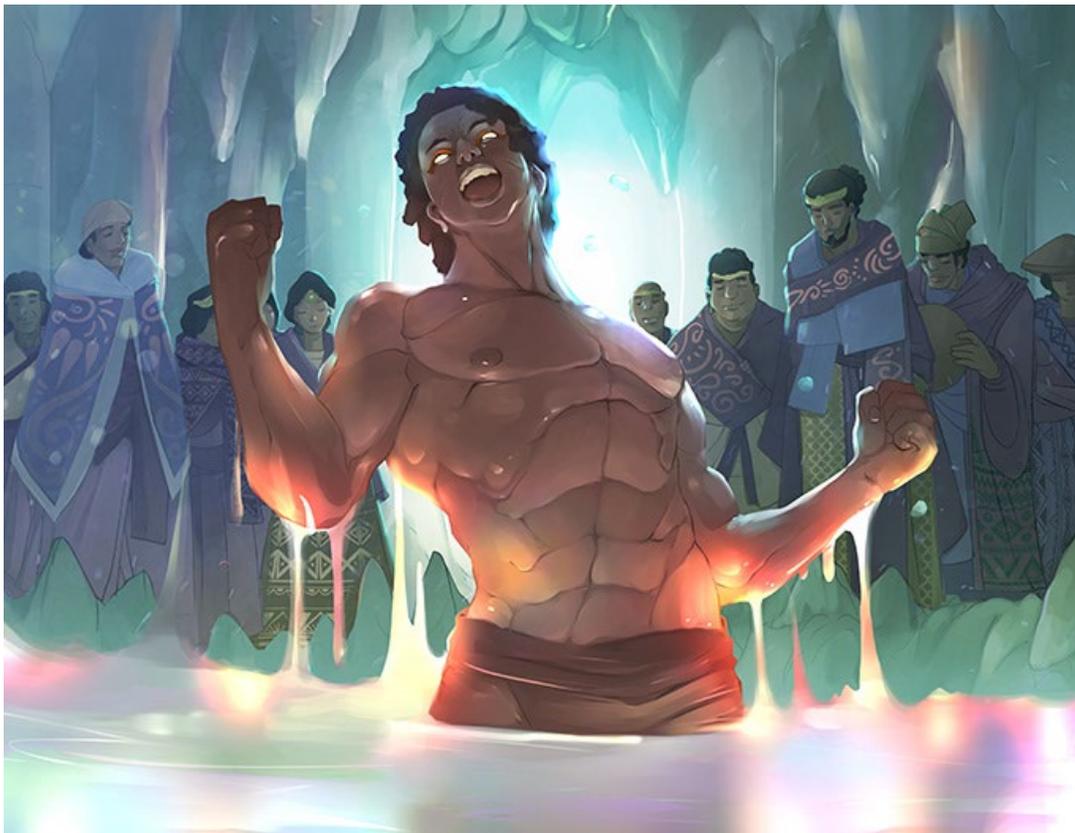


EXIGENTS OUT OF THE ASHES

IndieGoGo Draft Manuscript Part 1
Introduction, Chapters 1-2



In a farming village in a fertile valley, in the shadow of two mighty mountains, the faerie army amassed. Dawn's golden rays lit their princely leader's brow. Jewels flashed on his beringed fingers as he raised a slender hand to order the advance. Eager as his fae warriors were to march, his movement was almost bored. All the other villages had fallen easily as the horde swept down the passes. This one would surely be no different.

Except.

A lone young woman strode across the field to meet them. Wheat whickered at her ankles as she passed, the sound loud in the horde's sudden quiet. In her calloused hands, she held a scythe half-again as tall as she was, with green jade twisting through its haft. Sunlight sparked off its black blade. The morning breeze blew her auburn hair from her neck.

At first the raksha prince laughed with delight, to see the solitary farmhand standing against his horde. How quaint her defiance. How futile the gesture. How exquisite her folly would taste.

Then the Strawmaiden swung her grimscythe in a whistling arc, and the raksha's good humor crumbled like dry autumn leaves. At his command, silverwights and hobgoblins rushed in to overpower her. They fell like so many stalks of grass as they came within reach of the farmer's scythe, deadly as cold iron.

The faerie army's jubilant war-songs became dirges; their dirges became wails of terror.

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Three days, the battle raged. The fae swarmed locust-like over the fields, intent on Janest and the village of Kolisz behind her. Hobgoblin blood soaked the ground, stalks of wheat springing from the ground as they fell. A raksha cataphract's lance impaled her, yet she did not fall; the fields sustained her, crops turning gray and leaves wilting so that Ten Sheaves' Chosen might fight on.

When the second day dawned, Janest's fellow field-maidens formed a line at the village's edge. Armed with staves and pitchforks and scythes of their own, they fought to drive back any fae that slipped past their Exalted sister. By the time the sun reached its peak, the line had advanced, field-maidens fighting at Janest's side. Their presence bolstered her resolve: many of them had been with her for as long as she could remember. They'd held her chubby hands as she learned to walk. They'd taught her how to sow, how to reap, how to fight, or learned those things alongside her.

The rest were the babes Janest had helped raise. She'd held *their* tiny hands during those first wobbly steps. She'd shown them how to tell sprout from weed, and when the corn was at its sweetest. The field-maidens were part of nature's cycle, in a way the lords of chaos should never — *could* never — be.

Brave as they were, her sisters had trained to fight off bandits and wild boars, not the shambolic hordes of the Wyld. Nothing could prepare them for the this — for teeming hobgoblins that feasted on their fear and pain, for faceless soldiers spun from their nightmares, for baying faerie war-hounds who spoke in stolen voices.

One by one, Janest's sisters began to fall.

With a roar like summer thunder, she carved a path to the army's leader.

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The third day dawned bloody. The clash of jade and iron against gossamer metal echoed throughout the valley as the faerie host paused to watch their prince and his honor guard of cataphracts battle the farmhand. How they stamped and shrieked when a spindly blade sliced into her belly... and yet the Strawmaiden fought on.

Rust crept along that general's sword like blight through a crop. It shattered in his grip. He had no time to reach for his dagger or demand a weapon from a cataphract. Janest ended his life with a mighty swing of her scythe, and the general's golden-haired head fell to the ground like a gourd knocked from a fencepost.

The faerie horde's joy vanished. They fought valiantly, but their leader's death had dealt a fatal blow to their morale. Cataphracts either felt Final Harvest's sting or fled from it, and, leaderless, the rest of the invading force fell into chaos. Janest and her sisters scattered them, driving them out of the valley.

As she turned back toward Kolis, Janest stumbled at last. Her sisters caught her, held her up as the pain and exhaustion crested over her. They would have carried her home, but Janest demurred. She leaned on them, though, as she had all her life.

♦♦♦♦

Villagers lined the streets as Janest and her sisters returned. They cheered and they wept, for while Kolis was saved, they'd suffered many losses. As the field-maidens headed for the village's great hall, the people followed, part parade, part funeral procession. The air rang with songs usually only sung in the winter, when the warriors returned victorious from their raiding. Janest heard harvest hymns, too, songs for reaping and threshing, with new words to commemorate her victory over the fae.

The villagers sang Janest and the field-maidens all the way to the hall, and even when the doors closed behind Janest and two of her sisters, their voices still echoed.

Inside, the High Reavers argued. Ten Sheaves' priests stood in agitated clusters, some whispering fiercely amongst themselves, others raising voices hoarse from days of shouting. Most looked as ragged as Janest felt. Their clothing was rumpled; dark smudges beneath their eyes spoke to their exhaustion.

Heads swiveled to view the newcomers. Janest was suddenly keenly aware of how she must look: dirty, clothes torn and soaked with both her blood and her foes', sweat matting her hair. For an absurd moment, she was a little girl again, bracing to be chastised for not scrubbing the dirt from beneath her fingernails after a day in the fields. The High Reavers had always loomed so large to her.

But now, she saw they were just people, as frightened and tired as anyone else. She gently prised her sisters Amalon and Marieke's hands from her arms and stood straight. If she leaned — just a little bit — on her scythe, no one seemed to notice. "They're gone," Janest said. "The army fled back into the mountains."

"For how long?" asked one of the priests. Tomasz was a man in his middle years, who taught field-maidens and farmhands to read tomorrow's weather in the winds and clouds.

"I don't know," she said. "A long time. Years, I hope. We proved we're not worth their while." She knew this the way she knew how deep to plant a seed or when the corn was at its sweetest. The raksha would be licking their wounds for a long time; if they returned, it wouldn't be to Kolis, not when their were other villages they could prey on.

And who will protect those other villages?

The thought startled her.

Ten Sheaves had given his life so Janest might protect Kolis. Had any other gods in the valley done the same? *Could* any of them have? Word had trickled in all season of the faerie warband's implacable march, of the communities lost to their hunger: sleepy little Senjek; Poljna, whose orchards had the sweetest apples; Zreta, which clung to the mountainside like a stubborn goat. All fallen to faerie gluttony. No other champions had risen.

She remembered how Ten Sheaves had shown her a vision of Yu-Shan, the city that is Heaven, on the last day of his immortal life. *“I have never walked its streets, and now I never will. Perhaps you might, one day.”* How many cities were there, between here and Heaven? How many people in need of help?

The High Reavers were all watching her, expectantly. Janest realized she’d missed a question. “I’m sorry. What did you ask?”

Iron-haired Henryka hid a scowl. “We said, what do we do now?” In all the years Janest had known Henryka, she’d never asked questions, only orders and instructions. She told you what needed to be done and expected it to be done promptly.

“She’s tired,” said Marieke. “And wounded. We need to let her rest. Tomorrow can be for answers.”

Janest held up a hand for her sister to wait. To her astonishment, everyone in the room went still. It felt like the moment at the start of the spring festival, when all Kolisz waited for Tomasz to proclaim how the planting season had fared. But Janest was no High Reaver.

“Why are you asking *me* these questions?”

Henryka glanced at the grimscythe gleaming in Janest’s hands, at the faerie blood staining her clothes. “Ten Sheaves chose you above all others. Surely, he gave you his wisdom to deliver to us.”

Another priest spoke up. “Janest carries Ten Sheaves’ blessing, not his words. He chose her to be our guardian, not some messenger. Can’t you see that?”

They fell to bickering again, this time about the harvest god’s intentions. About *her*.

Ten Sheaves had said nothing about the High Reavers. He’d offered no advice for what Kolisz should do after he was gone or even what Janest should do.

No. That wasn’t entirely true.

You are to become Exalted — my champion, my Chosen — and the salvation of your people. If you live, perhaps the salvation of much more.

What did that mean? The salvation of much more? She thought again of the vast valley, so much of which she’d never seen, and the world beyond that. She thought of Heaven’s shining grander and the regret in Ten Sheaves’ voice as he spoke of it.

But for now, Kolisz remained her greatest concern. “Tend the wounded,” she said. “Gather the dead. Be sure everyone has food and shelter. Tomorrow, we’ll consider how to rebuild.” They were the same tasks the High Reavers always oversaw when raiders came riding in winter’s heart, yet it was as if none of them had ever considered them.

Their arguments stopped, Now, and they set about their duties with renewed conviction. Taking advantage of this flurry of activity, Marieke and Amalon ushered Janest out of the great hall.

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In the following days, after her wounds had closed, Janest tended to her people. She comforted the grieving and sat with the wounded. She returned to the fields to survey ruined crops and churned-up earth, renewing the soil with her newfound blessings. She tried to take up a hammer and joined in repairing a house, despite Amalon’s chidings about reopening the gash in her side. Her fellow field-maiden didn’t yet understand the power of the Exalted.

Where her sisters treated her much as they always had, however, the High Reavers very much did not.

They sent runners to ask her advice on reconstruction. Tomasz kept her up late reviewing what could be harvested, and whether they'd have enough for winter. Even Henryka waited for Janest's subtle nod before announcing a plan.

They looked to her for guidance, not as Ten Sheaves' replacement, but as his appointed emissary. Janest felt that responsibility tightening around her like baling twine. She loved Kolisz, but at night she dreamed of far-away places. During her few idle moments, she wondered if there were others in need of her help. She wondered what Kolisz might become if she stayed, whether she'd be the climbing vine that stole the villagers' sunlight and left them unable to grow on their own.

