholesome practice of abonsam worship.

The abonsam should not be. They do not play by normal rules. They do not play by *any* rules, including

the rule of flesh. They are spirits made flesh; one moment they may be skin and meat and blood and another just a thought, idea or memory. They exist and they do not exist. They have their own forms and yet they can possess mortal shells as well...and they need not forego the former to do the latter.

This power of possession forms the backbone of abonsam sorcery. A mortal subject to possession can try to resist, though for most the futile effort ends in the total subjugation, if not the destruction of his will. One who relinquishes his body to a fiend can cohabitate with it, suppressed but alive until the invading presence chooses to leave.

The body of a possessed mortal often takes on aspects of the fiend inhabiting it and sometimes retains these even after the inhabiting spirit has departed. Bestial traits are not uncommon and rumors of people melded with abonsam abound throughout Mbey; most assume that such an individual is an impure soul who did something to allow the malevolent spirit to trespass upon his flesh. One bearing the marks of possession is most often driven from his village, to die in the wilds or live as a hermit. Bitterness, or even just the need to survive, makes this pariah an ideal candidate for further interaction with Bonsam.

The exorcists of Gelwaar, the sole folk capable of forcing an abonsam from a possessed mortal, were also skilled in mystical combat with the fiends—a necessary contingency should the spirit seek revenge against the offending exorcist. Little wonder that these rare, willful men and women became the first targets of the Bour Ba Ighodalo's secret police once he made the decision to break the Bonsam Stones. Still, rumors persist that some exorcists remain, hidden away from the eyes of the bour ba and his infernal consort, Chitendu.

In the absence of these exorcists another type of sorcerer has arisen, called *rooi heks*, who practice The Red Touch. A sorcerer makes contact with the Jok who possess her for a time in the name of the greater good. In exchange, she is left with the ability to use The Red Touch. While the Jok are seemingly infallible, the people they choose aren't always up to the task of the gifts they receive. Whenever someone comes into contact with the Jok, the world around him twists and bends in unnatural ways which puts stress on his soul. This unnatural bending of the world is the source of both power and temptation.

Rooi heks see this twisting of the world as a gift, but some view it as a path to corruption. The Jok chooses a righteous person for their means, but it does not mean her soul can survive the stress, and evil may tempt a rooi heks. The Red Touch removes Corruption from the world by allowing the rooi heks to absorb it into herself. She then uses the stress on her soul to command the very substance of the world the same way the Jok do. In a land overcome with the abansom, a rooi heks is willing to use anything at her disposal to cleanse her land.

Most people in Mbey view The Red Touch as direct opposition to the abansom. A few feel the power is not meant for mortals, and its use is pure evil. It is true that overuse of the Red Touch can lead down a path of Villainy, but many rooi heks walk a fine line to balance cleansing the world with the use of their power. A Hero with the Red Touch hopes to do more good than bad with her Jok granted powers, and freely accepts the consequences if it means she can use it for good.

In all Mbey, only one other magical tradition remains and, to some extent, has flourished. As fear leaves humanity distant and isolated from the spirit world, an Assanyi priest looks to the sympathetic magic inherent in places and objects for answers. Most especially, her rituals of calling for the spirits of the dead offer the common folk a medium by which to communicate with the Ori who give life to the world. In villages across Mbey, men and women gather around fires to speak their prayers to the spirits of friends and relatives, before releasing the creatures into the night in search of the Thousand Small Gods.

A traveler in Mbey might, at any given time, stumble upon one or a dozen of these questing spirits. A spirit is dangerous—he is subject only to the whims of his most primitive instincts—but killing one is an act of highest blasphemy, subject to retaliation of any who discover the crime, but most especially from the village of the spirit's origin.

Government

What Mbey was less than a generation ago and what Mbey is now are two very different things.

In both, the bour ba is a political and spiritual leader. The nature of his sovereignty has changed, however. When he sat upon the Sika'Dwa stool, he ruled by divine mandate of the Jok. There was no question to his authority, not because no one dared, but because the people had no need. The bour ba ruled with grace and wisdom and when it came time for a new king to sit upon the stool, the kangam (leading notables) of the five vassal kingdoms chose their next leader. Thus, the title of bour ba was non-hereditary; the kangam of the five tributary kingdoms freely choose any man from the sixth, that of Mbey, and they regarded their duty with both solemnity and joy—a sacred honor to ensure the continued prosperity of Mbey. It was as close to a true meritocracy as people could imagine.

This system raised Bour Ba Ighodalo to the Sika'Dwa.

People cannot know what people cannot know, and none in Mbey knew what the Atabean Trading Company was capable of. They too failed to foresee Bour Ba Ighodalo's weakness for his children. But can a father forced to endure the enslavement of two sons ever be called weak? Even if he trades the divine stool of Sika'Dwa for their very lives? In Bour Ba Ighdalo's grieved mind, he believed that wisdom, not weakness, led him to break the Bonsam Stones. This "wisdom" was to know that absent the Jok's great gift, Mbey could not be. Four other rulers in the four other Kingdoms of Ifri sit upon a Sika'Dwa still. The gods favored such peoples. Mbey could not stand with them, nor against…a Kingdom led by mere humans was no kingdom at all. The Bonsam Stones, though, contained power to match, perhaps even rival, the Jok. If the gods had forsaken Ighodalo's rulership, then the devil ratifies it.

Ighodalo remains Bour Ba. Around him is his council—beings with the appearance of native Mbeyans, but resembling no one at all. Foremost of these hovers always smiling Chitendu, never far from Ighodalo's side. Ighodalo rarely says a word without first measuring it against the strange being's counsel.

No one now knows how Ighodalo intends to choose his successor. Mbeyans presume he and his advisors will select the next bour ba, in defiance of tradition. In the meantime, Ighodalo's agents search for his sons; in the new Mbey, perhaps one of these boys will ascend to his father's throne.

Each of the five lesser kingdoms—Nder, Diourbel, Mboul, Gelwaar and Kahone—have bours of their own, appointed by their own electors, the kangam. In the recent past, they possessed considerable authority—the bour were the bour ba's lesser equals. The bour ba entrusted them to oversee their own affairs, granting them near autonomy save for matters of defense and trade and they extended their loyalty to him, trusting in the grace and wisdom granted by the Sika'Dwa.

Now, the bour rule at the convenience of Bour Ba Ighodalo, who wears around his neck a thong of leather upon which hang five human hearts. These are the hearts of the five bour, taken from them to ensure their devotion. Four of the hearts still beat. The fifth believed to be the heart of Nder's Bour, has gone silent, just as Nder itself has.

Beneath the bour are the kangam, the leading notables of each kingdom. In most ways, a kangam carries the greatest burden of responsibility in Mbey. No formal process exists to become kangam; she achieves recognition organically when others come to her for counsel and when they have troubles. She can seek guidance from the bour, who (in the past) could seek guidance from the bour ba if the matter warranted it, but most times, a kangam seeks practical solutions to practical problems, ranging from simple property disputes to foreign aggression. For this reason, the kangam, as opposed to the bour, choose each new bour ba.

Of course, these hierarchies vary from kingdom to kingdom.

In Nder, for example, each village has its own leader, called a brak. The brak is, for all practical purposes, the chief of the kangam and in many respects, each treats his own village as an autonomous political entity. Brak negotiate everything from trade to warfare on a village-to-village basis, with little interference from the bour, making the recent, unified vanishing of every single Nder village more mysterious.

In Kahone, the Laman is the official representative to Mbey, but within Kahone itself, the queen, known as the *Lingeer*, wields power just as great. Ancient emigrants from Maghreb, their culture was both

patriarchal and matriarchal; at the head of each line, a non-hereditary king and queen attended to the affairs of their respective gender. And while the Second People adopted the patriarchal customs of their neighbors out of a necessity to accord with the empire, they felt no inclination to relinquish the ages-old tradition of their matrilineal authority. This wisdom proved unusually fortuitous, for Bour Ba Ighodalo overlooked the Lingeer when he summoned his vassals to Lougua and stole their hearts to him. Now, though the Laman of Kahone remains bound to Mbey, he rules over a kingdom of none, for the queen has rallied her Second People southward, away from the cursed kingdom.

Education

In one respect, women have a significant social advantage over men—that of education. In the capital of Lougua is a university, originally constructed by wealthy Dīnist merchants to serve and educate their own children. Through royal decree, the university was only allowed to operate if its doors also opened to Mbey's children as well. To have a child attend this school is a great honor, and the education provides a source of limitless opportunity, but life on Mbey's frontier is hard for peasant families and a healthy boy can be rarely spared on such luxury. A girl, too, performs vital tasks in supporting her family and village, but a second or third daughter might well be planned specifically to fill the role of student. This is certainly less true now, with the corruption of Bour Ba Ighodalo and the new policy of Louguan isolationism. Many families grieve daughters trapped in that terrible city behind barriers of impenetrable flame, forced to endure who-knows-what atrocities at the hands of the mad king and his infernal court.

Currency

Old Mbey's economy, culture and political dominance was driven by extensive trade. Its conflicts with Manden and Maghreb were often about its vast natural resources, particularly the fertile flood plains of Nder and the fantastic kola orchards of Kahone. But the even longer periods of peace resulted from shrewd trade agreements. The key to this political maneuvering were the shipwrights of Mboul, whose mastery of the oceans afforded Mbey a ubiquitous presence in the port markets of Khemet, Aksum and others. In exchange for generous trade on Diourbel stallions and other Mbeyan goods, these faraway nations ensured that Mbey always had allies along the borders of its would-be enemies.

That is all in the past. New Mbey's ships are forbidden in nearly every port in Ifri, but Mbey has replaced these old allies with a new one: the Atabean Trading Company. To facilitate this relationship, the Company has built markets, plantations and trade outposts all along the Mbeyan coast, as well as many nearby islands. Their principal interests are gold, slaves and real estate, for which they offer guns, ships and military support.

Mbey possesses few gold or silver mines. What precious metals the Kingdom does have, it took from elsewhere, through trade or force. In the past, a Mbeyan had little need for currency—the goods she produces provided more than sufficient barter—but raids into Manden occur with greater frequency now, both for slaves and gold to trade to the Company who prefer a currency to trade. For a time, the metalworkers of Lougua minted official Mbeyan coins, striking them in the image of Bour Ba Ighodalo, but the Company found such currency rejected in nearly every market across Ifri, so now they prefer to deal only in raw ore. Castel del Elmina, a one-time plantation on a small island off the coast Mboul, has at great expense been converted to a foundry for the express purpose of extracting pure gold from ore, and black smoke churns from its chimneys day and night.

No discussion of Mbey's economy is complete without mention of its "cursed gold." Company, being "civilized" folk, rarely trade directly in goods for slaves. Instead, she pays with gold coinage for any flesh purchased, which an Mbeyan slaver may then spend in Trade Company markets as he sees fit. For an agent, this means double dipping, taking a cut at both ends of the deal. For those who later come to possess this gold, it may mean damnation, for any gold received for flesh in Mbey bears Bonsam's taint and that when spent pays back the spender with ill fortune. A single coin grants a single bit of bad luck—a lover leaves or a loved one meets with a terrible accident—while an entire coffer full may leave a man or woman in utter ruin. Such curses are never so blatant as to lead to the spender's death—after all, a person who possesses

one coin likely possesses two and he should live to spend both—but almost anything else is possible. A Company agent scoffs at such superstitious drivel and she may be right; certainly, no Trade Company employee has ever suffered from any obvious, arbitrary tragedy. Indeed, their fortunes have only surged since allying with Mbey. Still, those who do believe reluctantly accept Company coin derived from Mbey, leading the Trading Company to create elaborate laundering rackets to get their coinage into circulation. Already these coins can be found nearly anywhere in Théah.

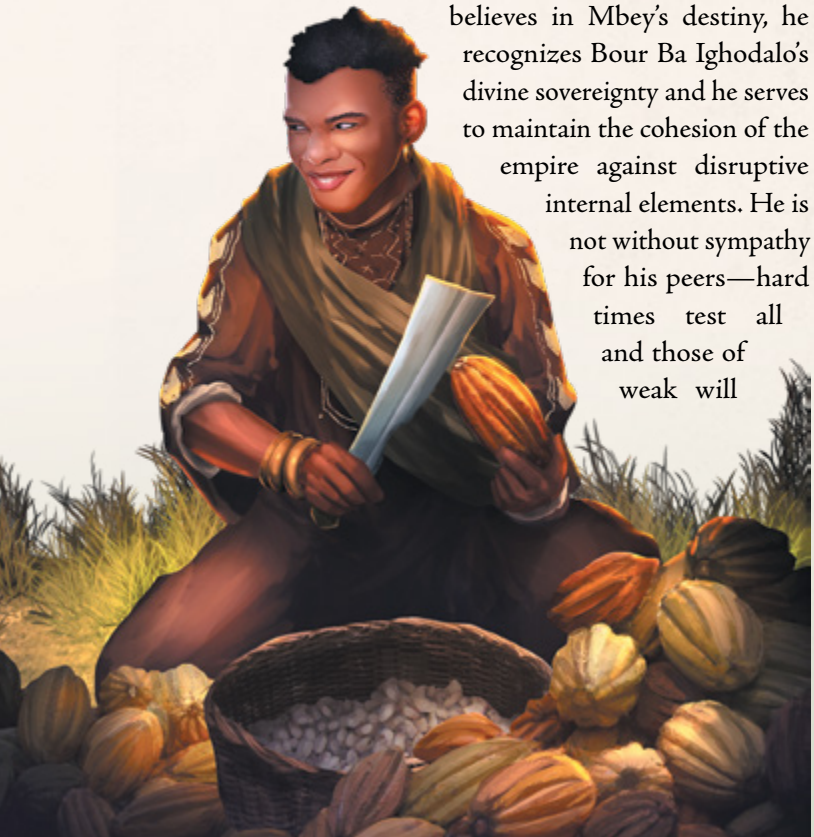
Military

Sons of the Ninth Dead Guard

Mbey's horrors are not purely demonic. Indeed, in the face of such monstrousness, a very human evil keeps order in Mbey.

The Sons of the Ninth Dead Guard enforce Bour Ba Ighodalo's will. Inheritors of the legacy of the Ninth Guard, all but destroyed in the Siege of Lougua and the Seizing of the Bonsam Fields, the Sons are part military, part secret police and part religious cult. He wields no supernatural powers and needs none; blind faith, nationalistic pride and suicidal devotion are his tools.

Nearly all the Sons are volunteers. They are young men and in some cases, women—younger than their Ninth Guard forbearers. A Son believes in Mbey's destiny, he recognizes Bour Ba Ighodalo's divine sovereignty and he serves to maintain the cohesion of the empire against disruptive internal elements. He is not without sympathy for his peers—hard times test all and those of weak will can hardly be faulted for the fragility of her faith—but his job demonstrates to the faithless her folly, and does not forgive her.



The typical Sons patrol consists of a dozen individuals. Some few boast Mboul mounts, salvaged before the decimation of the Mboul herds, but any Son is more than a match on the ground for any other fighter. An unflagging runner, he can pursue quarry for hours through scorching savannah. Armed with Théan steel and black powder weapons, he is a fearsome killer of the first order. Even his armor—tanned leather studded with glittering fragments of basalt—is designed to strike fear into his enemies.

Many of Mbey's larger settlements, actually fortress-towns, function as staging grounds for the Sons of the Ninth Dead Guard and their Company trade partners.

Mbeyan Names

Names in Mbey are important because they mark lineage. A parent names her children not after living relatives but the names of ancestors recently deceased. Some follow this custom in hopes of currying favor with the spirits, others as a means of appeasement. Names are most often kept within a maternal line—mothers, aunts, the husband of a grandmother, the brother of a great-aunt. This practice serves to channel the spirits towards those individuals, hopefully producing favorable qualities, but sometimes leading to tragic faults.

Common Male Names

Abdou, Alagie, Amadou, Alieu, Baboucarr, Dawda, Ebrima, Lamin, Modou, Saul

Common Female Names

Aja, Bintou, Binta, Fadia, Fatou, Ida, Kaddy, Maimuna, Mariama, Salimatou

Notable Locations of Mbey

The Stones of Bonsam

Without doubt, the Stones of Bonsam are the source of Mbey's woes...and all its power. Tremendous black stone monoliths dotting the plains of Gelwaar, it seems very much like a cyclopean graveyard, though prison is a far more apt word. Each of the stones incarcerates a single devil, an abonsam, which in Ifrian means evil. The greatest of them all is Bonsam themselves and they are the source of all evil.

The people of Gelwaar have long labored as wardens over the Bonsam Stones. That all ended when Bour Ba Ighodalo's forces marched into the plains under cover of night and stole the first of the Stones. Secreted away to Lougua, the bour ba pacted with the being inside—Chitendu—releasing it into the world to do his bidding. That began the great excavation of Gelwaar, in which all Bonsam Stones were wrenched from their primordial resting places and carted away to Lougua, where the bour ba might wrest from them even greater power.

The nature of the Bonsam Stones is a mystery. They are crystalline in appearance but unlike jet or onyx or any other material. Darker than a sky without stars, they reflect no light, but rather seem to absorb it. As you draw near, you can feel the air cool around you, as if stepping into the shade. Draw too near and you may feel something thrash suddenly away just beneath the surface, like a fish under the riverbank, surprised by an intruder. Give it a moment, though, and you feel it float back to the surface, as if curious about the trespasser in their space. At this point, you can commune with the abonsam inside. They will make you an offer. The details vary, but the premise remains always the same: power for freedom.

Impervious to accidental ruin, shattering a Bonsam Stone is no more difficult for mortals than cracking an egg. The only exception is the prison-stone of Bonsam itself, which requires the touch of all five rulers of Ifri. Noting that the legend says nothing about being willful accomplices, Bour Ba Ighodalo has initiated a secret campaign to claim one hand from each of the other four rulers.

Obsessed as he is with the Bonsam Stones, most people believe that Bour Ba Ighodalo has opened dozens, if not hundreds of them in his mad bid for power. Truthfully, Ighodalo has unleashed less than a dozen abonsam upon Mbey—Chitendu, the five fiendish braks who attend to his vassal kingdoms and a select few others to assist in affairs abroad. But he has stockpiled hundreds of Bonsam Stones, both to deny his would-be enemies access to them and as a contingency should any of those enemies grow too brazen.

Story Hooks

- The abonsam inside the stones are insanely powerful, each one capable of terrible acts. A new cache of these stones is discovered in a previously unexplored area of the Fields of

Bonsam, set to be picked up by the Ninth Dead Guard. The Heroes overhear this information. Can they steal the stones and destroy them before the Guard picks them up?

- The Atabean Trading Company would dearly love to get their hands on one of the stones for examination. When they approach the Heroes to aid them and offer knowledge on how to get one, can the Heroes turn the tables and take the stone themselves so they can destroy it?
- One of the last members of the Gelwaar Guardians hides with an unusual Bonsam stone. Rumor says the stone is dual colored, both dark as night and white as day. Can the Heroes track down the guardian before Ighodalo does? And what is the secret of the stone that sings and sobs?

The Burning Jungle

The jungles surrounding Lougua were once misty, sweltering, humid affairs—dangerous by any standard, especially to those unfamiliar with their trackless expanse—but at least they were not on fire. Now the canopy burns with a livid emerald flame that seems to be alive. The fires rage on, stifling intruders with their heat, yet the native flora and fauna are never consumed in the blaze. Few ever return from this endless green inferno. If a hell has manifested anywhere in all the world, this is surely it.

Still, the Burning Jungle serves a vital purpose in defense of Mbey, for only the will of the bour ba can grant safe passage through its blazing eves. The king's city of Lougua lies safely ensconced in its deepest reaches, all but cut off from the rest of the world, and never again will foreigners lay siege to it.

Story Hooks

- The animals in the jungle begin to change in unusual and horrible ways. More than one scholar from the Invisible College wishes to get their hands on one, despite the dangers. A member sends one of the Heroes to capture a bird said to be made entirely from flame.
- The passage through the Burning Jungle does not always end well. Some people go missing and a few travelers report glimpses of what they think might be another world. On their way through the jungle, the Heroes see such a vision, and in the other world, they seem to be versions of themselves with emerald eyes. Now whenever they look in the mirror they can see their dopplegangers just out of sight. How can they rid themselves of these specters?
- The Burning Jungle is spreading, growing slowly towards the nearest river. What happens if the green flame extends to the river network that is Ifri's lifeblood?

Lougua

Lougua is older than the kingdom itself. A tiny native village when the Mbeyans first arrived, carved out the heart of the rainforest, it remained as such until the arrival of the Jok, who placed the Sika'Dwa stool in the center of its inner circle and thus elevated its fate above all other places in Mbey.

In the centuries since, it grew into a haphazard tangle of huts and houses interwoven among the trees. Always at the very center sat the Sika'Dwa stool. And each day the bour ba took his seat, governing in full view of all.

Despite its isolation, Lougua thrived. From the north, travelers came by boat to the headwaters of the Mbey River and disembarked there for any of the smaller rivers that then flowed south into the Mbey Basin. For those from the west, guides brought them along safe, well-tended paths.

Though it may have lacked some of the cosmopolitan virtues of Khemet's grander ports, the first Company to make their way into Mbey's interior were startled by the sheer size and diversity of this misty jungle city. Boasting some 50,000 permanent residents and half again as many visitors, Lougua was a marvel. Blessed with a variety of materials with which to build—including lumber, mud and clay for bricks and quarried stone—the city was a mélange of architectural styles. The poor farmers who tended the fields at the city's borders dwelt in dome-shaped huts of wood and mudbrick. The wealthier Crescent Empire traders and merchants were fixtures in Lougua for at least two generations before the arrival of the Atabean Trading Company. They brought architects

and engineers to erect mansions of polished wood, marble and even gold, surrounded by courtyards of manicured greenery, competing among themselves for the grandest and gaudiest of domiciles. These same merchants ingratiated themselves with the bour ba by gifting him with a soaring palace, whose peaks towered above the treetops and whose corridors were festooned with art from every corner of the world. They parlayed that goodwill into the construction of a university staffed with instructors from the Crescent Empire and beyond, ostensibly to educate their own children, though the bour ba insisted its doors be open to his people as well. It was the jewel of Ifri.

The Lougua of modern Mbey is more prison than city. New arrivals number few. Even fewer are those who leave. Walls of unbreachable flame ensure that only those the bour ba wills ever come, or ever go. The university remains, though its halls stand mostly empty now, staffed by gaunt prisoners seemingly more dead than alive. The merchant mansions remain, absent their previous masters—their lawns overgrown, their wealth stripped and interred within the royal vaults of the bour ba. Throughout the city beats the rhythmic drumming of a tam-tam. If you follow that maddening sound, it leads you to Bour Ba Ighodalo, most likely to be found in one of two places: his soaring palace of ebony spires or upon the Bonsam Throne at the very center of Lougua.

The Bonsam Throne is perhaps Lougua's most notable landmark. Once the spot where the Sika'Dwa stool sat, it has now been filled with a high mound of broken, black stones. Where a person of Mbey respected the Sika'Dwa stool and gave wide berth to it out of reverence, the Bonsam Throne she fears, for it is built from the fragments of shattered Bonsam Stones. Only one dares approach and each day he scales that bleak tumuli and sits atop it, holding court in the fashion of his predecessors, the bour bas of old.

Story Hooks

- Few escape the city but a small rebel group plans to dig their way down to an ancient tunnel carved by the python Dan Ida Hwedo herself and mentioned in an old text. They just need tools and engineering know-how.
- The city receives regular shipments of tribute in the form of gold and food. However, since the disappearance of Nder, the city's shipments have been attacked. Many of the guards have reported seeing ghostly figures before a thick fog envelops them and sends them to sleep. Now the bour ba has sent the Sons of the Ninth Guard into the city to terrorize the people into giving answers. The Heroes receive a coded note that points to Nder as the source of the rebellion, but can they trust it?
- A secret resistance against the evils of the bour ba and the Atabean Trading Company brews inside the school. The Heroes receive a mission from a secretive society who wants the student resistance safe with their parents and away from capture.

The Slave Fields of Bonsam

In a rocky scrubland as far as the eye can see, black stones that may very well have fallen from heaven pierce the soil. They reflect no light. Even sound seems muted in their presence. These are the legendary tomb-prisons of Bonsam.

Once this vast plain stood inviolate, safeguarded against trespass by the warriors of Gelwaar. Their vigilance was necessary, honorable and sacred. They protected the world from the devil and no greater memorial of humanity's greatness existed than their unbroken watch of the centuries.

Now there is not a more hopeless place in all Ifri. The Gelwaar have been relieved of their duty, replaced by Bour Ba Ighodalo's taskmasters. Camps have been raised and slaves—many of them unfortunate Mbeyans—toil daily to drag new Bonsam Stones from the earth. By decree of the bour ba, Mbeyans transport each stone to Lougua on the Bonsam Road, as it has come to be called. A ruinous ditch—carved in the face of the land by the passage of countless donkey teams and elephants dragging 1,000 pound pillars from Gelwaar to Mbey—has become the most reliable of passages into Mbey's steaming interior.

At its nearest terminus is the town of Kabi, a new settlement given shape by the needs of the taskmasters and their wards. Tents and other semi-permanent structures cluster around a single black obelisk, fully 20 feet wide and buried to an unknown depth. A dozen elephants have died in the attempt to uproot it

and yet the earth holds it fast. So Bour Ba Ighodalo's servants turn instead to studying it, even casting their eyes towards the Island of Flame in the hope of discovering its secrets.

Story Hooks

- Brother Karlas Osuna pleads with the Heroes to accompany him on a mission of mercy to free a group of slaves destined for the fields.
- A former slave master approaches a Hero in a tavern and asks for her help. He knows the ins and outs of the fields and has a plan to free all the slaves there. Is this a trap or a genuine plea for assistance?

Belleté

Belleté was one of two great Company trading colonies on the west coast of Mbey, along with Mosina, its sister city. Mosina disappeared with the rest of Nder, leaving Belleté the capital of the Company enterprise, not just in Mbey, but all Ifri. And Governor Binchet is pleased with this development.

Belleté, originally cut from the rainforest of Kahone, now serves as a staging ground for Company forays into Manden, part of the ongoing campaign to take that Kingdom's legendary gold fields. The flyspeck of a settlement, of relatively little value, acted as a waypoint for the foreigners moving north and south. The only site of interest was a place the Mbeyans called Nandi Nundi—an especially fertile delta at the mouth of the Southern River. Binchet established a small plantation there, keeping the name Nandi Nundi because it amused him.

In the early days of the Company plot against Mbey, Belleté occasionally served as a safe hold for conspirators, but its role was otherwise minor. Once in motion though, its economic importance surged, as Binchet acted upon his own ambitions. With Bour Ba Ighodalo distracted by civil war, Binchet turned his gaze to the villages outlying his borders; he swiftly threw the villagers—all of them Second People of Mbey—into irons and marched them back to the colony as slaves. He kept many on as labor—necessary to expand Belleté's borders, as well as the fields of Binchet's own plantation—but he sold the vast majority on the slave blocks they built themselves. In the months that followed, Nandi Nundi expanded exponentially, its sprawling fields worked by over 200 slaves, while the flesh market became the epicenter of the Belleté's Great Auction House, where a Mbeyan could sell his peers for gold, weapons and goods, and foreigners could buy the slaves for transport across the sea.

By then, Belleté's influence was such that despite Mosina being the larger of the two slave markets, it was the southern colony from which the Company staged their most daring raid—the one where they kidnapped the twin sons of Bour Ba Ighodalo. They held the children in Nandi Nundi, a calculated move to take advantage of Binchet's grim reputation. When the Sika'Dwa stool arrived in Nandi Nundi, people watched Binchet personally place it upon the auctioneer's stage and sit upon it, in plain view of Bour Ba Ighodalo's twin boys, whom he then auctioned off to the highest bidder. Then he auctioned off the stool itself. Depending upon who you ask, this event shattered Bour Ba Ighodalo's mind.

How exactly Belleté prospers, let alone remains standing at all, is a wonder. By all rights, Bour Ba Ighodalo should have razed it to the ground for its transgressions against his family. Some believe the bour ba bides his time, knowing that Binchet is the man most likely to lead him back to his sons. Most figure, though, that Chitendu's council has spared the foreign colony; rumors swirl of the spindly armed woman oft-seen amid the Binchet's flesh markets, though what purpose she might have there is a mystery.

Story Hooks

- A Jok disguised as a slave comes to a Hero for help. She knows the location of the Sika'Dwa stool, and if the Hero can help get it back, he will be righteously rewarded.
- A Hero, asked by the Church to recover a stolen bible, finds it the focus of attention for a series of murders. The book, stolen by pirates in a raid on an Company ship, contains coded plans to undermine the currency of a Théan nation with devalued coinage.
- A Hero is saved by a man who claims to be a son of Bour Ba Ighodalo. If she helps him

gain his freedom from slavery, he can help his father resist the power that Chitendu has over the Kingdom.

Castel del Elmina

Castel del Elmina is a foundry-fortress on the coast of Mboul. A one-time plantation, it now serves an even more vital function for a Company agent's interests in Mbey—here they smelt the gold ore they acquire, both in trade and through raiding, into pure ingots for transport. But even that covers the shadiest of their activities: the minting of their own currency and the more than occasional forgery of various Théan coinage. Two dozen Company goldsmiths comprise the upper echelons of its labor, complemented by nearly 20 slaves, half of whom are children. A half dozen warships and 100 well-trained mercenaries ensure the absolute security of Castel del Elmina.

Story Hooks

- The Heroes and several other crews, gathered by Captain Kayode Bonsu, plan to rob the foundry of its gold. The crews are some of the best (but untrustworthy) pirates in Ifri, and one crew harbors a spy that could unravel the entire operation.
- The fortress commander's handsome son is newly engaged to a noble from Montaigne. Against orders, the commander arranges a ball to celebrate the excellent match, simultaneously putting the security of the fortress at risk. The Heroes have been hired for extra security, without knowing the true nature of the fortress. On their first night, a one of the children manages to send them a message from a resistance cell in Nder. They need a distraction during the wedding…will the Heroes be able to provide it?

Sono, the Company Graveyard

Between Belleté and Castel del Elmina is the island of Sono. On a hill there, above the tree line, stands a small church of the Vaticine religion. Built by the Company, it is one of the very few institutions of Théan religion in all Mbey, because it fulfills the one sacred function even the largely inobservant Company find essential: it gives them a place to bury their dead. The entire hillside around the church is dotted with wooden grave markers painted white, and new holes, dug weekly, receive the ever-growing Company casualties.

Brother Rodrigo attends to the cemetery, along with a half dozen slaves—two men, three women and a child—and a staff of three. Rodrigo is tall, with soft eyes and features. In his fifties, he has only the slightest touch of grey around his temples and the very tips of his long mustache.

He is a kind man and generous. Still, he wanders the flesh market of Belleté on an almost monthly basis, replacing one or another of his slaves. Folks have long speculated on why a gentle, soft-spoken man like Rodrigo found himself so far away from civilized Castille, or what drove him into the arms of the Atabean Trading Company. Similarly, no one quite knows what transpires on Sono to cause such rapid turnover among its slave population. These speculations are mostly idle, uttered without rancor or even real curiosity, over a bottle or three of rum. So long as the priest attends to his duties, no one much cares about his past or his present.

Story Hooks

- Brother Rodrigo, adept at Hexenwerk, uses his art to try to put the spirits of the dead on Sono to rest but the task is not so easy. The island is filled with angry ghosts who died in sin far from home. When a Hero investigates rumors of dark dealings, she finds instead a world-weary man overwhelmed by the suffering and evil that surrounds him.
- The dead grow increasingly restless as if something deliberately stirs them up. Is it the work of a man or monster?

The Horrors of Mbey

Nightmares possess a syntax. It is not the obvious horror, the thing that cannot be. It is the slight skewing of angles, a nearly imperceptible shift in scale and scope, a sudden variation in sound, the dawning realization that your senses cannot be trusted. The waking knowledge that you cannot escape. That is Mbey.

That said, plenty of obvious horrors exist as well.

The Village That Walks

In Kahone, the villages of the Second People stand empty. Many of their inhabitants have been taken in chains by the Atabean Trading Company, their Mbeyan heritage offering no sanctuary from the unrepentant slavers. Others have fled south to Manden, hoping for warmer reception there than with the Company. Plenty have died, either in resistance or in flight.

One village, though, refuses to be reclaimed by the jungle. The Village That Walks stalks the rainforest on improbable legs, its huts and clay and thatch pressed into the roughest approximation of a human silhouette. What force animates this 30-foot monstrosity is unknown. Its purpose is equally opaque. It seethes with animus and murders indiscriminately. Some who claim to have seen it describe people, bloody and broken, pouring from its huts, like maggots from a festering wound. It leaves no tracks, nor does it blaze any trail at all through the jungle, save for the corpses strung like ornaments in its wake.

Plot Hooks

- A man called Nosomo believes that the Village That Walks once housed a powerful blessed object and seeks to recover it. Can the Heroes track the monstrosity through the jungle by word of mouth alone?
- After mapping the village's path for months, a Wiseone believes that there is a pattern to its movement, a pattern that draws it to one of the last sacred places in Kahone.
- Adema, a weaver from Kahone, believes that the Village That Walks is her home village. The village rose when she was away from home and she wants the Heroes to lay her people to rest.

The Pride of Diourbel

In Diourbel, many of the great horse breeders released their herds into the wild. This was no easy decision; for all their breeding and all their warfare training, they were no match for the hyena, cheetah and wild dogs, much less the horrors swarming down upon Diourbel from the Fields of Bonsam. Yet, for the proud horseriders of Diourbel, they preferred to send their beloved herds to death than to be forced to go to war with them in the name of Bour Ba Ighodalo.

One woman a story says, whose name is always forgotten, parlayed with the gods to protect her herd and that these gods sent the spirits of the simb, or lions, to inhabitant the bodies of her horses. Others claim that they are devil-possessed, perhaps from drinking the brackish water that leaks out of the ground in Gelwaar. Regardless, the Pride of Diourbel, shaggy, savage creatures, know none of a typical equine's timidness. Rightly feared throughout the middle-lands of Mbey, they strike in the night, trample huts to the ground and carry the survivors screaming into the savannah…though to what ends is unknown, for the Pride are not carnivores. If even a few could be repurposed as mounts, no cavalry could stand against them.

Story Hooks

- A rebel faction has been seen riding these terrible beasts. Have they figured out a way to tame these magnificent horses or is it a clever deception to cow the local governors?
- One of the Pride has been captured and a Hero's friend has been given a week to train the beast for riding or face being fed to lions.
- Bour Ba Ighodalo sends a huge hunting party to capture the Pride for himself. A Hero find his dreams plagued by visions of slaughter only he can prevent. The vision is unclear on who is being slaughtered.

Current Relations

It should be noted that the people of Mbey, may have differing opinions on the relations between Mbey and these Nations and Kingdoms below. On the whole, their true opinions are suppressed, and while you may find that outwardly they share the same ideas as their Bour Ba, inwardly…they may not.

The Kingdom of Aksum

The Aksumites act high and mighty. Perhaps they are. But they are also sneaky, gold-loving spies. They claim tradition and unbroken lineages to the past but their people neglect the spirits of their families for the spirit of a king.

The People of Aksum send their spies into our borders, but for once they do not do it to overthrow us. We know they fund the various rebel groups that have formed since the disappearance of Nder.

The Kingdom of Khemet

Others claim that we are like the Khemeti with their veneration of the ancestors but we share little in common. They have long been dismissive of our people. The Company say that there is land to build bridges upon, that we can work together, that their queen could be our ally. But we still harbor doubts.

The Queen of Khemet is as troubled as our Bour Ba. If the Khemeti people were wise, they would do away with her before they fall to the same darkness that has plagued us. Their past haughtiness towards our people has led to folly. We wish we did not share so much in common.

The Kingdom of Maghreb

It seems as if war looms. The spirits of the dead howl injustices and peaceful words are in short supply. Though there have long been connections between our Kingdoms, kindness has died in the desert and the seas provide no haven.

The Company has ruined our long-standing relationship with Maghreb by harrying their ships with vicious pirates, and now they control the rhythm of the drums of war. Whose bodies do you think will be the first in line? Certainly not the soldiers of the ATC.

The Manden Empire

For ages, we have warred with the Mandenkaw. They have preyed upon our communities and we have retaliated in kind. Much was at a standstill with neither side giving way nor finding an advantage. Many of our ancestors cry for revenge. Our new allies have tipped the balance and it seems that we have an advantage over them. Soon, their end will come and our ancestors will be pleased.

Our feud with Manden has lasted for as long as we can remember. We would take pleasure in gaining the upper hand, if it did not come due to the ATC and Bonsam evil. Once our ancestors may have cried for revenge, but we fear soon they will weep alongside Manden's if the poison of Bonsam spreads.

The Nation Montaigne

Through our contacts with the Atabean Trading Company, we have become partners with Montaigne. We harbor their ships, and trade with ease and pleasure. Their nobles find excellent respite here and soon we shall grow wealthy due to their wealth and our connections. Together with the ATC, we might bring a new day to dawn upon all of Théah…one where Mbey is in control.

Day? You mean everlasting night… The greed of the Montaigne nobles knows no bounds. They plunder our land and resources, and consider us good for merely carrying their carriages. May the gold they wear be a heavy stone around their necks.

The Atabean Trading Company

We will never forget what they wrought upon us with words and lies. We keep our enemies close in Mbey. The Company believes they have the upper hand because we allow them to trade and lavish praise upon us, but we hold ourselves to a higher power than they do. Sure, they are good for making inroads into other Nations, but we merely bide our time for revenge.

We will never forget what they wrought upon us with words and lies. Our people lay under a cloud due to their greed and cruelty. They sell us into bondage indiscriminately, and we know they would do anything to see themselves in power. For now, we are silent, and waiting, but soon enough we will rise against them. Hopefully we can unite before it is too late.

BOUR BA IGHODALO

"The Animal that bites you will be from your kennel, so take care that you have dogs, not wolves."

Bour Ba Ighodalo

Bour Ba Ighodalo was not a weak nor unwise man. However, he serves as an example of what can happen when pushed to the very brink. Bour Ba Ighodalo made his choice in a moment of human weakness, but what man could allow his sons to be murdered? What king could?

His defenders say Ighodalo may be the strongest of Mbey's kings. Due to the treachery of the Company, he is the only king of an Ifrian Kingdom who does not sit upon a Sika'Dwa stool. He knew that his Kingdom so deprived could not stand against other threats, and so he grasped the only power he knew of: the Bonsam Stones. Shattering them freed their evil prisoners, and he stacked the shards into his own thrown of power where the Sika'Dwa stool once sat. The other kings of Ifri were given their thrones, but Bour Ba Ighodalo *made* his. Does that not make him the greatest king in all Ifri?

Words such as these are a slow poison that his closest advisor, Chitendu, whispers to him every day.

In appearance, Bour Ba Ighodalo is a gaunt man, a shell of his former, portly self. His eyes are sunken and he sags under the weight of the five hearts—four of them still beating—which he wears around his neck on a thick leather thong. His voice still carries all its old authority, though where once he expressed a mirthful tone, a dark, booming timbre somberly shaded has taken hold. His people hear him speak, though, only during his daily visits to his black shard throne, an event that every citizen of Lougua cannot refuse to attend.

Story Hooks

- An unidentified Jok appears to a Hero in his dreams with an incredible request. He must recover a stone shard from Bour Ba Ighodalo's throne and bring it to Iu-Neserer.
- After garnering the attention of Bour Ba Ighodalo, the Heroes are brought before him to receive a reward. Inside one of the gifts, a note has been placed stating that Bour Ba Ighodalo only lives due to Chitendu's will, and that he desperately needs the Heroes to find a way to free him. The note seems to be written by Bour Ba Ighodalo himself. Do the Heroes dare interfere with the Devil's politics? Is the note even real?

Jaineba, the Last Simb

Jaineba is one of the Second People of Mbey. The Second People migrated to Mbey from Maghreb in the distant past. They maintain their own distinct culture, widely informed by influences from the Crescent Empire. Since the breaking of the Bonsam's Stones, the Second People have suffered the most. Treated as second-class citizens and persecuted for their religion, they often suffer the same fates as Mbey's enemy neighbors (captured and sold off as slaves).

Jaineba lost their siblings in the early resistance to Bour Ba Ighodalo's tyranny, and led their remaining family south to Manden, where they live as refugees.

Jaineba has a natural talent in *njom*, a kind of wrestling the Second People practice for both warfare and recreation. As a child, they longed to perform njom and practiced it with their brothers.

The Second People's culture has provisions to cast aside the roles of one's birth gender for a preferred one. After much grueling internal debate, Jaineba realized that they could not cast aside either gender, as they felt perfectly at home in all expressions. As their mother's last remaining child, Jaineba has taken up the ceremonial duties required of both genders, which includes wearing their eldest brother's njom regalia as tribute and to intimidate potential foes. The njom warrior in full regalia is called simb, which means "false lion" in the Second Peoples' language.

This choice to inhabit dual roles has not always been easy on them, but the flight south has opened their spirit to opportunities not possible before. Jaineba has learned to adopt the mannerisms associated with either gender, and can easily move between presenting as male, female or a blend, using whichever feels comfortable or works best for a given encounter.

Story Hooks

- Jaineba sacrifices themself to help refugees escape an abonsam death squad and is captured. A refugee begs the Heroes to save their fallen savior.
- On a journey through the treacherous jungles, a Hero is beset upon by Chitendu's thralls who seek to tear him apart. He is victorious due to Jaineba's help. In return they ask for help in freeing several families from the clutches of Atabean Trading Company slavers.

JAINEBA, THE LAST SIMB

"There are no requirements to fight against tyranny. You need a solid heart, a desire to be free, and the courage to tell others that they are as brave as you."

CHITENDU

"Evil does not corrupt the hearts of people, it finds the tears and mends them. And who can say no to feeling whole again?"

STRENGTH	INFLUENCE	RANK
6	8	14

Chitendu

Bour Ba Ighodalo's faithful and ever-present advisor, Chitendu, took her place at the Bour Ba's side following the king's return from the Fields of Bonsam. That she was previously a *resident* of those fields seems obvious to most, but few assert their beliefs out loud.

Chitendu is a pot-bellied woman with spindly limbs, oily skin and teeth that are mere nubs in her smile. And she smiles a lot; she is an affable being who laughs at everything, even herself. If it weren't for the cloud of flies and gnats that constantly circle around, her disarming appearance might even be called pleasant. Some rare few, however, speak of a different Chitendu—a braying, hyena-headed woman with an elephant's tusks and tail, the latter appendage perpetually swatting at the flies that accost her.

Bour Ba Ighodalo is never found without Chitendu at his side. On the other hand, Chitendu often wanders the streets of Lougua on her own, gossiping with (some say interrogating) its people. Some claim to have met Chitendu in faraway places—places she could not possibly have been, given the distances involved. Such people lie, obviously.

Story Hooks

- A trio of Bonsam stones goes missing while on route to the capital. Furious, Chitendu places a massive bounty on the head of the pirate responsible. Can the Heroes beat the bounty hunters to their prize so that the stones do not fall into Chitendu's grasp?
- Rumor states that one of the stones taken from the Field of Bonsam lies untouched in the deepest dungeons. Why has Chitendu segregated this particular stone and placed it under such heavy guard?
- A Hero meets a disguised Chitendu in a different kingdom, saving her from an attacker using strange magic. When the Hero gets to Mbey, the attacker hunts him down, claiming to be a Gelwaar exorcist sent to destroy the abonsam at all costs. Can the Hero clear up the mistake and help the exorcist defeat Chitendu once and for all?

Shanga, the Eternal Captain

Shanga was one of Mboul's greatest sea captains, in the days when words like "great" could reasonably be deployed in regards to Mbey. Now sailors call her "pirate," though that is not correct either. She is a woman trying to assuage her shame and guilt the only way she knows how—by eternally harrying the Atabean fleet wherever and whenever the opportunity presents itself.

In the days of first contact with the Atabean Trading Company, Captain Shanga was their most outspoken advocate. She sailed for them, transported their merchandise, even visited faraway Montaigne. But the first night she glimpsed familiar faces looking up at her from the cargo hold, their lips trembling and fear in their eyes, something she did not even know sat inside her broke. She waited until the land was no longer in sight and she seized the ship, slew its crew and freed the trapped souls. For months on end, she plied the coasts of Mbey, exploiting her unique knowledge of its secrets to disrupt Atabean trade, but not one captain, no matter how skilled, is a match for such Villains. She eventually met her end in the deeps off the coast of Nder...or so it was believed.

At least six Atabean crews testified to the destruction of Shanga's caravel, the *St. Marie*, yet someone continues to terrorize the Atabean shipping lanes. Witnesses describe the *St. Marie*, its barnacle-encrusted prow festooned with the crab-eaten corpses of Atabean slavers.

Story Hooks

- Captain Lisette Gaston of the Atabean Trading ship *Oyster* is the only person to cross swords with Shanga and live. She fled inland afterwards and has been hiding out in the desert ever since. The Heroes are tasked with finding the captain and discovering what she knows about Shanga's mysterious "resurrection."
- A gold coin has been given to a Hero in payment for helping a wealthy merchant who was the sole survivor of one of Shanga's devastating attacks. Now he dreams night and day of the captain whose fiery eyes have marked him for death. Can he convince Shanga of his innocence? What price must he pay to escape death?

SHANGA, THE ETERNAL CAPTAIN

"The coin of slavers will not comfort you at the bottom of the sea."

STRENGTH	INFLUENCE	RANK
8	3	11

Chapter 4

the Kingdom of Maghreb

THE KINGDOM OF MAGHREB

Oh, beautiful Maghreb, I wish to kiss your brown lips, sweet as honey
Your dark hair shines with the light of the sun. I wish to bury my face in it,
Your tongue speaks delights, gracing my ears with your words of mirth and laughter
Let me kiss the blush of your cheeks, warmed by the sun
Your cloth of gold garments hides the lusciousness of your body
And your heart beats against mine, It leaps with the promise of love.
—*Wallad bint Amra, Maghrebi poet*

A land straddled between two oceans, one of water and one of sand, the Kingdom of the Maghrebi is a land of blinding beauty, intrigue and turmoil. Port cities shine like jewels at her crown, glimmering with myriad tongues, beliefs and riches. The grasslands and scrub forests bounce with grazing animals and farms. The purple splashes of indigo fields spread like the rosy glow of a lover's blush. Her garments are gold, the stretches of sand draped like the most exquisite of silks, shifting with the winds, the verdant oases spots of color on her luxurious garments. And at her center beats the Heart of the Desert, the high volcanic peak which rises above all the land, holding her secrets and true desires. Pirates, scholars, merchants and travelers all find their way across Maghreb, seeking fortune and fame, the blood in her veins.

The land is split into three distinct regions: the Maghrebi Coast, spotted with bustling port towns, mayor and magistrates answering to the ex-buccaneer Mar Veraci, her seat and position coveted by her sister Farfan; the grasslands support countless small farms and goat herders, its true riches deposited in the indigo fields, fiercely guarded and overseen by Hennu Noumidia, the formidable aunt of the current

Maghrebi ruler; and to the south, the vast expanses of the Ubari Desert, a region of constantly shifting sands. The Blue Queen Tasa Noumidia, magic-user and prophetess, rules them all, leading the people of Maghreb, singing the ways that were and the ways that shall be, protecting them from harsh sun and evil forces. She has recently retreated to the desert as troubling voices from the Heart of the Desert have drawn her attention away from the capital. A prophecy tells of a great war with the south, which will only be stopped with blood flowing from the throne. Which throne and whose blood, the Blue Queen has yet to determine.

A guest in the capital of Maghreb, Duke Francois De Toille, watches the threads of the Nation as it weaves together. With one hand, the Théan visitor offers the aid of his armies, in exchange for trading and mining rights. A sultan to the east offers his assistance, also desiring the trade routes, wishing to defeat the devil of Ifri as well.

The Blue Queen works toward a vision she saw earlier: Maghreb as a shining light of Ifri, a haven for travelers of all lands, where magic moves and builds wealth and happiness for all. She has foreseen a great battle ahead of her, and news of evil spirits and oases drying up in the desert speak to her biggest fears: the Devil of Mbey encroaches upon her kingdom and seeks to scoop it all up for themselves.

Allied with Mar Veraci, pirates harry the ships of Montaigne, blunting their influence. The duke aims to establish trade and cement his influence in Maghreb, trying to gain access to the Heart of the Desert, which some say holds riches. Others say the tunnels that surround the Heart of the Desert lead to the Devil themselves, waiting to be led out. Farfan, jealous of her sister's station, hopes to usurp her and tries to establish a glass making industry of her own to rival the Vodacce.

Naravas Naryan fights the evil on the southernmost borders of Maghreb, as spirits of sand and darkness encroach upon the Golden Sea. The Blue Queen fears she will be surrounded on all sides soon and must pick her allies wisely. Doubting herself, she has moved her court to the Heart of the Desert, seeking the council of the spirits who reside within the mountain.

How the Land Came to Be

Legends say the Golden Sea was once a lush pastureland, with many herds and people, with grass as green as emeralds, and fields of yellow flowers as far as the eye could see. The people of the south grew envious of the riches of the land, the fat cows, the happy people, and they marched against them to take what they had.

The people of the pastures, not ones for war, took their herds and their households and fled. One great wizard stayed behind, waiting to make sure the people were safe. As the first soldiers came upon him, they struck him down. The wizard called out and as his blood spread through the ground, the grass withered.

The dirt became sand. The water rose into the sky, forming a cloud at the back of the peaceful pasture people, shielding them from the warriors as the desert

Decimus 23, 1666

It is hot here, unbearably so, and the night bone-chilling cold.

I arrived in Maghreb by way of Tariq al-dhahab, a trade route that runs north from Manden, through Maghreb and on to Khemet.

The Blue Queen, Tasa Noumidia, is beautiful. Physically comely to be sure, but there's something about her soul that inspires those around her to be the best version of themselves and to join her in her causes. She is kind and has a thirst to help her people, but is beset on one side by a corrupt Montaigne duke, Francois De Toille, and on the other by the evil that creeps over the border from Mbey. She maneuvers in court to keep the duke in his place and the devil's foul taint from her lands. The queen cannot look to Khemet for help, since the queen there sits under a perpetually twilight sky and makes dark deals to hold on to power. Aksum may be an ally but it is far away, and Manden thinks only of itself in these troubled times.

At her side combating these ills are the Amazigh clans of the desert and, most importantly, the Desert Ghost, Naravas Naryan, her cousin.

I feel in my heart if someone does not step up to help her, the same thing that has happened in Mbey will happen here. The Blue Queen deftly dodges the sinister malaise seeping from Mbey, which corrupts all it touches, and evades the machinations from Montaigne and the Atabean Trading Company...but for how long?

A GLOSSARY OF MAGHREBI TERMS

Agguta: Maghrebi storytellers similar to the griots of Manden and Mbey. Agguta are similar in caste to the Inadan.

Amanokal: a confederation of Maghrebi leaders that come together in times of trouble to make decisions and defend against a common enemy.

Amazigh: an ethnic group of Maghreb. The Amazigh people are Maghrebi, but not all Maghrebi people are Amazigh.

Amizagh: the common language of Maghreb.

Imajaghan: a noble social caste of the Maghrebi people.

Imghad: a social caste of free people in the Nation of Maghreb.

Inadan: the tradecrafts caste of the Maghrebi people.

Ineslemen: a social caste of the Maghrebi people consisting of clerics and sorcerers. Those that deal with the world of the supernatural.

Maghrebi: the people of Maghreb.

Silphium: a silver, blue-hued coin used as currency by the people of Maghreb.

Veneration: ancestor worship commonly practiced in Maghreb.

began to stretch. The trees turned to sand before the warriors' eyes and the wind whipped the grit into their faces. Where the wizard fell became the Heart of the Desert, and the desert is seen not as a curse but a blessing.

The title of "The Keeper of the Cool Water," is what the people call the ruler of the Maghrebi. She speaks to her position as one who must see to the wellbeing of the people and ensure that they use the farmland and water wisely.

The people of Maghreb know the land can only give so much, but there are times when the water lies low or the trees do not bear fruit. The king or queen must ensure enough for all, rationing and occasionally seeking foreign aid to provide food and water for everyone. Sometimes the Keeper of the Cool Water serves as a spiritual leader, expected to act upon any insights the dead kings and queens of the past may give her in her dreams.

Adventures in Maghreb

Maghreb is a land split between coast and desert, with extremes of sand and water. As a prosperous nation that has a sea route to Théah, it is well-situated for adventures mixing Théan visitors with Ifri locals. The country is a true mélange, with a variety of religions, national origins and careers both mundane and fantastical.

In contrast to many of its neighbors, Maghreb remains a stable country with a benevolent ruler and well-defended borders. Adventures in Maghreb might involve intrigue from other countries, spiritual quests given by the Jok or battles along the coastline involving Vodacce ships and local corsairs. The mountainous north houses cosmopolitan cities, including Cyrene, a city that once rivaled old Numa; in the south, nomads cross the dangerous desert sands, which hide ancient ruins.

A Hero might find himself bartering in the teeming mountain cities, traveling with a group of pastoral herders through the grassy savannah and then seeking a nomadic route through the desert to find lost relics or a safe path into one of Maghreb's neighbors.

Playing a Hero from Maghreb

The desert and the coast shape Heroes from Maghreb. Even those who have lived in the cities have survived sandstorms and droughts, and any traveler across Maghreb has seen the half-buried ruins and the endless dunes.

Many Maghrebi travel, whether as nomads crossing the desert, as traders on the coastal ships, or as pastoralists driving herds of goats and cattle across the great grassy plains. This gives a Maghrebi Hero a certain fatalism, for she has seen the stark power of nature—but she also takes joy in simple pleasures, for life is hard, and she is undeterred by hardship. Your Hero from Maghreb might be...

- A Cyrene warrior, a woman dedicated to the ancient goddess of battle and to the safety of Maghreb, crisscrossing the land with a sword and a distinctive lion pelt.
- A sorcerer carrying a singing sword, a charmed weapon devoted to the destruction of evil spirits.
- A nomadic follower of al-Dīn, who travels from oasis to oasis and knows every path through the desert, bringing the words of the Second Prophet from memory.
- An envoy to the Atabean Trading Company, familiar with the ways of the Théan foreigners but also a deft hand in the many goods that Maghreb has to offer, like ivory, indigo dye and gold.
- An agent of the Blue Queen, disguised as a simple goatherd or camel trader, who secretly gathers information for the majestic ruler of the Maghrebi and ferrets out information about threats to the country.
- A scholar from the Half-Sunk Library, well-read in all manner of history and familiar with all Ifrian cultures, who seeks an end to a curse uncovered when the edifice was unburied.
- A dealer in antiques, lamps and metalwork, who has also made a job of collecting devices that may be tied to the jinn.
- A corsair from the coast, who has served on Vodacce and Maghrebi ships and became the swashbuckling equal of any sailor from Théah.

Social Strata

Among the Amazigh who make up the majority of the Maghrebi, the people belong to clans that further divide into hierarchies. The head of these clans are led by a chief, descended matrilineally, each part of a larger noble caste, the Imajaghan. Most warriors come from the Imajaghan, who have access to weapons and camels and keep them with force of arms.

Below these nobles, the clerics and sorcerers, or Ineslemen, deal with the unseen and the mysterious. This caste, considered as semi-noble as nearly anyone can become, requires a great deal of intellectual work to achieve.

An Imghad is a free vassal that supports the nobles, keeping herds of sheep, goats, oxen and camels. He is required to host any noble passing through his lands. Also in this lower social stratum, the Inadan, the crafters produce a variety of artisanal goods, and the Agguta include the singers, musicians and story-telling historians. Many of the Agguta work directly for a noble patron, which provides a certain degree of security.

Day Three of the Prophet's Mass, 1666

A series of misunderstandings, mostly due to my poor understanding of the Kel Tagelmust language, led me to join a raid against a Montaigne caravan in the northern desert. Note that the Kel Tagelmust words for raid and party are remarkably similar. To hear the Montaigne merchants speak, you would think the Kel Tagelmust are vicious marauders and brutal murderers, but while some bands are little more than bandits, most are decent people with a strong code of honor. Misunderstandings are common between the Kel Tagelmust clans and Montaigne traders, mostly due to the merchants' poor understanding of the locals' traditions. It was one such misunderstanding that led to this raid. The Montaigne caravan left an oasis in poor condition and the Kel Tagelmust struck to exact a price for the dishonor.

Customs & Culture

Amazigh Hospitality

The gods cannot fill our hands if they are full
If they hold to this life too tightly
Give freely and be like the king
Give freely and be as the gods
For only the wicked grasp wealth and water
Wallad bint Amra, Maghrebi poet

Within the interior and especially in the desert, one thing is the difference between life and death: water. With hundreds of songs written about the beauty of the desert wilderness, the gleam of moonlight on the sand and the clearness of the sky, no one is foolish enough to explore Maghreb without water, or without knowing the location of the closest oasis or water source.

Nomad and village dweller alike notice the lone traveler, the wanderer in the desert and often send children to ask, "Do you have water for your soul? Do you have fire for your belly?" as an invitation for her to come and join them for a meal and a drink of water. Often the children bring a bowl of water for the traveler to wash her hands and face. If the traveler does so, she has accepted the invitation and should follow the children back to the village or caravan. Turning the invitation down is not seen in poor taste if the traveler is pressed for time, but is considered slightly rude and may color their opinion of the individual. What is more important than building community within the Maghrebi? (For most Amazigh, that list is very short.)

A traveler who accepts an invitation is led back to the village or camp, his animals cared for by the young, watered and fed. He is not required to remove his weapons. The desert is a dangerous place and the Amazigh know friendships are often forged in battle. Offerings of food, water and salt are made. In return, the Amazigh expect reports of the weather and road conditions, especially if anything strange has happened.

Foreigners are welcome along with fellow Maghrebi, but are often set up under quickly assembled tents. While the Maghrebi acknowledge that everyone must be brought in from under the sun, family bonds and familiarity must still be maintained and respected. If one of the travelers has a relative among the Amazigh, her group may be invited into the relative's home, but that traveler maintains responsibility for her foreign friends, and is expected to translate and be sure no traditions or taboos are broken.

Housing foreigners outside family tents but within the encampments extends hospitality to all who cross Maghreb, but also avoids misunderstandings that can result in awkwardness or even violence. Amazigh also worry that a traveler may, in fact, be a jinn in disguise. A foreigner should wisely familiarize himself with the warning signs of malevolent spirits, to prevent misunderstandings and to avoid such forces on the roads and ways.

A traveler who spends the night can expect food and water in the morning, her animals watered and cared for. Leaving before being blessed five times is poor manners.

Clothing

On the coast, the garments vary as much as the people who frequent the maritime cities. A Maghrebi favors the long, light colored robes which protect her skin from the sun and sand, often made of cotton, with the rich favoring fine linen. Wool cloaks are fashioned for those very rare cold evenings, made from sheep and goats. Maghrebi also wear head coverings to protect themselves further from the elements.

The poor tend to go barefoot, while reed or leather sandals protect the feet of the affluent. The most favored dye is indigo, with the deepest, richest hues worn by the rulers of the Maghrebi themselves and the Amazigh. Leather is tooled and made into beautiful belts depicting traditional designs, and the number five is a motif routinely used in art and charms. While gold can be found across the land, Maghrebi prefer silver, with decorative coin headdresses, earrings, rings and bangles made by artisans both skillful and simple. Smooth stones are favored over faceted ones, and everyone, regardless of gender, wears jewelry.

Language

There are many small dialects among the Amazigh tribes. Though all Maghrebi can understand one another with concentration, many of the smaller villages and tribes can have thick accents or smaller idiomatic expressions that can sometimes cause misunderstandings.

Maghrebi who live along the coast tend to be familiar with other languages, especially those of friendly kingdoms such as Aksum. One can find translators who speak Théan tongues in the port cities, but such services tend to be uncommon and expensive.

Food

Millet porridge, goat and camel milks and cheeses, and flat breads make up most of the staple food in daily life. Thick yogurts, beer-like beverages and tea are all common as well. Couscous (made from steamed durum wheat semolina) also forms a basis for a great number of dishes, usually with stew or vegetables on top.

One popular tea, *ashahi*, is a green tea mixed with sugar. After steeping, the server pours it over mint and sugar three separate times into a new pot. Once he completes this ritual, he serves the ashahi by pouring it into small tea glasses from a height of a foot or more to produce a thick froth. Ashahi tea is not a local beverage, but instead imported from Cathay; as such it is most common in wealthy households.

While foreign foods are sometimes imported along the coast, such fare is rare in the heartland. The Maghrebi palate also tends to disdain the strong wines from Théah, instead preferring buttermilk, tea, orange juice or simple water.

Art and Music

A great deal of Amazigh art comes in the form of jewelry, leather and metal saddle decorations, *trik*, and finely crafted swords and spears, lances and bows. Pilgrimage boxes with intricate iron and brass locks secure items for travel, sometimes with keys being sent ahead by messenger.

Tambour, monochord violins, drums and flutes are all commonly used in the music of Maghreb. These instruments often accompany poems and songs. Historically, all musicians were women, but that has changed in recent centuries. Still, the mourning chants of Amazigh women shake the earth with pounding feet and the skies with wailing cries and many men still fear these displays of anguish.

Amazigh women also decorate themselves with henna, drawing geometric patterns with triangles, squares and lines. Simply done for beauty most of the time, it is also used to ward off evil and to prevent evil from finding an individual. In these latter cases, henna is used on both women and men.

Religion

The land of the Maghrebi varies and so do the deities they revere. Spirits dwelled within the land when it was first created, making themselves known to the people who lived there; some demanded worship, while others instructed humans in the ways of the land, and still others imbued the people with bravery and might. Some of these gods came from other countries, brought here in the idols and prayers of their people. Fertility, strength and bravery keep the Maghrebi vibrant and the gods bring wealth to those who share their lives, their might and their stories with others. New gods travel through the land, brought through the port cities and trade roads of the desert. As long as the gods are benevolent, they are as welcome as the people who worship them.

Chief among the deities and oldest of them all is Cyre, goddess of war. Some say the first queen of Maghreb was Cyre herself, who came to favor the first king and allied with him knowing that he could raise an army to fight off the corruption of neighboring lands. The First Queen's tomb lies empty, with only a crown and the skin of a lion left in her memory, lending credence to stories that the first queen was, in fact, a goddess, and those in the royal family doubly blessed by deific blood.

Cyre is depicted as a tall, muscular woman, pinning a lion down with her spear or holding a bow and arrow. Described in traditional Amazigh garb, she wears a crown with five jewels in it, with a water skin at her belt and a crescent moon above her head. Whether she was a renowned warrior, deified in death, or a spirit herself, many debate endlessly. But all agree her arm could not be broken while she fought the lions of the Toubkal Mountains, triumphant over every bloody maw that came against her, and the people pray to her for bravery, safety and victory. Her

greatest temple is in Cyrene, where a large statue depicting her towers over the city square, thronged by the songs of smiths and sword wielders alike.

A secret society of warrior women, dedicated to Cyre, travels Maghreb. Claiming to be older than the royal family itself, these women move from shore to sand, correcting wrongs, tracking cowardly criminals and removing wild animal threats. To join, a woman must track the troupe down, vowing to prove herself to them and taking an oath on her longest-dead direct female relative. She must then hunt down a lion and kill it, bringing the hide back after tracking down the troupe yet again. Only then will she be accepted among the ranks of the Women of Cyrene. The warrior woman swears never to touch money, the only metal she touches being that of sword or charm against evil. She also does not marry, as Maghreb is her truest love.

Ancestor Worship

The Amazigh believe that those who have passed in body still dwell here in spirit. Help comes not only from the gods but from a loved one, transmuted into a deity by his death. He lies buried in a tomb deep in the mountains, his body rubbed in ochre, dressed in clothes befitting his rank, tools and food for the afterlife placed beside him. The body is arranged in the fetal position and buried in a tomb in the desert or taken to the mountains. Those held in high esteem lie close to the Heart of the Desert, with rulers buried in the Heart of the Mountain itself.

The living swear by the dead and invoke them in oaths, incorporating them into their lives and conversations. A person seeking guidance or comfort returns to the tombs of the dead, praying to them and sleeping at the tombs. The deified dead come to her in her dreams and give her answers through symbols, impressions and cryptic phrases. That which is dreamed is accepted. An Amazigh petitioner trusts those she knew in life in death, very rarely questioning the answers given to her by her ancestors.

The living remember the ancestor for the qualities he had while living. Qualities like patience, bravery, resourcefulness are all invoked accordingly. A long dead ancestor has stories told about him around the fire, and charms are sometimes inscribed with his name in the hopes the bearer may become more like him or gain his protection. When the Vodacce monks came to Ifri with stories of their church, the lives of the saints caught the attention of the Amazigh more than their chief deities. Art made by the Amazigh sometimes incorporates Théan iconography and some have come to call their ancestors "saints" in the Vodacce tradition. Beneath the veneer of the Church of the Prophets, the beliefs of Maghreb run like a hidden river, painting it with gold, silver and blue.

The Goddess Ifri

She turns our sweat into bread
for the children's mouths,
Her kiss is the honey of the buzzing bees
Her sigh is the gentle breeze, caressing the grain
She weeps, moved by the beauty of our good lives
Watering the fields with her saltless tears.
Wallad bint Amra, Maghrebi poetess

When the Théans first arrived on the shores of Ifri, they arrived during the festival season for the goddess of Fortune and Fertility, Ifri. When they asked the celebrating locals about the land they had found, a mistranslation led to the land being called "the land of Ifri." As a goddess of fertility, the land is indeed her domain, but the misunderstanding led the Théans to call the whole of the land Ifri.

Despite the mistake, Ifri remains an important goddess in Maghreb. The people plow fields in her name and store seeds in jars bearing her epithets, and couples desiring children pray and sacrifice to her. Everything good that springs up from the land is a blessing from her hand, brought forth by the sweat of farmers. Her idols are depicted with tears streaming down her face, her garments carved to appear as if embroidered with indigo flowers and other auspicious symbols. Maghrebi consider it good luck to pour water over her face, and your own, when passing a statue of her.

In addition to being a fertility goddess, Ifri is also a goddess of fortune. A merchant prays and makes sacrifices to her at the front of the caravan, to make the way clear for his goods. A gambler invokes her, asking her to make her coins grow. Putting seedpods with her name carved into them ensures the growth of one's finances, and a pregnant woman wears charms to ensure safe, easy births.

Neith

Originally a goddess of Khemet, Neith does not delegate her responsibilities. A primordial goddess of war, weaving, hunting and wisdom, she is free of consorts. Of her many abilities, the power to create things—including other deities—without male energy is unique.

Depicted with two arrows, Neith, also a goddess of protection, turns her warriors into weapons. As the protector of fallen soldiers, her crossed arrows are usually drawn on their tombs, and a dying soldier prays to "Great Mother Neith" to protect her soul. As a goddess of weaving, a weaver sings hymns to her as he makes his cloth, singing in time as he runs his shuttle over the threads.

Due to her position as one of the oldest gods, Neith is often invoked in legal disputes, known not only for her wisdom but for her ability to carry out her judgment. Some say she even holds up the sky, so warriors and laborers pray to her for strength.

The Vaticine Religion

And so, go out to the nations and
speak the Truth of the Prophet
For those in the dark cry out for
the light so they may see
For truth is like water to the thirsty
An oasis in the wasteland of fear and lies.
Wallad bint Amra, Maghrebi poetess

For the followers of the Vaticine religion of Vodacce, Ifri is a land ready to be cultivated with new followers. Centuries of converting non-believers in their own lands have prepared missionaries who wish to bring salvation to the Lands of Gold and Fire. The coastal cities practically burn with sin, full of pirates, cutthroats and deviants of all proclivities and hungers. The fact that those in need of saving mostly hail from Théan lands is not lost on the ruling family. A missionary who finds himself in the Kingdom of Maghreb stands watch, the pressure to be a perfect exemplar of his beliefs and to correct the wrongs of his former compatriots an extra burden to bringing the good news to the people of Maghreb.

With many of the static population on the coast, a missionary finds it easy to build a church in the coastal cities, seeing her temples as havens to the faithful trying to adhere to their faith. In addition, many of these churches offer free room and board to a traveler, with the caveat that he attend service beforehand. In a land of shepherds, she speaks of the Prophet keeping the people safe from the wild animals of fear and despair, a rod and staff which can defeat the gaping maw of the Devil, who dwells in the desert, waiting for the hopeless. To seafaring acolytes, she speaks of a good captain, who pilots through the storm, never losing a passenger or crewmember. She speaks of the good deeds of those who have passed on, empowered by the power of their deity. Offering food and charity to those who need it, she speaks of saints who intercede to their foreign god on their behalf. Art of the saints and their symbols is commissioned from local artisans, incorporating Vodacce iconography with Maghrebi aesthetic.

Vaticine temples mostly dot the coast, with their establishments growing sparser the further south one travels. Occasionally one finds a wandering priest on one of the desert roads or sitting in the shade in an oasis, and a priest is always at the Half-Sunk Library, translating and transcribing the works there.

Al-Dīn

The religion of al-Dīn has found its way into Maghreb and established itself in the soul of the country, carried in the hearts and minds of many of the caravan workers who make their way into the desert and farther north. The religion of the Second Prophet made its way into Maghreb not through the ordained but by everyday adherents of the faith, speaking of the miracles and teachings.

This organic approach led many people of Maghreb to adapt al-Dīn into their local beliefs. The nature of the Prophet is argued over many a campfire. Some say the Prophet holding on to life speaks to his doubt, as he did not believe his spirit could serve the living after his death. Some even claim he was dead when his words were written, a dream figure, leaving those he left behind to write his teachings down. Still others say his teachings are his spirit, reaching from beyond the grave to teach and impart wisdom and hope in those who read them. These discussions over the nature of the Prophet do nothing to dissuade the Maghrebi from following the teachings. Those who follow the way of al-Dīn share other commonalities

with the people of Maghreb and so most try to accommodate and find where their beliefs overlap, rather than finding reasons to fight over the differences.

Over the years, the rulers of Maghreb have followed the people's lead and taken to al-Dīn, intertwining the beliefs and culture with their traditional ones to varying degrees. Maghreb's version of al-Dīn reflects the colorful and myriad views of the people who live by the sea, in the scrub and on the sands.

Sorcery

A Maghrebi knows that the spirits have given him the power to shape the world around him, to keep the balance and to vanquish evil. With a vast tradition of singing and storytelling, his skill with word and melody has worked its way into his most potent magic: the sword which sings. The word for sword and song are the same in the language of the Amazigh, and redundancy of the word in the phrase "sword that sings" gives the magic more power.

The *flyssa*, a heavy-bladed long sword that slowly tapers to a blunted tip, is the most common vessel for this power. The blade itself is inscribed with a song lyric, imbuing the sword with magical energy. The bearer of the sword writes a spell or song of battle, which describes her will to keep her homeland and the people within it free from evil. As the smith works the metal in the forge, the warrior sings over the blade, the spell worked into the red-hot metal of the blade. As the blade is forged, the color of the metal changes from red to blue, the swirls of her lyrics scintillatingly writing itself within the blade. The blacksmith sings along in harmony, creating balance within the blade, honing the edge to match the will of the forger and the composer-warrior. When the sword is forged, the warrior takes the blade to the queen, her kiss being said to strengthen the magic and metal against the evil of the Mbey.

In addition to the martial magic of the sword, the creation of beautiful talismans is integral to the culture of Maghreb. Not all talismans are magical, but some are, inscribed with ancient hymns to the Jok, warmed by the wearer. Such talismans are worn close to the body and made of unpolished silver.

Government

Each small community in Maghreb essentially rules itself, but when trouble calls, each local ruler turns to his neighbors just as one herder might look to a family member to help when a lamb goes missing. A confederation of leaders comes together as an *Amanokal* to make decisions and appoint overlords in times of war. More common in the grasslands and plains of Maghreb than the cosmopolitan coast or the deepest desert, the term Amanokal also describes a group of clans working together. The coast's large number of differing groups have trouble agreeing, and the desert has little time for deliberation. Despite the rarity an Amanokal can still be convened. Above this body and all others is the Keeper of Cool Water, the ruler of the land.

Education

Youth in Maghreb are educated well, in both the home and the community. Many Maghrebi communities have small schools that teach reading, writing, math and—depending on the community—the basics of their particular religion. This formal schooling is usually short as many children apprentice to extended family members to keep up a family trade.

While a Maghrebi is not nearly as deeply educated as the Aksumites, he still values literacy, numeracy and especially familiarity with stories. A Maghrebi who lives along the coast also tends to pick up bits and pieces of foreign tales or sailors' stories. Some Maghrebi stories are even traveling tales designed to contain important landmarks, so that reciting the story allows a traveler to remember the routes across the land.

Currency

Almost every kind of currency can be found in the coastal cities of Maghreb, both in the pockets of merchants and raining down on the gambling tables. Paying with gold, silver, porcelain and shells, a traveler on the coast would be wise to keep track of the exchange rate lest a few transactions bankrupt her. The Amazigh royalty mints their own money in the form of silver coins hued blue; several coins are currently being made and circulated including the silphium coin of Cyrene and the coin featuring Ifri on ones side and Cyre on the other, called the Goddess coin.

THE BARBARY PIRATES

The corsairs of Maghreb are, of course, quite similar to the Barbary Pirates of our own world's history. These infamous pirates not only patrolled the waters north of their borders, they went abroad to raid European towns, heading as far as Iceland!

In **7th Sea**, Maghreb is not part of any "Ottoman Empire," so the corsairs of Maghreb are not involved in any kind of slave trade. This means that their depredations tend to focus more on taking wealth from coastal towns or Théan merchant ships, rather than capturing people. Following the examples of the Barbary Pirates, you can organize the corsairs in fleets of 100 or 200 ships if you want to make a serious naval threat, or your Heroes might fight against an enemy ship or two. Mar Veraci could nominally unite the corsairs for a joint venture, should the need arise, but even while at liberty, the corsairs tend to work together in groups, with an appointed "admiral" overseeing a group of ships. This makes them more organized and dangerous than many Théan privateers outside of the Pirate Nations.

Be sure to read about the Barbary Pirates for more inspiration on the corsairs of Maghreb.

However, reflecting the influence of al-Dīn, there is talk of a new coin being circulated in the near future, once the queen can settle on a value and design. In the interior, people accept money, but barter is the currency of the land. Farmers offer bags of grain and baskets of fruit for fabric, medicine and other goods, trying to meet need for need with those willing to trade.

Military

Military matters in Maghreb are the province of the nobility who defend not only their lands, but the lives of their vassals. Occasionally, they raise armies of conscripts from the coast, but these are typically mercenaries fighting for money. In the grasslands and southern desert, the ruling families lead individual bands of warriors in lightning fast raids and assaults either on foot or from the backs of camels.

Though Maghreb has a conscript army, the coast has an irregular navy—the long coastline and the trade from Vodacce encourages many Maghrebi sailors to take up a life of sea trade and occasional piracy. While the queen does not formally sanction privateers in the same fashion as the Théan nations, Mar Veraci—the governess of the coast—turns a blind eye to the occasional pirate vessel, especially when the pirates target enemy ships or Vodacce merchants who have tried to exploit the Maghrebi. These corsairs form a dangerous net against any naval incursions, especially because they quickly band together when threatened or when a chance at rich plunder arises. Stories abound regarding the extraordinary courage and luck of the corsairs. Stories also abound of ghost ships or pirate crews that had a brush with the supernatural and became something inhuman—indeed, some sailors even claim that the infamous pirate Captain Reis was once a corsair of Maghreb.

Maghrebi Names

Maghrebi names are typically chosen by a grandparent or even an honored guest. Appellations indicate where someone comes from, be it region, town or clan, added with the prefix *Kel*. A warrior from the western regions of Maghreb might style himself Kel-ataram (from the west) or if dealing with a foreigner may simply say that he is Kel-Maghreb (of Maghreb). Furthermore, a daughter might list her mother's name after *Illi-* or a son might add *Gwa-* before his father's name. So, one might introduce herself as Izza Illi-menna Kel-Maghreb meaning Izza, daughter of Menna, from Maghreb.

Common Male Names

Aderfi, Aghilas, Amalu, Anir, Badis, Ides, Ikken, Izemrasen, Marin, Saden, Tariq, Usem, Yani

Common Female Names

Dassin, Dihya, Hennu, Lalla, Tafsut, Takama, Tanirt, Taylalt, Tinifsan, Tinhinan, Tiziri, Ultafa, Ultasila

Notable Locations in Maghreb

The Half-Sunk Library of Theletha

Jutting from the earth on the outskirts of the coastal city of Theletha, the sands whip around the door. Children skip along the roof, laughing and calling to each other, tumbling over the worn marble. Makeshift stairs lead from the entrance down into the atrium, lit by lamps of olive oil. "Step Lightly," a sign on the wall reads. A man with a long beard sells sheets of hand-made paper and wax. A woman grinds the ingredients to make ink, the sound of the pestle scraping along the inside of the mortar, a happy note in the warm air. Two youths fan the entrance with large, green palm fronds and a lone, dusty lizard sits by the ceiling, its fat belly moving with every breath.

The Half-Sunk Library has only been exposed for the last 50 years, the first corner discovered when a merchant's camel tripped over the edge, sending the merchant and his baskets of dates sprawling to the sand. The merchant rose to see to his animal and felt the hard stone of the edifice under his feet. Thinking perhaps he had found an ancient tomb and treasure trove, he ran to get help, enlisting the aid of family and friends to excavate the building. After many weeks of effort, the entrance to the building was found and made safe for entry. The building revealed not monetary treasure but scrolls, books and ancient tools, much of them written in the language of the First Empire. The interest from the merchant's friends waned, but several remained intrigued by the tools and tomes inside. They had found the largest stockpile of books from before Maghreb was Maghreb. Word of the library reached the ruling family and they negotiated the ownership and care of the library to ensure the safety of the people and the mysteries which lie within it.

The Half-Sunk Library has several texts which serve as translating guides for some of the works there. Scholars and others seeking knowledge read, cross-reference, rewrite and translate the words there day and night. Care must be taken when perusing the volumes, to make sure the books are not damaged. The objects within can only be accessed by those who have permission of the head librarian, Mula Arsinagh.

The library is massive; while it is called the Half-Sunk Library, the architecturally inclined think only a fifth of the building lies exposed, about 9,000 square feet jutting from the golden sand. Around it a small town dubbed the City of Pages has established itself, populated by scholars, teachers and those who seek knowledge. A portion of the population is constantly in flux. People passing through to do research before they continue their journeys and a thriving paper-making industry draws workers in, as well as those peddling wares to scholars and travelers. No one has counted the number of titles within the library's marble walls and the mystery of why the library came to be under the sand makes one hesitate before she enters. Several people have entered the library and never returned, leading many to believe certain

areas are cursed or laid with traps. But the knowledge within is too tempting, so the library is never without patrons.

No weapons are allowed within the library and books may be copied but not removed, save for those who have special permission from the head librarian and the queen. The library rests also at an angle; some efforts have been made to level the shelves and books but the deeper one goes into the library, the more severe the incline becomes, as if something snapped the library in two. Scorpions, snakes and other desert creatures live within the walls and between the books and a skeleton or two have been found in the deeper aisles, unmoved.

The vivid murals on the walls, done in some colors none can reproduce, make the library of interest to artists. Most of the scenes depict familiar stories but some are more puzzling, the meaning behind them left for speculation. One painting seems to be of the Blue Queen, but the writing around the figure has been rubbed away, the symbols and accompanying images difficult to discern.

Story Hooks

- A scholar secretly presents the Heroes with a sacred plate of copper. The plate has rectangular slits punched out at random, but when placed atop a specific scroll, the slits reveal only certain words, thereby showing a hidden message. The 500-year-old scroll, when read with the plate, speaks of the current queen.
- Copies of a blasphemous text find their way into the bazaar, and any who recite the ancient words inside realize their wildest dreams at the expense of a human soul. Many people in Theletha are dying horrible deaths while others become fabulously wealthy.
- Twice at midnight a howl issues from the bowels of the library, terrible howls filled with sorrow and regret. The locals are inured to the sound, but in the last few months they have become increasingly desperate. On one fateful night, the howls and pleas accompany a Hero's name beckoning her to enter.

The Painted City

Blue as the beauty of water
Blue as mystery of the Amazigh robe
Blue as true love
Blue is the Painted City of my heart
—Wallad bint Amra, Maghrebi poetess

The crown jewel of Maghreb, the capital city from where the Amazigh rule, is known as the Painted City because of its ornate, painted blue walls, studded with azurite, lapis and other semiprecious stones in fabulous, geometric mosaics. Guards constantly patrol in order to make sure the wall stays as pristine as it was when first built. Its gates are made from ironwood, carved with images of the great leaders of the Amazigh.

The first leader of the Amazigh, who married the land and provided sweet water for his people, is on the east gate. The second gate depicts the Queen Tula, who opened trade with neighboring countries, negotiating the treaty which allowed Maghreb to acquire the ironwood used for the gates. Under her watch, the way posts placed on Tariq al-dhahab protected those who traveled the former caravan route. The third depicts the King Hultan, who stopped raiders from overcoming the city, both by rallying the armies and with his magic. The fourth door represents the Sea Queen who built the Maghrebi fleet for trade, travel and military purposes. Some of the residents of the city wish to build a fifth gate for the current queen, Tasa Noumidia, and have campaigned for it, but the Blue Queen warns the wall should not be compromised in any way, especially not in praise of one such as herself.

The Palace

At the heart of the city is the Palace, a grand white and blue edifice, the sweeping arches, and intricate mosaics making it one of the most elegant buildings of the land. Depictions of natural wonders, running animals and fresh flowers all gleam on the walls and ceilings, picked out in shards of precious stones. The former Queen Jayla, a great artist and ruler, designed the current palace. She used the architecture as a lesson to her children in showing the importance of every person, no matter their origin or station. Each separate piece of stone or glass may be humble, but

when put together under a skilled hand, harmony and beauty can be achieved. The walls, enchanted so that the mosaics shift, are animated by old magic. A visitor commonly finds himself being followed by a tiger-eye gazelle or malachite snake, and occasionally carnelian flowers give off a brilliant perfume.

The palace is three stories tall, with open walkways overlooking lush gardens and copses of trees. At the center of the palace is the Sovereign's Spring, a font of clear, fresh water which sprang up when the first ruler of the Amazigh buried his waterskin beneath the soil. The pool of water sits before the throne, perfectly cool at all times of the day. Even in times of drought, the level of the water remains the same, and people believe the water is a blessing from the deities, showing their favor over the monarchy. The palace has a garden full of date palms, pomegranate orchards, pistachio trees and more. The public is permitted in certain areas to glean fruits and nuts from the gardens.

Guests receive sumptuous quarters, outfitted in the finest fabrics. Rich incense wafts through the air, mingling with the scents of the roses grown around the palaces. All the quarters of the royal family are decked out in the telltale blue of Maghrebi royalty, lotus incense burned outside their doors to invoke peace. The palace grounds also include public parks and places where caravans and individuals can rest and sleep.

Surrounding the palace is the city, a sprawling urban area with an outer region, lands where nomadic tribes settle when they visit the capital. A large market-place—open night and day—is set up in view of the palace, with wares from all over Ifri sold under the tented stalls and on the outspread blankets of merchants. Maps to places of interest are sold by eager tour guides, each claiming to have the best story and knowing the best time for approaching each site.

Story Hooks

- Three haggard emissaries have fallen prey to drunken Théan soldiers in a back alley. The soldiers flee at the first sign of trouble. One emissary clutches a ragged scroll and tells the Heroes they came from Mbey. They have news for the queen but at every turn they have been attacked by those that want the truth hidden. The scroll details a route to the hidden land of Nder in Mbey.
- The Heroes attend a gala thrown by Duke Francois De Toille in honor of the Blue Queen. As the night passes, several blue-robed Amazigh warriors try to sneak inside. With closer inspection, the Heroes soon realize a plot to kill the Blue Queen by Khemeti killers disguised as the blue warriors.
- In a disreputable area where one of the Heroes drinks, a building the Hero has never noticed before suddenly catches his attention. Inside the building he finds every delight imaginable in the cavernous walls. The proprietor, a woman clad in scintillating red and gold robes and a cape of peacock feathers, gives the Hero a box. When he accepts it, he awakens in an alleyway the next morning holding the small but surprisingly heavy item. The box is solid and made of brass inlaid with lapis.

Tedmiat Megaliths

Some say it is the hand of a giant.
Others say it is five spirits, punished
for some unspeakable crime.
A disreputable guide will say for five silver pieces they can take you to where the stones are their clearest.
—Khadija Azawad, historian

Two days travel from the capital lie the Tedmiat Megaliths. Surrounded by the scrublands and visible from a kilometer away, a large, black stone circle rises from the hard-packed dirt—five pillars jutting from the ground reaching to the sky. The pillars are not all the same size, and writing unknown to any living person covers them. Books with the writing have been found in the Half-Sunk Library, but no translating tome has yet been discovered. There are no breaks between the pillars and the ground, meaning the entire formation was carved from a single stone. There are no other places with this type of stone found within the kingdom of Maghreb. Scientists refer to it as the Formation Stone, one of a kind.

On first glance, the stones appear to be black, but as the light of the day changes and the sun and moon move through the sky, the stones reveal their transparencies. Portions within the massive pillars

become more opaque and translucent than the surrounding stone and give way to mysterious shapes inside. Torchlight moved around the pillars reveals the shapes as well, and some hypothesize the ground itself contains more of the strange figures. Some of the more well-known images within the pillars are the Weeping Woman, the Swallowing Toad and the Waiting Snake.

Scholars both local and from abroad hope to translate the pillars, with the goal of unearthing their secrets. The mystically inclined believe that the megalith is the hand of a giant and that unlocking the secret puts the giant in the servitude of the summoner. More historically minded scholars assert that it is simply a religious site of people long since lost. Cartographers have observed that two of the pillars line up with the Heart of the Desert and Half-Sunk Library, respectively, but what the other three may align with is up for debate.

Story Hooks

- A visiting scholar excitedly reveals to the Heroes that she somehow caused one of the megaliths to partially open, though she is not sure how. In the base of one of the monoliths are three, square indentations and in two of the indentations rest two small brass and lapis boxes; the third is missing. Inscribed above the box, a sentence reads, "Three united, the sun will always blaze. Black stones will hold fast those things with wicked ways."
- An Amazigh headman, slighted by a Hero, challenges her to a duel in the shadow of the great megaliths. When the Hero arrives, she finds all the Amazigh dead and their belongings gone. An investigation reveals Montaigne mercenaries working for Atabean masters.
- A huge sandstorm reveals a small tablet at the base of one of the monoliths. The tablet is written in several different known languages and the ancient language written on the monoliths themselves. Several factions want the tablet for themselves, and the Blue Queen commissions the Heroes to bring the tablet back to her, in secret.

Tariq Al-dhahab

What killed Tariq al-dhahab, the former vein of riches and trade? Stories say a message was brought on the road, a letter whose news a wise woman did not want to reach her. So she sent sandstorm after sandstorm, filled the road with biting snakes and stinging scorpions and opened the sand to consume those who walked upon it. What was in the letter? What stories were swallowed by the sand?

Stone posts jut from the ground like broken sentinels, the old markers of Tariq al-dhahab, one of the first major trade routes through Maghreb. Starting at the capital city and stretching into the kingdom of Manden, this old trade route has gone unused for decades. Some of the posts have been swallowed by the shifting dunes, lost until the sand and winds reveal them once more. Each post is inscribed with a greeting, and custom dictates responding to each post in kind.

Stories tell of caravans crossing the desert on Tariq al-dhahab, tales of bandits, ghosts and sandstorms. Treasure hunters sometimes venture out to Tariq al-dhahab in the hopes of finding an abandoned caravan, imagining caches of easy riches under the sand. A few days' time reveals a different part of the road, obscuring the next stretch.

The downfall of the trade route remains up for debate, but another threat roams the area of Tariq al-dhahab, falling upon those who dare to travel it. When the first ruler came to Maghreb, he brought his wife from Khemet, marrying the Maghrebi and Khemeti spirit and having children who held both dear. These children grew up together as one household, but some children longed to return to Khemet, who wanted to claim that kingdom—to claim their birthright and their original home. When Tula the Waymaker sat on the throne, her cousins, perhaps encouraged by Khemeti agents, sought to usurp her. She pushed them back and banished them. After she died, a strange band of robbers began harrying the caravans, leaving the goods and dead bodies in their wake. Those who survive their attacks say their weapons do not sing like Maghrebi weapons, and as such, they are instead foreign criminals who undid Tariq al-dhahab. Perhaps they are simply brigands, but the story lives on.

Story Hooks

- The Heroes are commissioned to travel Tariq al-dhahab as security for a wealthy merchant. Along the route, the Heroes' caravan passes a merchant moving in the opposite direction from Mbey heading towards the Painted City. The caravan from Mbey tells a strange story of seeing other caravans waylaid and destroyed along the road. The next day, the Heroes come upon a caravan whose members seem ill with some kind of cough; no medicine or magic seems to help, but the caravan master insists on pressing on as they pass each other. The following day the Heroes come across the remnants of a third caravan, this one picked over by vultures, its goods still in its wagons, the dead strewn about—until they rise up to confront the Heroes. A day later, members of the Heroes' own caravan start to fall ill.
- A windstorm blows the sand off of an ancient monument buried deep in the earth. At a small aperture at the top, the Heroes hear voices calling to them for help. The voices sound familiar, and the Heroes soon realize they hear their own voices, seemingly from days in the future. The future Heroes explain they pursued assassins sent to kill the Blue Queen in the Heart of the Desert when they fell afoul of the black swathed wizard in the assassin's employ. In order to avoid their fate, they must make some changes…
- A fright of ghosts appears in procession, walking Tariq al-dhahab. As they pass the Heroes' camp, they give each of the Heroes a gift: a belt, hat, ring, etc. The last specter in the train gives the Heroes a locket for the Blue Queen Tasa Noumidia and whispers, "Deliver this before the mountain wakes…"

The Well of Timbu

Not all stretches of Tariq al-dhahab have deteriorated. Close to the halfway point, the Well of Timbu shines under the golden sun. Purple shadows stretch over the sand and crystal clear water of the oasis, the songs of birds a gentle melody in the rustle of the date palm trees. Small groves of olives, figs and stone fruits grow here, carefully maintained by the Well Keepers, the mysterious veiled individuals who never speak, but offer food and refreshment to any who come here.

The Well of Timbu is said to be older than Maghreb itself. The warrior woman Cyre found it one day on a hunt, the scent of the ripe fruit and the clean water drawing her to its location. As she approached the water, a pride of lions, their hides glimmering pure gold, emerged from the brush, growls deep in their throats, their claws like blood-iron swords, their teeth sharp as sunlight. They attacked her where she stood, her warrior cries overcame their roars, and her blade blunted their claws.

The battle lasted for five days and five nights, and on the fifth evening, she finally overcame the beasts. Subdued, Cyre did not kill them but enchanted them, changing them to the Well Keepers, dropping their gold hides to the ground. She bid them to watch over the Well of Timbu forever, maintaining its balance for others wandering the desert and in need of respite from the heat and the sand.

Because no blood is allowed to be spilled here, one accused of a crime often runs for the Well, knowing if he can arrive safely, he has protection for five days. Countless disputes have been solved at the Well, tempers cooled under the shade of the palm leaves, and people of Maghreb know many stories which begin with a falsely accused individual taking refuge at the Well of Timbu. In these cases, new evidence and parts of the story were added each day, until the accused was proved innocent.

While meant to be a place of respite, the Well of Timbu is not meant to be a home. A traveler is only allowed five days at the well, after which the Well Keepers bids her farewell by simply pointing off in the direction the traveler needs to go. Somehow, the Well Keepers know how long everyone has been at the Well and have never missed a person's departure time.

Those who do not heed the Well Keepers wake up on the sixth day in the middle of the desert, naked, without water or food. Few have seen the violators cast out, reporting only that the Well Keepers stand over the one to be banished, with a low growl rolling through the camp, the person gone in the blink of an eye. Luckily, a person kicked out is not banished forever—one who survives and returns is sure to leave before she has overstayed the hospitality of the Well Keepers.

Story Hooks

- Buried on the shore of the crystal clear water is a treasure said to be hidden by a long ago ruler of Maghreb. The Heroes come by this knowledge eavesdropping on Montaigne sailors working for Duke Francois De Toille. Legends say that among the gold and jewels lies a vase which stays filled with whatever you pour into it.
- Passing the Well, the Heroes notice the water drying up and the guardians lying languid under dying palm trees. Those drinking the once refreshing waters find it thick and acrid. Witnesses say the Well changed only a few days ago, when a caravan of dark robed traders from Mbey watered its caravan at the oasis. Can the Heroes track down the caravan and restore the Well?
- While taking respite at the Well, the Heroes hear the wild baying and coughing laughter of hyenas. Other travelers arrive and speak of spectral hyenas with baleful eyes moving in such a manner as to herd travelers to the site. In the small hours of the night, the Heroes see hundreds of the hell-born animals surrounding the oasis, eyes glowing with crimson hunger.

The Heart of the Desert

Rising above the sands, flanked by the Toubkal Mountains, is the great Heart of the Desert, a shield volcano that has as many stories set there as caverns. One legend says the first people's souls came from the many caves of the mountain, their bodies fashioned out of the clay and dirt of the land around it.

The Heart of the Desert has not erupted in anyone's memory, but stories of its activity feature in the folklore and stories of the people. Part of the mountain range that ends in the city of Cyrene, the Heart of the Desert lies almost halfway along the chain, the mountains flanking it shorter than the rest, as if bowing down to this holy hill.

At this hill, the Amazigh inter the bodies of their royalty. Some say hundreds of tunnels reach their way under the mountain, and the first king lies buried within the Heart of the Mountain at the behest of his Amazigh wife. All rulers since then have followed suit, the funeral procession making the long journey through the scrub and the desert, the cries of mourners wailing over the hot air. The longest tunnels under the Heart of the Mountain house the bodies of these dead sovereigns, back into the earth where the first souls came from. Others among the Maghrebi bring their dead here to be buried as well, usually opting for caves other relatives and ancestors have been placed in, the entrances marked by those who came before with white and blue writing.

The Blue Queen ventures into these tunnels to hear the council of the dead, using their advice for guidance in the future handling of Maghreb. Within the tunnels, the temperature of the air fluctuates between hot and cold and breezes blow up from within, smelling of sulfur. Some have reported smelling strange perfumes or incense within the caves, while others have said they have heard running water. The queen has explored the cave more than anyone, going as deep as she dares and even sleeping within the cave in the hopes of the guiding dreams due to her.

An underground river does, in fact, run under the Heart of the Mountain, but the water is warm and gives off steam. Strange eyeless fish swim within its waters, and lizards without arms crawl upon the rocks. The caves are unfathomably convoluted and few travelers visit the Heart of the Mountain for the sake of exploring the caves. Some believe a great devil is tied

up and trapped within the mountain and venturing too far means possibly stumbling across the great evil. Several merchants from Tariq al-dhahab have said one tunnel leads from the Heart of the Desert to Khemet, while others claim it leads to cursed Mbey.

The Heart of the Mountain is seen as a holy site, often visited by those who adhere to the old ways of interning the dead. Most everyone in Maghreb has an ancestor buried within the mountains, so occasionally a desperate person looking for answers makes a pilgrimage out to the Heart of the Mountain, regardless of her current religious beliefs, in the hopes that a dream leads her in the right way. In the curves and dips of the Heart of the Desert are small oases, offering a bit of refreshment and relief for travelers. One such oasis has become the new court of the queen, as her frequent visits to consult the dead had brought her out to the desert more and more. Tents of indigo and white flutter in the breeze, dotting the brown of the desert, music and cookfires welcoming any travelers who may also be coming to the mountain. Those hoping to learn the secrets of the Heart of the Mountain have plenty of time before it next erupts. Or do they?

Story Hooks

- An aged and ancient woman claims to be one of the Jok and asks the Heroes to escort her into the Heart of the Mountain. She has a bronze bowl full of volcanic glass shards that must be placed deep beneath the Heart to keep the volcano from awakening.
- Somewhere deep beneath the Heart is the grave of an unnamed warrior. The Blue Queen has had a vision of this Hero returning and leading warriors across the Ubari. The Heroes must bring this warrior's body out of the Heart, but when they find the burial niche indicated by an ancient map, it is empty except for regalia—headdress, mask and spear.
- A Hero enters the caverns beneath the Heart as an escort to a funeral procession, there to inter a deceased Amazigh noble. Enemies seek to prevent the burial of this noble, and perhaps to steal the regalia to be buried with her. As the procession finally reaches the catacomb where the body is to lie, the walls crack and lava starts to leak forth. Do they simply leave the body to the lava? Can they escape before the volcano erupts? Will the enemies following them manage to block their exit?

Cyrene

Where the mountains meet the sea rise the high walls of Cyrene, a city which rings with the songs of blades and sword-making day and night. A person who hears the swords before the mountains come over the horizon is destined to be a great fencer, attuned to his calling. The great walls, wide enough that two horses could walk side by side along the tops, are made of massive, white stones dazzling in the sunlight, rippled with bloodred veins of iron. The wall surrounding the main gate is composed of smaller blocks of stone, replaced when the First Empire besieged the city. The feet of the massive statue of Cyre still stand at the gate, a sandaled foot on each side. The figure's head, twice as tall as any person and still holding fine detail, lies within the marketplace, watching over the transactions and individuals who pass through the grand bazaar. A large, black sword is embedded in the top of the statue's head. Stories say when the sword turns red, evil is coming and all warriors should go south to face whatever approaches.

In Cyrene the best swords are crafted from the iron rich ore that makes the red steel. The ground upon which the city rests is a deep, rich red-brown. Legends say when Cyre walked among the mountains, a wind devil rose up, taller than a palm tree, whipping the sand up so it scraped at her skin and raked against her eyes. Cyre sliced at the wind, calling upon the names of the deities who came before her, but the wind carried them away from her mouth. Cyre held her sword above her head before she plunged it into the ground, calling upon the oldest name she knew. Some say she called Ifri herself, goddess of the earth and fertility. Though the name is lost to time, all of the tales are sure about the response. Blood pooled around the blade, red and hot, leaping up to lick at the steel. Cyre drew the blade from the earth and struck at the wind spirit, driving it back into the dark from whence it came.