She spent one last night among her sisters. Amalon promised to tell the High Reavers she'd gone. Marieke wept as they kissed one another goodbye.

Then, as dawn rose golden over the fields, Strawmaiden Janest set off into the world.

Introduction

"A mighty flame followeth a tiny spark."

— Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy

The Exigents are many and myriad, but also utterly unique. They're not a single kind of Exalted, but the manifold Chosen of Creation's countless little gods. In times of dire need, gods can petition the Unconquered Sun for a spark of the Exigence — a bonfire of pure, creative power — to raise up their own Exalted champions. To do so is always a risk; no god can know what it will cost them. Many are consumed by the process entirely.

Exigents have left their mark on Creation's history as individual heroes, tipping the scales of power across countless wars, revolutions, and dynasties. Most — like Wun Ja's Architects, the Sovereigns of Uluiru, the enigmatic Puppeteer — are the Dragon-Blooded's equals in power, but a rare handful, like Strawmaiden Janest, rival the power of the Solar Exalted.

Exigents give players and Storytellers the opportunity to flex their creativity, inventing unique Exalted as player characters, allies, or enemies. This book presents four example types of Exigents with everything you'll need to play them, descriptions of other Exigents for readers to flesh out with their own designs, and guidelines for creating new Exigents and Charms.

Exigents also offer players and Storytellers the chance to explore Creation's little gods: their histories, passions, and plans. An Exigent's relationship with the god who chose them can be far more personal than those of other Exalted with their distant patrons. Even an Exigent whose patron god didn't survive her Exaltation might still find herself entangled with his priesthood, cult, allies, and enemies.

This Book at a Glance

Chapter One: Chosen of the Little Gods presents the Exigents and their history, describes how gods create them, and provides examples both of Exigents and patron gods as a starting point for your own designs.

Chapter Two: Great Forks presents the City of Ten Thousand Temples, one of the Scavenger Lands' greatest and most prosperous cities. Spirits dwell here en masse, seeking worship, influence, and earthly delights. It's also home to countless Exigents, including champions chosen by the city's gods and wandering heroes seeking purpose or companions.

Chapter Three: Beyond Mortality provides guidance for Exigent character creation, advancement, and

traits.

Chapter Four: Power of the Exalted provides guidance for designing your own custom Charms, whether for Exigents or other Exalted.

Chapter Five: Strawmaiden Janest presents Janest, Chosen by a humble field god but with power to equal the mightiest of Exalted.

Chapter Six: The Puppeteer offers presents Pakpao, the Puppeteer, a master of intrigue who pulls strings both figurative and literal.

Chapter Seven: The Architects presents the Architects, Chosen of Cities, each a living incarnation of one of Creation's many cities.

Chapter Eight: The Sovereigns of Uluiru presents the Sovereigns of Uluiru, Exigent god-kings empowered by a gem-god's sacrifice and the blood of a dead Incarna.

Appendix: Creating New Exalted explores adding entirely new kinds of Exalted to your game, with three examples of optional Exalted: the Dream-Souled, masters of illusion and transformation; the Hearteaters, monstrous Exalted who feed on free will; and the Umbral Exalted, wracked by inner turmoil and a darkness that both corrupts and empowers them.

Lexicon

god: A type of spirit, typically serving as the divine steward of a place, thing, or concept as part of Heaven's Celestial Bureaucracy. Among all spirits, only gods can use the *Exigence*.

Exigence, the: The divine flame that is the font of *Exigent* Exaltation. *Little gods* may petition the *Unconquered Sun* for a *spark* of this flame, allowing them to create Exalted champions.

Exigent: Unique Exalted chosen by Creation's *little gods* using the power of the *Exigence*.

illicit Exigent: Any Exigent created by a god who didn't receive the *spark* of *Exigence* by petitioning the *Unconquered Sun*. Such *sparks* are instead obtained from other gods whose petitions were answered through theft, bargaining, extortion, and other means.

little god: All *gods* other than the Celestial Incarnae.

patchwork Exigent: An Exigent created by multiple deities, tormented or warped by the irreconcilable Essences that rage within them.

spark of Exigence: A portion of the *Exigence* bestowed by the *Unconquered Sun* upon a *god*, which can be used to create an Exigent — or can be given, traded, or lost to other *gods* seeking to create *illicit Exigents*.

Unconquered Sun, the: The God of the Sun, King of Heaven, God of the Sun, and custodian of the *Exigence*, apportioning *sparks* of the divine flame to gods whose pleas he deems worthy.

Springtide's Promise was burning. The city's banished admiral-prince had returned for revenge, and she didn't care who stood between her and the steward that had usurped her. Her foreign soldiers stalked the streets while native families huddled in their homes or donned scraps of armor to bolster the steward's guard. People choked in smoke and fled into the streets half-blind, resulting in a terrible confusion of violence.

For a clever young thief like Twice-Errant Savannah, the city-wide panic was unfortunate. The admiral-prince's long siege had given the Chosen of Grifters many opportunities to exploit wealthy families' fear, right up until her navy broke through the city's blockade. The sudden violence put an end to his plans; now he sprinted through hazy streets with a satchel-full of stolen jewelry, hunted by a gang of the admiral's marines.

As he looked for a hiding place that wasn't on fire, Savannah reflected that this whole situation would make for an entertaining tale of misadventure if he survived. A part of his mind estimated the odds: three-to-one against. He willed that part of his mind to shut up.

He turned a blind corner and slammed into an old woman, sending them both sprawling and scattering Savannah's collection of jewelry. "Sorry!" said Savannah. He rolled to his feet and desperately searched for his treasures through the smoky haze. "So sorry!"

To Savannah's surprise, the wiry old woman found her feet almost as quickly as he had. She held up a lantern to help his search. It was absurd — his problem was smoke, not darkness — yet somehow the lantern's light glinted off the most valuable piece of his collection, a necklace of translucent Underworld obsidian. Savannah snatched it up and breathed a quick sigh of relief.

"That must be worth much to you," the old woman said.

Savannah's cheeks burned. In his hurry, he'd thought only of his treasures. He'd forgotten about escape, and he certainly hadn't thought to help an old woman to her feet in a burning city. Savannah knew just how much he could sell the necklace for...but what was that worth just now?

Savannah cleared his throat. "Do...do you need help getting somewhere safe, ma'am?"

The woman chuckled and supplied her name: "Nozifo." Then her eyes widened, and Savannah realized that someone had snuck up behind him. He leaped forward, and the blackjack that would have bashed his skull in merely struck his back, very hard. Savannah tumbled away from his attacker, satchel held close to his body.

Though pain and smoke blurred his vision, Savannah could make out half a dozen imposing figures — the admiral's troops had found him. He opened his mouth to negotiate, to plead, but Nozifo stepped forward to defend him. Light sprang from her, a pale, clear brilliance that cut through the haze. Savannah watched in awe as she fought the soldiers bare-handed, blocks and strikes precise as Varangian clockwork.

"Run!" she shouted.

It was the only sensible thing to do, but Savannah didn't budge. He'd found someone like him, a rare and unique wonder...and if he left her now, he likely wouldn't find her again, even if she did survive. He needed a distraction, a chance for Nozifo and him to escape together.

Savannah wasn't much of a fighter, but he had been chosen by a god of grifters, a patron of debtors and cheats. He breathed a promise of wealth into the obsidian necklace and threw it into the fray.

"Eyes up, everyone!" he crowed. "First to reach it gets the prize!"

Chapter One

Chosen of the Little Gods

The Birth of the Exigents

In a time before history, the Unconquered Sun led the gods in rebellion against their creators and oppressors. Bound by an ancient geas, the gods could not themselves fight the Ancients. The Celestial Incarnae and their great allies, the Elemental Dragons, imbued mortals with their divine Essence and raised up the Exalted host to do battle with the makers of the world. But these were not the only heroes to take the field.

Many lesser gods clamored for the secret of Exaltation, but the Incarnae kept it guarded, fearing what might come after the war. Instead, they sought out a font of power, a force with which they could empower the little gods to choose Exalted without surrendering the great secret. The Five Maidens saw it beyond the world's edge, a numinous and otherworldly power older than the world's makers. World-walking Luna found the path to it, navigating through a labyrinth of unreality. The Unconquered Sun kindled it with an ember of his own Essence, igniting and consuming that primeval force to light the divine fire of Exigence within him, an answer to the Incarnae's urgent need.

The Unconquered Sun offered this ever-burning flame to all gods, great and small alike, with which to create their own Exalted. There was a cost to these champions, as the Incarnae had paid to create their own Chosen. Some among the weaker gods could endure the cost of Exaltation; others were destroyed by it, sacrifices made in the name of victory. They fought alongside the fabled Chosen of the Incarnae and the mighty Dragon-Blooded: the Chosen of Betrayal, her might multiplied a hundredfold in defiance of the world's makers; the Chosen of Conquest, who smote the Ancient's armies with her great treasure-wheel; the Chosen of the Firmament, who led an army of devil-stars against the enemies of the gods; and other legendary Exigent heroes.

The Exalted host triumphed over the enemies of the gods, and the Celestial Incarnae took the Ancients' place at the Games of Divinity. The fire of Exigence still burned, but the Unconquered Sun no longer shared it indiscriminately, for the power of the Exalted was great enough to disturb the Most High. It was reserved for those gods who sought champions in the name of their duties in the great Celestial Bureaucracy — though at times, a plea made in the name of compassion, righteous conviction, or the like was rewarded with Exigence, for the Unconquered Sun is also the God of Virtue, and it is not his nature to deny such prayers when Creation is in dire need.

As the First Age reached its apex, the Unconquered Sun turned his face from Creation, for he could no longer bear to watch his own Chosen. The flame of Exigence dimmed from the world as countless pleas for Exalted champions went unheard. Only rarely did the Exigence fall among the gods, and the ranks of their Chosen dwindled unto nothing.

Now, the Unconquered Sun looks on Creation once more with the return of his Chosen, and the flames of Exigence blaze anew. Countless gods have had their pleas answered, and the Exigents' ranks have grown to a height not seen since the First Age.

Petitioning for Exigence

The hearthfire of the Exigence burns with the Unconquered Sun's Essence; only he can offer it to the little gods. Though he takes his leisure at the Games of Divinity, secluded from Heaven, he hears the prayers of

the gods and their petitions for the divine flame. Most who beseech him successfully speak of their need at great length, explaining how choosing an Exalted champion would fulfill their duties to Heaven, though at times a simple, desperate plea has been enough to win the Sun's blessing. The Unconquered Sun is difficult to deceive, rebuking those whose petitions are made with anything less than absolute candor, but he is not infallible and has been hoodwinked in the past.

When the Unconquered Sun grants a god's petition, he draws forth a spark of the Exigence from within himself to bestow upon them, descending from the Most High like a shooting star or a fallen ember. It falls into the hands scarce moments after they finish their prayer, burning with a power beyond imagining.

He was more town father than city father until the refugees came, homeless and hungry. They'd flocked to his temples, praying for prosperity and the city's acceptance, catching even the notice of Wun Ja, Goddess of the Shining Metropolis, from her abode in Heaven. An Exalted champion could lead the growing city, could bring together its people and make an answer to their plight. Wun Ja has promised to share her power with him, for the Chosen of Cities are her Exalted in part. Now, sitting behind his own altar, he reviews his proposal one last time, written in exquisite calligraphy lest he stumble over his words. The Unconquered Sun will listen. He has to.

A spark of Exigence is immaterial, held within a god's Essence as the Exigence itself burns within the Unconquered Sun's. It is not easy to bear the flame; it blazes from within them, scorching their very spirit. Gods who cannot find a worthy champion quickly often imbue the Exigence into a physical vessel, unable to bear this agony any longer. The wary and the fearful might choose to endure this burden, for it is far easier to steal a spark once it is removed from a god's Essence; others see it as a test of their resolve in shepherding the Sun's gift.