The blood seeped into the land and mountains around it, filling them with the unusual iron-threaded rock. The iron ore is smelted out and processed in a method only known by a few dozen people. Then this specially acquired metal is given to one of the few sword makers who know how to make the metal sing, creating strong but flexible blades which never break. The individuals make up the Guild of the Bleeding Earth, all of them swearing to keep the secrets of the metal and the fire among themselves only. An apprentice to the Guild starts when he is old enough to carry a bucket, and only the most trustworthy and skilled are allowed anywhere near the blade making process. The unanimously voted head of the guild, a former miner, has seen the lowest subterranean part of the mines. The organization operates from a fortress within the walled city, guests allowed in only by invitation and most foreigners forbidden from entering its gates.

Day and night the smiths work on the blades, often with the person the sword is intended for, singing spells and prayers over the steel to strengthen and sharpen the blade. A smith works alongside the warrior to design the blades, making it unique for the bearer. She inscribes the blades with lyrics to ballads and inlays the hilt and scabbard with blessed items, elaborately tooled leather and precious stones. Nothing compares to the precision and masterwork of the blades themselves, the combination of the carefully guarded method and the iron of Cyrene making them unparalleled in all of Ifri. The swords hold an edge, but are flexible. The redder the blade, the finer the blade, with the best looking as if made from blood itself, shining with magic.

Even rarer than those blades are the Sinifere Sarif swords, those made from the Cyrene ore and star metal—the latter substance difficult to come by and even more difficult to work. Only four of these swords have ever been crafted in the history of Ifri, and the smith who created the final one is old; the smith's identity remains a mystery, as the guild members do not forge for glory.

There is great concern for the safety of a smith, as his secrets are coveted by many. A guild member swears to put the secrets of his skill before anything, including himself and his family. He must even take an oath before the reigning sovereign that even if the sovereign's life is threatened, he must protect the blood of the earth. The guild always creates a set of blades for each of the newly crowned rulers of Maghreb, and they consider these swords part of their legacy, bearing them wherever they go. These swords have been crafted for the last 1000 years, older than some of the current dynasties.

Cyrene's coastal location makes it the destination for a warrior from either side of the ocean, luring her with the crashing waves on the sea cliffs that lilt with the happy melody of swordplay. There are sword-fighting festivals and tournaments complete with prizes and merrymaking. There are also stadiums where a person with a dispute can resolve her issues with the sword or the "mind's dagger," the tongue, arguing in official courts overseen by a council of Amazigh holy elders who give final judgment. Before anyone may duel, custom asks her to go to the head of Cyre in the marketplace and place her hand on the stone, swearing to fight in a manner worthy of the Goddess and to accept the verdict of the blade. The largest festival is the Naming Festival, held in the spring where all the swords created over the year receive a blessing, their names declared before those lucky enough to be in attendance.

All around and within the walls of Cyrene grows the plant silphium, similar to fennel. Grazing animals feed upon it, supposedly giving the meat and milk of domestic animals a sweet, pleasing flavor. Many also use the plant as medicine, both the plant parts and the resin. The seeds of the silphium, shaped like hearts, are used for medicine as well. The plant, said to be wild and unable to be cultivated, grows only around Cyrene. As such, the coins of Cyrene depict silphium stalks on one side, the heart shape of the seed on the other. Some say the silphium grew where Cyre had pierced the ground, patching the wound in the earth, and so compresses of this plant are applied to wounds, as they speed the healing process.

Story Hooks

- The Sword Oath festival happens every year in Cyrene. Some oaths are those of true love and devotion; others are for vengeance. This year, the Blue Queen tours the city and has decided to participate in the festival. The Blue Queen lets it be known that if the oath

pleases her, the sword over which it is sworn will be blessed. When the Heroes make their pledge, her eyes go white, and she speaks prophecy about a great journey they must complete in order to save Maghreb from a coming evil.

- Several ingots of the finest iron from the red mountain have been stolen, with rumors that a necromancer can combine them with a Mbeyan Bonsam Stone to make Dire Blades for ritual use. Not only would the blade be just as dangerous as a sword made with sky metal, the blade infects victims with an evil sickness.
- A master smith from the Guild of the Bleeding Earth is kidnapped, with the goal of extracting the secrets of making Cyrene swords. Evidence points to the Vodacce—perhaps in search of a way to make weapons that can stand against the dracheneisen of Eisen—and the Heroes, who count the smith as a mentor and friend must mount a rescue before the kidnappers steal the secrets of red steel.

Ubari Desert

The great Ubari, the Golden Sea of Sand, stretches across Maghreb from Mbey in the west to Khemet in the east. Its great dunes are occasionally punctuated with seasonal rivers, or *wadi*, as well as small oases fed by deep aquifers. The wadi in the Ubari are not as regular as those in other lands, springing to life perhaps once a year at most, but sometimes with decades between washes. Dust storms commonly rage in the spring, rising up and feeding upon themselves lasting for up to a week at a time.

Plateaus of sand dunes build up slowly and provide vantage points for Amazigh nomads. These plateaus shift with the wind over time. The Amazigh claim that somewhere deep in the Ubari is a haunted place they call the "oasis of little birds" or Zerzura. This oasis is surrounded by white masonry and stone covered in minute carvings. Descriptions of Zerzura, always by a solitary traveler who finds the White City after a storm in the spring, have led some to speculate that it is a settlement of the Jok, but none have ever confirmed this.

Though the Ubari is home to nomads, it also occasionally serves as a destination for those avoiding detection or the authorities of the outside world. The shifting dunes, the outcroppings of stone, the buried ruins and the occasional oasis, hospitable enough for an individual with some knowledge of survival, provide enough space to prevent easy detection. As long as such individuals do not interfere with the nomadic tribes or the paths of pilgrims, the Amazigh leave them alone as well.

Story Hooks

- Jaineba, a njom warrior from neighboring Mbey, seeks shelter while fleeing a woman named Chitendu. They tell the Heroes that Chitendu has several bands of unscrupulous mercenaries hunting the sands for the warrior and will do anything to capture them. Jaineba has several women and children hidden nearby that they wish to smuggle into Manden, or failing that, deeper into Maghreb all while evading Chitendu and her assassins.
- An oasis near the border with Khemet has been poisoned, and travelers from both sides of the border are at each other's throats, hurling blame and accusations, demanding recompense and water. Can the Heroes settle the dispute and determine who is responsible?
- A caravan bearing an envoy from Manden has disappeared in the Ubari. The Heroes need to find it before the Manden dignitaries in the coastal cities find out. Complicating matters, raiders from Mbey have been crossing the border near where the caravan was due to travel. The caravan tracks lead inexorably to Zerzura, the lost White City—but the residents may have their own inscrutable reasons to never let the caravan leave, not least of which is to prevent them from carrying news of Zerzura to the outside world.

Current Relations

The Kingdom of Aksum

Maghreb has respect for Aksum. The people of Aksum were the first to bend metal to their will and mint coins, and they seek peace and power for their own. Their adversity with Manden is troublesome, as the Manden Empire is one of Maghreb's greatest allies. Hopefully peace can be made between them.

The Kingdom of Khemet

Khemet and Maghreb have lived adjacent for centuries, with shared history tying these two countries together. However, issues relating to the recent drought and famine have soured relations between these two nations.

The Blue Queen's father requested aid from Khemet for food and seed; his request went unanswered, neither a yes or no coming back from the Nation. Many have relatives who lived through the famine and the Blue Queen suspects Khemet is too concerned with Khemet to work alongside Maghreb for the common good.

The Kingdom of Mbey

Goods coming into the port cities are harried by pirates paid by the Atabean Trading Company. If not for Mar Veraci and her cunning leadership of her fleet of personal ships, the port cities would be desolate or controlled by Atabean interests.

The company has allied with Mbey, which has Queen Tasa on alert. Enemies to the north and south keep her anxious and reports of Mbey troops running maneuvers close to the camps of desert people has the populace concerned. People close to the border have been going missing lately and everyone fears that Mbey is the likely final resting place of these ill-fated people.

The Manden Empire

The Manden Empire has been a great ally to the Maghrebi, coming to their aid during the famine and currently the country it imports and exports with the most. Their common religion cements relationships between their general populations and their military prowess may come in handy if Maghreb finds itself besieged on all sides.

While Maghreb remains significantly smaller than the Manden Empire, its ruler treats the Blue Queen with respect, when he could strong-arm the country for its iron and weaponry.

The Nation Montaigne

Maghreb tries not to be dazzled by Montaigne's new and interesting promises. Every sentence beginning with "give" ends with "take"; Montaigne obviously wants the ore in the mountains and takes advantage of the chaos of the coast when it can.

Also, the idea of a duke being arrogant enough to think he can marry the queen is a source of irritation. Maghreb has its pride and does not tolerate one who thinks he can easily manipulate the Nation's desire for peace and plenty.

The Nation Vodacce

A strange, backward country that makes people like Mar and Farfan. Great in magic, but it only sends priests to turn people away from the faith of their ancestors, and say they are wrong in their beliefs. Vodacce goods are beautiful and trade is beneficial…as long as the Maghrebi do not have to talk to them.

MAR VERACI

"Adventure, wealth, and notoriety are passing. Fame is nothing compared to loyalty and freedom. I'd rather my name to be forgotten than spit upon."

Mar Veraci

A new ruler for a new age, Governess Mar Veraci is the self-appointed and much-celebrated leader of the coastal cities. Holding court in one of the restored ruins of the Numanari Empire, Mar Veraci has the respect of sailors and merchants, having once been a fierce pirate herself. Born in Vodacce to a Vodacce mother and Ifrian father, Mar and her sister Farfan always looked south, eager to visit the land her father called "the Lands of Gold and Fire." When she turned 16, she ran away from home, joining the crew of the *Gallant Breeze*.

The seas finally allowed Mar to live as the woman she is, and not the man Vodacce insisted upon. She lived as a corsair for several years, and having made a name for herself on the seas, she appealed to the Blue Queen for permission to oversee the coastal cities. Wishing to concentrate on the goings-on of the desert and concerned with the darkness reportedly creeping in from the south, the Blue Queen bestowed the sovereignty of the coast to Mar.

Easily winning fights with her words as well as her swords, Mar Veraci is as dashing as they come. Every child pretends to be her in their daytime play, often pitting her against evil pirates or cunning jinn. Veraci believes everyone has a role to play in Maghreb and prefers to hear all parties—much to the chagrin of the rich and powerful. Excellent with twin foils, she favors the fencing style of the lands across the ocean. Veraci sees herself as a helpmate to the queen and quickly reminds people who Maghreb's true ruler is.

Story Hooks

- Mar has been accused of attempting to assassinate the Blue Queen and hand over the land to allies in Iskandar. In a bid to clear her name and find the assassin, Mar pays the Heroes to investigate. All signs point to Mar's sister, Farfan.
- Veraci's greatest weakness is her love of freedom. She hates slavers with a passion that drives her to reckless action. An abonsam agent has realized this and has a small fleet of slaving ships as a trap the Governess cannot resist. She tasks the Heroes to help her crusade but can they figure out the trap before Mar engages?

Naravas Naryan

Naravas Naryan, the Ghost of the Desert, has sworn his life and the life of his people to keeping back the evil of Mbey. Naravas is the Hero every child of the desert pretends to be. Yet Naravas never wishes his lot in life upon anyone, as his dedication to fight Mbey comes from a painful history. Naravas' twin sister was stolen away to the south when they were children. This event not only led to his quest for righteous vengeance, but somehow strangely gave Naryan the power to occasionally *see* into Mbey, knowing exactly when raiders encroach upon the Kingdom of the Maghrebi.

Naravas is the fastest camel rider in the Ubari Desert, and carries a blade called the Song of the Heart. Like all the blades of the desert, the sword is imbued with sorcery, reacting to the magic spells sung to the blades. His blade was forged in the famed sword city of Cyrene, made of sky metal as all true blades are forged.

Naravas' first duty is to the protection of the people of the Kingdom of Maghreb, and he has mixed feelings about the queen moving the majority of her court deeper into the desert. On the one hand, Naryan can better protect the queen with her so close by, and having the greatest Maghrebi magician at his side encourages the people. On the other hand, having her close to danger makes Naravas nervous, mostly because where she goes, Duke De Toille often lurks behind.

In addition, when the queen is far away, Naravas believes he can better mask his true feelings for her. When she is close, all he wishes to sing about is her. His first love must always be Maghreb and its people, and so he puts his personal desires behind him, forgoing his quest to find his sister and his love for the queen to lead his warriors against the evil to the south.

Story Hooks

- A Montaigne merchant claims to have sighted Naravas' sister on board a vessel sponsored by the Atabean Trading Company. Naravas lacks experience with the sea and asks the Heroes for assistance.
- Nomads from the south claim that Naryan's warriors attacked their tribes, stealing vital supplies and slaying all opposition. Naravas is nowhere to be found to answer these claims. Can the Heroes find Naravas and uncover the truth?

NARAVAS NARYAN

"There is nothing more beautiful than a sword in its sheath, a desert at sunset, and the Queen of a free people."

DUKE FRANCOIS DE TOILLE

"Why envy the intelligent and wealthy? Learn their secrets, read their books, and certainly you will have their money soon after."

STRENGTH	INFLUENCE	RANK
9	9	18

Duke Francois De Toille

Duke Francois De Toille sees opportunity in everything. The duke cannot say for sure which he finds more intriguing: the amount of riches he could make or the number of secrets he could reveal. Both could bring him power and so he plays in politics, affecting both the local economy and the relationships of those who hold power. With ties to companies and manufacturers across the seas, he hopes to make the local economy reliant on traded goods, indebting the locals to foreign banking. With a vendetta against Vodacce, he hopes to start a glassmaking industry to rival and beat them at their own game.

However, one thing is chief in his mind: the Blue Queen and her connection to the Heart of the Desert. The great power in the south churns in his mind as he retells himself stories of the Blue Queen communing with spirits. De Toille knows that learning the secrets of the Heart of the Desert requires growing close with the queen, and what lies there can give him more power than he has ever known.

Priding himself on his intellect, De Toille believes he is always the smartest in the room. Preferring to translate for himself to be closer to those he seeks to dominate, De Toille has learned many languages. Despite this, he does not see himself as manipulative. He feels he just knows what is best for everyone.

Francois envisions a world where he can bring Ifri and Théah together in a way extremely profitable to him, even though he knows that his success will disenfranchise many vulnerable people. His unhealthy fixation upon the Blue Queen has led him to believe that their union could bring about the future power he so desperately desires.

Story Hooks

- De Toille desires an audience with the Blue Queen Tasa Noumidia and will do anything to get it including kidnapping a Khemeti diplomat and blaming it on a Hero. Can he prove his innocence, find the diplomat and expose De Toille?
- De Toille, notoriously jealous of Naravas Naryan, plots to have him murdered. A Hero comes across the plot while working as security for the Duke—can she bring down the plot from the inside?

Farfan Veraci

The younger sister of Mar Veraci, Farfan burns with jealousy at what her sibling has accomplished. Raised in Vodacce and brought to Ifri by Mar, Farfan was shocked to see the ambitions of her now-sister not dashed upon the rocks.

The younger Veraci would never admit she gained her station simply because of her sister; she quickly lists her many talents and loathes to hear of her faults. The only one who gets away with it is Mar herself, who hopes her sister will mature past her petty self-righteousness and selfishness and learn to love a land where she can be free. But Farfan wants to grasp all that she can see. She burns with envy and greed.

While Farfan wants what her sister has, she still looks up to her and wants to impress her. Farfan is not the finest sailor, but she is extremely skilled with numbers and figures, which makes her a competent accountant, trader and navigator.

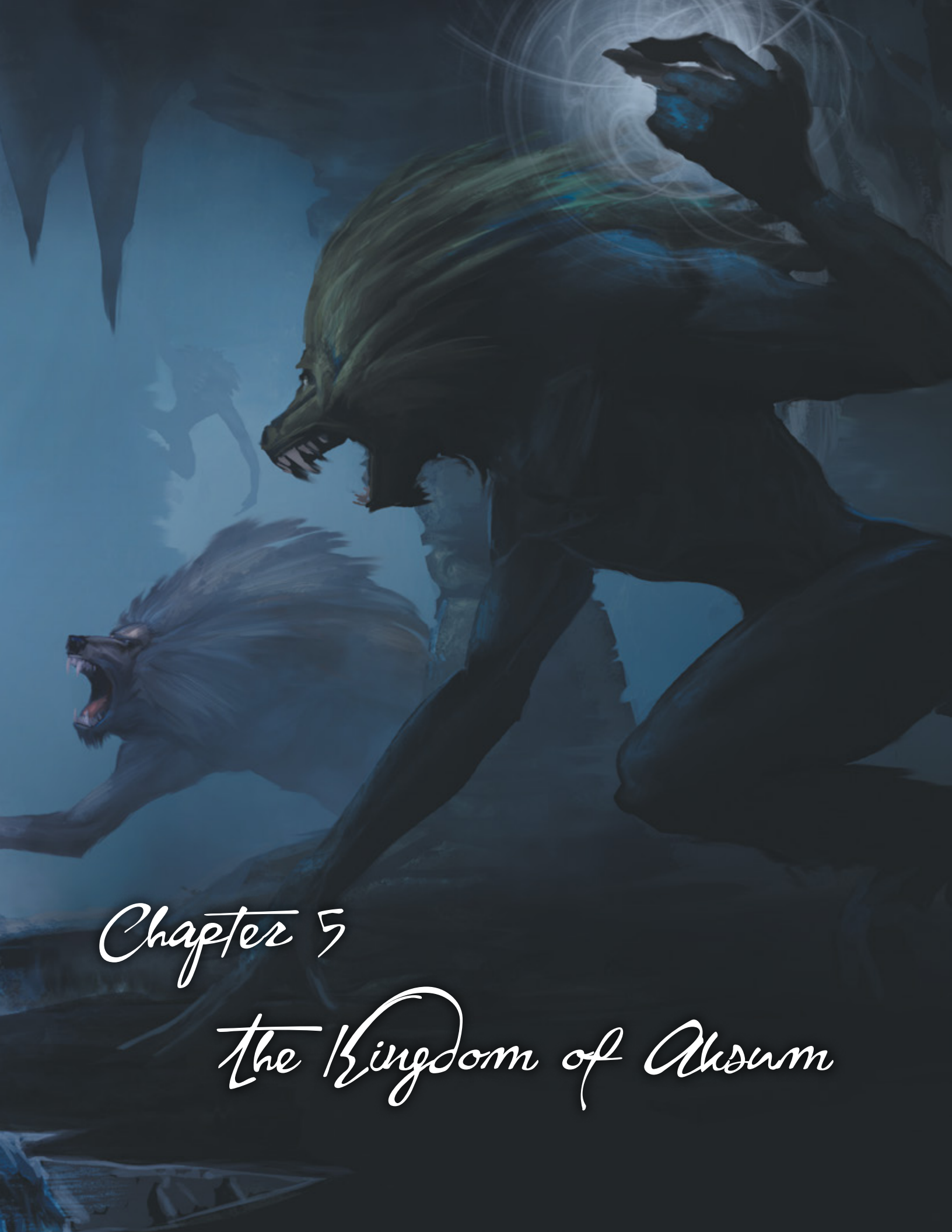
Story Hooks

- Farfan tasks a Hero with relieving a Vodacce ship in port of a special shipment of glassmaking sand found only in the Ubari Desert. It turns out that the sand hides smuggled Maghrebi artifacts and everything looks like Farfan and her Corsair contacts were in the know. Can the Hero expose the smuggling ring without landing himself in hot water?
- Farfan needs to get a private message to the Blue Queen. The message details a plot to usurp power by the Amazigh chieftains of the desert. The message says they hold ancient writing found in the Half-Sunk Library that cements their claims of authority over the Blue Queen Tasa Noumidia.

FARFAN VERACI

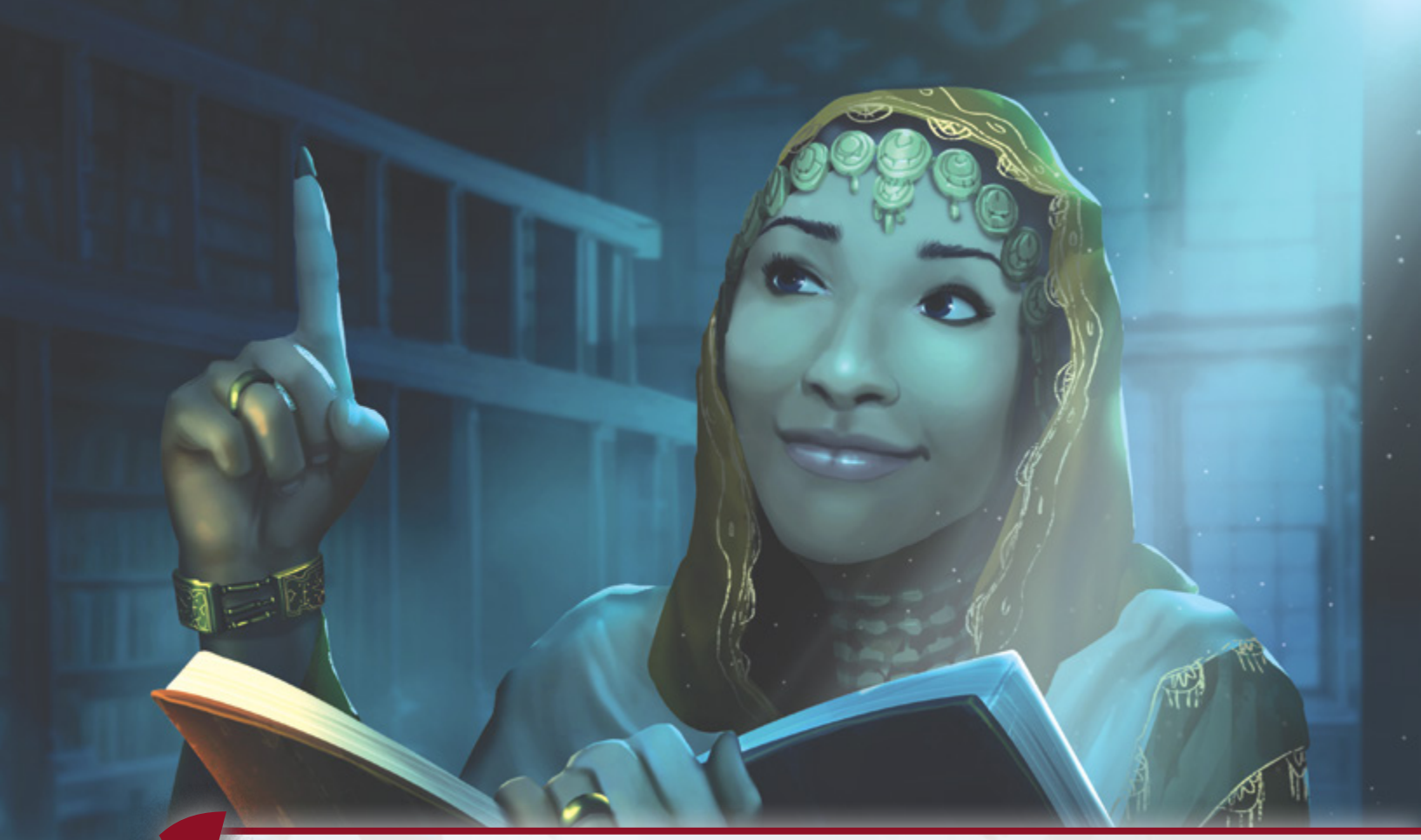
"Any fool can pick up a sword, but it takes a true master to get someone else to point it at the right opponent."

STRENGTH	INFLUENCE	RANK
4	5	9



Chapter 5

the Kingdom of Aksum



THE KINGDOM OF AKSUM

"Aksum, the past dream of greatness, a vision of how the future should be and presently, at crossroads of decline. Only faith and understanding can lead us to our true destiny."

Ras Abebe of Aksum

"The first of firsts": this is how the Kingdom of Aksum is known. The first life in Terra existed on this sacred land. The first footfalls of humanity landed on the sands of Aksum. The land itself holds a treasure trove of forgotten Jok artifacts, and even the collection used by the emperor to defend the land is but a handful among many. The kingdom contained the first people to have a written language, the first international trading empire in all Ifri and the first to develop advanced mathematics such as calculus. It was the first Kingdom to receive a Sika'Dwa stool from the Jok, thereby giving its king divine mandate and causing the land to reflect the sovereign's will. The Kingdom of Aksum was the first to mint its own coin and the home of many developments in agriculture, ceramics and architecture.

Aksum is situated on a high central plateau that ranges from 4,500 feet to 2.5 miles above sea level with the highest mountain, Bale, rising some 3.7 miles. Multiple rivers cut through the kingdom, but the Berbera River, the Kingdom's main one, flows from Iu-Neserer, home of the Jok, out to the sea. The climate has slowly changed over the centuries from entirely temperate to now being temperate on the plateau, cold in the highlands and hot in the south. The weather is consistently sunny and dry with short rains, but rainfall appears greater in regions with worshippers to Ajuk—at least, according to what local gossips claim.

Aksum, like so many other kingdoms, grew off the back of another. In its dawn, the Kingdom of

Aksum struggled against the neighboring Srek. The two fought for valuable land and food resources in a series of battles in which the Aksumites eventually achieved victory. Unlike other conquerors, though, Aksum did not exterminate the Srek. Instead the Srek were adopted into Aksum culture, their language preserved, their customs respected. Those who chose to leave were allowed to do so. The Srek became part of the Aksum, making a greater whole and a stronger kingdom. These actions caught the eyes of the Jok from their lofty thrones on high.

The mysterious Jok came down from Iu-Neserer (the Island of Flame) to teach the Aksumites advanced writing and higher mathematics, through which the people of Aksum learned to create calendars, roads, literature and refined music. These numerological feats enabled their brightest to predict the future via complex mathematical analysis. This gift, coupled with their core belief in unity, turned the Aksumites into the greatest diplomats in all of Terra. Every court wants to have an Aksumite Monitor, a consultant, to negotiate complex deals with her predictive analysis. As too often in the case with humanity, these talents have also been turned to war.

For three centuries after the Jok gifted Aksum with a throne, the Aksumites' might rapidly increased; they conquered more land and assimilated more tribes and customs into their own. The stories of their opulence, benevolence and wealth spread throughout all of Terra, but the people stayed humble and thankful for Aksum's gifts. Even those they fought and defeated earned their mercy and their offer of friendship. Never in their long history did they start a war, but they fought in many and lost only one.

In those early years, the Kingdom was a great naval power and trading empire that rivaled the Numanari Empire through the export of ivory, salt, kaffee, tortoise shell, gold and emeralds. Due to a significant conflict with the Numanari, followed closely by another with the Crescent Empire, Aksum overtaxed its resources and fell into decline. That defeat ended a six-century reign of greatness and precipitated a slow spiral downward.

As Aksum's bounty slipped away, greed overtook its rulers, and Negusa Nagast Wey and his three successors fell to increasingly immoral behavior in hopes of reclaiming lost wealth, glory and power. They resurrected the worship of ancient gods, immortal pelagic horrors that rested in the ocean and cared nothing for humanity. The divine Sika'Dwa stool's connection to the land eroded the bounty of Aksum, as the corruption of the negusa nagast reflected in disease and outlawry across the land. Finally, with the empire weakened, the Second Prophet and his family landed in the once-great empire. Tafari, son of the Prophet, took control of the kingdom and became the first Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro Emperor.

In the early days of the Second Prophet's arrival in Aksum, the worship of ancient oceanic religions brought forth creatures to test the Prophet. All fell before Khalil, but those acts were not forgotten, and the cultists swore he would die at their hand. Even today, remnants of these cults still lurk in the shadows. Their gods are immortal, so they have patience; the Prophet and his family are only mortal, after all, and the cults will have their vengeance in due time.

Every emperor or empress after the Second Prophet's arrival can trace a direct line to Tafari, who converted the kingdom to the faith of Theus. Each generation slightly alters the Imperial crest to reflect aspects of the Prophet they hold dearest. The lion is the only part of the Aksum Coat of Arms never to be removed.

Through the following centuries, most local place-gods and idiosyncratic religions fell by the wayside. The main religion, practiced by nearly 70 percent of

KINGDOM OR EMPIRE?

Aksum is referred to as a kingdom, but its ruler, the negusa nagast, is generally called an emperor. The negusa nagast holds fealty over the neguses and niste nights, themselves lesser rulers. Structurally, that makes Aksum closer to an empire—a collection of rulers who all bow to one emperor. Because the Jok gave each of the Sika'Dwa stools to a Kingdom, though, Ifrians consider Aksum proper a Kingdom; the emperor is "first among sovereigns" of Aksum and, as the holder of the stool, the rightful sovereign and connected to all the lands.

By the same token, an Aksumite uses the word Aksum to refer interchangeably to his capital city and his country. Foreigners find this confusing; the expectation is that it is clear from context. On occasion, a person uses "Aksum City" instead to be explicitly clear.

all Aksumites, is the Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro Church. In rural areas, small communities still follow Ajuk. In the past, the Kingdom's different religions coexisted peacefully; despite pulling the Kingdom into an orthodox Théan faith, Emperor Tafari never outlawed the old religions and did not engage in campaigns of persecution. Instead, he adopted the highest aspirations of the Aksumite and chose to accept a plurality of faiths in his kingdom, even though he himself only adhered to one.

Now, Aksum's old grievances have come back into play. The Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro Church sends envoys to assert religious dogma, rejecting its former peace with the old faiths. At the same time, scheming Vodacce traders turn from ancient partners to bitter rivals and cut into Aksum's profits and trade routes. A Vodacce seems to take a perverse pleasure in breaking his word and his peace treaties. When confronted, he always blames a different Prince and shrugs, saying simply, "It is the way of Terra, my friend." Emperor Makonnen has turned to using disguised supply ships filled with soldiers to ambush Vodacce pirate vessels, then capturing the enemy ships and selling them back to rival Vodacce traders. He has sent diplomats to Castille, Ussura and Vestenmennavenjar to apply pressure to Vodacce. A Hero looking to aid Aksum—or just to fill her pockets with gold—finds a kingdom eager to hire foreign agents who can help to thwart Vodacce's imperialist ambitions.

The last decade has seen Aksum at war with the wealthy empire of Manden over trading exports. While lacking the endless resources of Manden, Aksum has kept its sibling Kingdom under duress by predicting fleet and troop movements, minimizing their own losses while maximizing casualties on the opposing side. Weary of the war, both kingdoms agreed a year ago upon a marriage to secure a lasting peace.

The stench of decay begins to seep up from under the glorious Kingdom, as crops fail and rumors speak of dark things from the shadows shambling out to consume everything before them. A few relic hunters claimed to have seen unholy batrachian abominations slithering out of ancient ruins. In the far south, more than one farmer has noticed her crops wilting overnight in foul-smelling gelatinous masses.

Nebīyi Monitors

The Monitors have been called countless things down through the ages—"Logopolians" and "Chroniclers" being two of the more common terms. A Monitor practices the art of enhanced analysis with elevated math, almost appearing to sing to the universe, in a call and response format. To embrace the art of the Nebīyi, she must dedicate her life to becoming one with calculations. The discipline of the Nebīyi hones memory, perception and analysis and learns to recognize important conjunctions of people, situations, places and times. This involves more than just calculations, points and logic. A Monitor describes this as more akin to navigating a river with flowing deviant paths and finding the course that leads back into the main body of the river.

A Monitor rigorously studies mathematics in conjunction with numerous mental exercises. While this does involve a significant amount of book learning and study, the Monitor also uses mnemonic "tricks" that can seem odd: special names for people or animals designed to create mnemonic associations, gestures or body movements to reinforce particular computations via muscle memory, color choices in her clothing used to help create patterns that aid her in recall and deduction. A Monitor may also rely on written computation, with a tablet and stylus for scribbling down his computations in tiny, specialized notations. The most skilled of Monitors, though, is said to be able to perform his deductions in an empty room with no aids at all.

This near-instantaneous process appears almost magical, but comes from decades of practice passed down through Aksumite history. Even an Aksumite child evidences this focus with her rhyming songs and games based on numbers. Aksumite culture and heritage embraces logic and predictability, and with the proper focus—and the blessings of the Jok—a trained Aksumite Monitor can predict the outcome of nearly any event based on its initial conditions. If the proper sequence can be recited in the appropriate tone...the impossible becomes possible.

While a Monitor relies on rigorous mathematics and memorization, her practices elevate this science into a spiritual art. Meditation, prayer and ritual chanting are all part of the training. A Monitor credits the

Jok with intervention that leads to revelation; simply making calculations in longhand leads only to meandering equations that provide no useful insights. The combination of spirituality and mathematics provides a Monitor with insights through numerology.

No outsider has ever become a Monitor; the predilection seems to lie with the Aksumites. Perhaps it is a product of how people are raised in Aksum, steeped in this form of nearly magical mathematical determinism. Perhaps no outsider has simply undertaken the years of dedicated work. Or perhaps the Jok have reserved this blessing for Aksum alone.

You can find systems for the Monitors later in this book. Monitors come from Aksum and rarely leave, but of course Heroes always break the mold!

Adventures in Aksum

Aksum is a kingdom of great size, with a well-educated population and a benevolent ruler. Even so, it is a land fraught with difficulties. For five years Aksum has been at war with the neighboring kingdom of Manden, and while an arranged marriage was to settle that situation, the heirs-apparent have vanished. Ancient cults still linger in rural areas, not all of them dedicated to local hearth-gods or helpful sky-gods. Hideous abonsam spirits roam unchecked, because the sorcerer tasked with defending the country against them has fled his post in exile.

Heroes coming to Aksum find a country filled with hopeful, sociable and thoughtful people living in a time of fearful uncertainty. The quality of life in Aksum is in decline, as the war drains resources out of the economy. Everyone is on edge—will the emperor find a new sorcerer to replace the old and protect the kingdom from evil spirits? Will the war with Manden have a peaceful conclusion before both kingdoms are destroyed or Aksum faces defeat?

Instead of finding small farm towns with a few dusty cattle, visitors discover prosperous port cities shipping exquisite metalwork and weaving to Vodacce and further abroad, and inland cities with massive stone-and-wood buildings, elaborately painted churches to the Second Prophet and bustling marketplaces. Traders follow the powerful river routes to connect far-flung cities, and any stranger could be a noble, a magician or a master scholar. Even a commoner congregates in shops and restaurants to discuss politics and the state of current affairs just as much as she talks about the weather and the state of crops.

A Hero in Aksum has his work cut out for him: the emperor needs help to protect his country, end the war and prepare his daughter for rulership. On a local level, Heroes could fight against river pirates, engage a disinherited noble in a duel of words (and make a lasting friend with a good performance), run afoul of the plots of evil magicians summoning abonsam spirits, discover ancient texts of the Second Prophet, delve into the mysteries of the Jok and their oracular mathematics and uncover a conspiracy to bring about the next Prophet and possibly the end of the world!

Playing a Hero from Aksum

A Hero from Aksum comes from a long tradition of knowledge, generosity and loyalty. Now, his kingdom has fallen upon hard times, and many of the neighboring kingdoms of Ifri have turned to wickedness and fallen under the sway of evil. A Hero from Aksum might be…

- A Nebīyi Monitor, who studies sacred mathematics and seeks to understand the world through rigorous analysis and memorization combined with spirituality and meditation
- A soldier from the Aksumite army, skilled in the use of shotel and spear, trained in tactics, with the endurance to run for an entire night and then face an enemy army the next day
- A Skia agent who seeks out hidden threats to the kingdom and deals with them quietly in the shadows, especially with a focus on ending the war with Manden
- A former member of the Zukic' Shok, or Imperial Guard, who has been released from service after five years of loyal protection and now seeks a new career of adventure
- A Melbur sorcerer or *dasusuo*, who deals with evil spirits and strikes bargains with them, always walking on the edge of making a deal that may lead to tragedy
- A rural stonecutter who keeps the secret arts of carving stelae, the magical stone plinths that protect Aksum from outside evils

Social Strata

Five distinct economic classes make up the Kingdom of Aksum, and lifestyles vastly differ for all. An Aksumite's embrace of knowledge hand-in-hand with her religion has brought basic literacy and mathematics to even the most humble farmers and herders. The line between peasants and small-scale merchants blurs, as does the distinction between wealthy merchants and land-poor nobility. Everyone has a chance to learn, which creates a sense of egalitarian camaraderie. In truth, political and economic power are not evenly shared, but even a laborer feels that she has some control over her destiny.

Because people of various strata interact freely and lack the harsh divide found in other parts of the world, this creates ample opportunity for a foreigner less knowledgeable about Aksum (or on rarer occasions crass locals) to accidentally insult a ras and find himself engaged in a public duel of words. Naturally, the emphasis on knowledge and education in Aksum makes a competition of poetic erudition much more likely than a bloody crossing of blades.

Peasant (Zxafi)

The life of a zxafi is a good life in the Kingdom of Aksum, as she receives an elementary-level education in even the most rural of areas through the auspices of the local church. Every major and trading town has a skilled physician, member of the clergy and a practicing member of Melbur, and these officials serve the public sphere not only with their work, but by teaching, and even the zxafi receive tutelage.

The day of a zxafi is filled with work, prayer, family and pursuit of personal happiness. Unlike peasants on other lands, a zxafi is not necessarily beholden to landowners by debt, though her movements are often restricted. She provides for her family through farming, day labor and animal husbandry. A zxafi may try to better her station by creating new opportunities, either by selling crafts or pursuing additional education so that she can rise into a professional role. But that advancement, like all things, takes time, work and the luck of the Jok.

Middle Class (Vwie)

A vwie belongs to some of the richest people in the Kingdom of Aksum, as she makes up the bulk of the merchants and traders. She controls exports and imports, as well as the bulk of internal trade in the cities. Civil government workers also fall under this banner. Unlike a zxafi, she receives a university-level education and can move freely locally or abroad if she can afford it. Architects, military officers and merchants are the heart of this class, and their work days are shorter than the zxafi and less arduous.

Church

Religion in Aksum is a serious business. The holiest of places requires a set regime that mirrors the Vaticine in Castille, the Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro Church. Membership in the clergy carries with it respect for the office, regardless of rank, and clergy members can move freely about the country, much like nobles. A clergy member is also subject to Church discipline and unlikely to be detained, questioned or reprimanded for his actions, even if criminal. If pressed, a light wrist slapping comes down from the negus of any province. Historically, members of the clergy have rarely misused these privileges, but as Aksum falters under the increasing pressure of difficult times, errant behavior and corruption becomes more common, and members of the clergy are more likely to abuse this station.

Royalty

Two classes of non-Imperial nobles call Aksum home. The first class of royals (including the negus) lives in immaculate palaces built of stone and takes an active role in controlling their local domains. A negus or niste night commands the troops in his region and must ensure they are prepared to fight, given the decade-long war with Manden. This royalty enjoys the life of luxury that her titles, wealth, lack of responsibilities and adherence to faith allows her.

The second class of nobility, due to the deterioration of Aksum's fortunes, has lost his land, wealth and influence. Many are little more than titled zxafi at this point for a myriad of reasons. The stories are varied and their plights individual, but each holds true to their title. A displaced noble often assumes that her loss of fortune is transitory and that she will return to her station of wealth and privilege. Yet many find themselves forced to sell their lands and make bargains with less-than-savory individuals to retain their lifestyles.

Imperials

The highest-ranking class in the kingdom is the Imperial family, with Negusa Nagast Makonnen ruling the kingdom alongside his queen, Zufan. His law is divine and his orders taken without question. The Imperial family, the smallest and most elevated caste in Aksum, possesses a wide range of privileges and a phenomenal amount of wealth and power at their beck and call. Members of the imperial family are considered living examples for the rest of Aksum, with people regularly citing historical examples of great deeds by previous rulers in proverbs.

The heavy burden of serving as an example for the rest of the kingdom does take its toll. The family and the royals pressure any ruler who cannot live up to these standards to abdicate. That act—surrendering power for the benefit of the people—is considered one of the greatest deeds any ruler can do. The fame from acknowledging one's limitations and abdicating frequently provides sufficient motivation to entice an otherwise weak or fallible monarch into stepping aside for a sibling or cousin. For instance, the former Emperor Girma Solace proved not to have the temperament necessary for leadership. On the advice of his royals he abdicated his position and traveled south to work for bunna farmers and to lend advice to the local negus. He studied scriptures and dedicated himself to a life of simplicity, which drew much acclaim for his willingness to give up the material comforts of his station. After his death, he was sainted for his dedication to the people of Aksum.

A GLOSSARY OF AKSUMITE TERMS

Dasusuo: "wise ones" (not to be confused with Wiseones). Someone who practices Melbur Sorcery.

Nebīyi Monitors: hyperaware mathematicians from Aksum, who use science gleaned from the works of the Prophet to foresee the future.

Negus: an Aksum ruler of a large portion of land and is also referred to as a sovereign, but not THE Sovereign.

Negusa Nagast: the Aksumite King of Kings, the Emperor of Aksum.

Nigiste Nigist: the Aksumite Queen of Queens, the Empress of the land of Aksum.

Shotel: a curved sword of the Aksum people.

Skia: Aksumite secret police used by the negusa nagast to ferret out trouble home and abroad.

Vwie: middle-class merchants of Aksum.

Ze'eg: the mother tongue of Aksum, the official language of the land and the only language in which government documents are written.

Zukic' Shok: Imperial Guard and the elite troops of the Aksumite emperor.

Zxafi: an Aksumite peasant.

Imperial Titles

Negusa Nagast (King of Kings) or Nigiste Nigist (Queen of Queens)

The full title of the ruler of Aksum is Negusa Nagast or Nigiste Nigist, and "Igziabeher, Elect of God, who presides over the Kingdom of Aksum from the city of Aksum." The title denotes the ruler of the kingdom who sits on the Sika'Dwa stool from the lower rulers of regions in Aksum.

Each negusa nagast and nigiste nigist has ruled the kingdom from the city of Aksum since Emperor Tafari moved the capital from the prosperous and thriving port city, Addis Addus.

A High Council of royals traditionally advises the emperor or empress. Though not an Imperial himself, a member of the High Council has great influence and can easily control a weak monarch.

While there is traditionally a lone negusa nagast or nigiste nigist, the Imperial documents hold a law that has only been invoked four times in the history of the kingdom: dual monarchy. In times past, the country has been ruled by not one, but two separate sovereigns, who must agree together and rule together. This law was enacted so long ago that no one remembers why such a thing exists, few even know about it; only historians remember this oddity now. Still, if Aksum were to split along political lines, or form a new alliance with a neighboring kingdom, this historical oddity could quickly become quite important!

Itergit (Consort)

Itergit are the blessed and crowned consorts of the emperor or empress, crowned three days after the ruler and sanctioned by the church. The title refers to both male and female companions. Each ruler receives the privilege of having one consort in addition to her spouse. This role has carried over from the first days of the kingdom.

Le'ul (Prince) or Le'elt (Princess)

The title used for daughters, sons and grandchildren of the negusa nagast or nigiste nigist to bestow their Imperial status. Should the current ruler die or abdicate, this title is forfeited to the children of the new monarch.

Nurgust (Imperial Family)

This title is used for another Imperial family, when the le'ul or le'elt are no longer the children of the current negusa nagast or nigiste nigist or when a monarch gives up power to another. A nurgust traditionally remains in the Imperial palace and receives a stipend for his expenses; depending upon the current ruler, this may be a means to keep relatives living in comfort or a way to keep him under surveillance. A nurgust generally enjoys a great deal of political influence, because she can move freely in the palace and interact with members of the Imperial family, but she is not beholden to many of the expectations placed upon the direct rulers of Aksum.

Noble Titles (Non-Imperial)

Negus (King) or Niste Night (Queen)

The title refers to the monarch of a vast province awarded by the negusa nagast. The title passes down from generation to generation and can only be stripped by the negusa nagast. A negus or niste night, as the voice of the negusa nagast, carries out the emperor's law, in spirit and letter. This is one of the most closely watched positions by the emperor and the High Council.

Ras (Duke or Duchess)

One of the most important non-Imperial titles in Aksum, a ras controls a section of land and draws income from all of the business and labor therein; these estates are larger than a single town but smaller than a kingdom of a negus. This title is often bestowed to heads of cabinet positions in the Imperial dynasty. A ras who heads a cabinet position retains her lands and titles while she serves, but if dismissed her estates revert to the emperor for reassignment. This is, obviously, a major incentive for a cabinet advisor to do a good job, so that the emperor keeps her at her post!

Bitwoven (Earl)

Only two bitwoven are appointed at any time, one for the Right Hand and the other the Left Hand, to serve under the ras. The bitwoven organize intelligence gathering and state security. Each one oversees an entire department of informants, spies and translators, with esoteric codes and unique standards—both to protect Aksum's secrets from outsiders and to stymie the spies of other nobles. The position frequently sees infighting between the left and right, as each tries to bring the most recent intelligence. In theory, the competition between the two fosters the best information gathering, as each uses the most effective methods, but this also leads to complications when agents of the Left and Right bitwoven cross in the field without realizing that they both work for the kingdom.

Lij (children of royalty)

Daughters, sons and grandchildren of a negus gain the title of lij as a signifier of their royal status.

Dscah Ru (Court Mystic)

The dscah ru is a counselor to the negusa nagast and schooled in the dangerous art of Melbur. The dscah ru summons and controls abonsams—a risky business of using demonic entities on behalf of the kingdom. The position is currently vacant, as the previous dscah ru fell under the sway of Bonsam and fled Aksum. By decree of the negusa nagast, this role has not been filled.

Abeto Hoy (Noble)

This is the title of any rank and file noble. If the noble has property or substantial wealth, the first syllable is stressed when addressing him. If not, he receives the respect of his blood but must eke out a living which can land him in any walk of life. Many leave home with hopes of finding a fortune abroad.

Imperial Court Offices

Ederase (Regent)

When the negusa nagast is too young or infirm, or abroad, the ederase acts in his stead and grants the ability to appoint nobles. In theory, the ederase works in trust for the emperor; in reality, popularity sharply influences the ederase's power. An unpopular ederase finds a noble dragging his feet and refusing orders, instead waiting for the emperor to confirm or overturn him. Thus, the ederase must also curry favors—or blackmail—for the day when it must be used.

Tsezafi Taesas (Scribe by Command)

This may be the most powerful position in all the Imperial Court, as the tsezafi taesas always walks two steps behind the emperor, listening and writing down every edict issued. Also empowered to safeguard the Great Seal, she keeps records of all appointments and publishes the laws and treaties of the land. The tsezafi taesas' signature appears on all documentation instead of the emperor's.

Agge Negus (Mouth of the King)

The agge negus are the heralds of the emperor. Historically, there are two at any given time, in case the emperor needs to send messages to multiple locations or one is captured or killed in hostile lands. An agge negus speaks with the emperor's voice, a prestigious position but not necessarily an influential one. Currently both agge neguses are abroad, and the emperor has assigned a temporary one in their place.

Lique Mekwas (The Emperor's Double)

Each negusa nagast has three or four lique mekwas to serve as impersonators that travel into battle with the emperor. It is the most trusted position in the kingdom. Since the assassination of the Second Prophet, this role has always been fully staffed.

Aqabe Se'at (Keeper of Time)

A member of the Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro Church is always appointed to this prestigious position. The aqabe se'at keeps the emperor's schedule and has authority over other clergy in the Imperial Court. This has frequently led to conflicts when the aqabe se'at sojourns outside the palace.

NOBLE HOSPITALITY

A noble is always welcome to visit for a few months at any other noble's residence. It is considered rude to turn them away. Even enemies grudgingly make allowances for visitors with whom they are currently fighting.

One couple, Abdikarim and Elsa, nearly destitute, travels throughout the kingdom, enjoying a taste of the life they once knew. Leaning upon the traditions of hospitality, they are constant guests of other families, with only their titles to provide welcome.

Blattageta (Lord of Pages)

The blattageta, the palace administrator, commands the blatta (pages) who minister to the Imperial family's needs and enforce palace protocol laid out by the blattageta. Though a page is not a warrior, she does have the authority to evict anyone who causes distress, behaves in a vulgar fashion or otherwise violates protocol.

Interacting with the Nobility

Visitors from abroad may be surprised at the ease with which one can rub shoulders with local nobles. In Aksum, nobility does not necessarily denote isolation or an elevated position that is unapproachable. Foreigners who are not dangerous and who observe proper decorum find it easy to meet and befriend nobles, even royals—but conversely, it can be difficult to tell a noble apart from everyone else while wandering the streets and marketplaces, as few have any special regalia or identifying iconography.

The Imperial family is a different matter; security dictates that no visitor enters their presence without a thorough vetting and under the watchful eyes of guards. Nevertheless, a well-spoken, congenial foreigner could probably secure an Imperial audience more easily in Aksum than in any of the other nations of Théah.

A polite Hero on good behavior finds it easy to make friends and associate with nobles. Of course, not all nobles have the wealth and power to offer patronage now, but a Hero may not be able to easily tell apart the impoverished from the wealthy, as many nobles still retain lands and houses—even the ones who do not still have lavish incomes from successful businesses. Nobles may also seek out foreigners with offers of trade, deals or the need for able outsiders to handle "special matters."

Customs & Culture

Clothing

Reflecting the weather of the region, women in northern and central Aksum wear clothing made of *smehha*, a cotton cloth woven into long strips stitched together. While peasants' smehha is rough and less flexible, it is easy to clean and takes a few days to sew a new dress. A noble woman's smehha, silky to the touch and warm, adapts to her movements, but each dress requires months to make. The cloth is soaked in a rich mixture for weeks to soften it. A merchant frequently has a colored stripe around the bottom of her dresses, while a noble's dress has a cascade of bright colors with ornate patterns.