A spark alone is not an Exaltation. A god must offer up their divine Essence, feeding their ember of Exigence that it might blaze bright enough to empower one of the Chosen. Exaltation is never without cost; no god can create an Exigent without being permanently lessened. Weaker gods are often destroyed outright by this, and even the mightiest gods take their lives into their own hands when they choose an Exigent. Few can survive creating multiple Chosen and fewer still are willing to risk manyfold diminishment, making most Exigents unique and singular champions.

Her river is dying. The plague swept down from the city, dammed the river's wellspring with bloated corpses and tainted her water with disease. The farmboy still comes to her muddy banks every dawn, his prayers sweet with true devotion. Now she prays with him, though she beseeches a different god. This plague is no natural thing, and she feels it changing her, poisoning her as it does her river. She would rather die, god of a lost river, than let herself become an abomination. Sun willing, she will sacrifice the last of herself to Exaltation, making her farmboy the answer to his prayers.

Illicit Exaltations

A spark of the Exigence, not yet kindled with divine Essence, can be exchanged between gods. Before the Unconquered Sun turned his face, it was rare that a god might bargain with a spark or give it as a gift, but when the flames of Exigence dimmed, those sparks that still remained in divine hands and the rare few still given by the Unconquered Sun became potent bargaining chips. Such exchanges are prohibited by heavenly law, but as the Celestial Bureaucracy has fallen into mismanagement and corruption, such commerce is rarely punished.

A god whose petitions go unanswered and who can't bargain for a spark might steal a portion of Exigence from another god. Only the most puissant of larcenous deities can steal a spark held in a spirit's Essence, though coercion, threats, and violence might force a god to part from their spark. Most stolen sparks,

however, are those that have been imbued in physical vessels, vulnerable to theft and seizure.

An Exigent chosen by a god other than the one who petitioned for their spark is known as an *illicit Exigent*, created in defiance of Yu-Shan's laws. Such Chosen aren't held culpable for their patron's misdeeds, but Heaven takes a dim view of them. Illicit Exigents who catch Yu-Shan's notice face close scrutiny for any sign of them assisting their criminal patrons' schemes.

It isn't fair. It must be a mistake. They are twins, mirrors and equals in every way, yet the Sun granted her brother's prayers and left hers unanswered. The North Mountain is hardly worthy of an Exigent; her South Mountain is by far the more prestigious. She climbs her brother's mountain by moonlight while he sleeps. Tonight, she will take his spark of the divine fire, and by morning, the South Mountain will have its champion.

Patchwork Chosen

The Exigence was never meant to be used by more than one god, but it is possible. Two gods might work together to catalyze a spark of Exigence, or an entire pantheon might contribute their Essence to create a champion. Perhaps they seek to create an Exalt whose power synthesizes their varied natures into something greater; perhaps they merely wish to share the burden of diminishment among themselves in the moment of Exaltation.

But while the gods may profit from this, their Chosen, known as *patchwork Exigents*, pay the price of this hubris. Disparate and incompatible Essences rage within them, making their Exaltation as much a curse as it is a blessing. Some are tormented by nightmares, delusions, overwhelming urges, or agonizing pain born of their schismatic nature. Others are corrupted or warped into monstrous beings, both Chosen and abomination.

Gods with shared or overlapping purviews can pool their Essence without creating a patchwork Exigent, their Essences harmonizing rather than clashing. The Architects (p. XX) are one such example, created by the goddess of all cities and the god of a single city.

The first thing he feels is cold. Not the cold of winter, biting at his nose and fingertips, but a piercing cold from within. He picks himself from the ground between the three shrines, the stone eyes of the gods staring at him in wordless judgment. They'd promised him power and glory, not this gnawing, icy void. He reaches for his chest but finds only a hole the size of his fist where his heart should be. That's why he's cold: he needs a heart. And if the gods have stolen his, then he must find another.

A Singular Exaltation

Like all Exalted, the Exigents are chosen from heroes and those with the potential for heroism. But beyond that, who is chosen depends on their patron's gods needs, whether they are Exalted in answer to a dire crisis or to serve the ambitions of a god who's stolen a spark of Exigence. Often the god appears directly to those they Exalt, explaining why they have been chosen and what they must do. Those whose patron gods did not survive catalyzing their Exaltation experience a vision, prophetic dream, or epiphany conveying their god's last wishes. But as the Exigents are infinitely varied in their nature, so too are their Exaltations, taking countless forms.

Far away, a goddess watches her kingdom's banners burn, centuries-old heavy cloth thrown off the parapets by the conquerors. She turns to the last prince of the kingdom, a man too young for the mantle she must bestow upon him. The Exigence burns beneath her skin. "You must carry the banners of a nation in your heart, and in your soul," she tells him — and he does. She fades into the rush of power, knowing that something of the place she's overseen for so long, a land and a people that she's come to love, will

survive.

Most Exigents experience Exaltation as an ecstasy of divine power, awakening to the Essence that suffuses them in body, mind, and soul as their anima banner flares, perhaps the first time it has ever been seen in Creation. Often the experience is shaped by her patron's nature — the Chosen of the Hearth feels flames of power blazing within her yet burning her not; the Chosen of Taxation feels a coin shining with numinous power clinking in the coffers of his soul. Patchwork Exigents often Exalt in agony, overwhelmed by the roar of dissonant Essence within their being.

The slave girl crept into the sorcerer-prince's laboratory by night, desperate for something small and valuable — just enough to buy passage to Palanquin when she escaped. Her master wouldn't miss one scroll or trinket. But she came instead to crystal casket, seeing the vague form that moved inside, trapped and screaming. The ancient god pleaded from within in a language she knew not, beseeching her, yes, but also someone distant and glorious. Fire kindled inside the crystal, and the god burned; fire kindled inside the girl, and her mind thrummed with the language of the Old Realm and all its sorcerous power. A power to break her master's sorcerous bindings upon her and to shatter the wards that guarded him. By morning, she had plucked his tongue from his mouth and set out in search of her future.

Most Exigents' Exaltations die with them, vanishing from the world. A rare few Exigent Exaltations persist beyond death to find another worthy of them. Some are like those of the Solar Exalted, passing on to a new hero chosen by their patron god. Others are inherited in a unique fashion: a legendary blade that confers Exaltation upon worthy wielders, a riddle spoken with the Chosen of Mysteries' dying words that will pass her Exaltation onto those who solve it, a plague that bears the Chosen of Disease's Exaltation to the one who can survive it.

"Behold," says the king, "our warrior of warriors, victor of victors!" The crowd's cheers drown out all other noise, like the vomiting of the runner-up she'd punched six times in the stomach before he stayed down. She holds her head high and approaches the dais, where the jeweled girdle lies atop a golden table. It's warm to the touch, and as her fist closes around it, she feels the surge of certainty and power. Her skin shines as gold as the table, her eyes a vivid platinum. Now, she understands: the belt does not make her victorious, it makes her Victory itself, champion of the tournaments she has dreamed of winning since watching her first match from her mother's shoulders.

Castes and Aspects

Singular Exigents like Strawmaiden Janest don't have Castes and Aspects, and even groups of Exigents, like the Sovereigns of Uluiru, might not have them. However, as is always the case with Exigents, exceptions and variations exist. Some Exigents who exist in numbers may have Castes, expressions of a role, like warrior, savant, or emissary. Others have or Aspects, expressing and influencing their nature and personality like a Dragon-Blood's fiery temper or a Liminal's melancholy moods.

For example, the Chosen of god of love might have Aspects of Eros, Storge, Philia, and Agape. A tide-god's Chosen may have a High Tide Caste, focused on forceful, direct approaches, and a Low Tide Caste skilled in subtlety and subterfuge. Some Exigents may have alternatives to either option: Architects, for example, don't have Castes or Aspects, defined instead by the city they champion.

Exigents and Other Exalted

Across Creation's history, the Exigents have crossed paths with other Chosen many times. Sometimes

allies, sometimes enemies, they're known to the great powers of Creation.

The Realm's Immaculate Order, Lookshy's Immaculate Faith, Prasad's Pure Way, and other Immaculate sects that hold sway in various Dragon-Blooded polities condemn Exigents as the result of forbidden congress between gods and mortals. Many press Exigents into service, the only path to atonement for the crime of their existence and a better life in their next reincarnation. Exigents who refuse to serve are disfavored, but they need not fear being named Anathema unless they defy the Perfected Hierarchy by threatening Dragon-Blooded hegemony.

The Silver Pact has known Exigents as allies and enemies both across its history; while individual Lunars may hold their own prejudices, the Pact as a whole judges each Exigent as an individual. The Exigents' resurgence is of some concern to the Pact; they tread lightly when they find themselves in Great Forks, Uluiru, and other places where Exigents are found in numbers, never knowing when one whose power equals or exceeds that of the Lunar Exalted might arise.

The Bureau of Destiny is tasked with overseeing Exigents for the Celestial Bureaucracy. Like all puissant supernatural beings, they can pose significant complications to the fulfillment of the destinies planned by Heaven, requiring Sidereal intervention to attempt to steer destiny back on course. Illicit Exigents also fall within the Sidereals' remit, foisted on the Bureau of Destiny by the rest of the Celestial Bureaucracy with the rationale that Exalted should deal with the Exalted. The Bureau monitors illicit Exigents for any sign of criminal conspiracy with their patrons and passes Heaven's justice on the guilty. But not all illicit Exigents need fear the Sidereals; the Bureau's resources are stretched thin, and many Sidereals are willing to overlook such misdeeds so they can devote their efforts to destiny, not the law.

The Spark of Divinity

Creation's gods aren't abstract embodiments of primal forces, but divinities entrusted with stewardship of some aspect of the world by Heaven's Celestial Bureaucracy. Gods in Heaven have broad and all-encompassing purviews: abstract concepts, primeval forces, and fundamental aspects of nature or human existence. They are gods of war and flame, of cherry blossoms and prophetic dreams. The terrestrial gods who dwell in Creation each oversee some specific facet of the world. They are gods of individual rivers, lakes, and even the Great Western Ocean, of the Blessed Isle's Black Shale Road, of the trade winds that blow through the Coral Archipelago, of An-Teng's elephants and of Nexus' thieves.

Exigents are Chosen of the god who Exalted them, not of those gods' divine purviews. Their power is also shaped by their patron gods' nature and deeds and the crisis that they were Chosen to answer. The Chosen of Ahlat will have Charms expressing excellence in war, particularly desert warfare, but her might also encompasses the war-god's prowess with bow and spear, the judgment he passes on warriors, and his authority over cattle and cattle-raiding. Shala Assai is the Chosen of Knives, but her power and Charms are not those of a legendary killer, for her patron sees knives as tools of human survival and ingenuity rather than mere weapons. The Prince of Ink holds power over the written word, but his Charms also draw from his patron's nature as a heavenly diplomat and advocate for peace.

Not all Exigents are equal in might. Most are peers to the Dragon-Blooded, but a rare few across Creation's history have rivaled the Solar Exalted. An Exigent's power is not dependent on that of their patron god: the mightiest of celestial deities might create a champion no greater than that of a humble terrestrial god, while the least among the gods can create Exigents of untold might.

If an Exigent's patron survives their Exaltation, consider the relationship between them. Most Exigents are swift to act in the face of the crisis they were created for, impelled by their patron's urging and their own Essence fever, but many are unwilling to continue in their god's service once that crisis is past,

striking off on their own. Some remain allies of their patron even as they wander far afield. Others might be bitter enemies, whether finding themselves opposed to their patron's goals or seeking vengeance for an Exaltation they never asked for. A patron's god cult, priests, and other allies are also a common presence in an Exigent's life, some eager to serve their god's champion and some distrustful of the outsider who's received a blessing they see as undeserved.

The Great Curse

When the Neverborn's death-curse fell upon the Exalted, it did not merely afflict those Chosen who stood against them in the Divine Revolution; they cursed Exaltation itself. No Exigent — and no other Exalt — is free of this affliction, no matter how long after the Neverborn's death they were Chosen.

From God to Exigent

When creating an Exigent, it's often easiest to start by creating their patron god. That god's purview, personality, and history help to inform the Exigent's concept and provide inspiration for her Charms. You can pick an existing god (a list of which is below at p. XX) or invent one of your own. If you're making your own god, you don't need to figure out everything about them — it's enough to know what they're the god of, what their personality is like, and why they needed an Exigent.