Men wear pants with knee-length shirts and different color collars for most months. During the colder months, men wear *hem-ki* (animal skin) jackets. The type of animal indicates the status of the wearer, along with the colors used. Common pastoral animals make up the coats of the peasants while rarer animals make up the coats of nobles, and some Imperials have jackets ostensibly made of monster hides.

During ceremonies, both men and women wear shawls made of delicate fabric that the Church provides annually. Every family has its own distinctive look with crosses, colors and patterns determined by the family's history, profession and standing in the community. Shawls end with beads hung from strands at three-inch intervals. Social class determines the number of beads; a peasant family has a single bead on each strand, while an Imperial has five on each string.

Foreign clothing, as that of Heroes from abroad, draws a mixture of curiosity and good-natured ribbing from the locals. The great heat of the summers scorches anyone foolish enough to wear the kinds of heavy garments found in Vodacce and Sarmatia. The restrictive nature of elaborate garments always draws chuckles from onlookers. A clever traveler quickly adopts local clothing whenever she can—while she may not always blend in due to her mannerisms or accents, at least she feels more comfortable than wearing a heavy wool jacket over a restrictive corset in the middle of sweltering tropical heat!

Language

Aksum has over 170 individual languages with 70 spoken locally. Ze'eg is the mother tongue and official language of the land and the only language in which government documents are written. Ze'eg is not related to any of the languages from the northern parts of Théah, but several words from the southern regions (primarily Numa and Vodacce) have crept into the vocabulary—predominantly for foreign cultural concepts such as "swashbuckler" and "archeologist." Visitors find that in northern Aksum, guides commonly speak at least a little bit of the languages from across the sea, especially in port towns.

Food

A zxafi eats whatever she can grow, fish or buy with her limited means. Common foods include root vegetables and starchy tubers, a variety of greens, sourdough flatbread, eggs, eel, fish and milk from herd animals. Since food quality varies and hungry families have to eat anything they can muster, a local adds a distinctive spice called *woti* to most of his dishes. Woti adds a smoky heat that sharply enhances otherwise bland vegetables and covers up unpleasant flavors in fish. Even on rare celebratory occasions when poor families have a small amount of beef, woti spices up the dish.

A vwie as well as a clergy member enjoys woti, but has a more varied diet than her poorer counterparts with a heavier focus on meats—beef, chicken and lamb. A clergy member receives a portion of foods grown in his territory, given as donations to the Church, and a prosperous merchant or artisan can sometimes afford foreign wines to add to her meals.

A noble has access to the greatest quantity and quality of food. His influence on shipping allows access to imported meats, cheeses, fruits and alcohols. This right of food also flows down into the upper levels of the military with any commander of 100 or more troops enjoying the fruits of Aksum and lands beyond.

The Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro Church does not eat meat or ingest dairy products on Wednesday and Fridays, except for the 30 days before the first day of the Lingering of the Prophet. In Aksum, scriptural doctrine holds that fasting represents humanity seeking forgiveness for the Second Prophet's assassination, and so she instead performs rigorous prayers on those days.

The national drink of Aksum is *tej*, a honey wine. Brewers make tej from powdered leaves, gesho twigs, fermented berries and (of course) honey. Vestenmennavenjar compare it to mead, though it has more of a woody, earthy undertone. The longer the fermentation, the more potent the drink. The honey wine's sweet flavor masks its high alcohol content, making it impossible to determine the strength of the drink before it is too late. Reputable tej houses include the fermentation time on the menu, while shady establishments have a reputation for leaving passed-out patrons waking in dark alleys with empty purses and wallets. In recent years, a nonalcoholic version, *berz*, has seen an increase in popularity and a spike in price, now costing more than tej.

Music

Both folk history and religion influence Aksumite music, as Vaticine elements slowly erode references to forgotten religions. Aksumite music has a modal system of sounds with long intervals falling between some notes, varying by region. For instance, the music from the highlands is monophonic compared to the south, which is polyphonic. In the highlands, the music has frequent pauses, and chanting from the musician fills the silence.

Instruments

The string instruments of Aksum vary by the region and its musicians. The *masenqo* is a single string bow lute, compared to a *krar* which is a six-string lyre, or a *begena* which is a ten-string lyre. Each has a distinctive sound that represents the area where it is played.

An Aksum Kingdom highlands musician favors the bamboo flute, the washint. While in the south, she uses a holdudaw, a carved-out animal horn. A northern musician frequently makes his horns of metal compared to the south that uses bamboo. The Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro Church uses the sistrum, a metal percussion shaker that creates a soft clanking sound, during their ceremonies to keep rhythm during prayers. The large hand drum, the kebero, is used by the Dīnists as prescribed by the Crescent Empire. Finally, the nagarit, a massive eight-foot-wide and fourteen-foot-high royal drum, is played with a stick during royal ceremonies and also used for official announcements.

NOTABLE NOBLES

Bitwoven Nebiat is the current head of the Skia. Though Nebiat seems to use his powers for the good of the empire, his true motivations are unknown. He typically defers to the emperor and feigns ignorance of unsavory operations, even as he possesses mountains of intimate information about many nobles across the country and even in foreign lands. Even so, the emperor trusts him implicitly, but nobody can say whether Nebiat's loyalty is absolute, or he has some sort of blackmail significant enough to depose a negusa nagast.

The second Bitwoven, Mazaa, is a seemingly cheery woman of short stature and boisterous affectation. No one could imagine the young woman as an intelligence keeper, including Nebiat. Her outward appearance and boundless naivete means that she is overlooked often, when in truth she is as dangerous as a viper. Deftly able to cajole information from people who would normally be on guard, Mazaa is loyal to the negusa negast, and is close friends with Princess Mehret. She maintains a strict eye on the immediate royal family and has a distinct distrust of her fellow bitwoven.

The current ederase, Habte, is older than the emperor and has yet to find a replacement. The elderly ederase can frequently be caught napping in the palace garden. Because he is not currently needed, officials consider him more an affectation of the palace, but wily politicians realize he knows the emperor and the Imperial Family in great detail—since at any moment he could be called upon to see to their welfare and step in their place.

One of the blatta, Atrua, has been possessed by a Jok to monitor the Imperial family and judge if they are worthy of receiving a new math. This is unlikely to be discovered unless a renegade abonsam happens to cross her path. Since currently the emperor has no dscah ru to deal with abonsam problems, the possibility that one could slip unnoticed into the palace is high. Because of the Jok's sacred abilities, it could easily banish such a creature, but has to reveal itself to do so. In the meantime, Atrua simply watches and waits to see if the right person rises to the needs of the empire and shows the worthiness for a new form of oracular calculation.

Dance

Practiced solely in Aksum, *Eskista* is a traditional dance performed by both men and women. The detail-orientated dance is one of the most technical forms of dance in the Kingdom and mastering it draws praise from the emperor himself. Eskista focuses on unique shoulder movements, with the bouncing of shoulders, rolling of shoulder blades and jittering of the chest. A dancer only performs this to traditional Aksumite string music.

Amrou, performed with the upper body like the Eskista, focuses on precise neck movements, instead of the shoulders, that require years to learn and a lifetime to master. It also incorporates a series of step actions, having the dancer's neck move one direction while his body moves in the opposite direction, and ending with a perfectly timed jump.

Rural locations still practice a less-structured dance, the *Gonbel*. The Gonbel is an agile spinning of the waist; the entire body is in motion to the music. Unlike other dances, the Gonbel rarely has a rigid set of predetermined choreography. Instead, dancers improvise in time to the music, shifting and swaying to accommodate changes in the beat or the tone. The Gonbel, considered an uplifting dance, a way to accentuate joy, shares happiness with the audience.

Art

The art of the kingdom can be seen in two distinctive categories: pre- and post-conversion to the Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro Church. After the conversion, a singular theme dominates art throughout the kingdom. The work of every type of artist—painting, crosses, icons, illuminated manuscripts and metalwork—reflects the new religion. Jewelry, basketry and textiles retain their more providential feel and expression.

Painting

Two styles of art, iconic and representational, dominate Aksum. Iconography, an ancient style with cartoonish figures having large almond-shaped eyes, focuses on religious objects, churches, manuscripts and most often a single person in profile. The drawings cover countless cliff faces and statues and are found all across Aksum. Painters have used this style for centuries, dating back to pictures of hunters chasing deer and fiery objects falling from the heavens and crashing into Terra near the Sulfur Depression. Diptychs and triptychs of religious icons are also common, and fully painted church walls show stories of the land.

The second style, representational, appears more on parchment and other flat, regular surfaces. Aksumite representational art carries an array of bright colors, two-dimensional figures and a single subject or multiple panels that tell a story, either folk, historical or trade. Representational art of this form, less stylized and more influenced by modern techniques, still tends to follow rigid rules of presentation that make it appear unvaried by Théan standards. In truth, an artist working with this style strives to provide a story within a specific set of artistic rules, which makes her creativity all the more intriguing when contrasted with modern Théan art that focuses on realism or complex scenes.

Metalwork

Aksum crafted metal when its sibling kingdoms of Ifri thought of it as magic. The metalworkers were exceptional and ahead of their time. Metal served to make implements, weapons and especially jewelry, tools and beautiful art objects—but until the introduction of gunpowder from abroad, the construction of firearms was unknown.

Metalworkers in Aksum most commonly work in copper and brass. The most common ornaments, seen throughout the kingdom, are metal Prophet's

THE ART OF STORYTELLING

Aksumite art, both iconic and representational, typically serves to tell a story, often relevant to the local history. Unlike Théan artists, who frequently paint scenes from distant mythology, portraits of nobles or recreations of wars, Aksumite art—especially the kind found on the walls of churches and ruins—often shows people at that very location, doing historically significant things.

As one famous adventuring archeologist said, "X never marks the spot." In Aksum, though, the art may very well provide a clue. Whether hunting for traces of Jok influence, looking for hiding spots of abonsam or seeking out lost or secret passages, the local art scene may provide just the clue that the Heroes need.

Crosses, which have slowly replaced the wooden ones that became popular after the kingdom's conversion. While copper and brass are still popular for making crosses, older ones are sometimes made of gold or silver; more recently constructed ones usually use only a gold or silver foil or plating.

Aksumite Prophet's Crosses often have a curved base (like an inverted bowl) called "the arms of the Prophet," mounted on a sphere easily turned to face different directions. The heads are flat with elaborate, detailed, handworked decoration. The closer one moves toward urban areas, the more attention can be found in the details of each cross; artisans etch words into them and an owner cleans his cross monthly.

Crowns, another major focus of the Aksumite metalworker, are made for the Imperial family, royals, noble officials and senior clergy. The crowns have a high front with two circular bands wrapping about the head. For the Imperial Family, the crown face still retains the image of the sun, while the Church's crowns have long crosses and a small metal band to support the weight.

Aksumite metal crafts have become something of a recent fad among wealthy Vodacce, who import brass bowls and elaborate cups at great expense.

Crafts

Aksum's assimilation of different ethnic, cultural and religious groups has created a range of textiles with geometric decoration; even the simplest of weaving is a math problem made real. The Church uses these weavings to create colorful vestments, hangings, baskets and wall ornaments. These colorful baskets serve multiple purposes ranging from serving to storage.

Weaving, a major pastime in Aksum, practiced not only by zxafi for practical reasons and by merchants for sale, but also serves as a form of art and relaxation. Baskets in bright colors and bearing complex designs adorn wealthy homes, while poorer folk rely on practical, sturdy baskets. Rumor holds that some basket weavers can make baskets with a weave so tight that they can carry water or even capture evil spirits. Large baskets can even carry human cargo—either to serve as a hiding place, or as a means to dispose of unconscious guards who might draw too much attention…

INSULT SOMEONE AT THE DINING TABLE

The mannerisms of dining in Aksum are very different from those of Théah. While Théans have adopted tableware (at least among the wealthy), an Aksumite eats with her hands, primarily by tearing off a piece of flatbread and using it to eat from the various dishes at the table.

A visitor should follow all of the following customs or risk insulting his host or offending other people at the table:

Wash your hands before you sit down to eat or touch the food. (Bowls of water are provided for this.)

When greeting someone already eating, just touch your wrist to his instead of shaking his hand, so you do not get food all over your hands or dirt all over his.

The food is served on a communal plate. You share with everyone else.

Do not reach across the table. If you want a piece of something on the other side of the large communal plate, ask someone to pass it to you.

If someone offers to feed a piece of food to you, accept this gesture of respect.

Always let the elders start eating before you do.

Of course, Heroes from abroad will not necessarily know these rules and might be surprised by them—especially if a friendly noble tries to feed a morsel to an unmarried Hero. This could result in a duel of words or swords. Conversely, a local Villain might use a Hero's unfamiliarity with local custom as "proof" that she cannot be trusted in deals or business.

Architecture

Aksumite architecture shares common roots that bear layers of variation by region. Most structures, castles, palaces, villas, zxafi homes and churches use alternating stone and wood. This entails protruding wooden support beams—a sight familiar to Vestenmennavenjar. The wooden beams have a thick, interlocking base known as a monkey-head style, which places pressure on the foundation and secures the building. A coat of whitewash completes the exterior and protects the stone against heavy rain.

The current trend in Aksum is for roundhouses of sandstone with basalt foundations. This style is slowly overtaking major trade cities, but rural areas resist moving away from the monkey-head style.

Théan architecture, despite its grand scope, has made little headway in Aksum. The famous architect Yona, of Addis Addus, imported Avalonian styles in an attempt to create new designs, but has met with a great deal of resistance. Notably, Avalonian construction works well in the rainy, cold weather of that island nation, but does not have good ventilation for the hot summers.

Yona still seeks patrons to finance the construction of new buildings in this style so that he can show his vision and perhaps test designs that incorporate a fusion of forms. If he can manage to build something truly memorable, such a patron could gain considerable fame—and a foothold in society in Addis Addus.

Sports

An Aksumite has taken his sports seriously since Nigiste Nigist Zaduxis began the Decimal Games during the time of Jubilation. During this unprecedented peace, athletes from around the kingdom journeyed to Aksum to compete.

No one sport defines the kingdom, as each major region embraces its own game. A highlander of Aksum from the far north trains rigorously at javelin tossing, as it helps her hunt game. The capital city and major trade hubs near the ocean have mastered the game of Kest, a board game of strategy and logic (somewhat like Go, but played on a rectangle). To the far south and near the borders, from the young age of four, a child learns A'Nazaha Wa-Tahtib, or simply Tahtib, a kind of stick fighting. A master stick fighter from the town of Jekti could easily defeat two fully trained cavalry soldiers. Lastly, the central Aksum cities train in long-distance running, a necessity for sending a messenger to other cities. Every three years each region has its own contest of champions that lasts four days in preparation for the Decimal Games.

Representing one's home region or city in the Decimal Games ranks as a high honor and recognition of one's mastery in a field of athletics. An athlete competes not just to show his own prowess, but for the pride of his home and as an aspirational example of what all the men and women of Aksum might achieve. Royals playing host to a visiting dignitary may take her to see the Games as a means of impressing her or providing a social outlet that demonstrates Aksum's culture.

While to date nobody has been so crude as to attempt to disrupt the Games by sabotage or by murder, the increasing pressure on Aksum due to its declining fortunes means that participation in the Games is now increasingly cutthroat. Any number of things could go wrong—an athlete waylaid on her way to the Games, events disrupted, sorcery used to cheat, foreign influence for crass gambling—and any Hero preserving the integrity of the Games in the face of such a threat could certainly win the favor of the emperor.

THE LINGERING

When the Second Prophet was assassinated, it took seven days for him to die by the hands of the seven assassins. This period is referred to as the Lingering. During observance, priests and the religious fast from Dawn to Sunset to symbolize humility and to seek forgiveness for the killing of the Second Prophet. Many acts of charity and grace are given during these days, and people are instructed to be kind and generous to all they meet. With this they hope to counteract the evil that was the destruction of Theus' Prophet.

Religion

The Aksum Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro ("One Unified Nature" in Ze'eg) Church, the religion brought by Khalil, is the dominant religion in Aksum. Zxafi and Imperial alike, when not within earshot of a member of the clergy or an overly devout family member, refer to the Church as the Hibiri Church. While shortening the name is not considered disrespectful, it is less dignified and raises the occasional eyebrow.

The Hibiri dates a few of its traditions back into Khemet, from the rites of a small sect in the Crescent Empire codified during the Second Prophet's journey to his homeland.

The return of the Second Prophet to Aksum guaranteed the place of the Church and its unshakable influence on the kingdom. The old religions slowly subsided after the conversion of Emperor Tafari. While some pockets of other, older religions remain in rural areas, each generation sees them shrink further as the Church assimilates more and more people. Ajuk, the largest of the remaining religions, only keeps a foothold because a rural farmer prays to his Sky God for rain, which is of course central to his livelihood.

The core belief of the Hibiri is that the first two Prophets, and eventually an awaited Third Prophet, are all incarnations of the same soul with one purpose. Each incarnation is a new aspect of awareness for the Prophet; all who come after them are the same person. The unifier's soul binds all of the Prophets together; race, gender and origin are all irrelevant, because the quality that makes the Prophet is spiritual, not bodily. The Hibiri teach that only two Prophets have existed to date and believe that the Third Prophet will be given flesh again. The Church believes that two more incarnations of the Prophet will arrive and that it is their duty to pave the way for the Prophet's return.

The Church Codex

The Aksum Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro Church Codex, the Yeberalachewini K'alati, also known as the Enlightened Words or Hibiri Codex, has two sections. The first part of the Codex is the First Prophet's teachings. This book, consistent with the Church of the Prophets in Théah, includes the various lessons that the saints dictated, with only minor variations. The Hibiri Church claims its version of the book as the oldest in the known world. The latter half of the text, the significantly larger portion of the codex, details the Second Prophet's teaching, wisdom and personal insights.

The Second Prophet became more prolific during his Lingering, as he spent seven days dying from wounds inflicted by the seven assassins. His works, *Āmeshashu Git'imochi* (Twilight Poems), collect all his teachings, prophecies of what is to come, hidden messages inscribed into the poem with a cipher only understandable by the most pious, and words of warning for his third incarnation. Many of the hidden messages, warnings and the actual name of the Third Prophet appear as unintelligible formulas. Of course, the Aksumite facility with mathematics means that many have tried to crack these codes, but even those who claim success have never been able to demonstrate their claims authoritatively.

The Hibiri Church has a friendly relationship with the Vaticine Church and al-Dīn but does not adhere to either religion's doctrines. The Hibiri has its own Hierophant and saints. Many saints have been lay priests that provided greater service to their people than to the crown. Both churches have exchanged clergy to share information, rites and rituals. Despite their differences, relations are friendly; the Inquisition stays out of Aksum, and the Vaticine Church considers the Hibiri Church a necessary adjunct in Ifri.

DEATH OF THE SECOND PROPHET

You may notice that the story of the Second Prophet's assassination here does not match the story the Dīnists tell of the Princess of Thaj murdering Khalil.

It is true that Tafari was Khalil's son, and that he became the Emperor of the land. And much of the Aksumite account of the history is well-documented and accurate. Dīnists simply believe Khalil left Askum before he died, and the Tomb of the Betrayers holds cultists Tafari found, and held responsible for his father's death. Which does nothing to explain the texts that come from the Lingering.

Hibiri priests believe the Dīnist story arises from an attempt to reconcile not having a body after hearing of the Prophet's death. His body being burned away an easy way to explain to his followers why no one could locate him.

They do not agree with one another, and scholars studying the subject have found evidence to support both accounts...much to their chagrin.

Ajuk, the Sky God

One of the last remaining indigenous religions in Aksum is Ajuk worship. Ajuk, a Sky God, graces Aksum's fields with rain and encourages crop growth. Worshippers of the Sky God believe that he still stays while all other gods have petered out because he has a rather practical and compatible job to do. This pragmatic and logical approach to godhood sits well with his people, and even some members of the Church have said that perhaps Ajuk is just another one of Theus' riddles. Either way, his people have not forgotten him. They celebrate annual holidays and festivals related to crops and continue to follow their traditions. Indeed, Ajuk still has priests called the Emuron, known as the diviners of the Sky God's Will. All of this worship seems to have paid off, for floods seem to avoid them, and rain is strangely more likely in areas with high concentrations of worshipers. Even the monasteries seem to never have issues with water or rainfall.

Sorcery

Melbur—Bargaining with Abonsam

The most infamous form of sorcery in Aksum is Melbur, a form of demonic bargaining occasionally compared to Sanderis. Traditionally called *dasusuo*, or wise ones, practitioners generally come from the nobility like sorcerers in other lands, though rural legends often claim that witches in the hinterlands also perform this kind of magic. The most prominent practitioner of Melbur, the dscah ru, traditionally an aide to the emperor, takes on the risks of bargaining with abonsam so that the emperor may remain untouched. With that position currently vacant, Aksum has no master of the craft to defend the emperor against hostile demonic spirits, nor to guide other youth in the craft.

Affinity for Melbur appears in youth, as whispered voices make subtle promises to the unwitting magician. Frequently, one abonsam becomes an "invisible friend" to the child, making petty deals such as punishing bullies or stealing toys in exchange for horrible acts such as torturing pets or brutalizing siblings. Because of the corrosive effect that this kind of bargaining can have on a young mind, it is very important for Melbur-attuned children to be identified and trained as soon as possible. Under normal circumstances the dscah ru oversees other, lesser magicians to take responsibility for finding and training these children. Unfortunately, this now means that children with this talent may very likely grow into a new generation of Villainous demon-bargaining magicians with no guidance and no scruples.

Government

The Kingdom of Aksum's government falls into a hierarchical administrative and authoritative pyramid, cascading out into the lower echelons, with the negusa nagast at the top representing the ultimate divine right of power. The most prominent military and administrative posts go to appointments of the Imperial family, in order to ensure loyalty. An Imperial posting also carries the assumption that, as an Imperial family member traces his lineage back to the Prophet, his closeness to divinity must also grant him improved insights that make him more suited to rulership.

Beneath the emperor and the Imperial posts are the various neguses and niste nights, essentially sovereigns over large fiefs, each reporting to the emperor but otherwise with nearly absolute authority within their own demesnes. Traditionally, a sovereign's position is hereditary, though an emperor could choose to depose one—albeit with a risk of a civil war. Each negus or niste night rules over one province, with ten provinces in the kingdom.

Each ruler further subdivides administration of the province into *woreda* or districts; a district might consist of a town and all of the farms surrounding it. Within a district are *kebele*, the smallest unit of local government, consisting of a ward or neighborhood.

Following the mathematical roots of the kingdom, each sovereign has ten governors; due to the size and shape of the provinces, this might mean that a governor oversees more than one woreda. Naturally, this creates fertile ground for jockeying between bureaucrats and nobles for additional power, and with Aksum's recent losses, some governors have fallen so low in their fortunes that internal power struggles are a foregone conclusion.

Outsiders viewing the government at work gawk at the level of bureaucracy and redundancies built into the system. Councils make low-level decisions that flow upward for approval, and once approved go to a larger council, and then to a mayor, and then a council of governors and then to the negus or miste nights of the province. Solving large problems therefore takes a significant amount of time, and even small issues can become bogged down in territorial disputes or petty struggles between bureaucrats. The level of oversight does, however, mean that the government can often identify and quash attempts to undermine the system through toxic proposals or corruption.

Education

Emperor Tafari instituted kingdom-funded education for everyone. The multicultural roots of Aksum contribute to a society with a broad base of cultural artifacts, general knowledge and history; preserving and building upon these elements, according to Tafari, was a prime responsibility of the state. The benefits of this are twofold: it provides the people with a higher quality of life, and it provides a steady income for the Church.

While education is public, zxafi can rarely afford the time necessary to pursue anything but the most rudimentary learning. Children, more valuable on the farm or working on crafts at home, must make do with haphazard tutelage. Vwie and higher classes of society, though, take full advantage of the public education system and widely regard education as a necessity.

Universities and colleges, all privately funded, require letters of reference and a donation for admittance. No law prohibits a zxafi from attending universities, but she finds it nearly impossible based on the requirements. To date, only four zxafi have ever participated in a university and only one, a woman named Adina, graduated.

The universities of Aksum, though comparable to the centers of learning in Théah, differ in their subject emphasis. Mathematics, of course, takes a high focus with literature and history also important. Graduate students go on to study engineering, architecture, politics, administration, philosophy, culture and some natural sciences.

Currency

Under Nigiste Nigist Zaduxis, Aksum began to mint its own coinage. While Aksum was not the first nation to use metal coinage, it was the first in Ifri to do so. In addition to promoting trade, the coins promoted propaganda with the face of the current nigiste nigist on each coin facing right with a stalk of grain and the words, *"May the Kingdom be powerful."* Eventually the coins added a disc symbol to represent a crescent, later replaced with a cross on the back of the coin once Aksum embraced the Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro.

The government mints coins in gold, silver and bronze, with the gold coins the heaviest (and smallest). The silver and bronze coins omit the stalk of grain in the imagery. The government closely monitors coin quality and removes any low-quality coins from

circulation. The gold coins are for external trade, primarily to increase the reputation and perceived might of Aksum. Rural villages rarely use coinage, instead relying on barter; hard coin shows up mostly in large cities and especially in trading areas and ports.

Military

The military and monarchy go hand in hand, as the negusa nagast is the Commander in Chief. Frequently, the negusa nagast delegates command of some or all of the military to a close relative—always within the family. This direct control of the military and troops increases strength and security of the Imperial family. The amount that the negusa nagast oversees the military personally depends on the predilections of the individual emperor—the current one being very careful to keep a close eye on the military, due to the uncertain position of Aksum.

While the negusa nagast is the overall commander of the military, each *sarawit* (regiment) answers to a negus and bears the name of its home district. A sarawit further breaks down into subunits in orders of ten, all the way down to ten-soldier units dispatched to vanguard, main body, left flank, right flank or rearguard, as needed. Organizationally, this allows local governors to call upon small quantities of the military if the need should arise—but woe unto any governor or negus who uses the army against the wishes of the negusa nagast.

The army ranges from cavalry on war elephants (both because horses are rare in the region, and one war elephant can trample hordes of enemy soldiers) to troops using the spear and shotel. Before the rise of firearms, Aksumite archers were legends of deadly accuracy, known as Alhidaf archers. This art of war is fading away and composes little more than five percent of the modern army. A current officer of the military realizes that Aksum does not have the wealth to fund a fully modernized army with firearms, so he relies instead on intense training for his ground troops and a focus on tactical and operational superiority by means of intelligence, planning and speed.

The Aksum Navy is a great undefeated fighting force in their waters, as they use Jok artifact "rocks" scattered along the bottom of the ocean to rip the nails out of invading vessels. That is why Aksum still practices the ancient art of *jegri*, binding the wooden planks tightly together with knotted cords.

Skia

The Skia is an ancient secret society created by Asmach Gelila after the Second Prophet's assassination. She believed that Aksum needed to protect itself from threats internal and external, and sometimes that protection needed a free and unfettered hand. She approached Emperor Tafari, son of the Second Prophet, to approve the society and grant them ultimate authority. While a Skia member has a high level of power, to use it exposes the society and ruins her ability to operate from the shadows. Instead, she uses their spiderweb of influence, money and predictive skills to move pawns in the game of nations. Rarely does she pick up spear and sword herself.

Asmach Gelila founded the Skia with eighteen members, based on the numerological belief that eighteen was a powerful number that brought good luck. While members have died or retired, they are promptly and quietly replaced with competent operatives. Four of the current-day members perished defending the Tomb of the Betrayers from Dscah Ru Rada before he fled the kingdom. Now, the Skia needs to refill its membership in order to fulfill its mandate. This means that resources are stretched thin as Skia agents both work to thwart enemy action and search for new recruits.

The Skia's current goal is to end the five-year war with the Manden Empire. Steeped in secret knowledge, a Skia member knows of the supernatural problems in Khemet and Mbey, and she believes that a unified front is necessary to stand against the coming darkness. To that end, she seeks to arrange the marriage of Princess Mehret and Prince Maghan Kon Fatta. As a contingency plan in the event of malevolent forces disrupting the wedding, she also hopes to wed Ras Mekonnen of Aksum to Lady Teru of Manden weeks before the Imperial wedding. Stretched thin as she is, though, the Skia teeter in the dangerous position of potential exposure—if some enemy does interfere with the weddings, the Skia has to act decisively to carry out the union, and this risks tipping their hand. Unless a member can find some Heroes to act on her behalf…

AKSUM'S IMPERIAL COAT OF ARMS

The Imperial Family's Coat of Arms links the family back to the Second Prophet. The coat of arms, etched in the stone of the Imperial Palace's main hall floor, appears on the emperor's crimson flags throughout the land. The symbol is of the stone throne with angels on each side of the sitting ruler. The angel to the right holds a spear and shotel (a kind of sword), while the one on the left holds a book and scale, each representing an aspect of a divine ruler. The head of the throne branches out into a large cross. At the foot of the throne is a ferocious lion awaiting the orders of the emperor.

Zukic' Shok (The Imperial Guard)

These twenty soldiers, chosen at an early age during their training, come from all walks of life. The group trains as a unit to protect the Imperial family and serve the throne. The group is broken down into different fighting styles with a focus on the spear and sword, and now firearms, with an equal split of their number knowing each.

A Zukic' Shok serves for five years, and when released, begins whatever career he wishes as a reward for loyal service. The short duration of his service, designed to keep the troops fresh, inspires a soldier to join them and promotes propaganda throughout the kingdom as he sees someone like himself elevated in rank.

There are always two Zukic' Shok with the negusa nagast, one of them a master of spear and sword and the other a crack-shot armed with multiple flintlocks.

Noble military titles include:

- Dejazmach: Commander of the Armed Forces and usually an older member of Imperial Family
- Fitawrari: Commander of Vanguard and usually a younger sibling of a negus
- Grazmach: Commander of the left wing of the troops
- Qegnazmach: Commander of the right wing of the troops
- Balambaras: General term for any noble leading troops
- Asmach: Commander of the rearguard and most trusted chief minister

Non-noble military titles include:

- Shaqela: Commander of 1,000 soldiers, who can perform battlefield promotions to any rank
- Shabell: Commander of 250 soldiers, who can perform battlefield promotions to Lla Azima Alea rank
- Metoliq: Commander of 100 soldiers, and backbone commander of the army
- Amsa Eleg: Leads 20 soldiers, and the position is rarely achieved through battlefield promotion
- Lla Azima Alea: Leads ten soldiers, the lowest echelon of command, and battlefield promotions to this rank are common. This is the highest level a zxafi can achieve (barring some kind of extraordinary circumstance).

Aksumite Names

Aksum had its own naming conventions, though after the kingdom's conversion, people adopted names favored by Vaticine and Crescent cultures. Surnames are not common, but recently some people have created their own. Standard practice among traditional Aksumites is to use the father's first name as one's last name. Aksumites never use surnames, whether father's name or a created one, to address someone. Instead, surnames are found in contracts and written correspondence. Every Aksumite given name has a meaning to it and frequently influences how that person encounters the world.

Common Male Names

Abal (Servant to the King), Amir (Strong), Biruh (Bright), Caleb (The Devoted One), Dawit (Beloved), Eezkis (Theus is my Strength), Frew (Seed), Hassan (First Born), Jember (Sunset), Lake (Healthy One), Medr (Astonished), Melaku (The Angel), Rada (He Shall Help), Samuel (Theus Has Heard), Sefu (Sword), Tamrat (Miracle)

Common Female Names

Abaynesh (Like the Berbera River), Addis (New), Bedelwa (With her luck), Desta (Joy), Eddel (Destiny), Emku (Pearl), Hamelmal (The Word), Heran (Heroine), Konjit (Beauty), Mare (My Honey), Ruth (Companion), Safia (Pure and Wise), Tarik (She has a Story to Tell), Worknesh (You are Gold), Yodit (Woman of Second Prophet), Zahera (Flower)

Notable Locations in Aksum

The geography of Aksum is as varied and plentiful as her people, ranging from deserts along the eastern border, to the Aekowa, Mondeba and Sel mountain ranges in the central core and tropical forests along the southern border.

Aksum has low-lying arid plains divided into two sections providing abundant natural resources. The species and plant life have evolved dramatically from the once-tropical paradise surrounded by mountains. The arid landscape is highlighted with mountains, hills and cliff faces. Some of the upper areas of the mountains have churches built into them. The top of some ranges remain snowcapped throughout the year, one of the only places in Ifri to have snow.

The Simmini mountain range offers a protective barrier to endangered and valuable Aksum wildlife such as the Abro wolf whose fur goes for a small fortune due to its color and warmth, or the Lagurme bird with its impressive wingspan and golden color, frequently used as hunting companions. Aksum is home to some 300 species of mammals and more native reptiles than any other kingdom in Ifri. Unique to Aksum is the Revi Zebra, the largest of all the zebra species.

Water access has always been a problem for the northern people of Aksum because of its limited rainfall. This led to a new agricultural development for the farmers of the north: terrace farming. A farmer cuts a series of receding flat platforms into steps and collects water in them. Then she transports the water to her crops.

Climate

The Kingdom of Aksum is a mountainous country laid out on a plateau divided into northeast and southwest. Countless lakes scatter the countryside, each becoming a way station for travelers and locals alike. The crystal clear water is always clean and refreshing, and the Lake of Remembrances is the largest in the country.

Aksum's climate has three distinctive categories due to her closeness to the equator. Zolka (Tropical Zone), Desa du Yuzi (Subtropical Zone) and the Teul (Cool Zone). The enhanced elevation of the country has lead to increasing annual rainfall and occasional flooding. The average elevation of the plateau is close to 6,000 feet with the lowest being some 600 feet below sea level.

The five seasons of Aksum are Metker (Summer), Teg (Fall), Gega (Winter), Uetl (Spring) and Helu (Winter/Spring). The coldest day of the year always falls in the middle of Helu and the flood season falls within Metker once a decade.

Aksum City

The capital city of the Kingdom of Aksum is a five-day trip from the port city (and former capital) of Addis Addus on a six-lane gold-painted road. After the death of the Second Prophet, monks and artisans began creating a detailed mosaic along the road, working day and night on the unraveling tale. For centuries, the work has been ongoing, the level of detail so immaculate that multiple lifetimes have not completed its slow, determined work. No amount of pressure, bargaining or torture can get the artists to say what happens once the story they have seen on their minds finishes. Instead, all of Aksum watches, waits and lets the awe of the work wash over them.

Aksum was built on a gentle slope that rises north and east of the city. Three surrounding flat-topped, forested hills form a defensive granite rock shield. Several small army shelters are hidden throughout the wooded trees, staffed primarily with Alhidaf archers and runners to alert the city of any invaders. The Mej Rejji stream flows down from the upper reaches of the hills into the city with runoff from the Berbera River tributary being collected in a large excavated basin of one of the flat-topped hills. A series of steps, cut into the rock, allows easy access to the basin for Aksumites, as water was crucial for the new capital city.

A metropolis from its inception, most of the buildings in the city lie in the western half, making up three-quarters of the city, and are furthest from the only opening into the city from its mountains' protective barrier. The largest structure is the Imperial Palace with its squared shape and focus on its pavilion. Lesser noble homes branch off from the palace and each social class spirals outward, with the lowest providing a protective barrier against anyone approaching the city. To reach the palace, one must travel through the entire city, first passing through the guarded gate on the only passage into town, passing through the open square market placed on the eastern part of town, then the peasants' homes, merchants, the church, the royalty and at last the Imperial Palace. Aksum has few constructed fortifications, as the country itself is a natural fortress with its remote location, the rocky walls and a military with knowledge of the land.

The style of homes is a pavilion, with enclosed inner courts and outer levels of the building providing increased privacy and increased security. Surrounding the town on all sides are cemeteries denoted with granite stele of varying sizes and detailed carvings. Further, from town, fields of stelae can be found designating the mass graves of the zxafi. To the east of town, three magnificent churches can be found. To the south, a group of stele with vivid colors marks the Imperial burial ground and the principal necropolis of the city.

Civic and social buildings line the sides of the mountain wall, running in a layered circle around the city. Steps have been carved into the rock to each office. As one walks through the streets of Aksum, generations of artists' work can be seen covering buildings with vivid religious paintings, with etchings for sale in the open marketplace. The songs of praise fill the streets and the smell of spices faintly floats through the air. As the city never sleeps, in the dead of night, people move to sell goods by lamplight or merchants arrive before dawn with new wares.

Statues of previous emperors line the steps of the Imperial Palace, and multiple army units patrol the city to secure its protection. The only two objects always visible in town no matter the location are the Imperial Palace and the Obelisk of Aksum.

Story Hooks

- The master plan for the city's grand mosaic has gone missing. Suspects include Rada in disguise, a sinister river pirate whose ships recently sank and a Khemeti noblewoman with a dangerous art obsession.
- The Mansa of Manden and his train of 8,000 servants and retainers arrive in the city to meet the emperor. The Heroes notice that one of these retainers is a member of the Leopard Cult and an assassin. Does she work alone or are there others in the retinue?
- The Heroes discover a wagon laden with explosives in a spot that blocks the only entrance to the city, clearly part of a nefarious plot. However, there seems to be no one nearby. Who could be behind it and were they attempting to keep someone out or keep people trapped within?

Obelisk of Aksum

This granite-appearing stele resides at the heart of Aksum City and is ever reaching toward the heavens. This monument of architectural achievement was created by Emperor Tafari, during the Lingering of the Second Prophet, in the style of the Aksumites that he ruled. Tafari, having mastered the art of Melbur, focused his will through the ring of his father. While focusing his will before the masses, Tafari's mind raced through the numbers of the universe, and he began a low chanting, sounding almost like a song. His hand moved in time with each tonal change and pitch adjustment. In response to his calculations, the universe itself seemed to split, and from the ether emerged 40 abonsam to carry out his will. The abonsam worked in perfect unison, as Aksumites watched in wonder. No one could summon that number of abonsam at once, much less control them with ease, and also preach the doctrine of the now-Aksum Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro Church. In under an hour, the abonsam force had completed their task.

The Obelisk of Aksum is ornamented with three false doors at its base, with decorative windows and the words of the Prophet etched into each side of it. At the top of the stela is a semicircular base roughly ten feet across with iron frames on the cardinal sides. When asked why the stela ended with a "table," Emperor Tafari merely smiled and told his people to have faith, as all would become clear in time.

In the ninth century, a married pair of relic hunters, Esra and Gorfu, presented a five-foot-wide metallic hexagon to Empress Ozoro for the blessing of their marriage. Ozoro had studied the ancient stelae scattered throughout the kingdom and deciphered the symbols of one in the highlands that depicted a similar device. She ordered one of the Zukic' Shok to place it atop the Obelisk of Aksum that night. Once atop the obelisk, a heavy rain began and continued for three days, ending with a lightning strike at the Obelisk.

During an invasion in the fourteenth century by abonsam after a citywide celebration of the Games, the emperor prayed for time to rally their forces. A wave of energy erupted from the Obelisk, eradicating a wave of creatures and giving the others pause. It provided just enough time for the Aksum forces to repel the attack. That night, the rains came and continued for three days' time before ending with a lightning strike on the Obelisk of Aksum. The granite is still warm to the touch, and the smell of the ionized air is noticeable around the monument to the Second Prophet.

Tomb of the Betrayers

Built onto a small hill 2.5 miles from Aksum City lies the Tomb of the Betrayers, surrounded by the jagged mountains of Awowa. It is the burial place of the seven assassins who murdered Khalil, the Second Prophet, centuries ago. Foreigners to the Kingdom of Aksum ask why the Tomb is so close to the city. Why display it for all to see? Shouldn't it be hidden, or better yet, maybe the assassins tossed into some unmarked grave? All Aksumites know better; many laugh in jest at the strangers and explain, "Unlike the Vodacce, we do not endure such vile behavior and that tomb is a reminder for all to see. In a way, it is a monument to the Second Prophet."

Upon closer inspection, the Tomb of the Betrayers has multiple doors on all sides with stone locks but no obvious entrance. No amount of picking or key can open these false doors made of immaculately carved stone. The tomb's irregular-shaped self-locking stones appear seamless at their joints. The precision of the joints is unlike any other throughout all of Aksum, and the marbled stone does not appear a day older than when it was first built.

Though no one has seen inside, one of the architects has said the interior of the tomb consists of one chamber with seven rooms. Each of the assassins was placed on a stone slab in each room. In the center chamber is one adorned six-foot stone cross with seven silver Aksumite coins. Seven eternal torches continuously light the inside of the tomb.

Rumor has it that the seven assassins still live inside the tomb, cursed with some half-life. Villagers swear on holy days they can hear faint screams begging for release or howls of agony. No one could open the tomb; no amount of force hurts the building and the building does not burn.

De Gas Ruz

The walled city of De Gas Ruz was once a bastion of the Hibiri Church and the most defensible city in the region of Tijui with its hundred cannons and metal and stone walls. The city, located on a hilltop in the eastern exterior of the kingdom, sits at an elevation of one mile. It is also one of the top eight trading cities in Ifri, with a bustling port. The city has over 30 churches and shrines for worship.

The city has become a thorn in the side of the emperor, but he has turned a blind eye toward it, since the people continue to pay their taxes and support royal decrees. Nine years ago, the Hibiri Bishop who ruled over the city was ousted in a silent coup by the merchant guild for heavy taxes on their trades and the Bishop's questionable behavior. The bloodless coup happened so rapidly that word didn't spread for weeks until the clergyman reached Aksum with three of the Auger's Guild to swear their loyalty to the emperor.

No one knows for sure what happened in the throne room that day. Some believe that the war with Manden did not allow resources for battling against such a heavily fortified trade center, or that the Auger's Guild had damning evidence on the noble clergyman or it was the emperor's plan all along. But De Gas Ruz is the only non-noble run city in all of Aksum.

Under the Guild's rule, the town focuses on money, no matter the deal or the cost. Shadowy dealings, scum and questionable traders see it as the jewel of Ifri. You can find anything on De Gas Ruz's streets, but watch your back.

For all the traffic, coin and power passing through the city, De Gas Ruz is on the front lines of any war and must be overcome before moving into Aksum's interior.

Story Hooks

- A very wealthy woman has come to town; daily she sends out seneschals to buy and bribe merchants, mercenaries and mendicants. Some say she is assembling an army; others claim she is removing one.
- A strange new cult has sprung up in De Gas Ruz claiming to worship a goddess of coin. Everyone who hears this rumor scoffs at it; such blasphemies and heresies do not happen in Aksum. Others rub gold coins across their lips and look the other way.

Domo De Melbur

Domo De Melbur has undergone many changes over the passing centuries, initially starting as little more than a few ramshackle huts with practitioners of Melbur. The huts are now a massive, sprawling monastery with ivory and stone walls. Domo De Melbur resides on a steep-sided, flat-topped mountain in the Aksum highlands.

The location, purposefully chosen by the then-emperor due to its defensibility and ability to grow crops, is self-sufficient and isolated on its nearly inaccessible plateau. During the time of Jubilation, when the monarchy was run concurrently, Emperor Yonatan feared that courting abonsams was a disaster in the making, but he cautiously decided to permit the sorcery solely as a means to improve trade. He placed a permanent squad of soldiers at the base of the mountain with orders to only allow official passage up or down and to kill any abonsams that might escape. Why use boats that take months of travel, endanger Aksumites to pirates and could possibly be lost at sea? Instead, summon an abonsam that could transport a trader and her supplies to the Numanari or Crescent Empire to sell.

As more and more nobles went to the monastery to master Melbur, the simple rustic buildings were replaced to allow them to live in some modicum of comfort, but the importance of mediation from the High Monk did not allow much distraction. While the ivory and stone building itself rivals the comfort of any negus' castle, the teaching of Melbur occurs in the surrounding area with royal-blooded Aksumites enduring hour upon hour of silent meditation in the surrounding wilderness. More than a few young nobles have found their health shattered from spending 12 hours in contemplation under chilling rain and the watchful eye of the High Monk.

An Aksumite with the touch of Melbur goes to the Domo De Melbur at an early age, usually between 12 to 18, to develop his skills. He learns to resist the corruption associated with courting abonsams, and in later centuries, to understand the rites that the Hibiri Church uses to perform exorcisms. While the *worship* of abonsam is banned, the sacred art of Melbur is taught with extreme care and discretion.

The monastery is always staffed by a High Monk who has mastered Melbur and 12 other monks of various levels of mastery. The monks are equally divided between men and women. To this day, a squad

of soldiers remains at the foot of the mountain. Many question why they are allowed to practice. Rumor has it that every emperor knows he could never eradicate the teachings of the old religions. Rather than have some abomination that could open Aksum to the corruption of Mbey, the monks teach resistance to the corruption—or how to control it. The Imperial mandate is to monitor the monks and all those that seek their teachings…forcing them to remain isolated, with soldiers ever ready to strike.

Story Hooks

- A battered guard from Domo De Melbur seeks aid. Her whole company was wiped out by abonsam and only she escaped. Upon arrival at the base of the mountain, however, there is still a small company of guards. They claim the runaway soldier went mad; she claims they are the spirits in disguise.
- The monks of Melbur claim that danger from Mbey has already entered Aksum and seek leave to scout the Kingdom in order to seek out this corruption. The emperor agrees, but only if the Heroes accompany them to ensure the safety of his people.

Stelae

Thousands of stelae can be found all over the Kingdom of Aksum, dating well back before their conversion to the Hibiri Church or that of the Crescent Empire. Stelae are old-fashioned burial chamabers. The practice is ancient, and served to honor those who have passed and to forever remember them. The craft of carving the stone, passed down from generation to generation, is now a lost art around the city of Aksum. Thus, new stelae are only made in rural areas where this ancient craft is kept alive.

Every stela, from the very first to the last one finished weeks ago, must be ordained by the Imperial family for location, verification of the depictions and the type of material used. The Imperial Family has never denied the construction of the stelae, despite their devotion to the Church of the Prophets. Indeed, the Imperial Family seems to actively promote the creation of stelae. In 1356 AV, the Imperial Family relocated an entire village until they finished building a six-foot-high stele of onyx, carved with symbols of the old gods.

Chamber of Wonders

The secret of the stelae is known only to the negusa nagast; the knowledge flows into him from the Sika'Dwa stool that has become a repository of all the sovereigns who came before, and which bonds the Chamber of Wonder to the current ruler. To date, no former ruler has ever mentioned the Chamber of Wonders, as if the knowledge leaves her when she no longer rules the Kingdom of Aksum.

Inside the Chamber is a map of Aksum with the location of every stela and potential sites for new stelae; the knowledge and map were provided by the Jok for unknown reasons. Each stela acts as a switch and a rechargeable beacon of telluric energy, allowing the emperor to control it. Each new stela magnifies the "machine" and enhances its capability.

The geometric symbols vary for each stela and represent its capacity. The emperor can control every stela from the Chamber of Wonder. Operating the stela board requires a mastery of calculus to predicting the flow of telluric energies.

Story Hooks

- The Dark Wizard Rada has found his way into the secret chamber and stolen the map of the stelae. With it, he plans on building stelae of his own. The Zukic' Shok contact the Heroes and ask to retrieve or destroy the map.
- One of the Heroes has strange dreams concerning a mysterious room with maps of stelae. In the dreams she moves the position of the stelae. The next morning the Zukic' Shok and the emperor himself are rumored to be looking for her.
- An Imperial courier is accosted by a strange beast (a Kishi from Mbey and a member of the Leopard Cult) and the Heroes happen by. In her possession is a copy of the map from the Chamber of Wonder. The courier is on her way to Niyyat Senai but refuses to tell the Heroes, saying that she is on business from the emperor. Minutes after she thanks them and takes her leave, a group of the emperor's guards arrive looking for the woman. The Leopard Cult, the emperor and Niyyat Senai all seek the courier.

City of the Covenant

The holiest of holy sites is the City of the Covenant located in central Aksum, equidistant from all points of the Kingdom. Only the most devoted can enter the city, and many pilgrims make their way to the city to pray. Although a pilgrim may travel thousands of miles, she does not attempt to enter the city. Anyone coming within five miles feels gradually overwhelmed with a sense of awe.

The small city has only a handful of residents. All of them are members of the monastery and the city's protectors. They fill their days with prayer, training and meditation on the existence of humanity. At the center of town stands the Church of the Covenant, a domed shape, three buildings carved from solid rock. Inside holds the earthly remains of the Second Prophet, his revelatory writing and the last of the items blessed by him.

Every building in the city has been painted white to allow a monk a canvas for her writings and art, enabling her to share the word with those worthy enough to see the city.

Story Hooks

- A Wiseone finds a Hero and leads him to a delirious young woman. She seems to be in a trance, half-asleep but occasionally muttering brief sentences. The Wiseone tells the Heroes that she needs to be taken into the City of the Covenant, no matter what the monks there say.
- Illness sweeps through the monastery in the City at a time when the monks were preparing for a grand celebration attended by the king. Can the Heroes step in to keep things running? Is the illness natural or were the monks poisoned?

Last Testament of the Prophet

The Last Testament of the Prophet sits high up in the mountains, forcing the devout to climb higher and higher, closer to Theus, to see its words.