When conceptualizing what a god's Exigent might look like, it can help to begin by narrowing in on three distinct themes based on that god's purview, personality, history, and reasons for creating an Exigent. These don't need to encompass everything or even the most important things about the god; they're just a starting point. You can then start sketching out ideas for your Exigent and what their Charm trees might look like based on this foundation.

You may have a strong concept for an Exigent, but not the god who chose them. If that's the case, you can work backward from your Exigent and their Charms to come up with their divine patron, figuring out how the Charms' themes are reflected in that god. You don't need to write their Charm set in full; it's enough to sketch out a few branches. As you define your patron god, you may find it provides further inspiration for your Exigent concept and Charms.

Divine Patrons

The following gods can be used as patrons for your own Exigents. They also provide examples of how a god's themes inspire the concept and Charms of their Exigent.

Fenya, God of Guild Cant

A tutelary deity of the Guild and the language-god of its secret tongue, Fenya is young but mighty, empowered by the language's use across Creation. Merchant princes pray to him — in the cant, of course — for eloquence and clarity of speech and to ward off misunderstandings. Fenya might be driven to create an Exigent to stand as a champion against threats to the Guild, to hunt down infiltrators who've stolen the secret cant, or — if he can lay hands on an illicit spark — to serve as his agent against rival language-gods.

Themes

As the Exalted of a language-god, Fenya's Chosen might have social Charms that are most powerful when conveyed through cant, eavesdropping Charms whose range increases dramatically for anything spoken in cant, and Charms to empower and enlighten followers that are most effective on those who

know the language.

Disgustingly rich by mortal standards, Fenya especially treasures the silver used in the Guild's preferred coinage, which he helps it promote over the Realm's jade currency. His Chosen would excel in bribes and other shows of wealth, especially when making use of silver.

Fenya is an impeccably honest broker; while he may present the truth creatively, he never lies. His Chosen might have Charms to sense and punish falsehoods, but their social influence Charms might be weaker or unusable for deception.

Vanileth, God of Artificial Flight

Vanileth remembers the First Age fondly: the great skyships, flying pagodas, starspires, and other wondrous conveyances that soared the sky; the prayers offered up to him by artificers, pilots, and passengers. Today, he has fallen so far in the Celestial Bureaucracy that he's been exiled in all but name from Heaven, residing a mountaintop eyrie in the far North where he crafts marvelous clockwork birds. Lookshy's scarce few skyships, the Haslanti League's balloon-driven air boats, and a handful of other flying crafts are all that remain of his once-great purview. Vanileth might be driven to create an Exigent to return artificial flight to creation or to fend off a winged foe of Creation — or he may already have a spark, awaiting the first mortal to reach his palace by sky.

Themes

As Chosen of Artificial Flight, Vanileth's Exigent would have a mastery of flying vessels and expertise in other vehicles, which they might enchant to take to the skies.

Vanileth is a masterful artificer, constantly tinkering with his clockwork birds. His Chosen might excel in crafting, particularly flying vessels; command flocks of flying automata; and stoke the ingenuity of inventors and engineers.

Secluded in his mountaintop sanctum, Vanileth offers rewards to those who can reach him. His Chosen might test the mettle and ingenuity of others, bestowing rewards on those who pass.

Yibi, Guardian of the Sweetgrass Temple

As a lion dog, Yibi is among the humblest gods, a minor guardian appointed by Heaven to defend the Sweetgrass Temple. Far in the south, the temple-manse nourishes soil and cleanses water, making it possible for the nearby cities of the Ytembe Confederation to survive. Throughout the centuries of her stewardship, she's fended off rogue spirits, mortal warlords, scavenger princes, and other threats to the manse. Creating an Exigent would almost surely destroy her, but she may still do so in the face of a threat too powerful for her to defeat.

Themes

Lion dogs are famously loyal, and Yibi has suffered great danger and long solitude in service to Heaven. Her Chosen could share that intense loyalty, guarding her positive Ties from all influence that would weaken or alter them; resisting intimidation, deception, and corruption through loyalty; and inspiring loyalty in others, deputizing them as guardians in Heaven's name.

As a lion dog, Yibi is a powerful guardian beast, with razor-sharp fangs and an impenetrable hide of jade. Her Chosen could draw on these traits, manifesting fangs, claws, and jade skin; honing his sense of smell; or drawing on her incredible strength and tireless nature.

As guardian of the Sweetgrass Temple, Yibi has ensured that surrounding cities have prospered. Her

Exigent might have power over fertility, plants, and water, able to imbue others with good health, raise up fields of tall grass to conceal herself, or create oases in even the most barren deserts.

It's Like That, But...

A Chosen of Yibi's Charms would likely have a good bit of overlap with both Dragon-Blooded, manipulating plants and water, and Lunars, drawing on animal traits. That's fine! An Exigent's themes can overlap with *some* of another kind of Exalted, as long as they remain distinct. That often means narrowing the focus of that theme and letting the god's nature and personality inform Charms that involving that theme. Yibi's Chosen has power over water and plants as sources of fertility, sustenance, and health rather than the Dragon-Blood's all-encompassing elemental mastery. Likewise, while Lunars can take any animal form, Yibi's Chosen is limited to their patron's blending of leonine and canine traits. When designing Charms for an Exigent with overlapping themes, you can sometimes take directly from other Exalted. You'll usually want to make a few changes to make it fit the overall design and mechanical focus of your Charm set, but sometimes you won't need to change it at all.

Notable Exigents

The Bleak Warden, Chosen of the Seals

The Bleak Warden is the callous guardian of an otherworldly prison, sealing away and unbinding the horrors trapped within as suits his purposes.

Omron Kanthu and The-Darkness-That-Binds

Many years ago, a child was born into Riven Quay's reeking, shadowy slums, orphaned or abandoned to a life of misery on the street. As Omron scuffed and stole and shivered through winters, the god known as The-Darkness That Binds walked the halls of the labyrinthine prison carved in Creation's dark depths, where countless enemies of Heaven had been sealed away. As more and more of its cells were filled, it grew harder for the gaolor-god to keep them locked away. First one prisoner escaped, then another, until The-Darkness-That-Binds knew his own power was not enough. Only an Exalted champion could keep these horrors contained, and he beseeched the Unconquered Sun.

Longing for more than a street urchin's life, Omron explored places forbidden to him and the earth's dark corners — the estates of the wealthy, caves and caverns, perilously decrepit buildings, abandoned tombs — searching for something, anything, that would give him a way out of this life. It was on one such expedition, traversing underground tunnels leading deep into the earth, that Omron finally found his prize. His companions had long since turned back in fear, and his lantern had flickered out, leaving him in pitch blackness. Lost, desperate, and afraid, his stumbling finally brought him to a luminous sigil, carved in the solid rock of a cavern wall.

A voice whispered to him, told him that the seal was yet unfinished and dared him to complete it if he believed himself worthy. Omron was no savant, was not even literate, but something in the half-finished sigil spoke to him, its solution as intuitively obvious to him as placing a puzzle piece. Cutting his arm on a jagged stone, he traced out a pattern in his own blood, and unsealed the power of Exaltation.

The Bleak Warden's Duty

The Darkness-That-Binds gave his Bleak Warden two tasks: maintaining the labyrinth's seals to keep its prisoners locked away and hunting down those who'd escaped the prison or who rightfully belonged in its

cells.

Now empowered beyond mortal imagining, Omron is free to explore Creation and seek out its secret wonders as he never could. But the burden of responsibility weighs heavy on him, and he chafes against his patron's demands. It isn't just wanderlust; the Bleak Warden's duties demand ruthlessness, and Omron lacks the cold heart they demand. Instead, those who speak with him find him a thoughtful man with gentle humor and a keen sense of justice, upholding his obligations only with great remorse.

Power of the Seals

The Bleak Warden wields the seals that ward The-Darkness-That-Bind's prison and greater seals beyond even his patron's grasp. He also embodies his patron's nature as a being of formless darkness, an implacable pursuer of Creation's foes, and a heartless gaoler. The Bleak Warden can:

- Draw on the knowledge, memories, and power of his prisoners.
- Unleash his prisoners against his foes, binding them lest they break free.
- Break an enemy's will by forcing an enemy to experience untold years of imprisonment in the blink of an eye.
- Track down even a quarry who leaves no trail, sensing its presence as a dissonance in the world.
- Create chains of darkness to bind a foe.
- Vanish into darkness.

Willow Specter, the Chosen of the Dice

Willow Specter is the luckiest man in the world, a daredevil who won his Exaltation from Plentimon, god of gamblers.

A Game of Chance

Long ago, Plentimon of the Dice won a spark of Exigence from a mountain-god desperate to recoup his losses in a high-stakes game. Without any intention of creation an Exalted champion, he's held onto it for years, occasionally staking it against treasures of immeasurable value or simply to make a game more interesting. Renowned for his fair play, none doubted that Plentimon would honor his bets, but he would only wager the spark when he was certain of winning.

Willow Specter had made his living in Nexus' gambling houses. At the age of thirteen, he took a week's worth of what he could beg and bluffed his way past the House of Golden Pips' hired muscle. He turned his meager coins into enough to keep him housed and fed, and then turned that into enough for life of luxury. He won fortunes and lost them, was tossed back onto the streets without a quarter-dinar to be made and rode the waves of fortune back to a life of riches.

Plentimon rarely leaves the casino that is his abode, but he watches over every gambler who prays to him, and Willow Specter caught his notice. He came to the House of Golden Pips, a man-shaped void flecked with silver and gold, and challenged Willow Specter to a game of chance. It lasted all night and all day, until Plentimon proposed one final gamble. If Willow Specter won, he would be Exalted as Plentimon's Chosen; lose, and become the god's eternal servant. Perhaps Plentimon's arrogance blinded him, perhaps Willow Specter was skilled enough of a cheat to hoodwink the god of gambling, or perhaps fortune simply smiled on him. He won and became the Chosen of the Dice.

The King of Gamblers

Willow Specter has amassed quite a fortune, spending it lavishly on finely tailored clothing, sumptuous feasts, and luxurious apartments in Nexus' bustling Cinnabar district. Luck is always with him, and not just at the gaming table. In the instant he thinks to hail a carriage, one pulls up beside him; on the run from Guild enforcers, he happens across a convenient alleyway to slip into. He stumbles across treasures thought lost forever and overhears teahouse gossip that tells him exactly what he needs to know.

Willow Specter has put his good fortune to use as a troubleshooter, enforcer, and assassin. His fees are exorbitant, though he'll cut them for interesting clients or job risky enough to excite him. He's currently working as a bodyguard for the Guild factor Nimah Fell, whose ruthless business practices and willingness to backstab his fellow Guildsmen have made him many enemies.

Plentimon largely leaves Willow Specter to his own devices, though the Chosen of the Dice is glad to help when the god requires his services, seeing him as an old friend. It's unclear to what extent Plentimon's been diminished by creating his Chosen. Do the glinting flecks within the void of his body seem dimmer than before? Does he hesitate just a bit before throwing the dice? Or is that all merely a bluff to make his enemies underestimate him?

For all Willow Specter's power and riches, he's not nearly as carefree as he seems. His confidence and swagger are genuine, but the nagging fear of his bill coming due is always at the back of his mind. Any gambler knows no winning streak lasts forever, and Willow Specter doesn't know when — or if — his luck will run out.

Loaded Dice

Willow Specter enjoys miraculous good fortune while also partaking of Plentimon's nature as a canny pit boss and astute judge of character. The Chosen of Dice can:

- Escape harm thanks to a lucky coincidence — a falling streamer knocking an arrow of course, a pack of cards in his pocket blunting a blow, etc.
- Know someone's wealth and its provenance at a glance.
- Make it possible for gamblers to stake memories, years of their lifespan, and other impossible wagers.
- Curse those who cheat in games or renege on their wagers.
- Reap greater rewards from risky endeavors.
- Exploit the corruption, greed, or pride of individuals and organizations.

Nurlissa, the Chosen of Masks

The Chosen of Masks wears countless false faces, changing her powers and identity as her circumstances require.