On a great cliff face is a carving dictated by the Prophet from his deathbed as he lingered four years. The carving is illuminated with vivid paint, gold leaf and silvered coins. As the hundreds of devout Aksumites carved the words of their dying saint into the rock, some believed his mad ravings. The symbols and words made no sense, but listen they did. Countless viewers have come to see the poem, eyes gazing upon the multicolored illuminated text and never grasping its meanings.

Seemingly written as a nonsense poem, the text is said to illuminate those who grasp and fully understand the meaning.

It is a riddle left by the Prophet. Could it be meaningless? Or could it change the course of Aksum? None yet know.

Story Hooks

- The Dark Wizard Rada goes to any lengths to gain the throne—even altering and defacing the words of the Prophet. The carvings have been obviously tampered with, but arguments break out over which interpretation and correction is proper.
- A priest claims to have deciphered and gleaned the meaning of the Prophet's Last Testament, but before she can reveal it to the public, she is assassinated. The assassins flee, taking the priest's papers and books with them.

Natural Caverns

These naturally formed caverns are the longest caves in all of Ifri, spanning 20 miles from inside the border of Aksum into Khemet by some three miles. A mile east of the town of Erobe, the caverns begin and run for a few miles before the town of Myco and before the Welib River. The walls of the cavern illuminate with a faint greenish glow from moss clinging to the walls. The caverns are filled with a vast spider web of tunnels. A few of the larger chambers inside of the catacombs houses smugglers transporting goods and people between the two kingdoms. Approaching from the Erobe side is a sheer half a mile drop into a canyon that accesses the tunnels behind a scrubby bush. While from Myco, the tunnel, a six by six foot opening, has been covered with a makeshift bridge by order of the local ras. The other 20 or more myriad entrances remain hidden, forgotten or collapsed.

Some of the tunnels to the east completely submerge during the summer season when the rainfall is high.

Story Hooks

- Amlak Bey in Khemet has been using the caverns to pass information back and forth between his agents in Aksum and his palace in Queen Twosret's court. The most recent courier became lost and barely made it out of the caverns alive, only to collapse at the feet of the Heroes with the coded missive still in his hands.
- Slaves escaping from Khemet have discovered the caverns. However, both their former masters as well as the Leopard Cult pursue them. One of the slaves makes it out of the caverns and into the arms of the Heroes with a tale of woe and a call for aid.

Lake of Remembrances

The largest lake in all the Aksum Kingdom was formed by prehistoric volcanic eruptions. As lava savaged the land and cooled, it formed the Lake of Remembrances. The lake in the northeastern highlands of Aksum is 55 miles long and 40 miles wide with a depth of 70 feet at its deepest and an elevation of 600 feet. Seven rivers continually flow into the landlocked lake with 20 seasonal rivers during the rainy season. Dozens of tiny islands lie inside of the lake with their numbers ebbing and flowing, as the lake rises and falls during torrential rains. Mapmakers believe that 25 islands exist in the lake, but to date, only 15 are visible and eight of those have monasteries, churches and fishing communities that slowly move more and more inland as the water rises.

The most devout worshipers of Ajuk, the Emuron, are transported to the center island and buried beneath the monastery. Worshippers believe burying these beings touched by the Sky God brings rains and good fortune for the coming year. To date, only ten people touched by Ajuk have been buried here. Unlike the surrounding islands with churches, the Ajuk monastery has not been damaged by the rising tide and the people on the island never go hungry.

Story Hooks

- An Emuron has died and her body must be taken to the Ajuk monastery. However, the seasonal rains have come and travel on the lake is treacherous. Furthermore, the head of the monastery does not believe that this corpse is truly an Emuron.
- A sea serpent from the Mokele-Mbembe has found its way to the Lake of Remembrances. Though it has not harmed anyone, it causes the local fishers distress. Can the Heroes convince it to leave? Why does it give the Ajuk monastery a wide berth?

Current Relations

The Kingdom of Khemet

As always, Aksum's relationship with Khemet is a profitable pleasure. While the Kingdom has fallen on harder times than Aksum, the government works to keep them strong from past relations. Khemet is the major importer of firearms and a wall against the corruption that is Mbey. Negusa Nagast Makonnen sees the Kingdom not simply as a trading partner, but as a bulwark against other attackers and thus works to prop up the darkness-shrouded kingdom.

The Kingdom of Maghreb

There has been little contact between the two kingdoms, as the war has taken Aksum's attention. During the year's reprieve, a few envoys have been sent to re-establish a friendship of some kind.

The Kingdom of Mbey

Mbey is a cursed land. Aksum has sent spies into the kingdom to gather intelligence. The Skia has secretly been supplying Jaineba and other sources of resistance in Mbey through various proxies.

The Manden Empire

The attempt at marriage of the Aksum princess and Manden prince places the war between the two on pause. The rumors that Aksum's princess does not want the marriage have placed the truce between the two on shaky ground. Many fear rejection means that the peace between the two will evaporate, and all-out war will only end with one kingdom a smoking rubble or assimilated into the other.

The Nation Vodacce

The Vodacce people are conniving dogs. Plans are lining up to cut off their trade routes into Ifri and cripple their empire.

EMPEROR MAKONNEN

"Silence does not buy you peace, and inaction will only bring you sorrow, securing the future requires constant diligence."

Emperor Makonnen

Negusa Nagast, Igziabeher, Elect of God Makonnen has ruled the Kingdom of Aksum for four decades and is reaching his sixth decade in age. His shaved head wears the crown of Aksum, his cloak a flowing silk garment with a dash of red, gold and silver. Once a passionate man, he is quicker to quell a riot than seek the actual cause of the issue. He has mellowed and grown into himself, no longer living in the shadow of his legendary father who was more military commander than king.

Makonnen is a tall, thin, self-assured, wise and soft-spoken king. He understands that just because you talk does not mean you say anything. Sometimes it is better to let others talk and when you speak, it carries more weight. When he speaks, people stop and listen—even if he was not the divine ruler, his natural charisma would arrest conversation. He has lost four children—two daughters and two sons—and has only his fifth child left, his daughter Mehret. The kingdom's future rests on their shoulders, and it is a heavy burden. Makonnen knows his days are numbered and the Kingdom has never needed a focused leader more than now.

His advisors whisper that Manden cannot be trusted, so he makes sure his daughter is continually taught her role in rulership.

Story Hooks

- A number of high-ranking members of the clergy have abandoned their posts and retreated into the wilderness to live as ascetic hermits. After one of the emperor's own advisors leaves, the emperor asks the Heroes to find him and determine why so many are departing before rumors begin to circulate about the falling of the court.
- Makonnen has learned of a young girl in Mbey who has prophetic dreams. He has spent a small fortune to have her smuggled to Aksum in the hopes she might dream of Mehret's reign. However, the smugglers who were to bring her have gone missing en route.

Princess Mehret

Strength, confidence and destiny rule the life of Princess Mehret of Aksum. On the night of her birth, an old Wiseone arrived at the palace bearing a gift of Orun Irin from Iu-Neserer. Emperor and queen thanked the Wiseone, who told them that their child was half of the solution. When pressed for more, the Wiseone simply nodded his approval and walked back into the night.

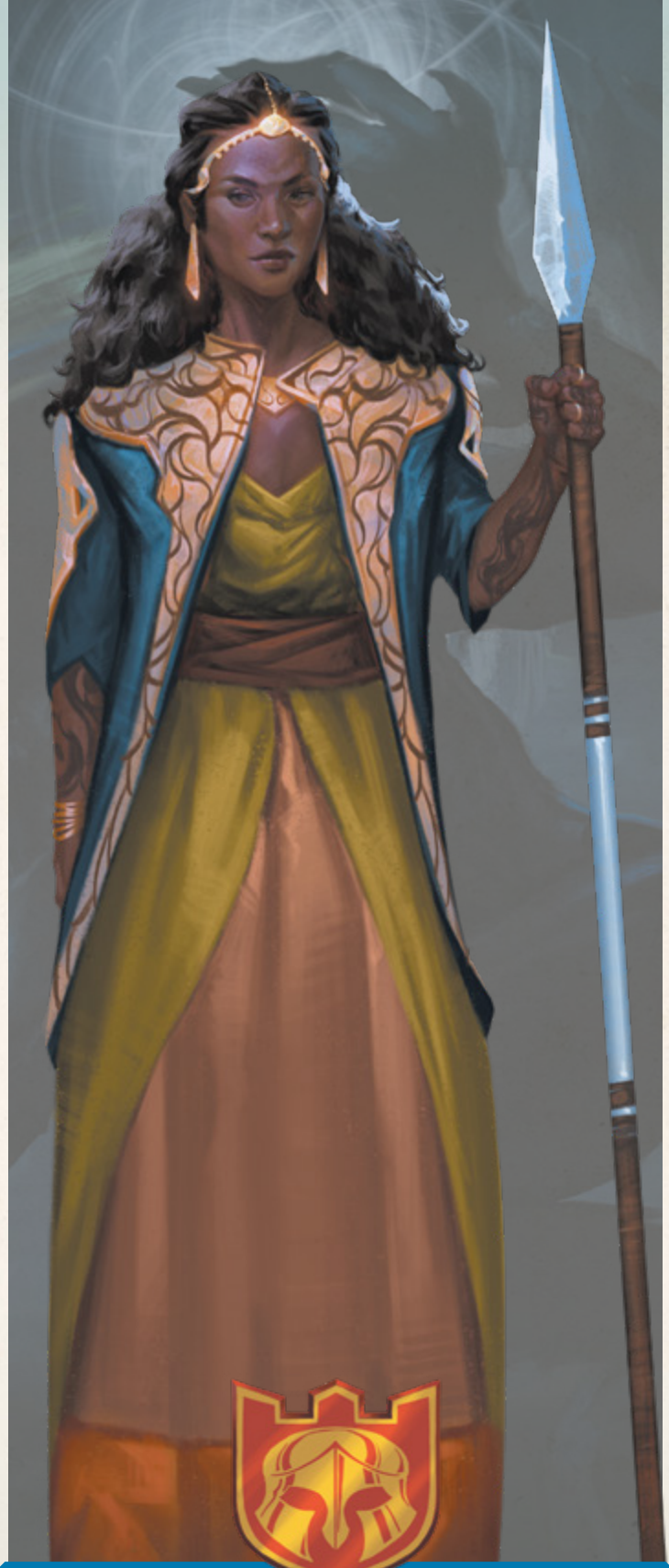
Mehret grew up in the halls of the Imperial Palace close to her mother and only knowing her father at a distance. On her fifteenth birthday, Makonnen brought out the Orun Irin and asked his daughter what she wanted crafted from the metal of Iu-Neserer. Ever practical, she had a spearhead crafted of the sky metal and an amulet (that she always wears) from the last of it.

Though they have never met, Mehret has been taught to believe that Maghan Kon Fatta of Manden is the other half of the solution and that their union is what the old Wiseone meant all those years ago. After all, isn't that what her elders have always told her? In order to save her kingdom, she must marry someone she has never met…

Recently, Mehret has begun to doubt what she has always been told. The Wiseone said she was only half of the solution, but he never said what the other half was, and Mehret cannot help feeling that it is not Fatta. She yearns for the call of the land and what lies within her kingdom. She routinely gives her father a fright by disappearing for a day or a two at a time, roaming Aksum in disguise. Mehret knows this is dangerous, but something out in the world is slowly convincing her that her Prince is not the solution to their problems.

Story Hooks

- The spearhead crafted for Mehret is more than anyone realizes. The sky metal was crafted by She Who Must Not Be Named and has the power to cleanse or destroy Ifri. When someone steals the spearhead, can the Heroes aid Mehret in getting it back before the thief realizes its power?
- A raid against Khemet-sponsored pirates goes wrong and they capture a woman Mehret has fallen in love with. Mehret is willing to take up spear and shield and go charging off to rescue the captive. Will the Heroes aid her or convince her to remain behind?



PRINCESS MEHRET

"No future is set in stone!
Why even the mountains get worn
down by the the sands of time."

NIYYAT SENAI, THE LADY OF FUTURES

"Logic is a hungry occupation. Every number leads to a banquet of new possibilities."

STRENGTH	INFLUENCE	RANK
6	10	16

Niyyat Senai, The Lady of Futures

There are very few people as brilliant as Niyyat Senai. Tall, elegant and unabashedly good at what she does, she is one of Aksum's best Nebīyi Monitors in a generation. So good is her work that she has been called "The Lady of Futures," for all her calculations have turned out true. Her work has stopped floods, aided the military and recently, they have even supported the claim that Princess Mehret's destiny lies only in marriage. Surely such a loyal and excellent Monitor has been blessed by the Jok.

Too bad she has been locked away in a room in her own home for the last three years.

The fake Niyyat is an abonsam named Ataro capable of taking the form of her victims by consuming their flesh. She has been posing as the Nebīyi Monitor in order to sow discord in Aksum and start a war with Manden. Since Makonnen trusts Niyyat's impeccable calculations, he has not suspected a thing. An agent of Chitendu, Ataro hopes to lead Aksum to attack Manden, thereby harrying the Kingdom on not one but two fronts.

Currently Ataro subsides on the hair and nails of her victim. While Ataro watches the real Niyyat sees a million calculations appear before her. She calculates for her life, and then hands over the knowledge to Ataro who keeps her alive…barely. Ataro then takes these calculations and adds her own discordant flair.

Recently she has shored up the notion of Princess Mehret's arranged marriage, being exactly what the Wiseone spoke of, but only the real Niyyat Senai knows the truth. Will she live long enough to tell it?

Story Hooks

- Rumors circulate that screams can be heard from Niyyat Senai's house in the middle of the night. She has brushed this off as night terrors. Nevertheless, Bitwoven Mazaa asks the Heroes to join her circle of spies and investigate.
- Niyyat Senai's calculations came up wrong, and led to the destruction of two new Aksumite ships in rough weather. Emperor Makonnen asks the Heroes to keep an eye on her and find out why and how her calculations could have been possibly incorrect.

The Dark Wizard Rada

Once the Dscah Ru of Aksum under Emperor Makonnen, Rada served as the chief sorcerer for little more than six years. The Dark Wizard Rada claimed to have been the illegitimate son of a negus killed during the war, who had also saved the queen's life. Makonnen, owing a debt to the dead negus, appointed Rada as assistant to the dscah ru. He served for four years before the prior dscah ru passed away in his sleep.

Once appointed dscah ru, he began studying all the ancient texts about the Second Prophet and the Lingering. He learned about the seven assassins of the Second Prophet, and with the whispers of abonsam in his ears, he decided that the kingdom could be saved only if he deposed the negusa nagast and took the throne himself. Then, with the power of the abonsam at his command, he could return prosperity to his home.

Princess Mehret discovered that Rada was actually the grandson of Ras Kidane, a banished traitor. Though she did not know of his plans, her line of questioning led Rada to flee the palace. Drawing upon the abonsam, Rada made his skin invulnerable to any weapon. Mehret pursued him and stabbed him with her Orun Irin spear. The burning wound forced Rada to flee into the night with his waiting pack of Kishi. Rada has since plagued Aksum with attacks, raids and banditry.

Now, he wanders the kingdom of Aksum with only one goal in mind: control Aksum and become the emperor. It is an impossible task for any person, but not with the seven legendary assassins inside of the Tomb of the Betrayers. He has failed five times to open the tomb.

Story Hooks

- One prophecy claims that the Tomb of the Betrayer will open when the Berbera crawls the southern jungles. Rada plans to dam part of the Great River by shattering the cliffs at eastern end of Serpent Canyon. Can the Heroes stop him before he sets off explosives?
- Rada has discovered a secret text that allows him to control the stelae. He uses them to control the weather and commit assassinations. He boasts that he can activate the pyramids in Khemet and open a way to Iu-Neserer. If not stopped, he may attempt to conquer a neighboring kingdom as a step to his goal of dominating Aksum.

THE DARK WIZARD RADA

"How can you call a land a kingdom if the throne is built on weakness and lies?"

STRENGTH	INFLUENCE	RANK
5	8	13

Chapter 6

the Kingdom of Khemet

THE KINGDOM OF KHEMET

Temples once held mighty Ennead. They walked beside us in our infant potential, their power alive in the blood of the chosen. Our ruler sat on the Sika'Dwa and spoke with the knowledge that we lived in the glorious time of power. Our barges flowed down the rivers to bring tribute to the Jok. Their obelisks rose high, crystal symbols of our gods and their covenant with us. We were chosen to guard the rivers of the gods, and rested mighty in their sight. The sun rose and set over us, and we were unafraid. Those days are long gone. Our gods are long since fled and we are afraid of the night once more. No matter what they tell you, there are reasons to fear the night.

—Excerpt from notes by Kahnanet Nenut, secret historian, informant to the Invisible College

Khemet, the Black Lands

Khemet, the kingdom of the two rivers.

Khemet, the kingdom in forever night.

Khemet, the kingdom at the edge of the fire.

Each of these are names ascribed to the Kingdom, which sits at the very edge of the Ubari Desert. Rising on the horizon like a shining jewel, the Kingdom of Khemet is a land of glorious cities and glistening waterways, towering obelisks and colossal pyramids. Known as a center of trade and cultural advancement, Khemet is a land divided. To the wealthy and powerful, it is a paradise of ancient treasures to be recaptured and new opportunities forged in ruthless business. To the poor, the land rots in the shadow of a tarnished sun, slowly being destroyed from the inside out by corruption, greed and hubris.

While the nations of Théah claim a rich history and diverse culture, Khemet's history makes them look like young upstarts. Spoken of in ancient Church and historical texts, Khemet has retained its culture and its identity since before the time of Numa. The allure of this ancient world and its mysteries draws explorers from all corners of the world…but Khemet does not give up its secrets easily. A Hero must be clever enough to learn the language and customs, flexible enough to understand how Khemet has changed hands but retained an unbroken chain of identity, and tough enough to brave wild deserts and buried ruins, if she is to become a true explorer of Khemet!

Khemet, the Twice-Nighted

Visitors to Khemet often remark on the number of ancient structures. Not only do great pyramids rise above the skyline, but every hamlet boasts buildings or ruins that date back to the distant past. Knock down a wall, and behind it a mural shows daily life from 5,000 years ago. Break an old pottery jar, and inside may be fragments of ancient scrolls detailing the practices of long ago, whether medical texts or beer recipes.

To the natives of Khemet, these are simply reminders of their past. Of course these things still exist—every dynasty has taken pains to insure its transition into the annals of history. Discovering an artifact like an old amulet, a cache of papyrus scrolls or even an entire tomb in the desert is par for the course. It is, to the people of Khemet, a curiosity akin to a Théan finding an ancestor's diary in a strongbox in an attic.

A GLOSSARY OF KHEMETI TERMS

Alhadirin: royal servants and attendants to the nobility of Khemet.

Alkhaliq: crafters of Khemet.

Enez: a term for the common people of Khemet.

Ennead: a group of nine gods of Khemet believed to have built the kingdom.

Eubayd: Khemeti priestly caste.

Heka: a form of Khemeti sorcery.

Hurr: the highest in status and wealthiest of the enez.

Mafqud: the lowest in status of the enez including those without a profession, such as adventurers.

Maharib: a Khemeti warrior caste.

Quawiun: the laborer caste and the most populated of the enez.

Treasure-hunters from Théah sometimes slip in to look for valuables or pieces of history, but the Khemeti are not fond of tomb-robbers. This means that your Hero will almost certainly find himself embroiled in the artifact trade once in Khemet—whether as a buyer, acquirer or protector!

Khemet, In the Hands of the Ennead

Once, the Kingdom of Khemet was graced with the blessings of mighty gods, the Jok. The earliest stories, inscribed in the innermost record rooms of the temples hint at a time before the Jok's coming, when the people eked out livings underneath a sky constantly trapped in darkness. The sun could not touch the land of Khemet until the Jok came and drove away the unnatural darkness. The darkness was brought by an enemy looking for a home to build a kingdom of corruption and eternal night. The Jok gathered up bright blue seeds, sky metal sent to the earth from above and worked with the people to drive away all those corrupted by the enemy's offers. They set right the wrongs plaguing the land and set upon a sacred Sika'Dwa stool a great and wise leader who

could lead Khemet. The Jok left behind nine of their own, nine gods who called Khemet home and looked upon the inhabitants as their children. They were the Ennead, and their temples stand to this very day, crumbling in the returning darkness.

While the Ennead sought peace, they knew corruption might sneak back and try to drive Khemet into chaos. To combat the dark, they worked alongside the leaders of Khemet to raise mighty obelisks. Legend speaks of the Great Obelisk at the mouth of the Iteru River, one of the four major rivers in all of Ifri. The obelisk towered over the people, inscribed with powerful pictograms. It was in the shadow of the first obelisk the Ennead gathered with the leaders of the land to crown the first king, wise Ahtunonen, and entered into the Covenant of the Most High. The Jok agreed to always bless the land with their power and to teach the people their magic, so long as the rulers stayed true to the people and the people to the Jok. King Ahtunonen so swore and the obelisk glowed with a warm blue light. The greatest of the Ennead, Ahmun, raised his hands to the sky, and the sun rose for the first time.

The histories about the time after the First Sunrise are full of legends, rumors and half-true stories, made up to fill in a timeline full of blanks. Before the rise of the Numanari Empire, the people of Khemet knew a time of unprecedented peace and prosperity. The rivers of the kingdom overflowed and watered the land, making fertile what was once kept in eternal night. The people were well fed and trade with other lands made the kingdom prosperous.

Mighty temples were raised to the Ennead, and there they rested, walking the land when necessary. They created more obelisks across the kingdom, each more impressive than the next, meant to glow and guard throughout the night. The Ennead, said to trust the people of Khemet so much, each removed their hearts and placed them within nine pyramids. With the help of the Jok's great knowledge, the towering city of Masr was built at the top of Mount Fahrad, the shining capitol of a country at the height of its power. From there, King Ahtunonen and the priests of the Ennead led the people with wisdom, compassion and power, standing guard against the ever-threatening night.

THE NINE PYRAMIDS

The nine pyramids of the Ennead are considered one of the great wonders of Ifri. These enormous structures are considered the legendary home of the hearts of the Ennead. Each pyramid also covers a great silver lake followers rowed across to bring offerings to the Jok, stopping just short of entrances to the underworld. Those who went on found themselves in the realm of the dead or other realms just as strange and unusual. The lucky came back with stories of unbelievable lands and fantastic wonders. The shores of the silver lakes are littered with their offerings and relics returned from the strange lands beyond.

Who were the Jok, truly? Nobody agrees on this—some Khemeti shrug and say they were simply a legend; others, that they were real, but that they have passed into legend. The Vaticine Church's official position is that the Jok may have been powerful spirits or magical entities, but no such creature can be as great as Theus. Scholars debate whether the existence of the strange structures of Khemet provides evidence that the Jok did exist.

The popular position in Montaigne contends that the Khemeti did not construct their greatest works, but that the Jok were some kind of visiting nonhuman creatures—akin to the færies of Avalon, perhaps—who left behind a legacy of incredible monuments that could never have been made by the people of the past. Avalonian and Sarmatian scholars reject such claims as dismissive and infantilizing of the Khemeti people, a failure to give them credit for their ingenuity, and instead see the Jok as either a mythical elevation of people with extraordinary talents, or supernatural beings that worked alongside the Khemeti.

Khemet, In the Spiral to Destruction

Just how long this time of peace lasted remains in contention. The departure of the Ennead did signal the beginning of the end. No one knows what began the final conflict, but Ahmun departed across the northern seas to seek council and fellowship with powers in the lands beyond. But when the god returned, the Ennead were drawn into a war with the very same forces that Ahmun meant to befriend.

The Ennead left to go north with an army, leaving behind the alchemist-king Idris Theyt, descendant of Ahtunonen, to rule. Theyt's wife went north as the general, but when the queen died in battle, thrice-great sorcerer king Theyt went mad. He became obsessed with bringing his beloved back from the dead, pouring fragments of his *ka* into great emerald tablets to bend the natural order to his wishes. His magic slowly consumed him leaving his daughter Nahashepsut to watch her father crumble. Worse, while the king tore himself to pieces, the darkness at the edges of Khemet began to seep in once more. Demons stalked the land and enemies harried their borders.

The seven Ennead who returned drew back to Fire Island. As they retreated, they drew the water with them, flooding Khemet and washing away many of the wonders they had once created. Only the highest points survived, along with the powerful obelisks that shielded some of the population from harm. In the wake of the flood, the waters receded to reveal a Kingdom decimated, its infrastructure and people washed away. Worse, the Kingdom fell again into shadow as the mighty obelisks guarding Khemet began to dim.

The survivors fell to fighting over the scraps just to stay alive. Their conflicts were charged by a new magic, discovered from the works of the sorcerer-king Theyt and fueled by the people's will to survive. They called it Heka; a person uses the power of his own soul, his ka, as fuel for the sorcery. This person carried weapons infused with his ka into battle, and made him a formidable enemy even against the guardians of the Most High.

Queen Nahashepsut, the most powerful surviving descendant of the Most High, rode down from her place in Masr to subdue uprisings and bring a glimmer of hope to the land. The queen reunited the fractured Kingdom and put an end to any dissention. Nahashepsut gathered together the leaders of the districts and decreed Khemet one Kingdom, now and forever, for it was the blood of the Most High holding back the inevitable darkness. Her descendants, and the rule of the Most High, have remained unbroken ever since.

Khemet, In the Eyes of the Prophet

Knowing her people were angry and near rebellion, Queen Nahashepsut found a way to distract the people and unite them under one banner: she took Khemet to war.

The nearby Kingdom of Aksum was powerful, strong in arms and rich in trade. Khemet had once outshone Aksum but the decimation turned them into a kingdom of refugees in their own land. Queen Nahashepsut reached out to Aksum for aid then lied to the people, saying the mighty and wealthy Aksum had turned them away. The furious people followed their queen to war with Aksum, invading border towns and attacking caravans. The bloody conflict raged on for a generation as the queen and then her son, Nehemek, led Khemet to victory. Wealth flowed back into Khemet and fueled the rebuilding of the First Khemeti Empire. The queen even sacked Aksum's wealthiest treasure city and used the spoils to rebuild Masr as her glorious capital.

Eventually, the people longed for peace and threatened once more to revolt. Nahashepsut's grandson, King Akheneset, restored order. His son, Ahmun-Hashet, went to Aksum and negotiated the details of a treaty. During his visit, Ahmun-Hashet began following the Second Prophet. When he returned to Khemet, he convinced his father to convert. King Akheneset not only converted, but became one of the Second Prophet's most devoted followers. Soon, belief in the Second Prophet swept through the kingdom, coming into conflict with followers of the Jok, who clung to the old ways.

King Akheneset's zealous conversion to the teachings of the Second Prophet brought them in contact with the Crescent Empire. Khemet found the Crescent Empire to be a source for trade, technology, education, military and religious training. With their Aksum alliance and friends in the Crescent Empire, Khemet became a dominant force in northern Ifri.

The Church of the Prophets had documents detailing Khemet in antiquity, though the Second Prophet's spread into Khemet blossomed into a new era of exchange. Priests and scholars from the Church traveled to Khemet to engage in missionary work and to seek out historical accounts from prior visitors to the old kingdom. Emissaries from Khemet in turn traveled abroad. In large Théan cities, small enclaves sprang up for Khemeti visitors and expatriates, bringing with them their food, clothing and culture.

Khemet, In the Shadow of The Darkened Sun

The rulership of Khemet remained an unbroken line from the days of wise King Ahtunonen, friend of the Ennead, to the great follower of the Second Prophet, Ahmun-Hashet. Khemet's rulers kept the blood of the Most High pure by marrying their own family members and the close relatives in the ruling class. They passed the power of the Jok's magic, their greatest secret, down from parent to child, never sharing the knowledge outside of their bloodline.

Jealousy over the power of the Jok, the storytellers say, led Queen Twosret to seek a lover outside of her cousin-husband, King Makaret. Queen Twosret, the rightful ruler to the throne, had been largely displaced from power by her general and cousin Makaret before they married. Though Twosret was the royal heiress, her father had taught the secret magic of the family to Makaret instead of her. Infuriated, the queen left the palace at Masr for the summer palace at Kyber. There, people whisper, she met a handsome stranger whom she took as a lover for seven days and seven nights. When he left, she returned to the palace and reconciled with her husband. Nine months later, her son Siptah was born.

Queen Twosret emerged from her recovery to announce that on the night her son was born, King Makaret was assassinated by enemies of the court. For the safety of the prince, her son would be kept in seclusion until old enough to rule. Instead of celebrating, the Kingdom went into mourning for their beloved king.

Siptah's birth heralded a new time of plenty. The harvests were bountiful, the borders more peaceful and trade more prosperous than ever. Even the sun shone brighter over the Kingdom. Queen Twosret garnered acclaim for her plenteous rule—enough that rumors of her paranoia were often overlooked. Priests declared the crown prince a sacred gift; both traditionalists serving the Jok and clerics of the Prophet claimed that the prince received a blessing by their faith. The Kingdom's good fortune blotted out whispers that every person who witnessed the birth of the young prince, from the lowliest servant to the king himself, died before Siptah finished his first meal.

As the Kingdom's fortunes grew, so too did the queen's paranoia. She first doubled, and then tripled, the royal guard presence for the Most High. She became increasingly sequestered and unwilling to meet with anyone she had not already known for years. Rumors started to circulate again that perhaps the queen was not entirely blameless in the King's assassination—rumors led to severe punishments to anyone repeating them. Only Siptah was immune to the queen's suspicion and anger.

Paranoia reached a fever peak after unknown parties attempted to kidnap the prince while he was ten years old. The queen's response was immediate and draconian: she executed every one of the conspirators and dealt ruthlessly with every guard assigned to Prince Siptah. She moved the prince to the summer palace at Kyber and transformed it into a blooming, paradisiacal prison. The queen ruled as regent while Siptah remained isolated from the people. Twosret even promised special favors to members of the Most High in exchange for sending their own children to be Siptah's playmates and companions—permanently. This bizarre isolation only spread more rumors: that the boy was different, strange, even otherworldly. Most knew never to repeat such tales. Those who did soon disappeared.

As soon as Siptah was moved to the palace in Kyber, Khemet fell into rapid decline. Famine spread through the outer districts. Banditry and lawlessness sprang up in response to the hunger and poverty. Within five years, all of Khemet became known as a hive of debauchery, violence, corruption and criminal activity. Pirates raided up and down the river and outsiders came up the waterways unchallenged. Influential politicians and officials ignored criminal cartels and took bribes to let robbers, murderers and bandit leaders walk free. Khemet became synonymous with violence and iniquity.

With internal strife reaving the country, the queen took a consort, Amlak Bey, from neighboring Aksum, in hopes of improving stability. The move did little but inflame the divide between the followers of the Ennead and the followers of the Second Prophet. Since then, Queen Twosret has survived six assassination attempts, some spawning tales of bizarre magic and strange guardians.

Worse yet, the Kingdom's slide into decline came under the most disturbing omen. It took time to notice, but soon it was impossible to deny: the days got shorter. Where once the sun shone hot and strong over Khemet, soon it grew wan, and it set earlier and earlier with each passing month. By the time Prince Siptah was 15 years old, Khemet saw only eight hours of daylight. Agriculture failed as plants withered, and predators descended from the mountains to prey on herds during the long nights.

A Khemeti has adjusted as best he can, but it is clear: the dark times have returned. A citizen does a brisk business during the day but returns to her home when the sun goes down. At night, the streets host only the bravest or the most foolish, as criminals walk the land brazenly. Only the most well-warded cities are protected against the monsters that range the night, and roads across the deserts have become treacherous. The Kingdom earned its newest nickname, the Black Lands, for it's unnaturally long nights and the horrors that have taken hold of its core in those dark places.

Visiting the Prince

Prince Siptah has been attended by dozens of servants, teachers, even visiting rulers and dignitaries—yet most cannot recall exactly what the prince looks like. Visitors describe him as a bright boy, well-spoken and caring, a strong prince who would one day make a good ruler. The only physical description they can give is of his eyes, black as kohl. Rarer rumors characterize the prince as dark as a shadow, radiating heat like a furnace. Whispers say the prince absorbs the light around him. But neither those stories, nor the people who tell them, last very long.

Of course, any Hero who learns of Prince Siptah cannot help but be curious. Are any of the rumors true? How did Prince Siptah come to this state? Is he even human?

Getting in to see Prince Siptah is a major undertaking—the queen's paranoia means that she does not trust anyone to visit the prince, and if someone *does* earn an invitation to the prince's palace, it does not include the privilege of leaving. Therefore, simply visiting Kyber requires a feat of cunning—nobody is allowed in, nobody is given permission to visit, with trespassers imprisoned or killed posthaste.

THE SHORTENING OF DAYS

Yes, the days in Khemet are literally shorter than elsewhere. Cross the border from Khemet, leave the coast by ship or walk into the desert and pass the obelisks that mark the edges of the country, and the light of day slowly comes back up, as if one walks backward against the setting of the sun.

Scientific-minded Heroes may desire to perform all manner of unusual experiments at the border to see how the sun seems to change position in the sky or how the difference in time reflects in instrumentation. Let them. This is not science. It is a curse.

While in Khemet, the days almost never last more than eight hours long, and as winter approaches they become even shorter. The sun sets early, often amid a red and dark sky. Leave the country, and it is like walking up a mountain where you can see the sun further down the horizon—slowly it becomes brighter and the sun seems higher in the sky again.

Note that while the days are shorter, time still passes normally. A day in Khemet has the same number of hours as anywhere else—there are just fewer hours of light!

Assuming that a Hero does manage to find a way into Kyber, whether by guile, by sorcery or by stealth, he finds the rumors are true. The prince, a being of strange beauty, stirs the mind but leaves it erased when removed from his presence. He is clearly touched by something inhuman…but what?

The Prince is intelligent, highly educated and possessed of great personal charisma, but he has no desire to leave Kyber. Why should he? All that he needs is there; anything that he wishes can be brought to him. He simply bides his time. He tells visitors patiently that when the time is right, he will ascend to the throne, and set right all that has been set askew in Khemet. He has compassion for the straits of his people, he says, but he cannot make a move to overthrow his mother…yet.

The prince also absorbs fire and light harmlessly. Depending on who is asked, he might be called a jinni, a demon or a god.

Adventures in Khemet

Khemet is a land of rich history, with mighty relics from its past scattered across its landscape. One need only look across the horizon to see a grand pillar or pyramid that commemorates the past, and every such landmark has a story to go with it.

Once, Khemet was a bountiful land, but now it suffers under a mysterious curse. A Hero in Khemet finds superstition and fear ruling the night, and the days shrink ever shorter. A Hero might endeavor to save the land from its curse by unseating its queen and replacing her with her son, the prince—or perhaps even someone else. Traders from foreign lands speak high praise for Khemet's wealth of gold and ancient relics, but now a person must give up her treasures for simple food merely to survive. Worst of all, literal monsters and evil spirits walk about during the long nights, and a Hero will certainly find herself beset by such creatures.

If a cure can be found for Khemet's woes, the Kingdom could be a bastion of stability for Ifri. It could help turn the tide against Mbey and the abonsam, and be a welcome trade partner for Aksum and Maghreb. To do so, though, evil as old as time must be stopped.

Under the watchful eyes of gods from a former age, with their beast-headed statues and hidden shrines inside of stone pyramids, the last hope of Khemet is, perhaps, for a new sunrise…

Playing a Hero from Khemet

A Hero from Khemet has a distinct culture tied to the old gods and to the Kingdom's long history. A Khemeti Hero fights against the curse that has befallen her land, and rather than flee, she seeks allies to bring the fight to the abonsam. Another Hero might choose to form a revolution to overthrow the queen, while still another may seek allies from abroad to battle the evil spirits that haunt his country. A Hero from Khemet might be…

- A noble privy to the troubles in the palace with the queen and the prince, who hopes to find a way to bring stability and balance back to the court and the country
- A maharib fencer whose love of country means bringing khopesh and shield to bear against the horrors of the night
- A priest of the old gods, who sings the old songs and keeps their light alive as a bulwark of hope
- A Heka sorcerer, who uses the power of names and words to reshape parts of the world
- An Iteru River pilot, familiar with the length and breadth of the land and all the settlements along the river at its heart.
- An escaped slave who hopes to bring justice to others who have fallen into that horrid state, by overthrowing slave owners and destroying slave markets
- A mafqud, or "misplaced," treasure hunter with long experience breaking into and robbing trapped tombs for survival—and who occasionally finds relics of unusual provenance.

Social Strata

The Nobility

The Most High have been the nobility of Khemet since the time of the Ennead and the Covenant. Initially the Covenant established those who fought and worked for Khemet to become the ruling nobility, establishing them as leaders all across the country. They served the Ennead as emissaries and managers of the land, acting as intermediaries between the people and their gods. The time of such lofty leadership has long since passed.

Today, the Most High have evolved into a ruling class separate from the everyday citizen. The Most High treat the rest of the population, whom they call the *enez*, as a breed apart from the nobility, separated by the blessings of the Covenant. A member of the Most High believes his connection to the now-disappeared Ennead left him touched by the very gods themselves, giving him a divine mandate to keep himself apart from the enez, and strict rules about interactions between the two are kept sacred. The Most High are forbidden from marrying or having children with the enez, on penalty of the enez being put to death along with the offspring. Social climbing is nearly impossible, with one exception. Should a member of the enez do a deed that finds favor in the eyes of the royal family, they may confer the status of Most High on the favored one, symbolically transferring the favor of the Ennead onto the new noble in a ceremony before the Great Obelisk.

One of the easiest ways to gain favor with the royal house of Queen Twosret is to dedicate a child of a Most High house to serve Prince Siptah at Kyber. A selected noble child understands that so long as the prince remains in seclusion, she may not leave or see her family again. Many families have sent favored children or their best tutors and young warriors to Kyber, eager for the day when the prince comes to court with his household so they might be reunited with their loved ones once more.

The Enez

Khemet's everyday population, the enez, are divided by economic standing and loyalty. Since it is nearly impossible for a member of the enez to move up to become a member of the Most High, the enez have structured their own class by proximity to the nobility. This structure rules every interaction between the people of Khemet; breaking the implied rules of respect and deference garners harsh reprisals.

The highest level of the enez is the *hurr*, "the free," one whose success in business has set her just below the Most High in terms of status and wealth. She owns land, flocks, barges, businesses and even slaves of her own, employing and commanding forces of other enez to further her ends. And though considered mostly taboo for the Most High and the enez to associate with one another, the rule is broken often as members of the hurr do business with the Most High.

Nonus 16, 1666

Adebowale, bless his rainbow-colored blanket, took me north towards Masr, capital of Khemet where he promised to introduce me to a Wiseone, one of the mysterious servants of the Jok, the beings that some Ifrians worship as deities. The great pyramids, tombs of the ancient kings, impressed me so much I barely noticed the boats all around us. The river traffic intensified to an incredible degree with so many boats that I could barely see the water.

Adebowale explained that this was a festival day and we were to meet the Wiseone in the morning. Apparently, the local ruler, Queen Twosret, has taken to spending a great deal of money on these events, to bolster her popularity with the common people and prevent the nobility from seizing power from her and her young son. I felt sorry for the queen, stuck in such a terrible situation despite her power and influence.

The following day I was surprised and delighted to see Isioma sitting in the bow of the boat sharing a spiced flatbread with Adebowale. She looked so beautiful with yellow flowers in her braided hair matching the yellow in her green robe. When I asked about meeting the Wiseone she just laughed and said if meeting two Wiseone wasn't enough for one morning. How could I have missed this? How could I not have realized what she and Adebowale were?

The second level of the enez is *alhadirin*, the attendants who work in service to the royal family and the Most High. The alhadirin include every sort of servant, from the body servant who clothes the royal family to the rower pulling a barge. Rank among the servants is almost as important as their rank among the enez itself. An alhadirin takes great pride in serving his household and considers the trust given to him a badge of honor.

The third level of the enez is comprised of the skilled creators, craftspeople and artists of the land. Consisting of singers, architects, weavers, dancers, poets, armorers and anyone whose job involves creating, an *alkhaliq* relies upon patrons to support her. Most noble and hurr families consider it fashionable to patronize as many alkhaliq as they can afford, and a creator produces work not only for sale but also in tribute to her patrons.

The fourth level of the enez is the priests, the *eubayd*, beloved of the Ennead and servants of the people. Just as the Most High were the voices of the Ennead across the kingdom, the eubayd serve the gods. An eubayd dedicates his entire life to maintaining the temples of the gods and travels the land giving funerary rites, attending births and providing other services. An eubayd educates the young either at large gatherings once a week in every town or else gets hired on as a private tutor in wealthy homes.

The fifth level of the enez are the warriors, called the *maharib*, both those who serve in the military and the private guards serving Most High households and the royal guard. Should a child be found inclined towards a warrior's life, she is turned over to a local maharib training academy, called a *farn*, or "furnace." There the child trains until she turns 14, or for three years if she is older, when she faces trials to become a full Maharib. The prince has a pack of young warriors who trained at Kyber, called his Falcons of the Wind, ready to descend on any who would harm their liege.

The sixth level of the enez is the laborers, the *quawiun*. This group makes up the largest section of the enez population, the strong arms and hard-working spirits keeping Khemet alive. The quawiun work every position from building great structures in the major cities to fishing and tending crops on the land. Though he is further down the social structure than the warriors or priests, most understand a quawiun belongs to the largest group of the enez and dare not forget the country eats, lives and grows on his back.

The final group of the enez is the *mafqud*, or "the misplaced." This is the lowest rank of the enez, made up of those without a settled place in society. The mafqud include people whose jobs are not recognized as respectable, such as those who work with waste and even treasure hunters.

Unlike the Most High, a person in one stratum of the enez can move up and down the social hierarchy, finding new positions should she prove herself able. A mafqud with martial talent can earn his way into a farn and become a Maharib, or else convince a priest of his dedication to the gods and become an educator. The most difficult group to join is the hurr, as wealth consists a large part of becoming a merchant, though the jump is not unheard of. Khemet is a place where the motivated can make his dreams come true with enough luck and dedication, and the enez all strive for better days in the face of the falling darkness.

The Politics of Slavery

Though Queen Twosret has made many unpopular choices in recent years, her institution of slavery might spell her downfall. Since the decline of Khemet has put so many into poverty, tax collectors report that many districts and towns cannot pay taxes to the throne. Increasing distress has led to riots and to people assaulting tax collectors, which in turn has caused escalation; now military guards accompany collections, and soldiers are stationed in towns where unrest is high. Instead of putting whole towns to the sword, Queen Twosret instituted a new policy: one who cannot pay her taxes for three consecutive seasons must send a family member into servitude. A servant of the crown is, however, not cared for by the state—instead, all of his costs for living are added to his debts. Soon, everyone understood being sent into servitude for what it truly was: slavery.

Since then, thousands of Khemet's own people have been taken into service by the throne. The enslaved population has bolstered the flagging economy and kept Khemet afloat, but only barely. Seeing the upswing in productivity, Queen Twosret has since made bargains with slave traders to procure more workers, even going through intermediaries to procure from the Atabean Trading Company or raiders attacking the coasts of Numa and the Crescent Empire.

The largest influx of such captured people came from a small armada of pirate ships coming from the Crescent. They brought with them a population of Yachidi caught traveling north to the Sarmatian Commonwealth and sold the whole lot to Queen Twosret. To the rest of the Kingdom, Queen Twosret presented the Yachidi as a shipwrecked people who survived a terrible storm at sea that destroyed their ships and all their possessions, but few believe the lies. The queen embraced the new influx of "refugees" and set up the population of nearly 200 Yachidi in the small sub-section of Masr called Gommek.

There, the population lives as slaves working in the city, breeding an indigenous slave population fully controlled by the crown. Traditionalists in the royal court as well as many of the peasant population, horrified by the idea of a slave population of captured foreigners, have not yet found a way to free the captured Yachidi or the thousands of indebted Khemeti now living in slavery.

This situation also makes travel to Khemet dangerous for other foreigners. An outsider may be detained and fined at any time for any number of offenses—and a person who does not speak the language finds herself hauled off to face sentence. Even someone who does speak the language may discover that fines and fees can escalate rapidly on the pretense of any crime, until he gets hauled off to become a servant. The result is clear: when the guards start to announce that you are being placed in the service of the crown for your debts, run!

HEROES FROM KHEMET

A Khemeti Hero can come from the enez, or from the Most High (with the appropriate Advantages, of course). A Hero from the lowest ranks may have backgrounds as a cart-driver, ox-butcher or servant; such a low station provides plenty of incentives for your Hero to seek adventure and find a better life. A middle-class enez such as a merchant or craftsperson tends to settle in the cities, but could find herself embroiled in adventure in the same way as anyone from elsewhere in Théah: her business ruined, family threatened, a conspiracy unfolding around her or a curiosity too great to ignore. A noble from among the Most High more likely entangles himself in local and international politics, business investments and academic study in pursuit of ancient lore, though of course the trope of a mighty noble falling upon hard times is an excellent one to motivate a Hero.

A Hero from Khemet should remind her associates that in Khemet, being an adventurer is not a respectable trade, nor a lifestyle that anyone looks up to. People consider an adventurer a vagrant, in the same class as a beggar. A traveler from abroad who expects to be met with respect because of his "adventuring," such as a member of the Rose & Cross or the Invisible College, may be surprised to discover that his rootless, aimless ways are considered at odds with Khemeti society. This has its advantages, though—a clever adventurer can always move unseen, because who really pays attention to the homeless wanderers and gravediggers?

Customs & Culture

Death, Dying and Mummies in Khemet

Since the ancient days, the people of Khemet believed death was a transition. A person who passed is interred alongside his family outside of towns and cities in crypts built into the ground or the hillside. These graves might be simple for members of the enez, or great dazzling underground vaults for families of the Most High. The Most High bury those of royal lineage in the Valley of the Kings just below the city of Masr.

Upon death, the priests of Isira and Anuros come together to ritually prepare the body to be mummified. The priests clean, embalm and wrap the body in white linens before placing her in her tomb alongside her ancestors. Belongings and treasures are placed in the tombs beside her to accompany her lingering spirit, her ka, into the afterlife. Each body is also given a funerary mask. The simplest ones are made of plaster and mud, but the wealthiest are made of silver and gold, inlaid with gems.

These tombs become visiting places for relatives, for the ka of their ancestors return when entreated to hear their prayers and carry them off to the gods. For that reason, mummies and the treasures found in tombs were considered thick with ka energy, the energy used in Heka magic. Evil Heka users often raid tombs not just for the gold and jewels within, but to find objects ripe with residual ka to rip out for use in their workings. Maharib are hired to protect tombs, as well as militant eubayd priests of Anuros who wear jackal-headed helmets.

Family, Gender and Sexuality In Khemet

Khemet has embraced an open-minded societal practice in terms of gender and sexuality since the times of Queen Nahashepsut and her restructure of the country. People refer to each other as his, her or zer, the third being the term for those of more fluid presentation. Family structure has remained a fixture since before the restructuring of the country and comes down from the time of the Ennead.

The traditional family is a single couple of any gender dedicated to one another, able to track their family legacy as a matter of pride back for generations on both sides of the family. This couple becomes the head of the household along with their legitimate children. It is also common for couples to have multiple partners as well and produce children from such relationships.

Many households even have an addition to the main quarters where the additional partners and their children live and grow up beside the main family. Children born of such illegitimate parentage are called *akhar* and in ancient times were not allowed to marry legitimate offspring. That rule is largely ignored by most of Khemet except among the Most High and the royal family, where illegitimate offspring struggle for recognition and opportunity.

Family life reflects in the Ennead as well. The old gods of Khemet often present themselves as male or female, but sometimes they appear in other guises, and occasionally they change their forms based on the particulars of a story—they are gods, after all. The Ennead, too, have generational lines, with gods tracing descent through parental lines, and a greater community around them who all partake in the business of the family. Even after death, the family is celebrated by tombs and offerings to the dead. If the gods practice their relations and their families in this way, then who are mortals to argue?

Language

The chief language among the Khemeti people is known as Sahidic. The many different dialects of Sahidic depend on the region and social class. Most dialects share much in common but the pronunciation may differ from region to region.

Food

The other major economic force since the sun began to set early is the shift in food production. Where once Khemet produced fields of glorious wheat, barley and other grains, the shorter days have left stunted crops full of half-grown bounty. Khemet has instead shifted to heavy fishing in the great rivers and importing more animals to raise and slaughter to sell for meat. Salted and cured meats, once a delicacy in Khemet, are now one of their major exports, and preservation of meat and fish is a significant industry, which in turn fuels a large demand for salt harvested from the ocean by families using generations-old techniques.

Art and Music

From ancient days, followers of Seknephet, goddess of creativity, became gifted storytellers and singers, dancers and musicians. Music is a huge part of every celebration, with tambourines, bells, lutes, drums, harps and flutes filling the air. A singer crafted stories into her songs for all occasions, and a skilled storyteller who memorized hundreds of tales in his lifetime often recounted history along with fanciful legends.

Temples, palaces and homes became the pages for these stories, carved into the very stones of Khemet's cities in chiseled hieroglyphics. Colorful inlaid mosaics became storybooks, retelling these tales in wondrous frescoes. A weaver told stories in her work, creating tapestries and carpets of all kinds made with beautifully dyed threads. Even the jewelry of Khemet told stories—emulating the likenesses of the ancient gods, reflecting the sun and moon or bearing patterns reminiscent of animals and famous people.

The stories of Khemet are even passed down in furious dance. Ceremonial dances at harvest festivals depict the stories of the gods. Every district has its own version of the music, its own version of the stories, but the dances are always pounding, rhythmic, overwhelming. During the long nights, people gather around the bonfires and play their flutes, their sistrums, their tambourines and cymbals and qanuns and mizmars, and they clap their hands, stomp their feet, and whirl and spin about the flickering flames. Their motions retell stories from times both old and recent, their joy and passion speaks out against the darkening days of Khemet…and reminds them that day shall come again.

Religion

Khemet is a kingdom split by two religious groups, those worshiping the gods of old and the new followers of the Second Prophet. Where once the temples of the Ennead predominantly stood all across the nine districts, the Kingdom now sees more temples to the Second Prophet than anything else. The two groups remained largely in harmony over previous generations, but with the new darkness descending on Khemet, religious differences have spurred explosive clashes between the two groups.

Queen Twosret has officially declared both religions equal in the land to relieve some of the difficulties, but it is only a matter of time before the split becomes an all-out religious conflict.

The Ennead

For as long as Khemet has existed, it has had a personal and deep relationship to its gods, the Ennead. It was the Ennead who rescued the people of Khemet from the original vileness of Bonsam, set the great Obelisks to protect the land and made the first bargains to teach the Most High the magic and wisdom they needed to turn Khemet into a mighty empire. The fingerprints of the gods remain evident across the land, from the nine districts which still bear their names to the giant pyramids housing the remnants of those gods killed in Khemet's defense. And though the gods have departed, their devout followers continue to worship the Ennead in the hope one day they might return from Fire Island to push back the darkness once more.

Each district has a patron god or goddess whose worship is principal among the people of that land, but depending on one's station in life or need, it is not unusual for an individual to have several patron gods. Temples to each god exist in every major city and smaller shrines exist in every town and even at crossroads and roadside stops across the desert. Barges travel up and down rivers owned by the priests of temples to help sailors bring offerings even when away from land, and a traveler carries with him tiny statues of the gods to pray no matter where he stays.

A priest, an eubayd, spends her life dedicated to the gods. She does not marry or bear children, but instead adopts orphans and runaways as her wards to raise within the temples to become the next generation. Along with tending the temples and performing holy rites, she oversees births, major milestones such as marriages and separations and the performance of funerary rites. The priest also acts as a mediator and educator, a task handed down from the time of the gods. Where the gods once steward the people, now their priests maintain that duty in preparation for the time when the Ennead returns to walk among the people once more.

Basat

None of the stories agree where the shapeshifting goddess of magic, childbirth, healing and protection comes from. Some say she is Ahmun and Apostis' sister, another that she was just another goddess among the Jok or that she even came from lands far east or across the sea. Seductive and powerful, the

goddess of cats lured Isira away from her brother-husband Seti and together they birthed a child, the glorious Horun. From her temple-palace in Basatan, Basat taught magic and appreciation for the finer things, reveling in beauty and glory until the murder of Isira by Apostis and Horun by Seti. Afterwards she became a figure constantly in mourning, a black panther prowling the countryside seeking revenge. It was also Basat who shared the knowledge of pictogram magic with mortals, and her followers embrace using magic, including Heka. Her symbol is the cat.

Isira

Goddess of the family, the underworld and the afterlife, Isira is widely considered one of the most powerful goddesses of the Ennead. Ancient stories talk of her walking the old battlefields with her son, god of death Anuros, granting life everlasting to worthy maharib who became her warriors to fight demon threats in the underworld. Lover of the goddess Basat, Isira warred with her brother Seti when she became pregnant with Horun, prophesied to be leader of the Ennead after Ahmun was gone. Isira was betrayed by Apostis and murdered, her body parts scattered into a pool of deepest water. Incensed by the act, Basat ordered the first pyramid built above the pool, and inscribed a message above the pyramid's entrance: *Seek Isira and discover everlasting life*. Isira's symbol is the ankh.

Horun

The youngest of the Ennead is Horun, son of Isira and the shapeshifting goddess Basat. Prophecy before Horun's birth said the young god would rise to become greater than even Ahmun, and was raised by his grandfather to become god of war, of the skies and birds. Able to transform into a great golden falcon, Horun, the foremost fighter in the war against the darkness, gained the favor of the people. Stories tell of his murder at the hands of Seti, jealous of his popularity. Horun was laid to rest in the district that bears his name under the great pyramid there among the greatest treasure trove of gifts from the gods. His followers believe he will one day rise again, aided by his mother Isira once she is reborn, and he will fly over Khemet once more to lead the people to victory. His symbol is the falcon.

Seknephet

The lioness goddess of creativity, bounty, fire, love and the harvest is the wild, uncontrollable member of the Ennead. A force of unstoppable creation, Seknephet is a goddess of plentiful harvests and artistic passions, unbridled love and ferocious revenge. Ancient stories tell that Seknephet was once twin girls, Sekmet and Nephthet, who loved one another so fiercely they became one person. This new goddess wanders the land, far from her temple and district of Seknephtam, her capricious nature praised or blamed for the quality of harvests across Khemet. Temples to Seknephet are often filled with people praying for creative inspiration or good yield to their crops, or else with help in love. Yet even her followers know of her capricious whims, and should she bestow her blessing, the fallout of her gifts is often unpredictable. Seknephet's symbol is the paw print with claws.

Apostis

Apostis, god of snakes, chaos and darkness was once the powerful brother of Ahmun, the opposite to his light. Though darkness was his purview, Apostis once believed in the balance of light and day and shared power with Ahmun. But as the people worshiped the sun, Apostis grew jealous and turned to demons and corruption in secret, even going as far as to consort with a demon to birth Ammit-Sat, a monstrous beast with the head of a crocodile, the body of a leopard and the hindquarters of a hippopotamus. Apostis fostered Seti's hatred for his sister-wife Isira so Seti hurt Ahmun by harming his daughter, Isira, and grandson, Horun. After Seti murdered Horun, Isira confronted Apostis, who set Ammit-Sat loose on her and killed her. Ahmun caught Apostis and led him away to the Fire Island in chains. The demon Ammit-Sat disappeared. Apostis' followers also number few, though they exist, and come to worship at his temple at Apostisra under cover of darkness to ask for vengeance on their enemies. His symbol is the snake.

Ahmun

Sun god and leader of the Ennead, Ahmun is the general who led the Ennead into Khemet to protect the land against the corrupting darkness in the ancient days. It was Ahmun whose light first drove

back the darkness before the Covenant of the Most High, and his worship is most widespread. Patron of the district that bears his name, Ahmun's temple at Masr is the largest of every temple. God of the sun, prophecy, military strategy, the rivers and the seasons, Ahmun led the withdrawal of the Ennead after the murder of his daughter, the goddess of the afterlife, Isira. His followers believe he will be the first to return to Khemet to lead them out of the dark times once more. His mark is the sun over a half circle.

Anuros

Son of Isira and her brother Seti, Anuros is the jackal-headed god of the dead. Known as a god of judgment, Anuros used the power he inherited from his father to see into the hearts of the dead to judge them worthy. Should they be found worthy, they would pass into the afterlife. If not, he devoured their souls. Upon the death of Isira, Anuros became guardian of the entrance to the afterlife, but could never again cross its boundaries. Ancient stories say gathering the tens of thousands of souls who died during the great flooding drove the god mad, and a follower knows she prays to an unpredictable god, as likely to aid her as to devour her whole. His symbol is the jackal.

Toroth

Deity of wisdom, knowledge and fair judgment, Toroth is described as neither male nor female but a fluid blend of both. From zer district, zer fostered centers of knowledge all over Khemet, schools open to all who wanted to learn. Zer priests, some of the best educated, travel to keep up Toroth's belief in spreading knowledge to the people. Magistrates and mediators attempting to judge fairly in their duty call for Toroth's blessing. During the war, Toroth maintained a meticulous record of all knowledge in an effort to preserve what the darkness tried to destroy. Ancient stories say zer hall of records still exists, left behind in the hurry to leave Khemet before the flood. Toroth is represented by a crane.

Seti

God of storms, scorpions, the desert and famine, Seti was the son of Ahmun and brother-husband of Isira until she turned him aside for the goddess Basat. Mad with jealousy, Seti turned to Apostis for affection, and the two hatched a plan to ruin the rule of the gods. Seti killed Horun, Isira's child, and convinced their son Anuros to keep Horun from returning from the dead. Seti was driven off by Ahmun and fled ahead of the other gods into exile, where he repents his evil deeds. Followers of Seti at his temple in the Setim district number few, but travelers and sailors call for his protection against the desert's dangers and bad weather. His symbol is the scorpion.

The Second Prophet and al-Dīn

With the Crescent Empire a nearby neighbor across the sea to the north, it was only a matter of time before cultures and ideas came to influence Khemet. King Akheneset was certainly not the first person in Khemet to encounter the ideas of the Second Prophet, but once the great king converted to follow the Second Prophet and became one of his greatest supporters, the religion spread across the country like wildfire. Houses of worship were built to rival even local temples to the gods and believers in the Second Prophet gathered larger and larger flocks with every passing year.

Generations later, the worship of the Second Prophet equals the worship of the Ennead, a fact that bewilders a follower of the old gods. She acknowledges the teachings about acceptance, reason and learning the Second Prophet espoused, but she points to the very pyramids themselves as evidence of the legacy of the gods of Khemet. She points to the magic in the land, both handed down by the Ennead to the royal family and Heka itself, as evidence of a power greater than any of the Prophets. She also remains concerned that the schism, which split the followers of the Second Prophet from the Vaticine Church upon the arrival of the Third Prophet could have a similar divisive influence on Khemet. Yet a follower of the Second Prophet remains unmoved, focusing instead on spreading good works, acceptance and reason to all corners of Khemet. His dedication has fostered a powerful connection with the Second Prophet followers in the Crescent Empire, and the bond has brought much needed financial aid to Khemet's flagging economy.

Recent difficult years have set a follower of the Prophets to wonder about the influence of sorcery and the Ennead upon his Kingdom. He points to

the shortening days and longer nights as evidence of vile magic afoot, a magic that must be understood in order to counter. Certainly the Ennead have not stopped the progress of the darkness creeping upon Khemet. More and more, suspicious and anxious people call for action, and increasingly, a follower of the Second Prophet considers that perhaps he must reclaim his home under a new banner, since the old ways have failed.

The Church from Abroad

The Vaticine Church seems far away, but increasingly, the nations of Théah turn their eyes toward Khemet as a land of ancient mysteries and grandeur. To the Vaticine Church, the works of the Ennead seem alien—massive monuments and bizarre remnants of a sorcerous age. The Church's prohibitions against sorcery are strong: the practice of Heka, the study of the protective monuments and the offering of prayers or sacrifices to the Ennead is seen as an affront. Church scholars argue that humanity must puzzle out Theus' Riddle for itself, not via "gifts" from strange spirits and prehistoric monsters. Scholars of the Invisible College assert that even the magnificent works of the Ennead must follow natural law, and that studying them might unlock learning about heretofore mysterious secrets of the physical world.

Officially, the Vaticine Church considers Khemet a kingdom in need of conversion. Like the Crescents, the people of Khemet are seen as mired in the past, unwilling to accept the truths revealed by the Third Prophet, blind to the light that Theus has revealed. Unofficially, the Church regularly sponsors artifact-hunters and scholars to visit Khemet in hopes of uncovering more secrets from the ancient tombs and monuments. Heroes and scoundrels alike could be called upon to travel to this land on behalf of the Church, but neither the followers of the Second Prophet nor the adherents of the Ennead take such visitors kindly. And, of course, what a Hero *does* find might throw all of her beliefs about Theus into question…

Sorcery

Heka

After the destruction wrought by the flood and the departure of the Ennead, the people ached for magic to protect Khemet once more. The alchemist king Theyt, who discovered the ability to bend one's spirit, the ka, used it to perform magic. By imbuing a part of one's self into an object, a written representation or even a spoken phrase, the Heka worker can bend the world to her will. The imbued object draws magical power from the world around it and down from the gods themselves and shapes it according to the sorcerer's designs. The stronger the ka of the individual, the stronger the working.

Heka as a magical practice demands an understanding of the connection between an object and the representation it has for other forces or materials in nature. By inscribing on a sympathetic object, the Heka worker can create these alchemical amulets or spells to manipulate nature around her, even transmuting flesh and bone or giving weapons additional strength and power. The only catch is every magical working requires an expenditure of ka, and the larger the working, the more power it requires. The ka, the very life force of a person, therefore needs time between workings to recharge. Too much use and an individual can sicken and easily die.

There are, however, shortcuts. A Heka worker learns how to siphon ka from another, bleeding him for his life energy, and to use the ka energy of tomb treasures, or even mummies, to fuel her work. An illegal smuggling network trades and sells pieces liberated from tombs for the purposes of such sinister works. Still, for the most part, everyone uses Heka from the enez to the Most High to produce magical wonders to help Khemet thrive.

Heka is, of course, a form of sorcery, and as such considered anathema by the Vaticine Church. That Heka does not have the same infernal roots as the forms of sorcery practiced in the north is irrelevant—it is a form of magic, an unnatural twisting of the world, and therefore seen as a corrupting influence.

Government

The royal court of Khemet is split soundly down the middle between those who support Queen Twosret and those who wish for the rise of Prince Siptah to happen immediately. The queen's ever-increasing paranoia and corrupt behavior has many believing she is the reason for the Kingdom falling into darkness—and they are right. Assassins who have tried to end the queen's reign found themselves facing not only the guardians of the Most High, but also strange, sorcerous (some might say demonic) forces.

One would-be assassin escaped the palace with grievous wounds and, shortly before dying, claimed that Amlak Bey is in fact a demon, but the people like the affable Aksum leader—and who believes the words of an assassin? Meanwhile, the queen allows a corrupt leader, tax collector or criminal to prey on the lower classes so long as he supports the monarchy, while pulling back her guards until they patrol less and less of the kingdom and secure only key locations like Masr and the summer palace at Kyber.

A person who supports the ascension of Prince Siptah knows he gambles with an unknown commodity. Most have never seen or spoken to the young prince at all, nor have they any idea if he will be a good ruler. The main argument for the prince's supporters is simply that any alternative must be superior to Queen Twosret's continued reign. The supporters of Prince Siptah run the gamut from well-meaning, Heroic defenders of the people like his intended bride and cousin Nunia, to foreign-backed criminal leaders intent on dethroning the queen and installing Siptah as a puppet king.

What people closest to the prince have let slip indicates the prince might be more difficult to control than many think. Even though little has escaped the Kyber palace about Siptah, whispers describe him as a thoughtful young man, concerned about his people and loving of his country. A detractor uses his isolation as an excuse to ascribe any flaw she can to him, calling Siptah weak and sickly, or else not intelligent enough or even mad like his ancestor Theyt. In addition to these mundane disputes, wild stories make the rounds whispered in hookah parlors asserting that Siptah is inhuman, somehow possessed of unnatural powers.

For the common man or woman of Khemet, it seems that the future is bleak indeed—continued rule by a despotic and paranoid queen, or the accession of her son, a prince of unknown caliber rumored to be a pawn of unnatural forces. Truly, if Khemet is to survive, it needs a Heroic effort to bring about new leadership.

The Politics of the Districts

The nine districts were established in ancient times when Khemet was ruled by the gods themselves. Each member of the Ennead established the boundaries of their territories lit by small crystal obelisks which, when united in power, protected their lands against incursions from corruption and evil creatures. Those obelisks, long since gone cold, now establish the markers separating each of the nine districts which remain across the kingdom. These districts are Basatan, Isiran, Horun, Seknephtam, Apostisra, Ahmun, Anuros, Toroth and Setim.

Though the districts once went to war after the decimation and the gods' disappearance, Queen Nahashepsut's power brought them together and secured Khemet once more into a single united force. Though ostensibly united, the districts still pursue their own agendas. The noble families of the Most High, who once served the gods as their spokespeople and attendants, now act as the governors of these lands, and spend their time vying for power against one another in front of the crown. Queen Twosret encourages the machinations of the Most High to keep everyone off balance, and each district negotiates heavily to trade resources and favors for its own enrichment.

Currency

Even after the time of the unification, the different districts have used widely different currency—anything from silver hoops and gold coins to bartering with animals, grain, timber and spices. Queen Twosret minted a silver coin called the *hedj* as a standard currency, but the practice has yet to truly catch on. A Khemeti still relies on barter for her day-to-day living, while the hedj remains in the hands of merchants, priests and aristocrats.

Khemet's economy has been in a freefall since the sun began to set early and the nights became so long. With only eight hours of sunlight per day, a citizen rises early to accomplish all his business, keeping legitimate market hours until just before sundown. All business goes at a hurried pace and most citizens are brutally honest to almost the point of rudeness about getting work done quickly. No one wishes to be caught out at night and all deliveries, transactions and business operations shut down once the sun falls below the horizon. The same cannot be said about more nefarious business practices. A criminal or conspirator willingly braves the dangerous nights to accomplish her business—after all, even the enforcers of the law fear the dark. When the moon hangs high over Khemet and the night air whips by in a cold breeze, an escort or hashish-seller plies his trade in backroom parlors, while a smuggler or mugger slips between the alleys in darkened shadows. Even she knows, though, that the shadows hunger.

Khemeti Names

Men and women's names are often derived from nature as well as variations on the names of the ancient Ennead, Heroes of the past and the virtues the Khemeti find most important. Names are given at birth and accepted by a Khemeti youth at the age of ten. Should a Khemeti child wish to change her name then, she casts her old name away and burns it in a fire in front of the entire family or community and her new name decreed. Many names have changed among the Khemeti over the years, as more have been incorporated from Crescent Empire influence alongside traditional names.

Common Male Names

Ahmentoten, Ahmose, Ahten, Amir, Ammon, Bashir, Farruk, Hekset, Kanan, Khafra, Khahent, Nekau, Nephermat, Nikare, Oded, Pentu, Raima, Rahotep, Ramses, Semenre, Tantamani, Teos, Wazad, Zahir.

Common Female Names

Amira, Behinu, Bithya, Iset, Isis, Khebeket, Khenut, Maatkare, Mayaneta, Meharet, Menwi, Mereret, Nebtu, Nefertari, Nepthis, Nikoai, Osenat, Pehya, Peseshet, Syrene, Sitamun, Takhat, Tayi, Tuya, Zanna.

Notable Locations in Khemet

Masr

The capital of Khemet, Masr, lies on a great hill overlooking the Valley of the Kings. The ancient city is one of the oldest places in all of Khemet, having survived above the floodwaters during the retreat of the Ennead. What was destroyed in the darkest times has been rebuilt on top of the ruins to turn the city into a mix of the Numanari Empire and more modern buildings. The city's four great gates are named for ancient rulers: Ahtunonen, Nahashepsut, Nehemek and Akheneset. A fifth gate, leading to the land of the dead, is under construction, named after the fallen King Makaret.

The city is divided into four quarters, with the two largest structures at the very center. Surrounded by a ring of temples are the Royal Palace and the massive temple of Ahmun. The palace glows like a golden beacon atop the hill, visible for miles in every direction. Made of several terraced levels, a grand staircase hundreds of steps high leads from the massive marble courtyard shared with the temple of Ahmun to the highest receiving halls.

The temple of Ahmun, only slightly smaller, rivals the palace in splendor. The walls of the temple are inlaid with gold and jewels, and inscribed with the pictogram language of the ancient gods. These hieroglyphics tell the ancient stories of the arrival of the Ennead to their departure and the history of Khemet down to Queen Twosret's reign. The temple is staffed by the most devoted eubayd priests and priestesses. Their leader, the nearly fanatic Nephet Malin, a devout follower of Ahmun, keeps relics of the ancient days secreted away in the temple, including the scepter of Ahmun himself.

To the east of the palace, the noble's quarter houses the families of the Most High. Their homes are massive open structures with grand pavilions and tiered gardens with large balconies to overlook the sun rising in the east over the city. The walls, inlaid with precious metals and mosaics, depict stories of ancient legend and the histories of the families living within. Around each villa lies the servant's quarters, housing their attendants, their families and the maharib guarding the homes.

Masr's marketplace is considered the largest in all of Khemet, with a dizzying array of imported goods from all across Ifri and beyond. Spices, textiles, animals, slaves, treasures and any kind of food can be purchased there, as well as stalls selling relics and treasures from tombs meant for use in Heka work. An auction block stands ready for use at the north of the market, where livestock and slaves go up for sale. A tavern called the Ibis Rest lies just west of the market where servants in search of work go each day to wait under the massive white cotton awnings for employers looking for skilled labor. The newest edition to the marketplace is a winery called the Red Vine, owned by a transplant from far-off Castille named Emilio Cortez and his husband, Hasan. This

open-air winery allows tastings of every vintage and invites visitors from far and wide to try vintages from across the world, brought to Masr for sharing. The winery has become an elite place to be seen, with musicians, poets and storytellers often brought in for lavish celebrations. Foreigners are especially invited to add to the mystique of the place.

The wealthier enez live closer to the center of the city, while the poorest live at the very edge of the cliffs. Since the sun sets in the west, the enez get the last view of the sun by day before it sets. The western side of town hosts any number of taverns and eateries, gathering places and small places of prayer for the followers of al-Dīn.

The northern part of town, the smallest district, hosts those foreigners who live in Masr, always eclipsed in their homes in the shadow of the royal palace and the temple of Ahmun. The district of Goshek, home to the transplanted Yachidi, is in this area, as well as a large Dīnist population moved down from the Crescent Empire. Foreigners from the rest of Ifri often chafe at being forced to live separate from the rest of the population.

Outside of the walls of Masr live the mafqud, or those waiting to enter the city. Shantytowns have sprung up, and plenty of trade in animals and illicit goods goes on there. The only road kept clear, the newly renovated one, heads down to the Valley of the Kings, though even at night this road can be dangerous due to bandits.

Story Hooks

- The mafqud outside the walls of Masr are under assault by the walking dead coming up from the Valley of the Sovereigns. Can the Heroes join forces with the common people to provide a defense?
- A delegation from the Atabean Trading Company arrived at court, but their leader disappeared in middle of the night. Their body is found two days later with a sign that implies the Heroes are next.
- Rumors point to a black panther stalking the streets at night, murdering powerful Heka users. Many believe the goddess Basat herself reasserts her power over Masr and Khemet. For two nights in a row, a Hero using Heka sorcery begins to dream of the panther stalking her. Is she next?

The Valley of Sovereigns

The Valley of Sovereigns, the resting place of the greatest rulers of Khemet, also hosts the tombs of the families of the Most High. It is a great honor to have a vault in the Valley of Sovereigns, and a noble fights to secure herself a space in her family's crypts so she can be counted among the greatest in the history of the country.

The Valley of Sovereigns is indeed a valley, but is dotted with smaller hills. These smaller hills have long since been hollowed away and vaults built inside for families. They exist in a ring structure moving outward from the center with the more ancient vaults near the middle. Inside the center are the royal vaults, with doorways built into the ground and stairs going down to the actual resting place of a ruler.

People consider the Valley itself a terrifying, sacred and unsettling place. Along with the dangers of bandits who often rob visitors that dally after nightfall, monsters such as restless spirits and flesh-eating ghouls have been known to linger around the tombs.

Story Hooks

- A small circle of nobles still upholds the ancient tradition of burying servants alive with their dead masters. The Heroes are told that a strange figure patrols the Valley of Sovereigns, freeing these unfortunate souls. Can they aid it in its mission to destroy the practice once and for all?
- Wily old tomb raider Aziz Mahari sells tickets to tour the Valley of Sovereigns. The Heroes are given free passes in a bet. Are they brave enough to spend the night in a place where the dead might not rest?
- The Tomb of Sobekneferu, one of Khemet's greatest rulers, is said to have a mirror that repels demonic forces. The tomb has been broken into several times. At night the spirit of Sobekneferu comes to the Heroes and begs them to find the mirror before Amlak Bey and his minions do.

The Iteru River and the Great Obelisk

The Iteru River is called the mother and lifeblood of Khemet. The winding river makes its way through the very heart of the country, up from the south to the ocean in the north. The Iteru, created when the Ennead departed the country, flooded the land behind them and created a great crack in the land, which stayed filled when the flood waters receded.

The Iteru River is both beloved by the people of Khemet and also a source of difficulty. Every season when the rains come, the river floods the low-lying plains along its banks, sending families racing inland ahead of the deluge. Once the waters recede however, the land is once more ready for planting, giving Khemet its entire agricultural industry. However, the swelling river also brings boats full of bandits, who raid villages and carry away anything they can.

The most dangerous area is the bay of Apis near the Pschent Peninsula. This bay is so full of crocodiles many wonder whether the demon Ammit-Sat hides beneath its waves. Still, people use the area as a meeting place for many barges and boats seeking to do business or hiding from the swelling of the river during the rainy season.

The mouth of the river near Apis Bay also contains the greatest treasure of the Kingdom, the Great Obelisk. First created in time of legend by Ahmun and the Ennead to protect against the darkness, the Great Obelisk stands high above the river as testament to the Covenant of the Most High. Miles high, the Obelisk is a deep purple crystal inscribed with ancient protective pictograms created by the gods themselves, their magic long since lost. In recent years, the crystal has begun to glow an eerie green-blue, like many other crystals across the land, making many wonder if the gods themselves walk the land again.

Story Hooks

- The Heroes are on a ship traveling in the shadow of the Great Obelisk. Suddenly one of them falls into a trance and starts spouting prophecy.
- A small village on the river hires the Heroes to stop a crew of murderous bandits from raiding their village, but when the bandits arrive the Heroes are surprised to discover they're all children.
- Giant crocodiles have been reported eating cattle and even people whole all along the river near Timsah al-Iter. When they attack a boat carrying the Heroes, they notice a man dressed all in black that seems to control them.

The Great Pyramids

The Great Pyramids of Khemet are considered one of the great wonders of Ifri. Nine stretch across the country, each dedicated to one of the Ennead. The monuments stand a testament to the days of legend when the gods fought for Khemet. The reasons for the pyramids were twofold, serving both as tombs for the gods and as storehouses for relics. Standing ten stories high and capped with giant basalt stones inlaid with gold, the pyramids are topped with a brilliant purple crystal capstone made of the same materials as the obelisks. By night they send an eerie glow illuminating the surrounding countryside.

Each of the pyramids is protected by Maharib. To violate the temple is considered sacrilege, but in recent years the maharib have been stretched too thin to keep out those seeking the treasures within.

Should a treasure seeker find his way down past the traps, and pick the right directions to find the tomb, he must first pass across a great silver lake in a massive cavern deep below the surface. Each silver lake is the same, deep and reflective. A boat always waits on the shore, ready to take a visitor to the other side. Should he ride it, he must face the voices of his loved ones, his enemies, even his own demons and greatest fears given form, tempting him into the waters. Only beyond that may he find the tomb of the gods.

Few have ever been inside the tombs of the gods and returned to tell the tale. Stories talk about treasures and relics made of sky metal and crystals, even the figures of the gods given form in ancient mirrors, meant to let mortals speak with them in their far-away homes. Only the greatest explorer, Adom Abasi, who entered the tomb of Isira in the Pyramid at Isiran, brought back a scarab amulet said to hang around the neck of her funerary statue. The queen herself has tried to confiscate the amulet, but wherever Adom Abasi hid it, he is not telling. The tale has inspired many a treasure hunter to try her luck at other Pyramids, mostly to her doom.

Story Hooks

- The Heroes go to seek their fortune after hearing about Abasi's legend in the Pyramid at Isiran. Yet Queen Twosret has decreed the guards to turn them back, with violence if necessary.
- A document circulates recording the tale of a stranger who staggered from the Pyramid of Anuros and swore the pyramid brought him back from the dead. The Heroes are approached by his wife, desperate to find him.
- The yearly competition for the maharib who guard the Pyramids decides who will be considered the champion of the gods. A Hero's sibling is signed up to compete. This year, the queen has declared the losers will die.

The Citadel of Kyber

The Citadel of Kyber is a wonder of the desert, created in ancient days by Queen Nahashepsut as a summer palace and renovated by Queen Twosret to house her son, Prince Siptah. The citadel is a terraced paradise, full of flowering gardens with water brought up with massive pumps from deep underground.

No one on the outside can be entirely sure what Kyber looks like, as the citadel's walls stand so high they block even the highest parapet from sight. There is only one set of gates, giant metal and gold doors hundreds of feet high. A terrifying maharib force guards the entrance and confiscates weapons before anyone enters.

Once inside, visitors are greeted by a beautiful palace, lavishly appointed with imported plants, animals and delights of all kinds. Fountains grace every level and open courtyards ring with the training of happy musicians, students and new maharib learning to protect the prince. A menagerie lies on the south end of the palace with creatures imported from across the world for the prince's education and delight. The citadel also includes a massive library, a columned dining hall where advisors to the nobility eat communally and all sorts of training halls teaching everything from mathematics to sculpting and languages.

The prince's rooms rise high above the levels of apartments housing the attendants, tutors, priests and maharib who live to serve Prince Siptah. A receiving hall similar to the one in Masr lies at the entrance to the palace where the prince is rarely seen. He remains in his apartments while his guardian and advisor to his mother, Councilor Gannan, oversees the comings and goings of any visitors. The prince stays high above it all, going about his studies, playing games with his companions or visiting his astronomy tower just above his apartments.

Kyber, considered one of the most secure places in all of Khemet, still has had multiple attempts to breach its walls by kidnappers and other assailants. Rumors talk about a secret passage through Mount Hararan behind the Citadel, but those same stories talk about monstrous creatures living in the tunnels, so many doubt they even exist. Yet, somehow, an assailant keeps getting in, leaving many to wonder just how he breaches the citadel's defenses.

Story Hooks

- A recent fouling of the water supply has left everyone in Kyber thirsty and on edge. But the maharib believe the "accident" might be a deliberate assassination attempt. The Heroes are tasked to go undercover as new maharib to ferret out potential assassins.
- Prince Siptah has requested new musicians be brought to the Citadel. The call has gone out across Khemet but how many are willing to stay indefinitely for an unseen prince? The Heroes, new to Khemet, heed the call in search of impressing the Prince. But what do they do when they find they cannot leave?
- The prince has sent word that he will depart Kyber to finally meet his destiny…whether his mother likes it or not. The Heroes have been hired amongst others to protect the procession from harm. When they discover a plot to kidnap the prince, they must figure out who is behind it before it is too late.

Current Relations

The Crescent Empire

The Crescent Empire remains the most necessary and worrisome ally to Khemet and the royal court. With the rise of the new empress in the empire, Khemet has renewed opportunities to secure an important trade and military partner. The religious connections alone between the two nations thanks to the spread of al-Dīn certainly make the two countries a likely pair of friends. But since the enslavement of the Yachidi in Khemet, the royals have been concerned about the empress' intercession on behalf of Khemet's new slaves. Cordial relations must continue at all costs.

The Kingdom of Aksum

The most powerful of Khemet's allies, Aksum has remained and will remain Khemet's priority in the region. Though allied publicly against Mbey, Khemet finds their healthy trade relationship a necessity in these quite literal dark times. Through Aksum's support, the royal court knows they will not fall, and Khemet continues to maintain its staunch support of the Aksum court. Whenever Aksum calls, Khemet will answer, if for enlightened self-interest above all else.

The Kingdom of Maghreb

Where once Maghreb might have been a worthy ally, the beautiful kingdom has fallen onto hard times and become a greedy old friend. Khemet's leaders see Maghreb as asking far too much of their once useful alliance without much in return and have decided to wait until the kingdom shows signs of usefulness once more before engaging in too much interconnection. Still, the populations of both countries remain closely related, often by blood, so it would be almost impossible to be rid of these neighbors completely without going to war.

The Kingdom of Mbey

Though many see Mbey as an evil, fallen place, the leaders of Khemet see an opportunity. A Khemeti may curse the ground the Mbeyan walks on when he passes, but with the Atabean Trading Company doing much work in the Mbey slave markets, the possibilities for trade between the two kingdoms grows more possible. Should a real alliance become a reality, all of Ifri could see darkness stretch further across the land.

The Manden Empire

Of all the kingdoms in Ifri, the royal court believes Manden to be the largest threat to Khemet's rise back to power. Their wealth in gold and their unity of their four states not only outstrips Khemet in economic power but has inspired many of the lower classes to look to Manden as an example of a kingdom dedicated to harmony with its people. The nobility and the royals disdain Manden's dedication to a plurality of voices, and have limited their connection to the empire outside of necessary relations. These relations lie primarily in maintaining overland caravans for pilgrimage and trade.

The Atabean Trading Company

The icy fingers of the ATC reaches out to Khemet's warm heart in negotiation, and many whisper it won't be long before Queen Twosret makes a deal with the company. Recently ambassadors from the ATC have come to court asking for trade and use of Khemet's rivers as easy transport paths in exchange for a steady stream of slave labor to build Khemet back to its former glory…with Twoswret gaining the credit. What an alliance with the ATC means for Khemet only time might tell, but surely the dark shadow over Ifri will spread like Khemet's eternal night.

> We are so close to finishing this tale, in bringing together the chains of the story! In the Citadel we found not the young prince we were promised, but his mother. Draped in linen garments, a diadem upon her head. Something about her unsettled me.
>
> We were followed to the Citadel. Bloodshed followed soon after we came upon her. Before she could say where the boy was, war cries spurred us to battle. What the Atabeans want with the stone, I know not, but they fight so fiercely, it could only be for nefarious reasons. Ignoring my past injuries screaming at me to stop, we fought like lions.
>
> **—A'isha ibnt Anwar, second in command of *Yemoja's Splendor*, 1668**

PRINCE SIPTAH

"The Sun burns bright in Kyber, but should it not spread its glory over all of Khemet?"

Prince Siptah

Siptah is the blessing for which Khemet has waited. The son of Queen Twosret and her mysterious lover, the prince was born the night King Makaret was assassinated and the Kingdom nearly thrown into chaos. Spirited away from the palace to the citadel at Kyber, Siptah grew up surrounded by attendants, tutors and guards. The prince proved himself to be a brilliant mind, learning the languages of Ifri and many Théan languages before the age of 12. His tutors began his studies at a young age, readying him for his sixteenth year when he would leave Kyber to join his mother at the capitol of Masr.

There is only one problem. The prince's birthday has come and gone, and his mother has not called him to ascend. Siptah suspects why he has been ignored. It is the same reason the sun burns bright over Kyber, even when it rains, and the nights are so short over the citadel. While the rest of Khemet lingers under ever-darkening days, Kyber languishes in sunlight, and Siptah knows it is all because of his father's blessing.

Prince Siptah, well aware his father was a god, has kept the burgeoning magic inside him a secret, making sure his mother's royal spies know nothing of his power. Siptah spends his time forcing his power down, or else he would radiate like a small sun. He knows it is only a matter of time before the power becomes too much to contain, and he yearns to seek out his father for aid. In the meantime, he aches to leave Kyber and rule his people. Yet his love for his mother keeps Siptah waiting, trusting in her good judgment, despite warnings from his advisors that many believe he will never live to see the throne.

Story Hooks

- Prince Siptah seeks representatives from every major religion to teach him about the spiritual practices of Terra, against Councilor Gannan's explicit concerns. He is especially interested in Heroes from the Vaticine Church who may know anything about what they call Legion.
- Rumors circulate about outsiders trying to break into Kyber to liberate the prince. Queen Twosret hires the Heroes to get to the bottom of the Villiany, but what happens when they find connections that suggest the Prince himself is behind it?

Damora Kai

Times are tough in Khemet. The long, dark nights draw out all kinds of monsters on the edges of Khemet cities, and crossing the open deserts means certain doom for the unprepared traveler. Thankfully, Damora Kai and her caravan are by no means unprepared. Damora grew up among the Ba'hani, a tribe of desert people who never fully integrated into Khemet society. Instead, her tribe traveled the great desert, establishing oases and welcoming travelers into their tents. Damora's people survived through the many years of civil war by pledging neutrality in all things, including the politics of the land. They follow an ancient pledge made by their ancestors to the goddess Basat to ferry all those that need guiding across the open, dangerous places. The Ba'hani are matriarchal and Damora is the latest in a long line to take up the title of Kai. She is a powerful woman and is always accompanied by a pair of jackal pups she raised from birth. In recent years, Damora has become more frustrated with the goings on in Khemet and the rampant exploitation of the poor. Though her tribe pledged themselves to neutrality, Damora has bent the rules to help those in need on many occasions, bringing many to wonder whether the Ba'hani can truly remain outside the conflicts of Khemet any longer.

Story Hooks

- Damora's eldest daughter Malita is meant to be her heir. But Malita has other interests, like leaving to join the maharib protecting the temple of Basat. Damora pleads with the Heroes to go with Malita on one important mission to Basat, which will hopefully snuff out her desire to do anything except take her rightful place.
- Six caravans have been attacked crossing the great desert, including one that carries the Heroes. Damora's people call a conclave of desert clans to root out the bandit threat once and for all, and ask the Heroes to aid them.
- The queen has demanded the Ba'hani submit to heavy taxation for their use of the trade routes, routes originated by Damora's own people. The Ba'hani whisper revolution.

DAMORA KAI

"Eat! Drink! Rest! The desert is unending, but good wine with friends is all too temporary."

QUEEN TWOSRET

"Power in the hands of the weak and untested is power wasted. Who would dare reap the harvest before it is sown?"

STRENGTH	INFLUENCE	RANK
5	9	14

Queen Twosret

Queen Twosret is a direct descendant of the dynasty begun by King Ahtunonen and the true inheritor to the throne, but she was promised at a young age to her cousin, the maharib general Makaret. She was not satisfied with this, and pressed herself to be the best ruler Khemet could possibly have in the hopes of proving to her father she deserved to know the secrets of Heka. When the dying king chose to teach her betrothed instead, Queen Twosret learned the greatest lesson: power is not earned so much as taken.

The queen took a lover who gave her the son she always wanted, though she never imagined her lover was a god in man's form. When her son was born blessed, she knew she was meant for great things. Which meant she couldn't let her son take over the throne.

Queen Twosret's paranoia over being set aside compels her to listen to a tiny voice night after night. It offers her enough power to control Khemet forever. Queen Twosret made a deal with something dark and vile, though she will never see it for the demon it is, and now barely resists its constant urgings to kill her only child. The urges are tempered only by the overwhelming love the queen has for Siptah.

To her people Queen Twosret represents the picture of a concerned, caring queen. In private, she flies into rages when questioned and demands nothing but the best from everyone around her. People whisper about King Makaret's "untimely death" just as her son was born, and so Queen Twosret knows what people think of her. She believes she has the power to maintain and grow Khemet into a greater kingdom than it has ever been. To do that, however, she must hold onto the throne. And her own son now stands in her way.

Story Hooks

- The plans for the queen's jubilee are underway, and emissaries from across Ifri have arrived. Now the enez are asking if she will remarry. All eyes turn to the richest and most Noble of the Heroes, and rumors of a connection begin to fly.
- A powerful Dīnist leader named Malik Nadir has arrived in Khemet, speaking out against excessive magic use. He has turned his eyes on the queen. When an attempt is made on his life, he hires the Heroes to prove that the Queen and his own son have tainted Khemet.

Amlak Bey

Amlak Bey is consort to the Queen of Khemet, ambassador from Aksum, and one of the most powerful men in the Black Lands. A distant relation to the royal family of Aksum, Amlak worked his way up in court from humble beginnings. He hoped to attain political power alongside his father, noted dignitary Nasir Bey. Yet where Nasir Bey was a careful and respectful man, his son excelled in court through deception and backhanded dealings.

When they traveled to the Crescent Empire as ambassadors, Amlak sought out the company of magic-users. Obsessed with magic, he began experimenting with binding demons to his will. During his first attempt, his father interrupted the binding and the loosed demon killed him. Amlak blamed assassins from Mbey and returned a hero, having valiantly survived to broker peaceful dealings with the Crescent Empire. Amlak converted to al-Dīn to gain the support of the Second Prophet followers in Aksum.

Soon after his triumphant return to Aksum, he went to handle peace negotiations with Khemet. There, he met Queen Twosret and fell madly in love. He quickly won her affections and the politically minded Twosret saw his use as advisor and ambassador to both Aksum and the al-Dīn followers among her people. Amlak moved into the royal apartments at Masr. Once there, he summoned a powerful demon to tempt Queen Twosret with power. He knew she would never accept offered power, but had to come to the decision herself. Now, the queen is nearly ready to seize the throne from her son, Siptah. The sun goes black in Khemet, though a new dark kingdom will arise with Amlak Bey on the throne.

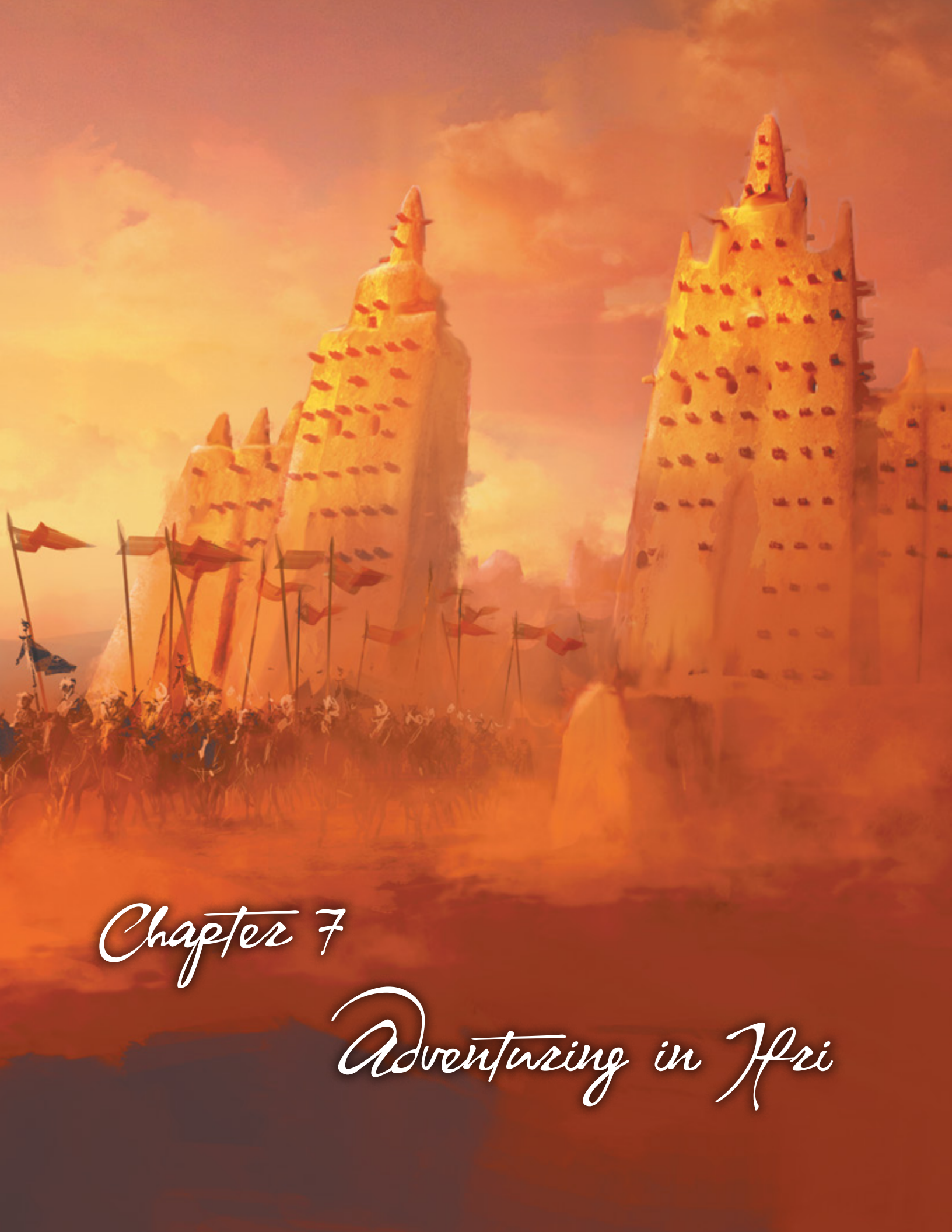
Story Hooks

- A new text regarding summoning ancient spirits has been discovered and held at the temple of Toroth. The priests swear that no one will ever read it. Amlak Bey has sent thieves to steal it several times. Can the Heroes protect it before he learns all of the tomes' secrets?
- An emissary from the court of Emperor Makonnen has come to check on Amlak for his cousin. He suspects that Amlak is not all he appears to be. Can the Heroes get the emissary the correct information about Amlak's dastardly deeds and implore Aksum to help free Khemet of his presence?

AMLAK BEY

"What do fools understand of true magic? Love is a spell as tight and as cruel as any technique from a scroll, and just as useful."

STRENGTH	INFLUENCE	RANK
4	5	9



Chapter 7

Adventuring in Afri

ADVENTURING IN IFRI

Making an Ifrian Hero

This chapter covers everything you need to make a Hero from Ifri. The rules for making a Hero are still the same—you'll be using the same steps from the **Core Rulebook**—but **Lands of Gold and Fire** further expands your choices to Heroes outside Théah.

You can pick between general and Nation Backgrounds just like in the **Core Rulebook**, so if you've read about horon noble from Manden, you can play one. This chapter includes new Advantages, Sorceries, Dueling Styles and a few new Secret Societies your charcters can belong to. This chapter also presents a new magical metal called Zahmeireen, which any Hero from Ifri can wield and Vile Dice a mechanic for gaining a partial Corruption for bonuses.

When making Ifrian Heroes, feel free to mix and match bits from the **Core Rulebook** and this one. Just be sure to ask your GM before attempting to step beyond normal limitations. An Aksum ras may have the Mother's Touch, but such a character is bound to be rare. While Heroes are exceptions to these rules, you should be prepared with a good explanation and a fantastic backstory for your GM to exploit.

Step 1: Traits

Every Hero has five Traits defining what that Hero's core strengths are. The Traits are:

Brawn is a Hero's strength and physical power.

Finesse measures a Hero's coordination and agility.

Resolve is a Hero's willpower and endurance.

Wits measures how quickly a Hero thinks on his feet.

Panache is a Hero's charm and personal magnetism.

Every Hero begins with all of her Traits at 2. You have 2 additional points you can spend to increase your Traits.

"BUT THOSE AREN'T REALLY 'NATIONS'..."

As the scope of **7TH SEA** expands across Terra, the question of "what makes something a Nation" becomes harder to answer. The people outside of Théah fall much less neatly into national borders, but for the sake of gameplay (and for consistency in language) we continue to refer to them as "Nations." This is not a statement on their culture or identity and more one of convenience when discussing game rules.

Step 2: Nation

Your decision of Kingdom affects your Traits, and also grants you access to Kingdom-specific Backgrounds and Advantages. Apply these bonuses after you have spent points on Traits.

NATION	BONUS
Aksum	+1 Wits or +1 Panache
Khemet	+1 Resolve or +1 Wits
Maghreb	+1 Finesse or +1 Resolve
Manden	+1 Brawn or +1 Resolve
Mbey	+1 Finesse or +1 Panache

Step 3: Backgrounds

The Lands of Gold and Fire produce Heroes as rich and varied as the Nations of Ifri. Your Backgrounds represent what your Hero did before the game begins. Were you trained to be a griot, telling the stories of your people and performing for small towns and royalty alike? Perhaps you became an Aksum Nebīyi Monitor who was trained to see the beauty of life through numbers? Perhaps your parents escaped slavery in Mbey to become resistance fighters and you carry on their legacy? Or, maybe you were born into a life of luxury as a Mandenka noble. This isn't where your Hero ends up, but it is where she started.

Backgrounds represent your past. You were a sailor, you were a griot, you were an assassin. While these things had a strong influence on you, they are not necessarily whom you've become.

Backgrounds give you a few things that make your Hero distinct from others.

Restrictions: Some Backgrounds have restrictions. Make sure you follow these; they are a part of your Hero's story.

Quirk: Backgrounds come with a Quirk, a personality trait common among people of that background. If you act in accordance with a Quirk from your Background, you gain a Hero Point. You may only gain a Hero Point from a particular Quirk once per session.

Advantages: Backgrounds give you Advantages. Advantages are abilities most Heroes will never have. If your Background lists an Advantage, you may add that Advantage to your Hero Sheet at no cost.

Skills: Each Background also gives you a set of Skills, which begin with 1 Rank. Skills are specific bonuses for specific tasks. Like Traits, Skills have Ranks that tell you how many dice they give you. A Skill's Rank can only go as high as 5.

Two Backgrounds

First, pick two Backgrounds from the following list.

You get all of your Backgrounds' Advantages. If you have duplicate Advantages, take another Advantage of the same point cost, your choice.

You get 1 Rank in all your Backgrounds' Skills. If you have duplicate Skills, add 1 more point (for a total of 2 points) to the duplicate Skill.

General Backgrounds

COMPANY AGENT

To your shame, you were once an agent of perhaps the greatest evil on Terra. Now you need to make up for it.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when your past misdeeds as a member of the Atabean Trading Company get you into trouble.

Advantages	Skills
Moral Compass	Convince
Sea Legs	Empathy
	Hide
	Sailing
	Theft

ISIFUNGO SENKOSI SEEKER

Zahmeireen is a tool to combat evil; you cannot let it fall into the wrong hands.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you commit to a course of action that is dangerous or morally questionable in order to pursue a corrupted Zahmeireen artifact.