History

Shalrina, goddess of faces, long ago abandoned her celestial estate in Yu-Shan for a life in Creation, peddling masks from a small shop in Nexus — some merely of exquisite quality, some imbued with miraculous power, and some faces given to her in trade. She petitioned the Unconquered Sun for the fire of Exigence for a champion to stand against an inscrutable monster known as the Eater of Names that preyed upon her city's people, threatening their very identity — and what were faces without identity?

Nurlissa was at starvation's doorstep when she came to Shalrina's shop. She was young, scarcely a woman, and she'd heard the shop's mysterious proprietor traded in faces and all that came with them.

What use was her youth if she died tomorrow? Shalrina offered a different bargain, for her will to survive at all costs had impressed the goddess. In exchange for her face, she'd receive Exaltation, a mask shining with divinity, and serve Shalrina as her champion.

Behind the Mask

After Nurlissa drove the Eater of Names out of Nexus, she continued in Shalrina's service, spying on her rivals, collecting on debts owed to her, and fighting against supernatural threats to her patron. But Shalrina was not a kind patron, and she demanded more than her Chosen was willing to bear. She fled Nexus, cradling the face she'd stolen from the goddess' vault in her hands — her own.

Since then, she's hunted Wyld beasts threatening villages in the Scavenger Lands, liberated slaves from Guild caravans, and dueled with outcaste champions. What she really wants, though, is a home, somewhere she can make a new life for herself and discover who she is when she's not bound by desperate poverty or servitude to her patron.

Like many Exigents, she's come to Great Forks, hoping to find a home among the city's many gods and her fellow Chosen. But Shalrina has many allies and agents; many of Great Forks' gods owe a favor to Nurlissa's vengeful patron. If she wants to survive in her new home, she'll need companions of her own.

Masks of Power

The Chosen of Masks' Charms are not born of her personal prowess and skill like those of other Exalted. Instead, she possesses a panoply of magical masks created by Shalrina and by herself, each with its own unique identity and Charms.

- The Mask of Exaltation is the first one Nurlissa wore, a mirror-image of Shalrina's own countenance carved in black jade. It imbues her with the prowess of the Chosen, the most fundamental of her powers and prowess. She can internalize a limited number of these Charms, able to use them even while wearing other masks.
- Wearing a mask of carved wood, she becomes the Lord of Beasts, driven by primal instinct and an affinity for all animals. She may speak to and command beasts, wield the prowess of a legendary hunter, pass unscathed through the most perilous wilderness, and empower her familiars.
- Wearing a devil-faced mask, she becomes the Red-Eyed Demon, a wrathful monster who exults in bloodshed and dominance. She fights with incredible strength, skin like steel, and berserker fury, and terrifies and subdues foes with her dreaded battle-mien.
- Wearing a silken mask, she becomes the Doe Courtesan, infinitely subtle and wise in the nature of power. She has power both seen and unseen, captivating others with beauty and inflaming their passions or fading from visibility and acting with perfect silence.
- Wearing a Sijanese funeral mask, she becomes the Gallows Saint, a tragic and melancholy hero. She is a peerless ghost-speaker and spirit medium and can spread infectious sorrow, navigate the Underworld's waterways, and draw upon the fell power of necromancy.
- The Mask of Herself restores her to her mortal identity, empowering her to conceal her nature as one of the Exalted, draw power from her fierce will to survive, and safeguard her relationships and those closest to her heart.

The Foxbinder of Shifune

The Foxbinder is an Exigent charged with the oversight of Wicked-Grin Shifune, a legendary trickster who serves as her patron, companion, and hostage.

The Fox's Punishment

A wild and mischievous fox-spirit, Wicked-Grin Shifune was once but a minor terrestrial god but cheated his way into a position in Heaven and the power that came with it, hoodwinking a god tasked with approving new hires. He lived a life of opulence unknown to earthly spirits — feasting on peaches of immortality, lounging about in his manse while attended by countless servants, making fools of mighty gods with his shapeshifting pranks. In time, he angered the wrong god, and found himself haled into Heaven's courts.

Found guilty not only of troubling high-ranking gods but of committing a crime against Yu-Shan itself with his fraudulent hiring, Shifune was given an unprecedented sentence: he would be forced to create an Exigent, diminishing himself to create an Exigent who would act as his keeper. Much gossip and commotion spread through Yu-Shan in the verdict's wake; many were shocked the Unconquered Sun would bestow a spark upon the judge as an instrument of punishment. The Exaltation was sealed within a bejeweled collar and placed in the Immaculate Order's care along with Shifune.

The Foxbinder's Legacy

Shifune has had many Chosen, the Foxbinders, over the years, each one handpicked by the Immaculate Order to receive their predecessor's collar. The current Foxbinder is Tamako, a young patrician woman who entered the Immaculate Order to escape an arranged marriage. She stumbled through a difficult novitiate, but the diligence and determination with which she undertook it so impressed her mentor that she remembered Tamako's name when the previous Foxbinder died. Now, Tamako wanders the Blessed Isle sniffing out Anathema at the Order's behest, accompanied by Shifune in those shapes that weren't burnt to nothingness when he created her Exaltation — a red fox with seven-fingered hands instead of paws and a handsome, red-haired youth clad in black, red, and orange.

Previous Foxbinders have kept Shifune on a short leash, either out of a sense of duty as the fox-god's captor or for fear of what punishments the Immaculate Order might inflict. Tamako is still new to her Exaltation, though, and gentle-hearted. She treats Shifune more as a friend than as a prisoner, and her compassionate nature risks compromising her loyalty to the Order. When rumors of a Lunar Anathema led her to a mere child, the moon's mark shining on his brow, she let him escape and told her handlers it was nothing but an alehouse gossip.

Shifune is greatly pleased by his Chosen's seed of independence, nurturing it at every turn by encouraging small acts of rebellion. He hopes that she'll one day turn against the Order, becoming the rebel that his Exaltation has always been meant for, and that the two of them will once again raise chaos across Creation.

Gifts of the Foxbinder

The Foxbinder's prowess thwarts cunning and deception, making her the ideal captor for Shifune, but she also shares his nature as a gifted trickster and has a spiritual bond with him that empowers them both. The Foxbinder can:

- Scenting lies, making it easier to track those who live by deception.
- Expose disguises, deception, and trickery, especially from those in power.
- Having caught someone in a lie, render them incapable of further deception.
- Commune with Shifune even across great distances and empower him as her familiar.
- Create illusions that make even the most outrageous lies seem true.

- Create convincing disguises out of flimsy props and pretenses.

The Torchbearer

The Torchbearer is an ever-burning hero of enlightenment, heir to a chain of scholar-champions dedicated to preserving knowledge in the Age of Sorrows.

An Inheritance of Flame

Centuries ago, Medo's armies besieged Cradle, a city known for its libraries and universities. Ogen-Moin, the mandrill-headed god of study by lamplight, guardian of Cradle's centuries of accumulated knowledge, sacrificed himself to light his sacred lantern with the fire of Exigence, empowering a scholar-champion to protect his beloved libraries: the first Torchbearer. The Exigent couldn't save the city, but he escaped with his life, all the codices he could carry, and a dream of the world bathed in the light of knowledge and reason.

Since then, the Torchbearers have pursued this dream. The flame of their Exaltation burns steadily, giving them a lifespan to rival a Dragon-Blood's, though without their long-lasting youth. By the end of her first century, a Torchbearer appears quite elderly, though she remains spry. A Torchbearer's Exaltation would normally die with her, but it can be passed on from master to apprentice — an act that invariably kills the master.

Nozifo Isiman, the Eighth Torchbearer

Nozifo was born to a Southern family of herders. She never cared for studying or sitting in quiet, dusty reading rooms, but her predecessor, the Seventh Torchbearer, appreciated a venturesome spirit and saw Nozifo's intuitive brilliance behind her unschooled mind. Instead of keeping her to a library, he wandered forest pathways and city streets with her as her whims led her, imparting an education to rival any Realm patrician's as they walked. As he lay dying, struck down by an outcaste bandit's blade, he passed the Torchbearer's flame unto her.

After a year spent planning, Nozifo avenged her master, leaving behind only the smoldering ashes of his murderer. She's since set out to wander Creation, seeking knowledge in need of preservation. She's fallen in love, had children, and foiled conspirators and despots, but she's never stayed still for more than a year. She's crossed paths with the Immaculate Order and been declared Anathema for opposing their suppression of information.

In the Time of Tumult, Nozifo questions how well her roaming heroism serves Creation well, contemplating settling down and building a library or academy to house and share the knowledge she's won. But she's made many enemies, and her power can only be concealed for so long; wherever she makes her home, her light will inevitably her foes.

The Flame of Knowledge

The Torchbearer's power is palpable — a pale, inextinguishable flame that burns along her entire body, just above the skin. She may manifest a lamp of Essence to contain and concentrate her flame or conceal it within a mundane lantern, but it never travels beyond arm's reach. She wields power over both literal flame and the light of clarity and understanding. The Torchbearer can:

- Draw on her lantern's flame to set fires, blind foes, frighten off wild beasts, and banish cold and darkness.
- Bolster the concentration and mental clarity of those who study under her.

- Imbue others with wonder, curiosity, and a drive to share their knowledge.
- Use her lantern to reveal the path to her location.
- Banish ignorance, discord, and disorganization.
- Reveal vulnerabilities and flaws.

Thousand Venoms Mistress, Chosen of Toxins

The Chosen of Toxins is a divine assassin and master poisoner, master of the ten thousand venoms found in Creation and the worlds beyond.

The Venomous Exaltation

A socialite and schemer among the spirit courts of the Scavenger Land, the poison-goddess Whirling Lady Koro-Bana's pleas to the Unconquered Sun went unanswered. She had sought it for selfish reasons, seeking a divine assassin to strike down her rivals, and her poisoned words could not deceive the Most High. Undeterred, she sought out another god who'd won a spark of Exigence, eventually finding one boasting of his luck in one of Great Forks' teahouses. As she toasted to his good fortune, she slipped a slow, agonizing poison into his cup. As he writhed and screamed, she revealed her treachery and offered the antidote in exchange for his Exigence.

Broken Sky was a devotee of Koro-Bana's cult in Great Forks, an aged herbalist who served by the goddess by giving poisons to those in need of them — wives seeking freedom from abusive husbands, youths seeking to escape forced military service by feigning illness, and dissidents plotting the death of tyrants. Many in Koro-Bana's cult sought to win her favor and Exaltation, boasting of their death-dealing feats. Broken Sky said nothing, but those she'd helped spoke for her, recounting how her poisons had changed their lives. Exaltation flooded her soul like a tide of burning agony, eating away and corroding her mortality until only the Thousand Venoms Mistress remained.

The Divine Assassin

Devoted to her goddess, Broken Sky assassinates Koro-Bana's divine rivals and their cultists with unthinking dedication, each poisoned corpse a prayer. When not working on her patron's behest, she offers her services to any who can pay the price: queens, gods, warlords, merchant princes, monks, and more have met their end at her poisoned blades. Countless bounties have been placed on her head; she takes no pleasure in dispatching those sent to kill her, leaving them helpless and paralyzed rather than dead when she can.

Broken Sky takes pride in her work, but she's more than an assassin. It's been years since she's seen her family; she relocated them from Great Forks soon after killing her first god lest they suffer reprisals from Koro-Bana's enemies or others seeking vengeance on the legendary assassin. She limits her friendships and romances to her fellow Chosen, knowing they can defend themselves. Her work as an assassin funds a more-than-modest lifestyle, but much of her pay goes to her patron's temple, ensuring it can continue the good work she did in life.

Ten Thousand Deadly Venoms

The Thousand Venoms Mistress is a physical, spiritual, and metaphorical embodiment of poison in all its many forms. Her Charms also partake of her role as divine assassin Whirling Lady Koro-Bana's schemes, social graces, and vengeful nature. She can:

- Synthesize poisons from her own blood.

- Poison a spirit's Essence, corroding and dissolving it from within.
- Metaphorically poison a group with discord, suspicion, and betrayal.
- Read the thoughts and share the senses of someone she's poisoned.
- Experience prophetic visions of the future by flooding her body with entheogenic venom.
- Commit herself irrevocably to an assassination contract, becoming implacable in pursuit of her target.

Boz Miklós regarded his shadow as it faded into view, approaching the Little God’s Gate into Great Forks. The God of Riverspeak had always hated the sheer effort it took to materialize and tread Creation’s soil, but he enjoyed breathing the same air the mortals did. It had a thickness to it, necessitating the subtlest changes in how he worked his tongue to shape words. It had a taste, sweet and rich.

Great Forks’ streets were a riot of rich colors, noisy hubbub, and aromatic street food, its streets packed with mortal and god alike. And they were speaking *his* language. Boz fingered the cord of the cloth-of-gold bag within his sleeve pocket. Within it burned a spark of Exigence, a treasure beyond worth — one that he intended to sell in this, the City of Ten Thousand Temples.

What would my champion even look like? He wondered idly. Might they hear every word spoken in his tongue, hear hidden meaning behind honeyed words, speak righteous truths with every syllable? Boz Miklós pondered this and settled for never knowing. He’d sought the Exigence to save the Hundred Kingdoms from a faerie horror that devoured language itself, but before he found a champion, the beast had fallen to the Wyld Hunt. No longer in need of an Exigent, Boz had reached out among his fellow gods to find one willing to bargain for a spark of divine flame.

He walked along one of the lanes towards the bazaar of Little Yu-Shan, where mortals and spirits transacted worship and business. He strode past noodle stalls and caravanserais to the cafés, the ones that served coffee made with crushed eggshells that Boz so loved. Having never met his buyer before, he’d agreed to meet her.

The buyer was already sitting at their chosen table. She was gaunt and corpse-like, with eyes made of sapphire and breath that smelled of rotting meat no matter how much mint she chewed to cover the smell. Boz had expected someone more pleasant than a goddess of decay but hid such feelings away as he greeted her. Ignoring his pleasantries, the goddess placed a huge scroll case, carved from green jade, on the table. This was their agreed-upon price: the complete text of the Thousand Swallows Cycle, a lost epic of the Shogunate, translated into Rivertongue.

Boz proffered his gift in exchange, shining with blinding light in the instant between him opening the bag and the spark finding its home within the goddess’ Essence. As she signaled for Boz’s second cup, she excused herself. Boz didn’t blame her; he’d wanted to get rid of the Exigence as soon as possible. But for now, his troubles were over.

As he lifted the curved coffee cup to his lips, a cat-headed goddess wearing a golden mask approached the table. “So good to finally meet you, Boz,” she said, then went right for it. “Do you have it? My champion?” She brandished a scroll case of her own, ebony inlaid with silver. Boz choked on his growing dread, unable to get a word out. Opening the green jade case to reveal only blank paper, he confirmed what he was already sure of: he’d been swindled. He felt something more solid than foam bump his lips as he took a nervous sip from his coffee. He smelled it before it bubbled to the surface, a rotted mushroom spreading tendrils of filth through the bubbles. He wondered what the Chosen of Decay would look like.

Chapter Two

Great Forks

Few cities hold such repute for holiness as Great Forks. Founded centuries ago by three mighty gods — Spinner of Glorious Tales, Weaver of Dreams of Victory, and Shield of a Different Day — and their followers, this thronging metropolis has opened its arms wide to spirits and pilgrims alike. Here, any god may seek to gather devotees, raise up a place of worship, and establish a creed. Every avenue is thick with

shrines and temples; every hour marks some festival, filling the air with prayer, bell-song, and scents of incense and burnt offerings. Petitioners seek blessings at small gods' shrines, whether for luck at dice or a balm for the pain of gout, and spirits walk openly among mortals. For such divinities, this is a city of freedom.

But Great Forks is as profane as it is holy — thus its other name, Decadence. Slave laborers work the fields while merchants peddle every sort of luxury among the city's avenues and bazaars. Priests grow fat on pilgrims' donations while the poor subsist on meager charity in the city's slums. For all too many, this is a city of exploitation, a great prayer wheel spun by human suffering.

As the fire of Exigence blazes anew, Great Forks has become the site of a new pilgrimage. Warriors, sages, and scoundrels from across the Scavenger Lands — indeed, from across Creation — converge on the city in hopes of winning Exaltation.

Founding

In RY 278, three long-suffering refugee peoples — the Mileti, the Houtholan, and the Veh— followed their patron gods to the junction of the Rolling and Yellow Rivers, a place of clement weather and fertile soil. Tired of war and struggle, wary of neighboring polities and the horrors of a nearby shadowland, the three peoples and their gods negotiated a peace. Settling together at the river junction, they became one nation, founding a city and sharing the land's bounty.

The three patron gods issued an edict, welcoming to the city any and all spirits willing to abide by its laws and proclaiming themselves **thearchs**, the highest of all the city's gods. Since this intervention, they've largely left governance in mortal hands — originally to princes and dynasties, today to a civil service dominated by the city's wealthiest families.

A City of Gods and Spirits

Gods appear at every level of society in Great Forks. Powerful and celebrated divinities lounge upon palanquins amid riotous festival processions. Newly arrived godlings preach to the masses in hopes of gathering followers. Wizened spirits bide in musty, cobwebbed shrines, abandoned by their cults.

Hundreds of gods dwell here, drawn by opportunity for worship, sacrifice, earthly power, and pleasure. Some have established themselves securely as beloved or feared patron deities, ensconced in grand temples overseen by wealthy priesthoods. Less fortunate godlings, indigent and down on their luck, offer petty blessings at alleyway shrines.

While the thearchs are first among Great Forks' gods, many boast cults and prestige to rival theirs. Serpent Brother, god of the Yellow River, is prayed to by farmers and fishermen and beseeched to ward off floods. Resplendent Twin, mirror-goddess of merchants, messengers, and travelers, dances between her sacred heliographs to the delight of crowds. Burning Feather, goddess of intoxicants, receives worship from all manner of pleasure-seekers.

While gods and elementals make up the majority of this supernatural populace, Great Forks is also home to other spirits. Ghosts offer benedictions to children and grandchildren or seek vengeance against those who've wronged them. The local ancestor cult brokers deals between ghosts and gods, allowing ghosts to be syncretized into a god's cult as a guardian, attendant, spouse, or other figure. Even the Fair Folk have taken up occasional residence as artists and performers, subsisting on the city's raucous atmosphere.

The Lords of Great Forks

Once mighty in the Celestial Bureaucracy, Great Forks' thearchs abandoned their heavenly posts long

ago. Nonetheless, their personal power remains great; few can challenge them within their métiers. They hold no official rank in Great Fork's civil service, for Heaven forbids gods to rule directly over mortals, but when they collectively issue an edict, the city takes their word as law.

The thearchs want to protect Great Forks and its people but disagree on how best to do so — and, at times, on what should be their first priority to defend. They hold each other in great respect and affection, but their longstanding mutual trust has been tested over the years by disagreements and occasional underhanded political maneuverings — not to mention each thearch's awareness of their others' powers of trickery and deception. They've always reconciled after these quarrels, though sometimes only through their priests' and cults' intervention.

Spinner of Glorious Tales is a god of wanderers and storytellers, though he was mortal before his elevation to godhood. Charismatic and driven, Talespinner usually appears as a middle-aged man roughened by travel and crowned with a nimbus of yellow light, though she's a skilled shapeshifter, wearing the forms of travelers and migratory beasts. His foremost priority is that Great Forks offers opportunities for enlightenment, purpose, wealth, adventure, love, and more — the things great stories are made of. The gentler the law's hand, the more such opportunities can flourish; while he's no anarchist, he's the foremost advocate of limiting the civil service's power in any scenario. But of all the thearchs, he's the most often absent from the city, spurred by wanderlust. He's often returned to Great Forks aghast at its political transformations in his absence.

Weaver of Dreams of Victory is a god of dreams, war, and looms. The enigmatic Weaver appears as a shimmering waterfall of shapes; each person who looks on her sees everyone they've ever known in these cascading forms. She's been known to appear dreams across the Scavenger Lands, passing along messages, warnings, and the thearchs' decrees. She's an exacting perfectionist, endlessly changing and meddling with the civil service to improve upon its flaws and abandoning old goals as soon as she conceives of a better one. The only constant is her deep, familial connection to her fellow thearchs and Great Forks itself, which ties the three gods together.

Shield of a Different Day is a god of defensive warfare, deception, and false memories. She wields an unbreakable lance and an unbreachable shield among her panoply, but none can remember her appearance, which fades from memory as she departs; she's depicted in art as a tall, powerfully built warrior with black hair, dark skin, and eyes like granite. While Dayshield is best known as Great Forks' defender, she also seeks to shepherd its cultural and economic prosperity, favoring the city's merchants, artists, and artisans over others. She has a complicated relationship with the Guild, valuing its role in commerce but wary of its potential threat to Great Forks' autonomy.

Against the Black Heron

In its early days, Great Forks suffered the predations of wrathful ghosts and shambling horrors that emerged from the Field of Endless Raitons, a nearby shadowland. The most terrifying and powerful of these served a puissant ghost-necromancer called the Black Heron, a queen of assassins presiding over a spectral court of killers.

Great Forks' thearchs banded together to drive off this threat to their peoples. Unable to match the ghost-queen through military might alone, they triumphed by cunning. While Dayshield led the city's army against the Heron's forces, Weaver peered into the Heron's nightmares to discover her fear, a secret vulnerability that might destroy her forever. Talespinner met with the Heron and told her of how the thearchs stood ready to slay her. Unwilling to call their bluff — if it was a bluff — the Heron retreated.

Great Forks' ancestor cult — from ghosts and Ghost-Blooded heroes to exorcists and

necromancers — played a prominent role in the thearchs' war against the Heron. That conflict has become the focal point of the cult's oral history. But in some corners, heretic cults venerate the Heron under a different title: the Princess Magnificent with Lips of Coral and Robes of Black Feathers.

The Lay of the Land

Temples and government buildings predominate along Great Forks' grand avenues and plazas. Civic architecture combines styles from across the Scavenger Lands, often tracing back centuries. Pillared porticoes, massive statues, and thin ornamental spires are common features, as are elaborate friezes, mosaics, and precious metal inlays adorning walls.

Many gods maintain sanctums in Great Forks: pocket-worlds hidden away from mortal eyes. These are often found in the precincts of temples and shrines, but others can be reached through the city's side streets, alleys, and courtyards. Burning Feather, Lady of Intoxicants, dwells in a labyrinthine manor of winding hallways and countless connecting rooms behind a certain caravanserai's back door. Whirling Lady Koro-Bana maintains a garden of countless poisonous plants. The thearchs share a triple palace, though it's easy to tell which palace originally belonged to each god: Talespinner's is a vast library filled with countless stories, Weaver's is spun from daydreams and nightmares, and Dayshield's is a mighty fortress. Diplomacy and debauchery among gods often take place in sanctums, as does the scheming of divine conspiracies.

Off the major arteries, streets grow narrower and blocks smaller. Residential tenements share walls and climb several stories. They're largely wood, brick, and stone, with steep gabled roofs covered with vivid pottery tiles and outer walls covered in stucco painted with a riot of colorful imagery. Windows and doors open on a web of interlinked courtyards, sometimes bridging the streets via underpasses, overpasses, and even rooftops — a veritable second city inaccessible to outsiders, concealing all manner of reclusive shrines, black market shops, slum dwellings, and witches' abodes.

Two streams flow through Great Forks on their way to the Yellow River, crossed by wide, picturesque bridges built in steep, arching curves to ease boat traffic. When not in the rushing waters of the rainy season, coracles ferry folk back and forth between embankments, while rafts come downstream bearing agricultural produce for market — though in the rainy season, the rushing waters drive vessels from the waterways.

Blocks of parkland are set aside for future development as part of the bureaucracy's long-term urban planning. Drugged slaves tend groves and flowerbeds; priests maintain small shrines to all manner of spirits. Homeless residents form tent cities in parks adjoining poorer quarters; in wealthier districts, household guards are dispatched to destroy such encampments and drive the homeless away.