Advantages	Skills
Zahmeireen Weapon	Athletics
	Convince
	Ride
	Scholarship
	Weaponry

RIVER PIRATE

You prowl the rivers and tributaries of Ifri for gold and other plunder.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you use your knowledge of hidden smuggler docks, expertise with port worker slang or a carefully placed bribe to solve a problem.

Advantages	Skills
Married to the Sea	Athletics
Perfect Balance	Hide
Personal Stash	Sailing
	Scholarship
	Weaponry

WALHU ESCAPEE

You managed to find your way out of hell on Terra. Nobody should ever suffer as you have.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you save someone from slavery, capture or danger by taking his place.

Advantages	Skills
Bodyguard	Brawl
Slip Free	Convince
Helping Hand	Hide
	Notice
	Theft

Aksum Backgrounds

ALHIDAF ARCHER

The archers of Aksum were once heralded as near legendary. Time to remind the world why.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you adhere to old traditions or outdated ancient practices to solve a problem.

Advantages	Skills
Sniper	Aim
Eagle Eyes	Athletics
	Notice
	Scholarship
	Warfare

ĀNIDI HIBIRI TEFET'IRO MISSIONARY

You have seen the truth of the glory of Theus and feel the call to bring His light to others.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you seize an opportunity to preach, proselytize or try to convert someone to your religion and it gets you into trouble.

Advantages	Skills
Ordained	Convince
Leadership	Notice
	Perform
	Scholarship
	Tempt

DASUSUO

The abonsam are wicked creatures of incredible power. You use that power to protect others.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you put yourself in danger to save an innocent person from falling to the influence of the abonsam or a similar dark supernatural force.

Advantages	Skills
Sorcery (Melbur)	Convince
Sorcery (Melbur)	Empathy
Direction Sense	Notice
	Perform
	Tempt

NEBĪYI MONITOR

Mathematics is beautiful in its truth, even if others can never see the splendor in numbers that you do.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you solve a problem by using obscure knowledge, a complex calculation or deciphering it.

Advantages	Skills
Lead By Example	Convince
Hand of Peace	Empathy
Linguist	Scholarship
	Tempt
	Warfare

Khemet Backgrounds

AWAL THMANI DANCER

It is commonly said that swordplay is like a dance. You make this comparison literal.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you avoid a conflict by convincing them to focus on their similarities, than their differences.

Advantages	Skills
Duelist Academy (Awal Thmani)	Athletics
Fascinate	Notice
	Perform
	Warfare
	Weaponry

MASR ALLEY DOG

On the winding, crowded streets of Masr, you are looked down upon as no better than a dog.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you solve a problem by lying, cheating or swindling someone who has it better than others.

Advantages	Skills
Shadow Stalker	Athletics
Got It!	Empathy
Direction Sense	Notice
	Tempt
	Theft

THE MOST HIGH

You are a descendant of the greatest kings and queens in the history of the world: the Most High of Khemet.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when your bloodline's reputation of corruption (magical or material) gets you into trouble.

Advantages	Skills
Blood of Sovereigns	Empathy
Imperious Glare (**NoT:V2**)	Intimidate
	Ride
	Scholarship
	Tempt

PRIEST OF THE ENNEAD

Much of Ifri, and Khemet, have forgotten of the ancient knowledge of the Ennead. But you remember.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you take on danger to find more information on the Ennead, decrypt a mysterious pictogram or defend your beliefs and it gets you into trouble.

Advantages	Skills
Sorcery (Heka)	Aim
Sorcery (Heka)	Convince
Linguist	Notice
	Scholarship
	Tempt

Maghreb Backgrounds

BLADE SINGERS

You split your time between perfecting swordplay and spreading history through song.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you help an ally to solve a problem by supporting him, backing his play or following his lead.

Advantages	Skills
Sword That Sings	Athletics
Time Sense	Empathy
	Perform
	Ride
	Weaponry

CAMEL RAIDER

Astride your beloved camel, there is no challenge you are not prepared to face.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you get yourself into trouble in order to save your beloved camel or when it rescues you.

Advantages	Skills
Trusted Companion (camel)	Athletics
Born in the Saddle (**NoT:V2**)	Intimidate
	Ride
	Warfare
	Weaponry

CORSAIR

Your ship prowls the coasts of Ifri, providing you and your shipmates with a life of freedom and adventure.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when your insistence on avoiding, mistrusting or misleading authority gets you into trouble.

Advantages	Skills
Handy	Aim
Married to the Sea	Athletics
Not On the Manifest	Hide
	Intimidate
	Sailing

IMAJAGHAN NOBLE

As a land-owning noble of Maghreb, it is your responsibility to care for and protect those under your charge.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you get into trouble after standing against the crowd, defending an individual or small group against a crowd or speaking out against your "betters."

Advantages	Skills
I Stand Against You	Convince
Leadership	Empathy
	Intimidate
	Scholarship
	Warfare

Manden Backgrounds

ALAGBATO IYA

You were once a member of the personal guard of the Mansa of Manden, the famed "Guardian Mothers." (Restriction: You must be female-identified.)

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you put yourself in danger to protect another character from immediate harm, whether that harm is physical or emotional.

Advantages	Skills
Embrace Your Destiny	Athletics
Bodyguard	Brawl
	Empathy
	Notice
	Weaponry

HORON NOBLE

You are the lifeblood of Manden, providing what its people need to survive.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you defy superiors, refuse to obey orders or similarly buck authority to do what you think is right.

Advantages	Skills
Blood of Gold	Athletics
Rich	Convince
	Empathy
	Scholarship
	Tempt

KURUFABA ATTENDANT

The Manden Kurufaba is among the most powerful economic entities on Terra. You wield that power.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you take a risky or morally ambiguous action for the sake of Ifri's culture or resources.

Advantages	Skills
Kurufaba	Empathy
Linguist	Intimidate
	Sailing
	Scholarship
	Tempt

SOFA SERF-SOLDIER

You were given a crude spear and sent to battle. You survived, you learned and you earned your freedom.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you solve a problem by taking advantage of other people underestimating you.

Advantages	Skills
One Against Many	Brawl
This Is My Town (**NoT:V1**)	Hide
Cast Iron Stomach	Notice
	Theft
	Warfare

Mbey Backgrounds

ADEYEMI'S VASSAL

Zahmeireen is a tool to be used. You would be a fool not to wield it, despite the costs.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you use dark magic, a corrupted artifact or questionable tactics in order to defeat evil.

Advantages	Skills
Signature Item	Athletics
One Against Many	Intimidate
	Ride
	Scholarship
	Weaponry

KANGAM

Mbey trusts you to be wise. Do not let your people down.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when your insistence on leading by example gets you into trouble.

Advantages	Skills
Light In the Darkness	Convince
Valiant Spirit	Empathy
	Notice
	Perform
	Ride

ROOI HEKS

You have the Red Touch, the secret corrupting magic of the Ori. What shall you do with it?

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you convince another character not to take an action that would have resulted in Corruption.

Advantages	Skills
Sorcery (Red Touch)	Convince
Sorcery (Red Touch)	Empathy
The Old Traditions (**CE**)	Hide
	Intimidate
	Tempt

SIMB WARRIOR

Like the lions of Ifri, your courage is unfailing and your deadliness is second to none.

Quirk

Earn a Hero Point when you end a fight before your opponent has a chance to act.

Advantages	Skills
Boxer	Athletics
Haymaker (**NoT:V1**)	Brawl
Survivalist	Empathy
	Hide
	Warfare

Step 4: Skills

You gain 10 points to add to existing Skills from your Backgrounds or to add new Skills to your sheet. Each point buys you one more Rank of a Skill, whether you already have any Ranks in it from your Background or not. You cannot raise a Skill above Rank 3 when making your Hero.

Achieving certain Ranks in Skills grants your Hero additional bonuses beyond dice.

- At 3 Ranks, you gain the ability to reroll any single die when you make a Risk using that Skill.
- At 4 Ranks, you gain the ability to earn 2 Raises per set by creating sets of 15, rather than only 1 Raise per set for creating a set of 10.
- At 5 Ranks, all dice that roll a 10 explode, allowing you to roll an additional die and add it to your total.

Step 5: Advantages

Although you already have some Advantages from your Backgrounds, you may now buy new Advantages. These distinctions set you apart from everyone else.

You have 5 points to buy new Advantages.

Advantages cost between 1 and 5 points and may cost different amounts depending on your Hero's Kingdom of origin. Some Advantages have restrictions.

All Advantages may only be purchased once unless explicitly stated otherwise.

An Advantage with the Knack tag (K) requires a Hero Point to activate, but no Raises—meaning that it does not take an Action, even though it probably activates on your turn.

1 Point Advantages

PERSONAL STASH (K)

You can spend a Hero Point when you receive Wealth to receive 1 additional Wealth.

DAREDEVIL

After making Raises during a Risk, you may immediately spend all of your Raises to take a single Action before any other character may act in the Round.

HELPING HAND

Activate this Advantage to assist an ally (giving her three Bonus Dice for a Risk) without spending a Hero Point. You can only activate this Advantage once per session.

2 Point Advantages

NOT ON THE MANIFEST (1 IF MAGHREBI)

You must have the "Married to the Sea" Advantage.

Your ship may store extra Cargo equal to your Ranks in Sailing. This Cargo must be obtained through illicit means (i.e., piracy, raids on coastal villages, etc.); any Cargo obtained through mundane means such as trade follows the standard rules of your Ship.

BODYGUARD (K)

You can spend a Hero Point when an ally would be dealt Wounds. Spend Raises to avoid those Wounds for that ally.

HAND OF PEACE (1 IF AKSUMITE)

Until you or your allies take an aggressive Action in a Scene, you may apply Pressure to any number of targets. A target may still only be affected by one Pressure at a time.

ONE AGAINST MANY (K)

When you spend Raises to deal Wounds to a Brute Squad, you may spend a Hero Point to double the number of Wounds dealt.

SHADOW STALKER (2 IF KHEMETI) (K)

Spend a Hero Point to move in silence, vanish into darkness or otherwise demonstrate your affinity with the shadows.

3 Point Advantages

BLOOD OF FIRE

While you have at least one Dramatic Wound, you gain an additional Bonus Die on all Athletics, Brawl, Warfare and Weaponry Risks.

BLOOD OF GOLD

While you have at least one Dramatic Wound, you gain an additional Bonus Die on all Convince, Empathy, Perform and Tempt Risks.

RICH (2 IF MANDENKA)

You begin each session with 3 Wealth.

4 Point Advantages

KURUFABA (MANDENKA ONLY)

You have spent time amongst the delegates of the International Kurufaba and are accustomed to making deals. When you agree on a deal (either spoken or in writing), you can spend a Hero Point. If the other party breaks the deal, you may give them an Infamous Reputation of your choice (for example "Dishonorable," "Cruel," etc,). The Infamous Reputation may be used against that character: in Risks which the Infamous Reputation is to the character's disadvantage, his opposition gains a Bonus Die. You may maintain a number of Kurufaba deals equal to your Ranks in Wits; once you have reached your maximum you may not activate this Advantage again until a deal ends, through any means.

MORAL COMPASS (3 IF MBEYAN)

Requirement: Your Hero must have completed a Redemption story and have no Corruption.

Your Hero knows that a person is better than the worst thing she ever did—in fact, your Hero embodies this. Whenever you help another Hero complete any Step in a Redemption Story, that Hero loses two Corruption Points instead of one at the end of the Story.

THE SWORD THAT SINGS (MAGHREBI ONLY)

You are trained in the art of song and steel famous in Maghreb. You either crafted or were gifted a "sword that sings" and can use it in battle. Anytime you use your Ranks in Weaponry or Perform, you may instead use your Ranks in the other to determine effects or dice (making Risks while in a swordfight, impressing a crowd with a dazzling sword-dance, using Dueling Maneuvers or any effect that relies upon either your Ranks in Weaponry or in Perform).

You can spend a Hero Point once each Round in order to use both your Ranks in Weaponry and your Ranks in Perform (either at the start of a Round to gain additional dice, when you perform a Duelist Maneuver to increase its effectiveness, etc.).

5 Point Advantages

I STAND AGAINST YOU (3 IF MAGHREBI)

When rolling dice in a Risk, spend a Hero Point to gain Bonus Dice equal to twice the amount of opposition you face (each Villain, Brute Squad, Monster, etc. counts as one).

BLOOD OF SOVEREIGNS (3 IF KHEMETI)

You are a member of the nobility of your home Kingdom. When you make a Risk in which your noble status would be a direct and immediate benefit, spend a Hero Point to gain additional Raises equal to your Ranks in Panache.

EMBRACE YOUR DESTINY (3 IF MANDENKA)

During an Action Sequence, you can spend a Hero Point to act before Villains on each Raise until the end of the Round.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE (3 IF AKSUMITE)

Spend a Hero Point after making a Risk, and choose any character who rolled fewer Raises than you. That character may change his Approach to match yours, and gains two additional Raises.

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS (3 IF MBEYAN)

After the GM spends one or more Danger Points for a single effect, you may spend the same number of Hero Points. The effect fails to activate, and the GM still loses the Danger Points she spent.

ZAHMEIREEN WEAPON

You possess an enchanted Zahmeireen weapon, one of the blades crafted with the legendary metal mined from Mbey (see **Zahmeireen** section, page 196).

Step 6: Arcana

For your Hero, you choose a Virtue and Hubris from the **Core Rulebook** (page 156). They do not need to be from the same card.

You may only activate your Virtue once per session.

You may only activate your Hero's Hubris once per session. Activating your Hubris gives you a Hero Point. The GM can offer a Hero Point to activate a Hero's Hubris, but the player may refuse. If he accepts, he gains the Hero Point and must act in accordance with his Hubris.

Step 7: Stories

While Heroes work together to tell a larger story, every Hero has her own story to tell. Your Hero is no different. The promise you made to your father on his deathbed. The man whose wrongful testimony sent you to prison for all those years. The woman whose love you have sworn to recapture. Stories are more than the things you tell everyone you will accomplish one day. Stories are also the road you will walk to get there.

More information on Stories can be found in the **Core Rulebook** (page 159).

Step 8: Details

Finally, let us fill out the blank spots on your Hero Sheet: we are talking about Reputation, Secret Societies, Wealth and Wounds.

Your Hero's **Reputation**, **Wealth** and **Wounds** are all identical to those of a Théan and work the same way. For more information, see the **Core Rulebook** (page 164).

Your Hero can join a **Secret Society** as well. All of the Societies from Théah are open to you, and this book presents four new societies:

Atoka-ona Farasin

A club of bankers, merchants and traders. A member of the Atoka-ona Farasin uses her wealth and influence in order to protect the resources of Ifri and prevent them from being exploited for the gain of outsiders.

Ch'ewi

A more of a social movement than a concrete society; Ch'ewi have no official rank structure or hierarchy. Unified by only the respect they have amongst the people of Aksum and their commitment to fighting against the influence of Bonsam, the Ch'ewi are a disorganized but respected bunch of self-proclaimed protectors.

The Children of Esu

Monster hunters who spreads information on their prey through songs and stories. A Children of Esu member is almost universally regarded as a Hero by the people of Ifri. She makes no distinction on the origin of the Monsters she hunts (abonsam or otherwise, she cares not), and she spends as much time slaying unnatural and dangerous beasts as she does spreading stories about how others might protect themselves from these threats.

The Keepers of the Sun

An order of vigilantes originally based in Khemet. The Keepers of the Sun, or Lightbringers as some call them, are led by an unknown member with the title of Mahat. The Keepers specialize in information and secrets, and use this knowledge (as well as skilled agents) to undermine the authority of Villainous nobles across all of Ifri and beyond.

Secret Societies

Atoka-ona Farasin

Olamide Ololade, a griot specializing in the history of Manden's wealth and economics, traveled to Castille early in her life. Specifically, she wanted to study the impact of the Inquisition on the country's economy. Her arrival and activities garnered the notice of the Invisible College, and they sent a representative to approach her. The Secret Society offered to exchange private economic data and analytical techniques for information about Manden and Ifri.

The griot became fascinated by the idea of rogue scholars preserving and fostering knowledge and science for future generations. She agreed to the exchange, but when she finally returned to Manden and began to apply her new knowledge, Olamide was horrified. The evil forces seeping into Manden under the surface of its glittering cities had begun to influence the economy. Black markets become more common. Manden's careful investment and trading, which negated the loss of physical resources such as gold and salt, frayed at the edges.

Olamide decided to start an organization, based on the techniques of the Invisible College, to protect the economy of Manden and the precious natural resources that provided their wealth. She named her endeavor *Atoka-ona Farasin*, "the Hidden Compass," because of their focus on guiding the economy. She recruited two like-minded individuals and charged them with finding others.

Like the Invisible College, no member of the Atoka-ona Farasin knows more than two others. No one knows how many members are in the Secret Society, but judging by their accomplishments, Olamide suspects they have dozens of citizens in their ranks. A member communicates with another using codes distributed in the economy. He buys a designated item in a certain market with a certain amount of currency to convey certain information. He codes currency ledgers to move information over great distances.

The main concern of the Atoka-ona Farasin is finding and protecting the locations of any meager riches left in Manden's soil. A member researches rumors of rich locations and, if proven true, she hides the coordinates and ends the rumors to keep the information away from Bonsam and their minions. She tracks and catalogues black markets. Any money from these markets used to destabilize the economy is rerouted with funds gathered by the Atoka-ona Farasin. Information may be leaked to the public, if necessary.

The Secret Society also protects knowledge and scientific discovery, but their primary focus is the legendary wealth of Manden. They expand their ranks and silently fight in the markets of Ifri to keep the darkness at bay.

Favor with the Atoka-ona Farasin

The Atoka-ona Farasin are primarily concerned with protecting the economy, in all forms, of Manden and by proxy, Ifri, by using codes and working behind the scenes.

A Hero who belongs to the Atoka-ona Farasin can earn Favor in the following ways:

- Selling economic information or secrets to the Atoka-ona Farasin is worth 1 additional Favor (for a total of 3) if the information or secret poses a direct threat to Bonsam's plans.
- Preventing any foreigner from plundering the wealth of Ifri whether by force or diplomatic means is worth 3 Favor. This includes both natural resources and culture. Though the Secret Society focuses on economics, a member still protects her culture passionately.

A Hero who belongs to the Atoka-ona Farasin can call upon it for aid in the following ways:

- Using monetary or natural resources from the Secret Society costs 1 Favor per equivalent Wealth requested. Depending on the amount, type of resource requested and GM discretion, there may also be stipulations in the funding. The Hero may be required to pay the amount back depending on the resource's purpose.
- Moving money via the Atoka-ona Farasin costs 3 Favor, and a member may ask for a percentage for his troubles, which he uses to further his cause.

Ch'ewi

The organization known as Ch'ewi, literally "Salt," is actually a bit of a misnomer. When it comes to Secret Societies, they are not secret to Aksum and the rest of Ifri, nor are they organized enough to be considered a truly distinct Society. The difficulty comes from attempting to codify a uniquely Aksumite concept in terms that Théan explorers, dignitaries and visitors can understand, even though Théah does not have quite the right words or analogues to capture it.

The term that actually comes the closest is perhaps "movement." The Ch'ewi movement began not long after the conversion of Aksum to follow the teachings of the Second Prophet. Some believe it an offshoot of what became the Orthodox Ānidi Hibiri Tefet'iro Church. Others believe it founded by the Skia in an attempt to gather information. Still others believe it originated in a communal gathering of workers in the salt mines. At this point, who can say which is correct?

What is certain, however, is the way that Aksumites view Ch'ewi with high regard. Those known as Salt preserve and provide flavor to life, just as salt preserves and provides flavor to food. Being Ch'ewi is a way of life, quality of character or strength of action in dire circumstances. The old man who spent years defending Aksum may be Ch'ewi. The young woman who pulled others from a burning building may be Ch'ewi. Some deliberately dedicate their lives to being Ch'ewi. Others have the role thrust upon them for only a moment. Regardless, they heal and help, serve and support those in need.

In this low time for Aksum, the Kingdom needs Ch'ewi more than ever. With the Dark Wizard Rada exiled from his former post as dscah ru, the Kingdom is in great danger from the abonsam that stalk the land. In recent years, Ch'ewi have stepped up to the task but the abonsam are canny and powerful foes, while Ch'ewi come and go.

Still, in this time of great need, a good person feels the pull of Ch'ewi on her heart. She finds herself drawn toward those of like mind and character. What began as disparate individuals has gradually become a loose affiliation to pool resources and help those in need. Small clusters of Ch'ewi find that they can accomplish so much more when they work in concert, deciding where to focus their efforts through democratic votes. And in Aksum, word travels surprisingly quickly from one settlement to the next, allowing Ch'ewi in one village to hear the needs of those in the next. Who knows what strength of action they could achieve if someone or someones forged a true, nationwide, directed alliance among these disparate groups?

Favor with Ch'ewi

Though less formally organized than other Societies, Ch'ewi still frequently interact with each other. In fact, the great danger of the abonsam has forced them to become more interconnected than ever before. They pool their resources to help those who cannot help themselves.

A Hero who belongs to Ch'ewi can earn Favor in the following ways:

- Aiding an agent of Ch'ewi is worth an additional point of Favor (for a total of 5). Ch'ewi thrives on mutual aid and assistance. Helping her help others is a sign of your salt.
- Defeating an abonsam, an abonsam worshipper or a character with Vile Dice (see **Abonsam and Vile Dice**, page 202) is worth 10 Favor. Ch'ewi know Aksum is at its most vulnerable now without a sorcerous dscah ru, and protecting the defenseless from the abonsam is a nearly overwhelming task. Assistance is a relief.

A Hero who belongs to Ch'ewi can call upon them for aid in the following way:

- Inspiring another to Ch'ewi costs 4 Favor. The spark of this noble aspiration lives in everyone, and can be fanned into flame in times of need. A non-Villain character acts to save you or helps you accomplish a mission as an agent with Strength at GM discretion.

Ch'ewi have one other notable feature. Anyone can become or exhibit Ch'ewi at any time under the correct circumstances. It is a quality of spirit more than a regiment of membership. As such, they are the only Ifrian Secret Society that allows their followers to also be members of other Ifrian Secret Societies. Likewise, the concept has spread far throughout the Lands of Gold and Fire and the other Secret Societies allow their members to simultaneously be Ch'ewi.

The Children of Esu

"A spear may kill a single Monster, but a story can kill a thousand."
—Mama Sende

If the legends of the griots are to believed—and all good stories are true, even if they never happened—then all manner of Monsters have plagued the innocent folk of Ifri since the land first rose from the waters. And since those same stories began, the Children of Esu have featured in them, telling tales around the fire and arriving just in time to strike down the horrors of the dark before heading off down the road to the next village in danger.

Originally hailing from Mbey, this Society has long since spread all over Ifri, its members rarely stopping in one place for long. A member of the Children typically works alone or in mentor-student pairs, communicating with other members through coded stories and songs as well as a simple yet surprisingly nuanced series of trail signs she leaves to warn of threats or alert fellow Children to safe haven nearby.

A younger member most often focuses on taking the fight to Monsters directly, while an elder composes clever tales and catchy songs that weave weaknesses of Monsters into the work, teaching as he entertains. Though rare, the Children occasionally congregate in larger numbers when senior members feel it necessary to share truly important information or rally against some dread threat, typically using a festival or celebration as cover for the gathering.

The Society takes its name from Esu, an Ori of the Thousand Small Gods of Mbey, who serves as the patron of the crossroads. The association is both a literal and metaphorical one—a member of the Children does wander, of course, and in the course of her duties, she usually takes on nomadic professions such as traders or entertainers. She also sees herself as standing at the crossroads between good and evil, life and death. It is not an easy road, but as Esu teaches, once you choose a path, all that remains is to walk it until its end, no matter where it takes you.

A member of the Children traditionally wears a handcrafted Esu mask when performing his duties. A mentor typically recruits a new member with the offering of a rough mask, which the would-be initiate then personalizes and completes during his training.

If Bonsam's local influence is relatively weak, then most everyone in the village likely knows who "Esu" is when she appears at the fire to tell a tale, even if they politely pretend otherwise. In corrupt places such as blighted Mbey, however, people take the secrecy of the mask much more seriously.

Although the Children have clashed with the Atabean Trading Company on more than one occasion since the ruthless traders came to their shores, a recent chance encounter may prove to be a pivotal one for relations between Ifri and Théah, if only in the shadows. While stalking a particularly dangerous abonsam working with the Company, a group of Children ran into a hunting party of die Kreuzritter that had followed one of the Company's corrupt agents all the way from Théah.

After a tense initial standoff, one of the Children recalled an old legend about a group of noble, pale-skinned Monster hunters who had visited Ifri in the past, and the two groups made common cause. Their teamwork led to a wildly successful hunt and the sound defeat of their mutual enemies, leading the two Societies to make informal plans to share information and assist each other in the future. Die Kreuzritter brings insight into threats such as the Company as well as some Théan horrors that those Villains have introduced to Ifri. While in revealing the true nature of Bonsam, the Children have shown the Order an enemy worthy of all the fury they can muster.

Favor with the Children of Esu

A member of the Children of Esu places a high value on passing along accurate information, whether verbally or by her many trail signs. She also remembers fondly those who help her with a bit of food, some medical attention or even just a quiet place to stay for the night.

A Hero who belongs to the Children can earn Favor in the following ways:

- Writing a story or song that directly inspires someone to join the Children or gives another member a pivotal insight she can use to defeat a supernatural threat is worth 4 Favor. There should be no question that the member's words were essential to the decision to join or to defeating the Monster.
- Restoring hope to an oppressed community earns 6 Favor. This does not have to be related to defeating supernatural activity, though given the nature of the Children's mission that is often the case. It is important to recognize that restoring hope is not the same as swooping in, defeating a Monster and walking off into the sunset. To earn this Favor, a Hero must genuinely assist in not only repairing the damage the creature inflicted but also instilling the spirit the community lost while oppressed.

A Hero who belongs to the Children can call upon them for aid in the following ways:

- A Hero can spend 2 Favor to pass a message through the Children's network of messengers and entertainers. It may take some time to arrive, but it will be kept secret and it will be delivered. This cost is reduced to 1 Favor if the Hero has the message coded into a popular story or song. Even then it is highly unlikely the code will be broken, though a clever and attentive Villain might notice a pattern if a Hero passes a lot of messages in his vicinity...
- A Hero can spend 4 Favor to engage one of the Children and learn a particular area's folklore in depth, which usually provides all manner of hints regarding local Monsters as well as important local landmarks, settlements and families, perhaps even details about any famous events that have occurred nearby. This allows the Hero to re-roll any or all dice for Scholarship rolls related to remembering or identifying useful local information for the duration of her current story. A Hero can only receive this mechanical benefit for one area at a time.

The Keepers of the Sun

Founded by the warrior priest Ahmunemhat in the earliest days of the Khemeti Kingdom, the Keepers were once a fixture of society in Khemet. Ahmunemhat, high priest of Ahmun, began a series of teachings on just actions in the eyes of the Ennead. At first, he taught only a select group of eubayd who he oversaw in the great temple at Masr. Soon, these disciples walked among city's people, extolling these teachings to rapt listeners who began to call them Lightbringers. Seeing the people's thirst for guidance on right behavior, Ahmunemhat collected and codified his thoughts in a *sebayt* (teachings) on living truly.

After Ahmunemhat passed away, his closest confidant and follower, Kaaper, sorted through the belongings of her deceased mentor and discovered a mask of shining gold crafted in the shape of a sun. As leadership of the nascent organization passed to Kaaper, she began wearing this mask while teaching as a tribute to Ahmunemhat and a reminder of their focus on good deeds under the open sun. The Keepers of the Sun flourished and their members became well known for their instruction and watchfulness as a beacon of light. They weighed justice in the deeds of noble and peasant, judge and merchant, and all in between.

As leadership of the Lightbringers passed one from one successor to the next, the golden mask became a badge of office. This continued until the reign of Queen Nahashepsut. As the queen took the country to war, the Lightbringers became a strong critic of her actions and attempted to turn the Kingdom against this course. Nahashepsut responded by outlawing the Keepers of the Sun and removing its adherents from positions of influence. "The sun sets," as they say, "but it will rise again."

Today, the Keepers of the Sun works covertly to expose Khemet's secrets to the broad light of day and they are certain that there has never been more need for their teachings and oversight. The days grow shorter and the Lightbringers believes this is because of the wayward actions of the Most High. Each day, the people hear new stories of corrupt nobles exposed, wily thieves caught, villainous magistrates uncovered and more. Each time, a symbol remains behind: a mark now seen scrawled amongst the winding alleys of towns in every district—a disc split by a horizon line, the sun rising again.

WHO LEADS THE KEEPERS OF THE SUN?

No one is certain who controls the Keepers of the Sun, not even its members. Known only as Mahat, he, she, they or zer appears in voluminous robes and the shining golden mask of the office. Still, nearly all of the secretive members of the order have seen Mahat at one time or another, for their leader is extremely active. They travel the breadth of Khemet to instruct followers, plan the downfall of the corrupt and spread praise of those who act with true nobility. And yet somehow, Mahat still manages to elude the clutches of Queen Twosret and Amlak Bey with supernatural grace.

Favor with the Keepers of the Sun

The Lightbringers are vigilantes, but also teachers and mentors. Their greatest concern is with the teachings of the Ennead and how to best set an example of those teachings to the people of Khemet. Often this means that small crimes may be justifiable in effort to prevent or expose a greater injustice.

A Hero who belongs to the Keepers of the Sun can earn Favor in the following ways:

- Selling information identifying or pertaining to a truly Heroic noble is worth 3 points of Favor. The Keepers want to spread the influence and renown of the worthy. When the people have good examples, they act more just themselves.
- Defeating a Villainous noble is worth 8 Favor. The Keepers of the Sun believe that the Most High must serve as bright examples of humanity and Villainy betrays that heritage.

A Hero who belongs to the Keepers of the Sun can call upon them for aid in the following ways:

- Calling Mahat for aid costs 10 Favor. The enigmatic leader is well known for stepping into the thick of things when necessary and come to your aid if called. Unfortunately, Mahat is needed all across Khemet and time is short. Mahat aids you as a 10 Strength agent for one Scene.
- Buying the knowledge of trustworthy contacts costs 2 Favor. The Keepers keep close watch on who has given in to the darkness of the land and who still feels the light of the sun.

Heka

After the destruction wrought by the flood and the departure of the Ennead, the people ached for magic to protect Khemet once more. The alchemist king Theyt discovered the ability to bend one's spirit, the ka, and use it to perform magic. By imbuing a part of one's self into an object via written representation or even a spoken phrase, the Heka worker can bend the world to her will. The imbued object draws magical power from the world and from the gods themselves, and shapes it according to the sorcerer's designs. The stronger the individual's ka, the stronger the working.

Heka as a magical practice demands an understanding of the connection between an object and its representation for other forces or materials in nature. By inscribing on a sympathetic object, the Heka worker can create these alchemical amulets or spells to manipulate nature, even transmuting flesh and bone or giving weapons additional strength and power. The only catch is every magical working requires an expenditure of ka, and the larger the working, the more power it requires. The ka is a person's life force, and therefore needs time between workings to recharge. Too much use and an individual can sicken and easily die.

There are, however, shortcuts. A Heka worker learns how to siphon ka from another, bleeding him for his life energy and to use the ka energy of tomb treasures, or even mummies, to fuel her work. An illegal smuggling network trades and sells pieces liberated from tombs for the purposes of such dark works. Still, for the most part, everyone from the enez to the Most High uses Heka to produce magical wonders to help Khemet thrive.

Heka is a form of Sorcery, and as such considered anathema by the Vaticine Church. That Heka does not have the same infernal roots as the forms of sorcery practiced in the north is irrelevant—it is a form of magic and therefore seen as a corrupting influence.

How It Works

Heka is lesser form of the pictogram magic of the Ennead, derived from the experiments of the alchemist king Theyt. He hoped to revive his queen by pouring massive amounts of his life essence into emerald tablets, believing enough would eventually defeat death. He only succeeded in meeting her in the world beyond, but the ability to infuse ka into objects and sigils lived on in his people.

Theyt's obsession with reviving his queen also led to the knowledge that the dead's ka, as strong as that of the living, could be used to power Heka. The most daring, desperate and immoral of Heka workers plunder tombs for objects to power this "Dark Heka." It is not without danger, however, and what happens to the ka, and therefore the souls of the dead, is unknown.

With a small vocabulary of symbols, a Heka worker can imbue her ka into amulets, sculptures and inscriptions to give them sympathetic power. Ka is worked in the form of the elemental signs: earth, air, fire and water—each providing different blessings via the Heka workers' magics.

A Heka worker tends to have a deep understanding of language, culture and symbolism—the more he understands, the easier he can fully visualize his intent as he works his ka. When you take this Sorcery during Hero creation, assume that you have had at least some study of the pictogram language of the gods. If you purchase this Sorcery later in the game, this study must be part of your Story.

The first time you buy this Sorcery, you learn two Talismans and one Inscription. Talismans must be from the same element, and you can only learn an Inscription if you already know the Talisman. Each additional Sorcery purchase, you can learn one Talisman and one Inscription, or one Spell. To learn a Spell, you must already know one Inscription.

To use this power in game, the Talisman, Inscription or Spell must first be created and then activated.

Creating and Activating Talismans and Inscriptions

A Talisman is a small statue, token or pendant created with natural materials and inscribed with a representative pictogram. The Talisman can be given to another person for her benefit and disintegrates after use. Writing or inscribing the representative pictogram on an object or structure creates an Inscription. Once the Inscription is used, the pictogram disappears. Others cannot destroy Talismans or Inscriptions without use of magic.

As a Heka worker, you begin each Scene with one Talisman or Inscription for each instance of the Sorcery Advantage you have. Determining which Talismans or Inscriptions are ready is not necessary—this simply allows the Sorcery to be activated once for each level of the Advantage you have. If you run out of Talismans or Inscriptions in a given Scene, you can create more.

On your turn, spend a Hero Point to create a Talisman or Inscription—or, to replicate the use of ka, take a Dramatic Wound. You may create any Talisman or Inscription you know, but you determine which one at the moment of creation. A Talisman or Inscription loses its power after one full 24-hour day, but can be recreated or re-inscribed.

To activate a Talisman or Inscription, the Heka worker must infuse it with some of his ka, limiting the amount of magic one worker can perform without exhaustion or death. This only takes a moment of concentration, but the worker feels the energy loss, however small.

Outside of an Action or Dramatic Scene, you can activate a Talisman or Inscription freely. If the effect is enduring, it lasts until a Scene begins. Within an Action or Dramatic Sequence, activating a Talisman or Inscription costs a Raise or a Wound. A Talisman has an immediate or short-term effect. Inscriptions are more powerful and, if their effect is enduring, last for the full Scene.

Creating and Activating Spells

A Spell is the most powerful level of Heka—the ability to create a magical effect with only a spoken phrase. As such, its creation takes more time and effort. She must write a unique phrase, different for each Heka worker, which represents her understanding of the element and pictogram she wishes to use.

Activating a Spell simply requires that the Heka worker speak her unique phrase. When you activate a Spell, you may use either the Talisman or Inscription effect of that pictogram. When a Spell is active, using other Talismans or Inscriptions costs two Dramatic Wounds instead of a Raise. Working too much magic demands much of the Heka worker's ka, which can be fatal.

The Elements

Earth

Strength: Strength's pictogram is the bull, also meaning stability. Strength Talismans are sometimes made out of clay in the shape of small bulls.

Talisman: When you activate a Strength Talisman, the bearer is blessed with strength from the ka imbued within. For the rest of the Round, he has one free Raise for any Action that uses Brawn.

Inscription: When a Strength Inscription is activated on a weapon, it does additional damage in a fight. Add additional Wounds equal to the bearer's Ranks in Brawn for the rest of the Scene.

Protection: The pictogram for protection and endurance is the crocodile, as at home in the mud as in the shining Iteru. Heka workers prize riverbank mud for these Talismans.

Talisman: An activated Protection Talisman makes the bearer's skin as armored as the crocodile. The Talisman prevents the next 3 Wounds (Dramatic or normal) she takes.

Inscription: When a Protection Inscription is activated on an object, structure or ship, it prevents the equivalent of the next 3 Hits (Critical or normal) it takes.

Air

Speed: The falcon represents speed and swiftness, able to soar high and far on the winds. Talismans often include leaves and feathers caught from the air.

Talisman: When a Speed talisman is activated, the bearer moves with preternatural quickness. He does not have to pay the cost to Improvise any Action for the remainder of the Round.

Inscription: A Speed Talisman inscribed on a ship or other conveyance gives it the ability to move at double the speed for the 24-hour period of activation. This cannot be used on horses or other living beings without fatal consequences.

Weightlessness: The pictogram for light and weightless is the feather, most often inscribed with a quill, whether on paper or in clay. Talismans tend to have a single feather attached.

Talisman: When you activate a Weightlessness Talisman, the bearer becomes more graceful—or at least lighter on her feet. For the rest of the Round, she has one free Raise for any Action that uses Finesse.

Inscription: An activated Weightlessness Inscription makes heavy things lighter and easier to carry. A Heka worker can make an object lighter by approximately three times her body weight for a 24-hour period or until the end of the Scene.

Fire

Courage: The lion represents courage and bravery, steadfast in the face of great odds. As with Strength, Courage Talismans are often clay, in the shape of lions with tiny straw manes.

Talisman: When a Courage Talisman is activated, the bearer is filled with a sense of bravery. For the rest of the Round, he has one free Raise for any Action that uses Resolve.

Inscription: An activated Courage Inscription on a structure, ship or other conveyance can help keep people inside or onboard calm in times of danger. All characters within the structure (or otherwise) gain an extra die to all Actions that use Resolve for the rest of the Scene.

Warmth: Fire is light, warmth, knowledge—so many things, and there would be so little else without it. Warmth Talismans are always baked in kilns and on hearths, trapping the heat within.

Talisman: When a Warmth Talisman is activated, the bearer will not be cold—not due to northern snows or desert nights or magic itself. The Talisman keeps its bearer as warm as she would be near a fire. This effect lasts one Scene or 24 hours.

Inscription: A Warmth Inscription on an object or structure heats it for up to 24 hours, to the temperature of the Heka worker's choosing. This has been used for both great compassion and great cruelty over the centuries.

Water

Healing: The symbol for Life is used for healing and purification magics, often inscribed in water alongside more permanent means. Talismans are often small bottles of purified water with a painted pictogram.

Talisman: Activating a Healing Talisman causes the ka within to restore life to the bearer. He can remove 2 Wounds.

Inscription: A Healing Inscription made on a structure or over a site of contamination removes all poisons and impurities from the area, equal to ten feet square per number of times the Heka worker has picked the Sorcery Advantage.

Insight: The eye of the gods over the waters of the Iteru represents insight and the world of dreams. These Talismans are always blue, with a stone in the center for the pupil in the eye.

Talisman: When an Insight Talisman is activated, the bearer gains clarity into a situation. She may ask three yes or no questions of the Game Master, all concerning information that character arguably should or would have. All three questions must be asked at the same time.

Inscription: An activated Insight Inscription on an object or structure provides insight into its past and purpose. The Heka worker may ask three yes or no questions of the Game Master about the structure or object, all concerning information that character arguably should or would have. Again, all three questions must be asked at the same time.

Dark Heka

Theyt's legacy was not only Heka, but his obsession with controlling life beyond death also birthed what most Khemeti call "Dark Heka": the use of objects from tombs to power Heka.

Despite the distaste for the practice of adventuring and tomb-robbing in general, the need for ka to fuel Khemet's sorcerers has created a black market for these goods—a demand at odds with the respect a Khemeti typically has for his ancestor's remains. What is more, disagreement is rife about what in a tomb is actually useful in terms of ka energies.

While few Khemeti will admit to being tomb-robbers, Dark Heka still provides an interesting discussion "in theory," and some consensus seems to have been reached on the ka richness of prized possessions and the corpse of the departed itself. Methods of extracting and using "ancestral" ka do not even differ from those of using one's own.

What stops most Heka workers from the use of this ka—beyond the fact that it is *wrong*—are the curses.

Few Khemeti mention the curses at first, but they are real and rampant amongst tomb-robbers and those who use tomb objects to power their Heka. Many try to wave them off as "bad luck," but the whispers in their wake do not lie. No one does more than murmur about the occasional possession by vengeful spirits, often occurring in the midst of manipulating stolen ka. Those are more difficult to explain away.

Some argue that Dark Heka is a misnomer—it is not the magic itself that is dark, but the act of drawing forth ka from the objects and bodies of the dead. However, a small, but growing, minority links the rise of Heka to the darkness that has swept across Khemet and its slow but certain decline. Surely, they are not the only ones to see it…

Melbur

A sorcerer of Aksum who possesses the power of Melbur, known as *dasusuo*, "wise ones," is one of the most powerful beings in Ifri. With little more than a thought, he is able to kill the most powerful warriors, destroy entire cities or create enormous monsters that follow his commands. Those who know the truth of his nature know that this power comes at an enormous cost: this sorcerer is bound to an abonsam, a terrible and impossibly powerful demon whose primary goal is to drive her human counterpart to further acts of depravity, corrupting his soul and driving him to true evil.

An abonsam makes first contact when her desired mortal is young. It is not uncommon for children to speak to imaginary friends, but Aksumites always meet these phenomena with concern. While many of these children are normal, some speak to demons.

These children are offered anything they desire, but always at a cost. Initially the cost may be small—"tell your mother a lie"—but over time they evolve and grow darker. It is not uncommon for these children to steal or torture animals, and rumors suggest that many children who go missing were truly killed by another child listening to the whispers of a monster.

Because of this, it is important to find a child who has unwittingly made a deal with an abonsam quickly before it convinces him to commit horrific acts. This duty falls on the dscah ru, traditionally the most powerful dasusuo in the Kingdom and one of the most important individuals in Aksum. In addition to bargaining with abonsam and tracking down a child who can use Melbur, it is also her job to teach that child how to safely deal with his demon. With this position currently vacant as per Negusa Nagast Makonnen's command, no one has official responsibility for instructing these children.

Until a new dscah ru is named, a dasusuo does her best to track down new children who have made contact with an abonsam, but it is difficult without official backing from the emperor. In the meantime, more and more children are at risk and lack proper guidance to control the all-powerful beings secretly pulling their strings. And without any true order, each dasusuo acts as his own master, with no overarching leader to guide the sorcerers. Because of this, a dasusuo often ends up at odds with another, with each attempting to find the greatest number of empowered children to build up his own personal might.

How It Works

Each time a Hero purchases Melbur Sorcery, her abonsam gains one Deal. The dasusuo selects two Minor Favors for any Deal her abonsam has, and can always invoke those Favors by spending a Hero Point. For a Minor Favor, the dasusuo only needs to ask for the effect. The bargain she made with the demon includes these minor Favors. If a dasusuo wishes to invoke a Favor during an Action Sequence, it costs one Raise as well as the normal Hero Point.

The abonsam cannot refuse a Minor Favor: these are part of the larger Deal the dasusuo made with the demon. These prices are minor, but galling.

The typical cost for a Minor Favor would be something like…

- "Raise a toast in my name!"
- "After I do this, you must say thank you. And you must mean it."
- "Give me a friendly handshake, smile and make eye contact."

If the dasusuo wants to make a Minor Favor that he has not purchased, he can spend a Hero Point (and a Raise, if during an Action Sequence), to ask his abonsam for such a Favor. In most cases, the act the abonsam demands repays a debt to another abonsam. They plot and scheme amongst themselves as much as with their mortal dasusuo, trading favors in a complicated web of intrigue and boons.

The typical cost for a Minor Favor that the dasusuo has not purchased would be something like…

- "The next time you are in the Painted City, find a one-armed man named Amalu. Buy him a comfortable pair of shoes."
- "In Arrada, there is a beggar the children call Sad Bakary. Make certain that he sleeps in luxury for at least one night."
- "In Masr, go to the bank in the noble's quarter. Gain access to safe deposit box 13. Take the letter that you find inside and deliver it to a woman named Nepthis."

A Major Favor is another matter altogether. A dasusuo does not select specific Major Favors when she purchases the Sorcery. An abonsam can always deliver a Major Favor, but it is costly. The abonsam knows that to ask for such a thing, the dasusuo must be desperate, and a desperate Sorcerer makes poor decisions, agrees to do things that she would never otherwise do.

The typical cost for a Major Favor would be something like…

- "Go to De Gas Ruz. Find Zahera, of the merchant's guild. Make certain that she loses her next caravan."
- "In Xwéda, there is a priest named Medr. He has a good reputation and is beloved by the people. See to it that they run him out of town in shame. Or that they kill him. I do not care which."
- "In Mbey, there are two brothers named Baboucarr and Ebrimaa. Convince one of them to betray the other in order to secure the whole of his father's inheritance for himself. I do not care which."

A Major Favor always results in a single point of Corruption, even when it seems like it would not. The consequences of such large-scale changes to the world reach farther than a mortal can understand, and wielding such power innately changes you. This is in addition to any Corruption that your Favor causes (such as commanding your abonsam to destroy a

MELBUR AND SANDERIS

While reading this section you will likely notice similarities between Melbur and Sanderis, the Sorcery of the Sarmatian Commonwealth of Théah. This is by design: sorcerers from both disciplines are empowered by hugely powerful, otherworldly beings who attempt to drive mortals to evil. However, the dievai and abonsam differ in some key ways. A dievas always makes her deals with adults, while abonsam exclusively empower children. And while their overall goals seem similar, that key difference drives the two apart. While there is little intermingling of losejai and dasusuo, those that do meet often comment that their demons hate each other. Dievai seem to hold the abonsam in contempt, somehow thinking they are better simply because they wait until their targets are adults to make the first offer.

city) or that the acts demanded in return might cause (killing the firstborn child of a king because an abonsam told you to do so definitely results in additional Corruption, for example).

If the dasusuo does not hold up his end of the bargain, he cannot invoke any Favors (Minor or Major) until he does so. If the cost his abonsam demands becomes impossible to attain, the abonsam can offer a new cost, but this will almost certainly be even more difficult and morally compromising than the first.

Each Deal has examples of Favors that an abonsam can provide, but Major Favors are much less strictly defined. In general, an abonsam is capable of accomplishing almost anything. Anything.

Deals

The following Deals are available to any dasusuo. Each time you take the Sorcery Advantage, you may select a new Deal made available by your abonsam and choose two new Minor Favors from any Deal available (either a Deal previously formed or the newly chosen Deal).

Blood

While the appearance of a Blood Deal abonsam may vary (one may have gaping wounds that never seem to stop leaking blood, while another may sniff or lick at blood in a battlefield), he is a uniquely powerful being. He can manipulate the blood in any living creature, allowing him to heal, control, bleed out or even instill a rage so strong in a living being that it can only be sated by intense violence.

Major Favors

- Completely exsanguinate a living creature, causing it to bleed profusely out of every orifice, killing him immediately.
- Take control of the blood within another living creature. The next time that creature spends a Raise to take an Action, you may select the Action taken so long as the target is capable of such Action (for example, you cannot force a non-Duelist to use a Duelist Maneuver). Obviously suicidal Actions such as jumping off of a cliff or stabbing oneself are ignored.

Minor Favors

- Find the precise location of any living person you wish, with exact accuracy both as to the person's location and the person herself.
- Cause a living enemy's Wounds to bleed more profusely than normal. Until the end of the Round, whenever an enemy is dealt Wounds increase the number of Wounds dealt by 1.
- Rapidly heal a severe injury, healing 1 Dramatic Wound from a living creature.
- Cause an insatiable bloodlust in a creature, causing him to indiscriminately attack the nearest target with its next Action.
- Know the location of every living creature within your immediate surroundings. You may immediately detect any living creature hiding without spending a Raise.

Corruption

An abonsam with the Corruption Deal often appears as an Ifrian, but one clearly sickly. Her skin may be obviously rotting away, suffering from a wracking cough or have insects and vermin around her body. She has domain over disease and can create a unique magical disease outside the skill of any mundane healer to cure.

Major Favors

- Infect a creature with a magical plague. At the beginning of each day, the target suffers 1 Dramatic Wound, and anyone who comes into direct physical contact with the target contracts the disease (and passes the disease on similarly). Due to its magical nature, this disease may not be cured through mundane means.
- Destroy a single Brute Squad in the current Scene. The dasusuo heals Wounds equal to the Strength of the Brute Squad destroyed.

Minor Favors

- Infect a target with a disease you are familiar with. This disease is mundane and affected by any normally effective treatment.
- Immediately cure a creature of any disease. That creature becomes immune to that disease until you use this power again, at which time he becomes susceptible once more (but does not automatically contract the sickness).

- Cause 1 Wound to all creatures in the current Scene.
- Desecrate a building or location, causing any faithful to a deity (such as a priest or true believer) to leave the area as quickly as possible. Those affected will not willingly enter the area outside of extreme circumstances, such as fleeing from a fire.
- Cause a corpse or other inanimate, once-living material (such as wood) to rot away into dust.

Darkness

An abonsam with the Darkness Deal can manipulate shadows and darkness, stretching or shrinking them. He can see and hear through shadows, use them as doorways and even give a shadow physical form to cause harm to another creature.

Major Favors

- Cause an eclipse, plunging a large area (such as an entire city) into utter darkness.
- Summon a shadow beast, a terrifying monster made of pure darkness, to stalk and kill one creature of your choice.