Beyond the city's walls, rustic villas of the wealthy dominate the rich, rolling hills. Much of the surrounding farmland is worked by slaves, though some landowners lease their fields to tenant farmers. Individual farmsteads lie scattered for miles across plains and hills, working marginal land and struggling to keep pace with rising taxes. Villages cluster along rivers and streams; buildings are brick or wood with thatched rooves, often raised on stilts to escape damage from the Yellow River's intermittent flooding.

City Districts

The thearchs dwell in splendor atop **The Hill of Hollyhocks**, ringed by hundreds of other grand temples to which all of Great Forks' divinities aspire. Lesser cults typically raise temples and shrines in **Holymaze**, whose streets throng with processions, festivals, worshipers, pilgrims, and newly arrived

godlings seeking followers. It's filled with countless podiums bearing plant or animal imagery, both for ease of recognition and as a subtle jab against Immaculate preachers.

Gods gather for carousing, entertainment, and more profane congress with mortals in the restaurants, theatres, and bordellos of **Little Yu-Shan**; it's also home to many of the city's God-Blooded residents. In the Hill of Hollyhocks' shadow stands the **Colonnade** district, filled with monumental structures that house the civil service.

Wealthy families maintain luxurious residences on **Wolf Hill**. Poorer folk dwell in less affluent districts — the reclaimed lowlands of **The Marshes**, the twisting market-streets of the **Beehive** district, or the wharves and warehouses of **Quayside**. The most destitute make encampments in the city's parklands, like **Spinner's Field**, a popular site for festivals and private recreation, or **Coppice**, more wilderness than park and the city's chief source of firewood.

The city's standing army barracks among the war-god temples of **Kerin's Gate**. Savants from foreign lands seek the **Violet Meadow**, one of the Scavenger Lands' great academies. Funerals, cremations, and the local ancestor's cults rites and festivals take place among **The Urns**, filled with graveyards, catacombs, and shrines to venerated ancestors and death-gods. Other districts abound, each with their own particular nature.

Religion and Theology

Countless gods reside in Great Forks, whether permanent residents or passing through, and all but the most destitute boast a cult of some kind. Some have but a single priest tending a shrine; others invite crowds of worshippers into great temples overseen by complex hierarchies of religious officials. Many gods and priesthoods oversee mystery cults with secret initiations, practices, and doctrines. Everyday customs incorporate religious meaning; residents greet each other with words of worship and regard gift-giving, even between mortals, as a form of ritual sacrifice. The thearchs frown on sectarian conflict and have occasionally made personal demonstrations of their displeasure to overly ambitious spirits and priests.

Heaven's Blind Eye

While the thearchs may not rule Great Forks, their edicts and interventions in its governance have long since passed the line into illegal intervention in mortal affairs. The city's continuous and pervasive intermingling of gods and mortals is a lesser offense, but one that could be brought against many of its divine residents.

At one time, such open defiance of heavenly law would have brought down swift judgment from the censors, mighty elemental dragons appointed by Heaven to seek out and punish the crimes of the gods. But the Celestial Bureaucracy is rife with corruption, mismanagement, and indolence, and its justice is slow and sporadic.

The Emperor Stag, the censor with jurisdiction over the Scavenger Lands, is deeply corrupt, ignoring all manner of divine crimes in Great Forks in exchange for regular festivals, offerings funded by the civil service, and the promise of a single favor extracted from each of the thearchs.

The Grand Mythopoeia

Great Forks has no central religious authority or dogma, but many of its cults share a common theological framework, the Grand Mythopoeia. This holds that all gods, from the pettiest spirit to the thearchs

themselves, are emanations of an overarching godhead, countless faces worn by the numinous divine. This godhead is a being of dream and story, and Creation is the story that the godhead tells itself.

Mortals play many roles in the Grand Mythopoeia across the course of their reincarnations; those who play their part well will be born into a greater role in their next life. Over countless reincarnations, a mortal might unite with this godhead and be reborn as a god. To play one's part in the Grand Mythopoeia is more than fulfilling one's assigned tasks in life; it calls for a life of bold decisions, expressions of passion, and profound words — all that makes a compelling dramatic figure. Eloquence, wit, charm, and grace are seen as signs of distinction and a part well-played in a previous life.

To harm another is to harm the godhead. Violence is permissible only in sport, duels, and ritual war, when all participants consent to it. Violence in self-defense, defensive warfare, and suppressing riot and rebellion is also permitted; acts of aggression are held to provide implicit consent to such violence. This exception is also extended to the use of force in apprehending suspected criminals and restraining disobedient slaves, construing a criminal's offense or a slave's defiance as implicitly inviting correction. A number of priests consider this justification flimsy and agitate for legal reforms.

While violating the prohibition on violence is unthinkable to many in Great Forks, other kinds of proscribed harm — emotional, financial, and reputational — are much lesser sins against the godhead; abuse, exploitation, and slander are as common here as any other city.

Theological specifics vary widely between priesthoods. Some delve deep into minutiae — like whether elaborate calligraphy or oral history better pleases the godhead — while others consider such speculation pointless, focusing on praxis. Countless sects have splintered from this core doctrine — Immaculate syncretisms, mystery cults that believe their patron deity to be the godhead incarnate, and apocalyptic doomsayers who warn that the story is nearing its end. Some heretical sects preach that there is no godhead, and that Creation is the countless stories told by gods and mortals.

Ten Thousand Temples

The city's temples overflow with art, music, and ritual. Most welcome visitors into their public precincts; many put on dramatic performances to draw in crowds. Some visitors attend a temple regularly not for its god, but for its architecture, rites, or community, a custom nicknamed "temple tourism."

Each temple has its own priesthood, each with its own unique structure and customs. Some are hierarchies organized under a high priest; others have synods giving all the priesthood's members an equal voice. Methods of initiation exist in such variety that almost any citizen of Great Forks could be accepted into the priesthood of some god or another. Some cults maintain priestly bloodlines; some require a showing of divine favor from their patron god; some permit only those in certain trades and professions to be priests.

Most temples are supported by offerings from worshippers and donations from wealthy mercantile families. Some charge pilgrims for entry into the temple proper, and exact further fees for blessings, access to inner sanctums or relics, and the like. The largest receive subsidies from the civil service, that they might continue drawing pilgrims and their wealth to the city. Some priests are independently wealthy from mercantile endeavors, artisanal work, or inherited wealth, able to fund smaller cults with their personal assets.

Proselytization

Outside of temples, proselytization and preaching are only permitted on one's own property; on the property of another, with their permission; or in the Holymaze district, with a permit from the city

bureaucracy. An exception to this law exists for proselytization in one-on-one conversations, though a separate law criminalizes unwanted preaching, including proselytizing to a slave whose owner forbids it, an employee whose employer does, or a child whose parent does. Illegal preaching is often ignored if it doesn't cause disturbances, but traffic obstruction, radical doctrines, and public affrays are harshly cracked down on, as are proselytes with influential enemies.

Shrine-Gangs

Groups of weak spirits, unable to establish individual cults or attach themselves to more powerful divinities, form shrine-gangs: petty pantheons that carve out enclaves in the city's poorer districts. Many are gods of baleful purviews with no blessings to offer potential worshippers, illegally extorting worship through violence or running apotropaic protection rackets. Most shrine-gang members feud and jockey for power among themselves, each hoping to gain sufficient connections, prestige, or wealth to establish an independent cult.

Shrine-gangs harass other spirits seeking followers on their territory, though powerful trespassers largely ignore them and causing too much trouble attracts the law's attention. Individual members aim to garner sufficient connections, prestige, or wealth to rise above the gangs, though many eventually tire of failure and leave Great Forks.

Shrine-gangs often recruit their priesthood from influential mortals from within their territory: domineering family patriarchs, prominent shopkeepers, crime bosses, and others with the sway to draw in worshippers and provide a supply of offerings and sacrifices. The most prominent shrine-gangs have temples and priesthoods to match those of Holymaze and approach the splendor of the Hill of Hollyhocks.

The Thorn Princes

This shrine-gang has claimed the Thornfounts as their territory, a cluster of tenements surrounding an overgrown courtyard whose dried-up fountain is tangled with thornbushes. Their ranks include Laughing Winter, a minor disease-god of the common cold; Czenime, a divine attendant who fled her mistress Afodha, the Lady of the Well; Bent-Stalk Umon, a field guardian whose land was paved over for the city's streets; and Ezkri of the Fishhooks, a centuries-old ghost whose descendants have long since died out. Thornfounts' residents know the Princes as kindly spirits, warding off minor ills and bringing forth fruits and vegetables from the courtyard. These spirits ask only for simple prayers and small offerings, the latter collected by their priests — foremen and other laborers with the brute strength to drive out other petty gods' proselytes.

Immaculacy

Lookshy's Immaculate Faith has a small but significant presence in Great Forks, owing both to Lookshyan missionary efforts and to immigration from across the Scavenger Lands. Other Immaculate sects from the Scavenger Lands and the Eastern Threshold, like the Intou heresy, have smaller followings, while the Realm's Immaculate Order, Prasad's Pure Way, and other distinct sects have little to no presence. While the city is an affront to the gods' place in the Perfected Hierarchy, few Immaculates have risked the violence and coercion employed in dealing with rogue gods elsewhere; such an act would invite violent reprisals and vigilante justice from the gods. Despite this, they're still heavily stigmatized; Immaculate temples must pay an excessive tax, and known adherents are often targeted as troublemakers by the city's law enforcement.

Culture

Few cities can match Great Forks' cosmopolitanism, founded by three disparate peoples and home to pilgrims and immigrants from across the East and beyond. Some gods encourage this, championing foreign goods, arts, and ideas that fall within their divine purview; ghosts preserve the arts, scholarship, and cuisine of cultures long dead. Half a millennium of cultural exchange, intermingling, and assimilation have synthesized these varied influences into a distinctive Great Forks culture, though one that evolves rapidly as new peoples and ideas come to the city.

Great Forks' culture is intertwined with its religious life. Storytelling is highly regarded, owing both to Talespinner and the Grand Mythopoeia's influence: As the godhead speaks Creation into being, so too does every story take on a reality of its own. Prevailing movements in art and literature prize works inspired by dreams, visions, and hallucinations. Intoxicants are seen as a method of communion with the divine. Bhang — edible preparations of marijuana, including lassi, butter, and candy — is the city's most popular entheogen, easily purchased from street vendors, though opium, qat, and betel also see use. Fragments of temple friezes, chipped away to be replaced with new bas-reliefs when a vacant temple is repurposed by a new god, are prized as talismans of good fortune.

Wealthy citizens engage in decadent banquets, inviting a score of guests to enjoy a broad array of small, flavorful dishes followed by poetry recitals, musical performances, dances, storytelling contests, competitive games, and convivial or philosophical conversation. Physical fitness and athletic prowess are prized among the upper class, who have the wealth and leisure time to attend the city's private gymnasia.

Great Forks' poor find entertainment in the city's public festivals and processions, enjoying their music, dance, theater, and other artistic display. Outdoor sports like footraces, swimming contests, and harpastum are common diversions, as are carousing, communal singing, and graffitiing the cities' walls and streets with charcoal and ocher.

Some things span all walks of life. Almost every resident of Great Forks frequently attends some kind of temple performance, whether a homeless beggar taking in a puppet-show at a humble back-alley shrine or a wealthy merchant attending theatrical performances in the Hill of Hollyhocks' most prestigious temples. Gambling also cuts across classes; good luck in games of chance is seen as a sign of divine favor. Gaming houses flourish through the city's districts, many frequented or even run by spirits. The wealthy fill their estates with the works of the city's most prestigious artists, while even the poor can usually afford an apprentice's practice composition or botched piece to decorate their home.

The Three Peoples

Most of Great Forks' inhabitants descend from the three refugee peoples who founded the city. Over the centuries, their distinct identities have blended into a cosmopolitan whole through intermarriage, shared religion, and cultural exchanges. Sizable minorities of each of the three peoples maintain cultural enclaves, limiting their interactions with outsiders and passing down customs and traditions scarcely adulterated by the passage of time.

Talespinner's people, the nomadic **Houtholan**, fled a series of plagues along the Silver River. While storytelling is prized throughout Great Forks, it's a cornerstone of Houtholan culture; their countless oral epics are recited in temples, family gatherings, and riverboats. Their riparian tradition as fisherfolk and river traders continues on the Yellow River; the city's riverside districts are heavily populated by the Houtholan.