Minor Favors

- Make a room dark as night.
- Observe an area or another character through shadows. You see and hear everything as if you were standing in the shadow, and all of your senses function normally.
- Open a shadowy portal to instantly travel a short distance to another shadow in sight.
- Cause a creature to be attacked by his own shadow, inflicting 1 Wound each time he takes an Action this Round.
- Wrap shadows around yourself to become impossible to detect. Any attempts to locate you with mundane means automatically fail (requiring no Raises to avoid).

Earth

An abonsam with the Earth Deal is a hulking, brutish-looking monster that could never pass as human. She can manipulate the ground beneath your feet in any way she desires, and any stone, gem or mineral answers her command.

Major Favors

- Animate nearby earthen materials to create an enormous Monster of living earth. This monster follows your single word commands such as "attack," "defend" or "stay," but any more complex commands are ignored.
- Cause a sinkhole to appear in the ground, capable of engulfing an entire city.

Minor Favors

- Make your skin as hard as stone. Until the end of the Round, whenever you are dealt Wounds reduce the number of Wounds dealt by 1.
- Change a small amount of earthen material, such as iron or mud, into a different type of earthen material, such as gold or stone. This effect lasts until the end of the Scene, at which case the material returns to its original form.
- Shatter a large amount of earthen material, such as a brick wall or a boulder.
- Cause the earth to ripple below a target's feet. Until the end of the Round, the target must spend an additional Raise to take any Actions besides standing still.
- Merge yourself, and anyone touching you, into an amount of earthen material with sufficient volume to encompass all affected targets. While within the earthen material you cannot be detected, but are aware of your surroundings. Minor damage to the material does not harm you, but its complete destruction expels you from its area without damage.

Fear

An abonsam with the Fear Deal attempts to hide his true nature more than any other of his kind. His complete mastery over fear is so powerful that even his dasusuo is taken aback the first time the abonsam reveals his real face. He brings even the bravest to tears and can even manipulate the fear of other Monsters.

Major Favors

- Instill true terror within a single target, killing it instantly.
- Until the end of the Scene, gain Ranks of Fear equal to your highest Trait.

Minor Favors

- Learn the deepest, darkest fear of a single character.
- Manipulate the fear of another creature, causing her to be wary of you. Until the end of the Round, the target must spend an additional Raise to take any direct Action against you.
- Cause every creature within 50 feet of you to panic as though something horrific occurred. Individual reactions may vary, though all but the most resolute flee in terror.
- Ignore the Fear Monstrous Quality until the end of the Scene.
- Reduce the Rank of Fear of each Monster in the Scene by 1.

Fire

An abonsam with the Fire Deal is a being of living flame, whose blood can melt stone and whose touch can set wood ablaze. She can create and manipulate fire, restore objects damaged or destroyed by burning or summon devastating swarms of fire to rain down from the sky.

Major Favors

- Create a massive firestorm, utterly destroying everything within 100 feet of the center point.
- Summon an unstoppable Monster of living flame, which attacks an enemy or enemies in accordance with a single command (although it ignores qualifiers, such as "without killing anyone" or "but don't set anything on fire").

Minor Favors

- Create a controlled and contained fire, the size of a bonfire or smaller.
- Snuff out all open flames in a room.
- Set another creature's clothes aflame, inflicting 2 Wounds each time he takes an Action this Round. The creature can take an Action to put out the flames, ending the effect.
- Reconstruct a hand-held object destroyed by fire, returning it to the condition it was before being exposed to the fire.
- Wreath a weapon with supernatural flame, causing it to inflict 1 additional Wound each time it is used to attack; the weapon melts or is burned to ash at the end of the Scene.

Knowledge

An abonsam who favors the Knowledge Deal often appears similar to a typical Ifrian, perhaps huddling within a voluminous cloak to hide his face or wearing masks. He can call upon the sum total of knowledge, of humans or other creatures. He also governs the connection between the mind and the body, and can cause a clean break between the two, turning an Ifrian's mortal body into a prison from which her mind cannot escape.

Major Favors

- Sever a creature's mind from his body—the creature remains alive, but can no longer speak or move.
- Alter a specific memory in a large number of people. You could cause everyone who has caught sight of you within the last 24 hours to completely forget your presence. They remember everything else, but there is effectively a void where you would be.

Minor Favors

- Answer a single, factual question with a yes or no. The question must concern only events that have already transpired. No matter how much it might insist otherwise, an abonsam cannot predict the future with any more accuracy than his dasusuo.
- Find the precise location of any object you wish, with exact accuracy both as to the object's location and the object itself.
- Uncover some scrap of knowledge, even if it is otherwise lost—anything from an ancient alchemical formula to a map guiding you to a hidden nautical retreat.
- Wipe a specific memory from a single character's mind. You could cause a man to forget he ever spoke to you, or cause your enemy to forget your face. This often has grave after-effects on the victim's psyche, especially if the forgotten memory comes under scrutiny.
- Restore an addled mind to full function. Sadly, this effect only persists for one Scene, and the character returns to her previous mental acuity afterward.

The Red Touch

"Corruption begets corruption begets corruption."

The Kingdom of Mbey began as a great and powerful land, full of bounty and the blessings of the Jok despite its separate vassal kingdoms. Their tradition was corrupted, however, as forces within and without sought a massive civil war causing loss on a level never seen before.

As the Kingdom slowly rebuilt itself from nothing once more, many have speculated at the roots of its second chance—comparable fallen nations never got such an opportunity, after all. Some believe that the corruption that currently runs rampant through Mbey will lead to yet another eventual downfall. However, few know that a different corruption of Sorcerers, of Sorcery itself, is the very reason for Mbey's survival from the ashes.

Only those who call Mbey home practice the Red Touch. The Jok are powerful, otherworldly creatures, and direct interaction with them by a mortal causes the rules of reality to bend and twist. It is in this bending and twisting that the rooi heks finds a power so often ignored, treated as a side effect or collateral damage by others.

The magic of this blight (commonly called the Red Touch) is seen as evil by most, but these views are often skewed by preconceived ideas and the red sheen to a rooi heks' eyes. In most nations, there is the idea of white magic and black magic, good versus evil, but only a rooi heks, "red witch," from Mbey understands the red magic that lies in the center.

Surely a Villain who practices the Red Touch can use these abilities for evil. He is already corrupt, so manipulating spirits who wish only to help feels utterly natural to him. A Heroic rooi heks, however, uses the Red Touch to cleanse the souls of others, giving many a second chance to be good people again. She walks a delicate line, sowing disorder in the world through the power of the Jok but also shouldering the negative consequences in the service of good. What is a Hero but someone willing to sacrifice her own well being for something greater than herself?

How It Works

The first time you purchase the Sorcery Advantage, you choose a single Disruption that your Hero can use. Each additional time you purchase the Sorcery Advantage, you choose an additional Disruption to learn.

The Red Touch can only be learned from another rooi heks who knows it, and rumors suggest Bonsam themselves created the first of their kind. By accepting the Red Touch, the rooi heks' very spirit becomes tainted by evil, but just enough to grant him the power to affect the world around him. This brush of darkness is not enough to take any of the character's free will…yet.

Every Hero starts without Corruption, but those with the Red Touch acquire an evil taint called Blight, akin to Corruption itself but less damaging to the soul. When interacting with someone with Corruption, the rooi heks may spend 2 Hero Points to absolve the person of her guilt, removing 1 point of Corruption from the target and gaining 2 Blight onto himself. This cannot be performed on the same person more than once per Main Story. He may then use his Blight to fuel many of his Disruptions.

If left unchecked, it takes only one wrong move for the character to become a Villain. A rooi heks has a greater propensity to giving in to his dark side, so the Blight he currently holds is added to his total for the purposes of Corruption. For example, a Hero with 3 Blight who kills an innocent gains 1 Corruption and makes a roll normally, but he becomes a Villain if he rolls a 4 or lower. Blight holds great power, but is also a tough road to walk for anyone trying to hold on to his humanity. If a rooi heks ever has 10 or more Blight, he immediately gains 1 Corruption and loses all of his Blight.

A rooi heks should never seek out Corruption, but she has her ways of dealing with her Blight through the use of Disruptions. Any Disruption activation or effect that requires the expenditure of a Hero Point can instead be paid by gaining Blight of an equal amount. The reverse, however, is not true; a Hero cannot reduce her Blight with Hero Points. If one wishes to tap into the power of the Red Touch, you need a bit of darkness on your soul.

Disruptions

The chaotic and corrupting influence of the Red Touch manifests itself in seven Disruptions. These Disruptions are a result of a mortal's use of the Jok's otherworldly influence upon Terra, its people and its rules; even other Sorceries are often considered "natural" by comparison, or at least less reality twisting. A sorcier from Montaigne might be able to tear holes in reality, a hexe from Eisen can speak to the dearly departed, but both give a user of the Red Touch a wide berth. Others wield power, but only a rooi heks has the ability to twist that power against its wielder or perhaps to deny it entirely.

Touch of Decay

Ancient religions within Mbey teach that a spirit lies within everything, living or inanimate. A chair has the same kind of soul as that possessed by a tree or a dog. With Touch of Decay, the Red Touch extends to the spirit residing within everyday things. The rooi heks touches an item and spends 1 Blight, rendering it unusable; a firearm falls to pieces, a suit of armor corrodes and rusts over a matter of seconds or a critical support beam in a building crumbles to dust.

In addition to immediate narrative effects (a Villain cannot shoot you with a pistol that no longer functions, obviously), this power can be used to instead create an Opportunity to be taken advantage of later. A rooi heks who uses her Touch of Decay on a Villain's pistol can wait until a dramatic moment to trigger the weapon's destruction. This special kind of Opportunity can be activated by any Hero on his turn as normal, but can be activated by the rooi heks herself even when it is not her turn. Effectively, the rooi heks can interrupt an ongoing action to trigger a Touch of Decay that has already been placed. Any Action interrupted in this way fails to be successful, but the character performing that action still loses the Raise he used to perform it.

Touch of Decay lasts until the end of the Scene. If Touch of Decay affects a magical object or a Signature Item, it makes the object unusable for the Scene rather than forever; the Hero drops her sword in a moment of clumsiness and must recover it later.

Ill Luck

Some say that merely being in the presence of someone who possesses the Red Touch brings bad luck for all. Ill Luck makes this no longer a matter of opinion, but of fact. By spending 1 Blight, the rooi heks becomes a beacon of terrible luck and everyone acting in the Scene (Heroes, Villains, the rooi heks himself, *absolutely everyone*) loses 1 die from all Risks. For each 2 *additional* Blight the rooi heks spends, all characters in the Scene lose an additional die from all Risks.

A rooi heks who activates Ill Luck may also spend 1 (and only 1) Hero Point before rolling dice in a Risk to make a single character not only immune to the effects of Ill Luck, but bolstered by it. Rather than losing dice for Risks she takes, she instead gains the same number of dice as a bonus. Only one character can be affected in this way at any given time, and the effect lasts until the end of the Round.

The Crimson Agreement

Communion with spirits is a common practice among many priests and magicians from cultures across the world, but the methods of the rooi heks may be the most intimate…and the most dangerous.

By spending 1 Blight, the rooi heks opens her soul to the Jok and allows it to possess her. An open soul is the perfect lure, and seldom can a spirit resist such an open invitation. The character gains access to one of the following abilities, depending on what sort of Jok responds to the lure.

- Death: Spend a Hero Point to protect any character from being Killed. While possessed, the selected character cannot die, even when he is rendered Helpless.
- Shadow: Spend a Hero Point to turn your shadow sentient. The shadow becomes semi-corporeal and obeys your commands. The shadow is capable of scouting, eavesdropping and other such activities but cannot pick up objects or interact with other people. If it takes a dangerous action, it is Strength 5 (rolling 5 dice) and spends Raises accordingly. If it takes a single Wound, it instantly returns to you and refuses to be reanimated until the next sundown.

- Blood: Spend a Hero Point while causing another character's third Dramatic Wound to immediately render that character Helpless. You can only activate this power once per Episode.
- Memory: Spend a Hero Point to speak as proxy for anyone, living or dead. The rooi heks must be able to touch either the target's body or something of extreme personal value belonging to the target. There must be another participant to join the conversation, as the rooi heks cannot talk to herself. This does not give the rooi heks any insights into what her target desires, it only allows the rooi heks to act as a vessel for the target to speak through.
- Heart: Spend a Hero Point to mask any signs of life in a Helpless character. The target's heart rate slows, his eyes become cloudy and his muscles stiffen. He also becomes susceptible to suggestion and can be directed to taking simple actions on the instruction of the rooi heks.

These powers come from the Red Touch's ties to Kap Sèvi (**Pirate Nations**, page 160). While a rooi heks isn't limited to making deals with particular Jok in the same way as a Sèvitè is with his Lwa, she has her own cost to pay. Because she is not bound to the same rules and is not forced to offer tribute (like a Lwa's Gran Met, or the costs associated with dievai and their Deals), the Jok always attempt to leave the rooi heks' body as soon as possible. At the end of the Scene, the rooi heks must spend a Hero Point in order to maintain control over the Jok she has temporarily bonded with; if she does not, the Jok immediately abandons her, and the rooi heks cannot bind with another Jok until the next sunrise. If she does, the Jok remains, but in both cases, it remembers being jailed against its will.

As soon as the Jok leaves the rooi heks, the GM gains a number of Danger Points equal to the Blight that the rooi heks currently has. These represent the Jok's displeasure against the mortal who took advantage of them. For a while, things simply do not go the rooi heks' way, and her allies often suffer by association.

Backlash

The corrupting nature of a rooi heks extends to other practitioners of Sorcery, and with time, a rooi heks can learn to direct and magnify this effect.

Backlash causes the next instance of a Sorcery to cost double the price paid—a losejas who activates a Major Deal gains 2 Corruption, a Strega must pay double the ordinary number of Lashes, etc. If there is no such associated cost for the Sorcery, then the power instead costs double the ordinary amount of Hero Points to activate.

Muddle

The Red Touch clouds the mind, even when that mind is immortal or inhuman. Hexenwerk can manipulate the dead, while the Rahuri can speak to their ancestors in hopes of guidance. A rooi heks can touch another character and spend a Hero Point to activate Muddle.

The next time that character receives information from a supernatural source (such as a Sidhe that owes him a favor, or speaking to an animal using a Gift of Matushka), the information is muddled, garbled, puzzling or in some other way confusing or incomplete. The information should still be *accurate*, but it does not have to be *true*. Misdirection, half-truths or matters of "perspective" should be exploited, but the information given cannot be an outright lie.

While the player controls the information garnered, the characters (neither the rooi heks, nor her victim) is aware of when or how the effect occurs. The rooi heks knows that she has inflicted a curse of misinformation on her victim, but she isn't "notified" when it occurs and has no control over what information is passed along.

Deny

Perhaps the most terrifying power a rooi heks can wield against another Sorcerer, Deny simply slams shut the gates of power that other practitioners of magic use to fuel their gifts. When a Sorcerer in the same Scene and within sight of a rooi heks activates a Sorcery power, the rooi heks can choose to immediately activate Deny.

The rooi heks wagers any number of Hero Points and Blight, leveraging his supernatural might against

his foe's. If the total amount of Hero Points and Blight spent exceeds the number of times his target has purchased the Sorcery Advantage, the power fails to activate. Any cost associated with the power is still paid (a Danger Point, added Corruption, Fate Lashes, etc.) but the effect does not manifest.

If the total amount of Hero Points and Blight spent does not exceed the number of times his target has purchased the Sorcery Advantage, the enemy's power activates as normal. The rooi heks must decide how many Hero Points or Blight he wishes to wager before he knows the result, and he cannot spend additional Hero Points or Blight in order to overcome a failed activation of Deny.

Any supernatural effect that does not originate from the Sorcery Advantage (such as the effects of the Seeker of Soryana Advantage or a specific Monster Quality) requires 3 Hero Points or Blight in order for Deny to be successful.

Pay With Pain

The corruption of blood is often the easiest. After a rooi heks activates Pay With Pain, any Sorcerer who uses her gifts in the presence of the rooi heks suffers 1 Wound for each Hero Point or other cost (a Strega's Lashes, for example) she spends to activate a Sorcery power. All effects still occur, even if these Wounds cause the Sorcerer to be rendered Helpless. Pay With Pain lasts until the end of the Scene.

Zahmeireen Weaponry

On the outskirts of the kingdom of Gelwaar is a place of pain, suffering and punishment. A dark wound in the earth, the mine delves deeper than any other across all of Ifri, perhaps across all of Terra. A place whose name is synonymous with misery and death.

Walhu.

For centuries, the mine was staffed by workers well-compensated for the dangerous, life-shortening work. They delved deep into the earth and brought back the most precious treasure in all of Mbey: *Zahmeireen*. This metal is twice as strong as iron and half the weight. In addition to these obvious benefits, Zahmeireen reacts to magic (dark or otherwise) and grows in strength and character alongside its owner. It seems to have a life of its own, a spirit. A soul.

Throughout history, many of the greatest warriors of Ifri possessed weapons forged from this wondrous metal. Through the years, dozens of these weapons were forged and wielded by Heroes and Villains alike.

Then Motuoka Gathaal came, and Walhu became a place of nightmares.

Gathaal was a fierce and vicious warlord. He claimed Walhu through conquest and built a prison. He sent messages to other warlords and rulers of Mbey, offering to imprison their most dangerous criminals (be they murderers or political rivals) for a small fee.

And he put them all to work, digging up Zahmeireen for his own purposes.

Where once pristine Zahmeireen was harvested from Walhu, now the metal is different. Whether due to the effects of Bonsam on Mbey or the harsh treatment of prisoners over the past decades since Gathaal seized control, now all metal that comes from the mine is laced with darkness and blood.

Walhu is filled with pain, torment and death. The imprisoned and enslaved are forced to mine Zahmeireen under truly sickening conditions. Where one "worker" falls dead of exhaustion, two more are brought in to take his place. In addition to criminals, the population of Walhu consists of political dissidents, noble rivals of the leaders of the Mbey and anyone who dared speak out against Bonsam. Each year more and more innocents arrive at Walhu. The innocent outnumber the guilty by

several orders of magnitude, but the criminals that reside within these bloody walls are the most vicious in all of Ifri.

The guards of Walhu typically care little for what goes on within the prison, so long as the Zahmeireen continues to flow and no one escapes. This has led to the rise of a chaotic culture amongst the prisoners, forming gangs and rallying around charismatic inmates.

Ghallik the Speaker, a Wiseone from Aksum, was sent to Walhu after being charged with treason. A folk hero to some, Ghalik has made plenty of allies within Walhu. While the guards care little for petty gangs and factions created inside the prison, they hear whispers of a coming uprising.

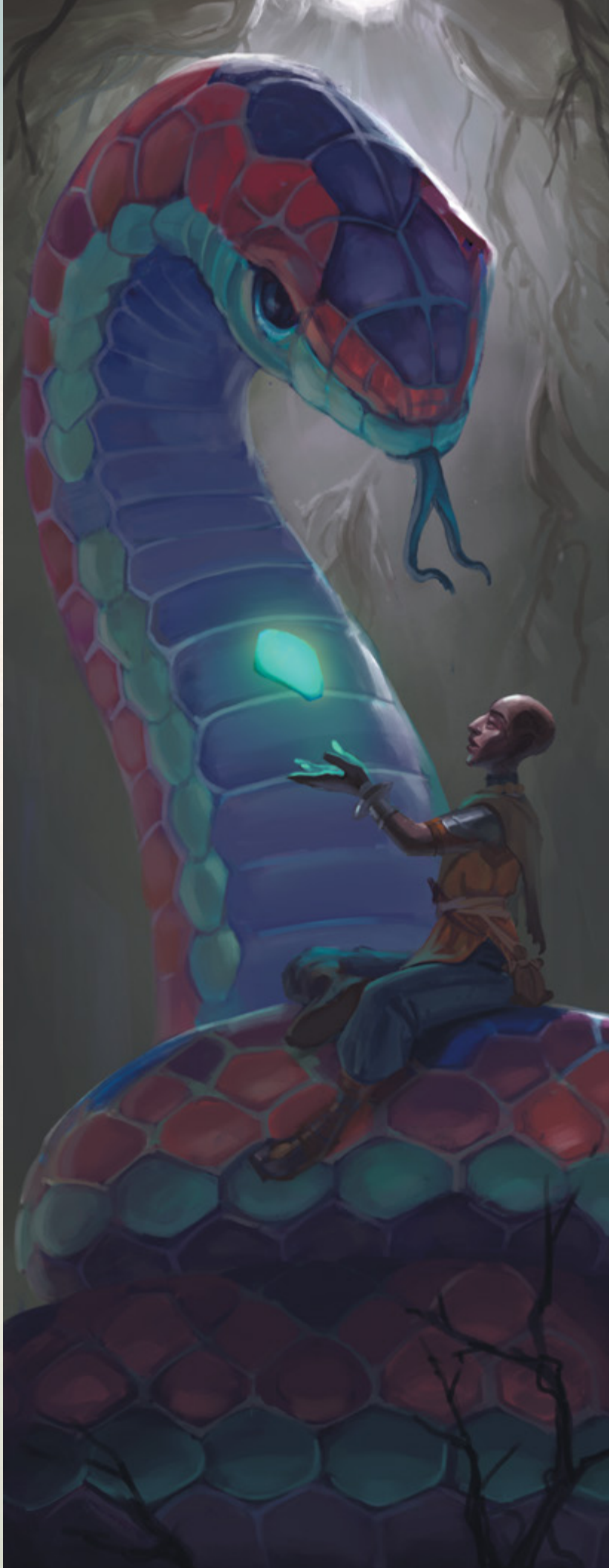
Once a high-ranking underworld influence in Ifri, Jasai Tfala now spends their time in Wahlu building a gang of followers within its walls. The circumstances surrounding their imprisonment raise many questions given their contacts. Surely no one goes to Walhu of their own volition…

Nyoka is a known loudmouth in many unsavory circles and it appears that her mouth has landed her in Walhu. Nyoka's bite does match her bark. A known thief and capable killer, she is both the most outright dangerous and loudest prisoner to step foot within these walls in some time.

Those sent to Walhu work to the brink of death every day. Each morning the slaves go into the mines with a pick and a single candle to navigate the dark and twisting tunnels. Throughout the years, the tunnels closest to the surface have been stripped of Zahmeireen, and day after day the slaves dig their way deeper and deeper into the mine. Those who return to the surface receive a meager supper (the only meal of the day) and allowed a night of fitful sleep before being sent back to the mines. Now more Zahmeireen is harvested than ever before in the history of the mine, and the smiths of Mbey forge countless new weapons to arm Bonsam's armies.

If you are one of the unlucky to have been sent to Walhu, you will quickly notice the effects of prolonged exposure to the mines. In its corrupted form, Zahmeireen appears less vibrant than when refined and seems harmless.

However, this could not be further from the truth.



In its natural form, Zahmeireen resembles raw glass or crystal in shape but with a flat, metallic texture. It glimmers and shines and pulses in the dark; stories say it's actually quite beautiful when seen in veins along the walls deep below Walhu. Shame that exposure to raw Zahmeireen is a death sentence.

When a person is exposed to unrefined Zahmeireen for long periods of time, an unnatural sickly ochre glow shines in his eyes, typically only visible in the dark. If exposed to the corrupted metal in its raw form for too long, the whites of the eyes begin to blacken. The hair thins and falls out, and the afflicted (constantly but slowly) sheds tears of blood. Known as *Ukuthiwiri Oe*, "demon's gaze," this affliction eventually leads to death, most commonly through blood loss. Those aware of the risks inherent with handling raw Zahmeireen wear clothing and gloves lined with silver, which reduces the dangerous effects of the metal. The slaves in Walhu, obviously, have no such protection.

Once refined, Zahmeireen loses its deadly side effects and the glimmer fades until all that remains is a flat, brown metal with an ochre shimmer. It is simple to tell if a Zahmeireen weapon is forged from corrupted metal or not: simply shining a light over the blade shows the truth, as uncorrupted Zahmeireen lacks the signature ochre shimmer found in modern blades.

Many seek to gain from the selling, trading or the use of Zahmeireen, and not all of them reside in Mbey.

A wealthy merchant from Manden, Zaleed the Cunning, smuggles Zahmeireen all across Ifri, demanding exorbitant prices in exchange.

In Aksum, Ras Kenta Manuke plots with a wizard to collect Zahmeireen, forging weapons to extend his political reach by way of dark rites and force on the way to becoming negusa nagast.

Captain Gormand and his ship *Hope's Bane* patrol the seas surrounding Ifri in search of anyone (including Lady Zaleed's ships) carrying Zahmeireen to collect it for reasons not fully known. Melting the Zahmeireen down to add to his idol of mangled metal deep in a cave off the coast of Mbey, Gormand hopes to wake *something* with this rather expensive and ill-shapen offering.

Some within Mbey have dedicated their lives to seeking out corrupted Zahmeireen weapons. The *Isifungo Senkosi*, "The King's Oath," an order of warriors, traces their history back to an ancient king of Mbey. This king entrusted his most loyal soldiers with Zahmeireen weapons, and they swore an oath to fight against any injustice. While many of their traditions have been lost to history, the group's current leader Zulekha T'khul has set these warriors to collecting corrupted Zahmeireen to purify the metal through a secret ritual.

However, one member of their order has begun collecting these weapons for his own purposes. Seeking to fight fire with fire, the respected warrior Osei Adeyemi stole most of the Isifungo Senkosi's cache of corrupted blades and founded his own sect. Because the corrupted weapons are so much more common, he intends to arm his own militia with these weapons to fight back against Bonsam.

How It Works

When you purchase the Zahmeireen Advantage, you gain possession of a weapon forged from the mysterious metal of Mbey. Select one Origin to describe the nature of how you gained your blade and two Facets that you can call upon when using your weapon. The Origin of your Zahmeireen weapon may not be changed; however, you may change one or both of your Facets by completing a three-Step Story.

Additionally, your Zahmeireen weapon may gain further bonuses by completing Legends. Your Hero does not begin with any Legends. Legends are earned during the course of play, and a Hero may have any number of Legends so long as they all have been completed.

Some Origins, Facets and Legends grant Bonus Dice under certain circumstances. These circumstances, left purposefully vague, are up for debate—the GM makes the final call on whether or not a Zahmeireen weapon's Origin, Facet or Legend applies in a given case, but she should be generous.

Origin

Every Zahmeireen weapon has an Origin. This is the means by which the weapon came into your possession. Every sword is different, and this is the first step in differentiating your weapon from one of another.

Fate

The reason that you obtained your weapon is unknown to you. Perhaps you pulled a blade from an enchanted stone, or perhaps you simply found it in a field. Regardless, its power is yours to command. While using this weapon in a Risk, you may reroll any number of dice which show a 1.

Legacy

You are another in a long line of proud warriors. Perhaps this sword was presumed lost when your father was killed in battle, but was given to you by a desert hermit who has taken you on as an apprentice. Gain 2 Bonus Dice in any Risk in which the history of your sword, or those who wielded it, would sway those you interact with.

Martyr

Sacrifices must always be made, and with the prerogative of a Hero, you must make certain you are the one paying it. Your weapon always seems to fall into the hands of those who understand this, and you put yourself in danger in order to achieve great things. Once per session, you may cause yourself a single Dramatic Wound to gain Hero Points equal to your Ranks in Weaponry.

Master Crafted

Your weapon is the peak of Ifrian craftwork. Perhaps you made it yourself, or a master smith crafted it for you. If you take the Signature Item Advantage, and your Signature Item is your Zahmeireen weapon, Signature Item counts as a 2-Point Advantage for you.

Treasure

Your weapon originally belonged to someone else, but no longer. Perhaps you recovered it from the vault of an evil prince, or you slew a monstrous beast from the desert and claimed the weapon from its hoard as your prize. Once per session, you may activate any Advantage you possess with the Knack tag without spending a Hero Point.

OTHER ZAHMEIREEN ARTIFACTS

The rules presented in this section provide guidance for creating weapons forged from Zahmeireen. However, craftspeople have been known to create powerful talismans, amulets and other items with a less militant use. These items are rare, but not unheard of. While some Origins, Facets and Legends may make sense for non-weapons, others may not (generally those that cause Wounds). Feel free to create your own rules that may be a better fit for items other than weapons, using the information in this section as guidance.

Facets

Facets are the potent magical effects your weapon possesses and provide its most powerful abilities. A Zahmeireen blade may only have a specific Facet once. For example, you can have Bane and Destructive, but you cannot select Bane two times to gain its benefit twice.

Bane

Your weapon is anathema to a certain type of creature. When you take this Facet, select one type of Monster (for example undead, abonsam, drachen, etc.). When you cause Wounds to a Monster of that type, you always cause 2 additional Wounds.

Dangerous

The power that courses through your blade leads it to be more dangerous than mundane weapons. Once each time you cause Wounds, you may spend a Hero Point to cause extra Wounds equal to the Trait used in your Approach.

Destructive

With a single blow, your weapon can destroy boulders, trees and even walls. Spend a Hero Point to destroy an inanimate, roughly human-sized object with your weapon. You can destroy larger inanimate objects in this way by spending additional Hero Points (two Hero Points to destroy an object approximately twice the size as a human, etc.).

Elemental

You can sheathe your blade in fire, lightning or another elemental effect. Spend a Hero Point to activate this ability until the end of the Round; any time you use this weapon against a being that would be affected,

ZAHMEIREEN, RED STEEL AND ORUN IRIN

Zahmeireen is far from the only special, semi-magical material in Ifri. Maghreb is famous for its so-called "red steel" of Cyrene, and the sky metal Orun Irin is valued for both its beauty and its mystical properties in weapons and charms. In most cases, treat objects like this as Signature Items (along with corrupted Zahmeireen, for example). Especially powerful and rare objects (the ancient spearhead from the back of the giant crocodile Sobki or one of the Sinifere Sarif swords made of Cyrene red steel and sky metal) are to be treated as purified Zahmeireen blades and use the rules presented in this section.

you cause 1 additional Wound. If a creature is especially susceptible to the element (such as striking a fire demon with a Zahmeireen blade enchanted with ice), deal 1 more additional Wound. Additionally, while this effect is active, you prevent 1 Wound each time the chosen element causes Wounds to you.

Life-Stealing

When your blade tastes the blood of an enemy, you may siphon away some of his life force to recover yourself. Once per session, you may spend a Hero Point when you cause Wounds to regain 1 Dramatic Wound.

Peaceful

The power that courses through your blade leads it to be more protective than mundane weapons. Spend a Hero Point when preventing Wounds to prevent extra Wounds equal to the Trait used in your Approach.

Quick

In combat your blade is a blur of motion, almost impossible to keep up with using the human eye. Spend a Hero Point when you take an Action that causes Wounds to another character. You may immediately take an additional Action, but still must spend Raises on this Action as normal. You may use this Facet only once each Round.

Veiled

Your weapon shrouds you from others, making it easier to pass by unseen. Spend a Hero Point to gain 2 Bonus Dice during a Risk in which you attempt to move silently or evade someone's notice.

Warded

Your weapon is effective at negating magical powers levied towards you. Spend a Hero Point when you are targeted by a magical effect (a Sorcery, a Syrneth artifact, etc.) to ignore the effect on you. Any other effects still take place, but the magic does not affect you in any way.

Wounding

This blade is exceptionally deadly and strikes more powerfully than normal. To prevent a Wound caused by this weapon, the target must spend 2 Raises.

Legends

Legends grant the Hero bonuses and abilities the first time she does something specific with her Zahmeireen weapon during play. Gaining a Legend is not always a positive experience (for example, being beaten within an inch of death is rarely pleasant), but you learn and grow from the experience.

The first time you accomplish a Legend during play (not in pre-game discussions, not in talk about what you do between sessions or over downtime and not in your weapon's origin, but during actual play at the table while you possess your Zahmeireen weapon), you gain a new bonus or ability associated with that Legend.

The bonus for completing a Legend is only gained the first time you do something. So the first time you earn wealth for your skills with the blade, you gain "Hero For Hire." If you are paid again, you don't gain it again.

The Legends listed here are not an exhaustive list, but should serve as a good baseline for how a GM can design his own Legends and associated rewards. The general rule for what constitutes a Legend should be that it is either difficult (such as defeating an enemy with the Fearsome Monstrous Quality for the "Warrior Without Fear" Legend), interesting and unusual (such as having a stranger comment on stories told of your swordplay for the "Named" Legend) or evocative and fun (such as single handedly

defeating a Brute Squad for the "One Against Many" Legend).

Blade Master
Be noted by an established weapon master for your skill. You may always reroll a single die in a Weaponry Risk, but you must keep the second roll.

Final Blow
Defeat a Villain in single combat. Spend a Hero Point when you cause a third Dramatic Wound to an opponent to cause additional Wounds equal to your Ranks in Weaponry.

Hero For Hire
Earn Wealth in exchange for services provided by you and your blade. Earn 1 extra Wealth each time you are paid for your services as a warrior.

Hero of Legend
Accomplish 5 Legends. Gain one of the following Advantages of your choice: Indomitable Will, Reputation or Valiant Spirit.

Named
Have a stranger comment on you and your weapon based on stories told of glorious past deeds. Gain a Bonus Die on any Risk in which your sword's name is relevant.

Never Give Up
Be made Helpless. Spend a Hero Point when you take your fourth Dramatic Wound to prevent that Dramatic Wound. You may activate this Legend once each Scene.

One Against Many
Defeat a Brute Squad without assistance. Any time a Brute Squad causes Wounds to you, you may spend a Hero Point to reduce the number of Wounds dealt to 1.

Reforged
Your Zahmeireen weapon is destroyed, but its shards are recrafted into a new blade. You may choose a third Facet which empowers your weapon.

CORRUPTED ZAHMEIREEN

Through the course of a story, a Hero may come to possess a weapon forged from corrupted Zahmeireen. These weapons bestow temporary access to the Signature Item Advantage so long as the Hero holds it, but with a catch; they corrode the soul. A Hero who possesses a corrupted Zahmeireen weapon without purchasing the Signature Item Advantage gains double the normal amount of Corruption for any action she takes, and the GM can spend a Danger Point to have the weapon knocked away, dropped or otherwise fall out of the Hero's grasp.

Purchasing the Signature Item Advantage removes these additional drawbacks, but does not unlock the weapon's full potential. For that, the blade must be purified by a ritual known only to the Isifungo Senkosi's most trusted members. A corrupted Zahmeireen blade can be purified (thus changing the Signature Item Advantage into the Zahmeireen Advantage) with a 3-Step Story, which must involve making contact with Isifungo Senkosi, earning their trust and performing the ancient cleansing ritual.

Warrior Without Fear
Defeat an enemy with the Fearsome Monstrous Quality. Spend a Hero Point to ignore Fear Ranks equal to your Ranks in Weaponry until the end of the Round so long as you have your weapon on your person.

Well Traveled
Visit each nation within your continent of origin (i.e,. each Kingdom of Ifri for an Ifrian Hero or each Nation of Théah for a Théan Hero). Gain a Bonus Die on social Risks while outside your Nation or when interacting with foreigners at home.

Abonsam and Vile Dice

While Heroes can earn and redeem Corruption as normal in Ifri, other forces are at work, seeding dark impulses in the hearts and minds of anyone who sets foot on the continent. As the result of the Atabean Trading Company's influence in the area, and Bour Ba Ighodalo's last desperate attempt to keep the seat of his city out of the ATC's hands, the abonsam within the stones being transported from Gelwaar to Lougua have awakened. Trapped by the bour ba's desire to hoard—but not break—their prisons, the abonsam within have been whispering to the populace. They promise all manner of fame, riches and power, if only their stones could be broken and they could be free to use their powers to their fullest extent.

The abonsam have found the easiest way to ensnare a target to be a matter of timing. They most often reach out when they find someone in a dire situation and offer aid. Their offer is subtle, a quiet voice in the back of one's mind that comes from within. It whispers that the only way out is to do whatever is necessary, justifying any action in the name of self-preservation. Most Heroes can shake away such thoughts, calling them the voice of fear. Every now and then, however, when the odds are stacked astronomically against her, she might just give in.

It may seem from the outside that Corruption has a stronger hold in Ifri, and Mbey especially, and that assumption would not be wrong. The abonsam, pacing in their prisons, foster the dark forces that wear at humanity's heart, turning the lazy stream into a raging river. Evil lives and spreads in Ifri, and gets harder to resist every day.

Vile Dice

Interacting with abonsam grants Heroes extra power, true, but that power comes at a price. Any extra dice granted by an abonsam's favor are Vile Dice. They represent the darker, more brutal impulses that linger in humanity's basest instincts. Interacting with forces that foster such evil makes it harder and harder to resist—the more often a Hero accepts an abonsam's help, the more its influence takes hold of her, steeping her mind in its own desires. Over time, she grows used to the idea of excessive violence and cruelty, and they permeate her own thoughts, making it difficult to avoid such acts.

Gaining and Using Vile Dice

As with all Evil Acts, the GM should always warn the player that accepting help from abonsam grants Vile Dice, and inform the player of how the dice work (using them toward Raises earns them Corruption).

Vile Dice should be visually distinct from the player's normal dice pool (a different color, different pattern, etc.).

The first time a Hero accepts help from an abonsam, he gains one Vile Die. For every time he accepts an abonsam's help thereafter, he gains one more Vile Die *and* replaces one die from his normal pool with a Vile Die.

Eric has already accepted help from an abonsam once, giving him an extra off-color die to roll. In dire straits, he elects to accept its help again. He can now add two off-color dice to his pool, and replaces one of his normal dice with an off-color die, for a total of 3 Vile Dice.

No matter how large a player's dice pool gets, he can only make Raises using a number of dice equal to his normal dice pool (his Trait+Skill number).

Vile Dice are not tied to any one Skill or Trait. Any time the player rolls, she adds and replaces the same amount of Vile Dice to her pool.

Every Vile Die put toward a Raise grants Corruption as normal. The first Vile Die used imparts 1 Corruption, the second die grants 2 and so on. It is possible to become irrevocably Villainous in a single Sequence or even a single Action.

Having accepted help from an abonsam three times, Sarah has 3 extra Vile Dice and 2 Vile Dice in her standard pool. She rolls 9 dice total (her normal pool of 6+3), 5 of which are Vile. She can select up to 6 dice to make Raises. Her normal results are 3, 4, 5 and 7. Her Vile results are 2, 5, 6, 8 and 10.

Sarah can only make a single Raise with her normal dice, but needs three to accomplish all her goals. She makes one normal Raise (3+7), and uses 2 Vile Dice to make up the remaining Raises (5 Vile+5, 10 Vile). She earns 3 Corruption points (one for the 5 and two more for the 10).

Redemption

A Hero can clear his pool of Vile Dice much like he can clear other Corruption he has gained. The unique nature of Vile Dice gives a Hero a few opportunities to remove their influence.

If the Hero has no points of Corruption, but the player does have Vile Dice in her pool, she can embark upon a standard 5-Step Redemption Story to clear all her Vile Dice at once.

Regardless of how much Corruption a Hero has, she can embark on a 3-Step Redemption Story to clear the Vile Dice one at a time. "Extra" dice always go first; only when the player has no additional dice to add to her pool can she begin to purge her standard pool of the Vile Dice she has earned.

If a Hero has gained Corruption through the use of Vile Dice, he can clear it all at once if his Redemption Story concludes with his rendering the abonsam's stone inert by restoring it to its resting place in Gelwaar. Any Corruption he might have from Evil Acts committed without the influence of an abonsam (without using Vile Dice) remain.

Vile Dice in Dramatic Sequences

While Action Sequences likely provide ample opportunities to narrate how a Hero's actions take a turn for the Villainous, Dramatic Sequences might be more difficult to turn toward Evil Acts. Explorative scenes where a Hero sneaks about to investigate might involve property damage if she used Vile Dice; social scenarios like galas or parties might mean the Hero's witty retort turns into something unnecessarily cutting, ugly and mean.

If there is truly no way to turn a Hero's Action into something that would earn Corruption ("I sneak down the empty hallway...but, evilly?"), she instead replaces a die in her standard pool with a Vile Die. The GM has final say on what can and cannot earn dice instead of actual Corruption, but using a Vile Die should always result in that Corruption spreading somehow.

VILE DICE AND MELBUR

Melbur, the sorcerous practice of making long-standing deals with abonsam, is distinct from the more immediate grab for power represented by Vile Dice. While only a Hero from Aksum may gain access to Melbur (by making a long-term deal with an abonsam in exchange for power), *anyone* who comes in contact with an abonsam can choose to gain power through the use of Vile Dice. This includes those who practice Melbur; a dasusuo can gain Vile Dice just like any other Hero, representing a short-term grab for power not covered by his Deals.

Dueling in Ifri

In a land as vast as Ifri, it would make sense that there are as many ways to engage in single combat as there are types of people. One would be a fool to think that there was only one true way to duel on the continent.

From the first days to the current season, peoples throughout Ifri have engaged in single combat. The combat is and has been part of daily life. Parents taught their children to fight and encouraged them to spar against one another to learn courage, perseverance and ingenuity. As a child ages, single combat allowed her to demonstrate her skill, secure social standing and prove her fitness for inclusion in adult activities. A leader uses single combat to resolve conflicts and bleed off tensions, preventing war and increasing his community's prosperity. Rituals and rules guided these bouts ensuring they were fair, though not necessarily safe. Only a coward or ignorant child broke the rules.

These types of combat are common during festivals, holidays and other appointed times. Among the people of Ikorodu, a traditional wedding includes formal sparring between the families—often a parent or sibling—of the wedded couple. In Asabu, young people gather together after a storm and, after dividing into two large groups and appointing referees, engage in one-on-one combat. In Masaesyli, a child practices for her rite of passage bouts with frequent sparring whenever she has sticks and time at hand.

With ritualized combat playing such an important role in society, the sheer number of unique fighting styles is not surprising. Ifrian single combat includes multiple forms of wrestling, boxing, striking and grappling arts, stick fighting and sword fighting. Anyone who claims to be an expert of "Ifrian combat" is a liar. The types of wrestling may require submission, pinning or forcing out of a ring. Sword fighting may include hooked *shotel* swords, the wide *akrafena* or the slender *takoba*—among others. Sticks may or may not have points, might be like a long *asaya* or short *iklwa*. In one popular style of fighting, boxers hit with only one—heavily wrapped—hand and shield with the other—bare—hand.

Understanding the prominence and variety of single combat in Ifrian culture is important because it underpins the development of dueling within the Ifri Kingdoms. When conflicts take place within a single cultural area or between cultural neighbors, people use the techniques that have been passed down and refined over centuries. When crossing boundaries or traveling long distances, fighters learned many different techniques and styles and began to blend traditions. Open-handed experts began incorporating weaponry and fencers learned grappling techniques.

Dueling grew as a sport and a method of cultural exchange. As with other forms of ritual combat, a Duelist used his duels to resolve conflicts without further escalation, earn respect and learn the history and traditions of other cultures. Dueling was a way to recognize and honor others' differences, while also finding or creating common ground.

Dueling's ability to connect different people has given rise to one of the more common terms for dueling, *odo ija*, or "river fight." Duelists may challenge one another by asking to meet by the river or by asking if someone wants to "have a talk by the river." This name recognizes dueling's *cultural importance* and does not actually designate where a duel takes place. This has not stopped owners of many dueling houses (any official enclosure that includes at least one marked circle for fighting) from naming their houses after the four Great Rivers.

Dueling has a complicated reputation in Ifri. While dueling has allowed for different cultures to share their techniques, rituals, rites and—often—music, some fear that it separates combat from culture and widens the distance between a modern youth and her heritage. Once the initial exchange has occurred, some fear that the subsequent Duelists only learn the fighting techniques and none of the values, stories or songs that accompany those techniques. Others criticize dueling for turning single combat into a sport that some Duelists practice to earn fortune and fame, rather than to build community bonds, earn respect or resolve conflict.

Duelists respond to these criticisms in a variety of ways. Some use traditional music to accompany the initial display portion of a duel or only teach students willing to also learn the stories behind their techniques. Many Duelists who win money for their skill donate most of their prize money to help others. Others, however, argue that dueling and ritual single combat are different and follow different rules. Single combat is not in danger of fading away, so there is no reason why dueling should be weighed down by single combat's rituals.

Whatever the viewpoint, nearly all can agree that odo ija and Théan dueling are not the same. Théan dueling and odo ija have four major differences that cause the most misunderstanding among duelists in both traditions.

First, anyone can have a talk by the river. While odo ija tournaments may have rules regarding the age and experience of participants, no one is barred from initiating or engaging in a duel. The Duelist's Guild pin carries little weight within Ifri. Any dueling house that tries to require membership quickly loses all native business.

Second, most duels in Ifri begin with a solo performance of skill. These displays can be as simple as pre-emptive posturing or as elaborate as ornate and deadly dances. The current trend toward three-to-five-minute long dances shows off the Duelist's agility, grace and strength. If a Théan Duelist is not prepared for this performance, he opens himself to ridicule from the audience. This has lead to a belief among some Théan Duelists that Ifri people have "no respect for proper dueling."

Third, Ifri dueling incorporates all the styles of single combat, while nearly all Théan dueling requires a weapon. Ifri dueling has a wider range of allowable moves than the Duelist's Guild recognizes. While some Théan Duelists relish the added challenge, others use this difference as further basis for the "no respect" stereotype.

Finally, fourth, odo ija duels end once one Duelist recognizes the strength of the other. This has lead to the formalization of four stopping points to a duel: refusing the challenge, ceding after the display, ceding after the first strike (or first blood) or being unable to continue (e.g., full submission or serious injury). If a duel continues until one of the Duelists is unable to continue, the duel is said to have "dried the river out." Duelists tend to look down on "drying out the river" and have little pity for those who do not accept defeat before that point. This is the easiest point of difference for Théan Duelists to understand.

Chaka

Named after a legendary leader, this Dueling Style owes more to war techniques than to ritual single combat. Chaka either innovated war for his people or stole others' innovations, but either way Ifrians know him for his military acumen and success. Based mostly on a single combat using two sticks—one to attack and one to guard—with a small shield to protect the guarding hand, this Style uses an attacking spear and a much larger, sturdier shield. Duelists have adapted the Style to use any bladed weapon and shield, however.

The Chaka Dueling Style has a poor reputation among most Duelists who condemn it for being too ruthless. Those who routinely dry the river out, however, like the Chaka Style's swift brutality. The Chaka Style is currently very popular throughout Mbey.

Style Bonus: Isihlangu Lock

When you wield a bladed weapon and shield, you can perform the Isihlangu Lock. By locking the outside of your shield against the inside of your opponent's guard, which may be a shield or weapon, you create a vulnerable opening to quickly exploit, while leaving yourself open to attack. You deal Wounds equal to your Ranks in Weaponry plus your Finesse. Until the end of the Round, you cannot perform any Maneuver that reduces the number of Wounds you take (although you can still spend Raises to reduce Wounds in the same way a non-Duelist can). You can perform Isihlangu Lock once per Round.

Awal Thmani

Practitioners of this sword-fighting Dueling Style learn a series of elaborate dances divided into distinct movements used during duels. The traditional sword for the Awal Thmani Style is a curved, sickle-like blade called a *khopesh*. Duelists hold the Awal Thmani sword in one hand and traditionally wield a defending stick or cudgel, although some users favor a simple shield instead.

Not everyone who learns Awal Thmani aspires to duel. Many dancers also learn and adapt the Awal Thmani Style for their own purposes. This has led to a renewed interest in ancient, traditional music and stories. A Duelist defending her art against less martial learners often point to the popularity of the Awal Thmani Style and the interest in once-lost cultures as a success of dueling as a cultural bridge.

Style Bonus: The First Eight

When you wield a one-handed sword or stick, you gain a special Maneuver called the First Eight. The First Eight uses a series of rapid slashes, punches and ridge-handed chops in the shape of a lateral figure eight or infinity symbol. To perform the First Eight, you must spend 2 Raises. The First Eight inflicts a number of Wounds equal to your Ranks in Weaponry plus your Ranks in Brawl. You can only perform the First Eight once per Round.

Omuhelo

Named for one of the rituals that involves single combat using this style of fighting, Omuhelo is a very athletic form of traditionally open-handed combat. The Dueling Style involves quick, one-handed handstands and other inversions as well as many kinds of jabbing and sweeping kicks. Duelists have adapted this Style to use a weapon—typically a stout stick, though some use swords—in one hand. A Duelist rarely uses the weapon, focusing instead on fighting with his feet.

A Duelist who practices the Omuhelo Style spends part of his training learning about his own ancestry and even goes on long journeys to speak with distant family members or visit places of his great-grandparents' youth. The inversions practiced in the Omuhelo Style are said to connect the Duelists to the reverse world where the dead reside and connect her with her ancestors. Understanding who those ancestors are and knowing what to expect from this potential connection is important to the Duelists.

The Omuhelo Style is very compelling to watch. Many Duelists perform solo at festivals to demonstrate their skill or engage in duels that do not extend past the performance stage of the duel. The style, showy and memorable, makes it one of the more well-known styles in Théah.

Style Bonus: Gazelle Kick

When you have at least one free hand, you gain a special Maneuver called Gazelle Kick. Gazelle Kick, a whirling, inverted kick, throws your opponent off balance. Gazelle Kick causes a number of Wounds equal to your Ranks in Athletics (minimum 1), and the next time your target deals Wounds this Round he deals one less Wound for each Rank you have in Weaponry. You can only perform Gazelle Kick once per Round.

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6,001 - 9,000
9,001 - 12,000
> 12,000