Weaver's people, the **Veh**, fled from a province of the Prasaki empire to escape religious persecution from its Pure Way. Their syncretic faith provided the theological foundation of the Grand Mythopoeia, and Veh priests played an important role in helping foreign spirits establish their cults in the city's early

days. They maintain longstanding traditions of scholarship, textile art, and oratory; many go into one of the city's priesthoods or join its civil service, whose formal kaftans can be traced back to the garb of the first Veh refugees.

Dayshield's people, the **Mileti**, fled the war that destroyed the Shogunate successor states of Laris and Velen. Their homeland was a cultural and economic hotbed of the Scavenger Lands; even today, many among Great Forks' merchants, performers, and poets are Mileti. Much of the city's outlying countryside is owned by wealthy Mileti, and certain skilled trades — masonry, glassblowing, bellfounding, and more — are dominated by Mileti artisans.

Clothing

Great Forks' fashion incorporates influences from countless cultures from across the Scavenger Lands, though none as prominent as those of the three peoples. Houtholan fashion consists of elaborately folded chitons and chlamyses, held in place with ornate girdles. Veh fashion features colorful kaftans, sarongs, and turbans. Mileti fashion is characterized by dyed silk sampots, patterned cloths worn as scarves, bandannas, and waistbands, and tall, elaborate headwear. Dyes, fabrics, and even certain patterns are restricted by sumptuary laws, the exclusive province of the wealthy. Jewelry, ornaments, and garlands are common, especially among the city's priests.

Cuisine

Rice — made into noodles, breads, and pancakes — and freshwater fish dominate Great Forks cuisine, which melds the three founding peoples' recipes with local ingredients. Small dishes with contrasting textures and flavors are popular, making use of seasonings like ginger, paprika, vinegar, fish paste, honey, poppy seeds, and sesame. Other staple ingredients include green onions, olives, pickled vegetables, cheese, yogurt, fowl, and pork. Rice dumplings stuffed with meat or sweets are popular food stall fare. The city's poor subsist largely on gruel made from rice and millet, accented when possible with vegetables, eggs, grasshoppers, fish, and other meat; the wealthy eat meat and fruit daily, seasoning their meals with foreign spices.

Popular beverages include tea, milk, coffee, fruit juices, rice beer, and wines brewed from both grapes and rice. Water is often made potable by mixing it with wine. Aside from knives for meat and spoons for soup, food is eaten with the fingers, using rice pancakes as napkins.

Slave laborers eat communal meals prepared from rations of rice provided by their owners, supplemented with whatever greens, insects, and river fish they can forage. Domestic slaves also receive scraps from their owners' tables.

Government

Great Forks is governed by its civil service. Eight commissions oversee all government activity, their members chosen each year by lot from the koruphai, the highest tier of the city's citizenship, and confirmed competent by a panel of priests and savants. Each commission's five members set policy for the bureaus beneath them and oversee promotions to fill gaps among mid-level functionaries, who in turn oversee and employ junior functionaries, down to the least prestigious scribes and aides.

Each commission's meetings are held in the city's public plazas, with lengthy debates that continue until a decision is reached, recessing only for bodily necessities. Wealthy bureaucrats trained in rhetoric at the Violet Meadow, priests with oratorical skills honed by years of daily preaching, and poets who've devoted their lives to their craft spend long days wrangling over policy and details. Social ties — friendship, family, cult membership, and business connections — grease the process; commissioners

often resolve disputes at theatres, teahouses, or dinner parties in advance of a meeting, sealing agreements with lavish gift-sacrifices indistinguishable from bribes.

Spirits are forbidden from holding office in the civil service, though this doesn't keep them from influencing it, often by using an office-holding priest, worshipper, or God-Blooded scion as a proxy. The thearchs likewise hold no official role in the civil service but have unquestionable informal authority over it. On those rare occasions when a thearch expresses disapproval of a proposed law or regulation, it's almost always been withdrawn; unanimous condemnations from the thearchs have never been defied.

The Eight Commissions

The Commission of Flourishing Grandeur oversees public works, conscripting *corvées* for month-long stints constructing and maintaining roads, irrigation, docks, granaries, schools, and government offices. Conscripts are selected by lottery, though the wealthy easily escape such obligations by paying the unemployed and impoverished to work in their stead.

The Commission of Burnished Silver is responsible for setting tax rates, collecting taxes, and conducting financial audits.

The Commission of Numbers and Papers administers the city's census, maintains public records, and conducts lotteries to select commissioners.

The Commission of Unquestionable Justice maintains and revises the criminal code, oversees law enforcement, and conducts trials.

The Commission of Shrines and Temples oversees religious activity in the public sphere, including festival scheduling, procession itineraries, permits for preaching, and temple subsidies.

The Commission of Prosperous Markets regulates economic activity and local business, including setting standards for product quality, regulating wages, maintaining standardized weights and measures, investigating merchants' and businesses' finances, and imposing laws regarding treatment of slaves.

The **Commission of Distinguished Guests** regulates visitors, immigration, and foreign trade — setting tariffs and duties, imposing laws governing visitors' conduct, and negotiating with foreign trade partners, like the Guild's Directorate in Nexus.

The Commission of Kingdoms and Nations, which oversees foreign policy, including diplomacy, intelligence gathering and espionage, regulating the quartering of foreign dignitaries in the homes of wealthy private citizens, and deploying Great Forks' military.

Citizenship

Great Forks' society is stratified into four classes: a three-tiered system of citizenship based on the annual income of one's household assets — farmland, business ventures, outstanding loans, and the like — with a slave class beneath them. Great Forks' resident spirits are citizens as well, subject to the same requirements as mortals; they may count their temple's income as their own, though many spirits also acquire property and invest in businesses. Citizenship carries many privileges, including holding office in the civil service, holding military rank, bringing lawsuits, and serving on juries. Only citizens must pay individual taxes; foreigners and slaves are exempt, though foreigners' business ventures are still taxed.

Every seven years, census-takers from the Commission of Numbers and Papers assess all Great Forks citizens' assets to determine if their income has changed sufficiently to affect their status. Citizens who

wish to secure an increase in status prior to the census may pay a fine for an early assessment. Often, these changes are minimal, with only a miniscule portion of the citizenry rising or falling, but when the census coincides with economic upheaval or transformation, it can significantly impact Great Forks' society, often leading to significant political and social change. The census takers are far from incorruptible; a wealthy citizen might bribe one to overlook a recent downturn in revenue or to give exacting scrutiny to a rival's assets.

The highest class of citizens, the koruphai (singular koruphe), must reap an annual income of at least a talent of silver from their holdings. Only the koruphai may hold the highest posts in the civil service or the military; prominent temples often restrict their high priesthood to them. Great Forks' overwhelming military losses in the Battle of Mishaka fourteen years ago significantly thinned the koruphai's ranks, resulting in many of these offices devolving to inexperienced and untested members of koruphe households; corruption, incompetence, and mismanagement have rarely been as common in the civil service or the military as they are today.

Beneath the koruphai are the mesoi (singular mesos), whose assets produce at least one hundred dinars annually. They have the right to hold most positions in the civil service and military officerships. Most priests, bureaucrats, and wealthy merchants are mesoi.

Those unable to qualify as mesoi are lakkoi (singular lakkos). They may enlist in the military and hold the lowest-ranking positions in the civil service, though in practice, unpropertied lakkoi rarely do so. Unpropertied lakkoi are typically laborers, artisans, street performers, and destitute beggars.

Beneath Great Forks' citizens are its slaves, comprising over half the city's population. They lack the legal rights afforded to citizens, receiving only the minimal protections provided by the Commission of Prosperous Markets' laws. Those forced into debt slavery are stripped of citizenship for the duration of their compelled labor, though any household members and children they may have retain their status. Manumitted slaves are considered citizens for purposes of legal protections but must either wait until the census or pay for an early assessment to receive formal status.

Citizenship and the Census in Play

If it's relevant in play, Great Forks' residents need Resources 2 to qualify as mesoi and Resources 3+ to qualify as koruphai. The Storyteller should feel free to have the census occur at whatever time best suits their chronicle's needs; if a Storyteller doesn't have any plans, players can introduce facts regarding the census.

Slavery

Great Forks' slave populace consists of people sold by slave traders, citizens forced into debt slavery, and those born to enslaved parents. Most are forced to labor in the fields outside the city's walls, tending rice, vegetables, tobacco, marijuana, poppies, and betel. Some work within the city as laborers, gladiators, personal attendants, secretaries, temple servants, and the like.

Great Forks' slaves may marry and own property and are entitled to rudimentary legal protections — while offenses against slaves aren't criminalized by Great Forks' law, a slaveowner may bring civil suit against an offender to recoup damages. While slaveowners have extensive leeway in their treatment of slaves, wanton physical violence and failure to provide adequate lodging or food violate laws concerning treatment of slaves, though these are often rarely enforced. Any slave may purchase their freedom, though the price of doing so is considerable; they must pay their owners both a portion of the expected profit their labor would have generated and for the lodgings, food, and any other goods provided to them.

Many in Great Forks have argued for reforms in the treatment of slaves; a smaller number advocate for outright abolition. These include former slaves, philosophers and ethicists, immigrants from foreign lands where slavery is outlawed, cults of gods of freedom, and some who are simply driven by conscience. Such efforts have faced significant opposition from slaveowners, the civil service, and the thearchs; any large abolitionist movement is swiftly suppressed by the Arrows.

Law Enforcement

While the Commission on Unquestionable Justice oversees criminal law in Great Forks, enforcement is delegated to a number of law-cults in good standing with the civil service. Most prominent of these are the Arrows of Ji-Zhen's Justice, worshippers of the Scavenger Lands' god of sanctioned punishments; Great Forks' residents colloquially refer to all these cults as *the Arrows*. They police the city's streets for public disturbances and investigate crime, focusing on wealthy neighborhoods and neighborhoods frequently traveled by foreign visitors. Victims of crime in poorer neighborhoods know better to expect much help from them.

The Arrows have jurisdiction over god and mortal alike, though investigating spirits is both politically unpopular and difficult to do as a practical matter. Some law-cults count God-Blooded, outcastes, and Exigents among their ranks; when these aren't available for a significant spirit investigation, the Arrows may deputize gods or other puissant supernatural beings to assist them.

Courts

Any citizen can initiate a civil or criminal proceeding by application to the Commission on Unquestionable Justice, though it's most often the victim who brings the case. Not all such applications are granted; petty grievances and de minimis offenses rarely reach trial. Cases brought by mortals against gods face especial scrutiny. The Arrows don't bring criminal proceedings themselves; they merely provide the results of their investigation to victims.

Criminal defendants and civil plaintiffs alike stand trial before courts of 101 jurors chosen by lot from among citizen volunteers; paid a pittance, jurors are largely poor or elderly citizens. Each case begins with ritual prayer by all participants for the *viveka*, the god assigned by the commission to oversee the case.

Trial largely boils down to each party's rhetorical skills, persuading the jury by appeal to precedent, practicality, and ethics. Jurors are expected to scrupulously study the laws that govern the case before pronouncing their verdict, but no such statutes exist for most civil matters beyond commerce — negligence, breach of personal contracts, property disputes, and the like. Such disputes are resolved solely on the parties' arguments.

While the jury decides the case, the *viveka* chooses the punishment. They have broad discretion in sentencing; the most common are fines, public humiliation, and imprisonment, though ironic punishments are in vogue, like requiring a defendant to perform a task chosen by the victim — or, if deceased, her family. Those unable to pay fines are placed in debt slavery; those who refuse to comply with other punishments face imprisonment instead. Great Forks no longer employs corporal punishment or execution, owing to the Grand Mythopoeia's prohibition on violence; the worst crimes are punished by revocation of citizenship and exile. Civil offenses may be punished by all these but imprisonment, disenfranchisement, and exile. Gods are punished just as mortals; their only formal privilege is that they may not be permanently exiled.

Great Forks' court system favors the powerful. While its juries are thought to be too large to easily bribe, the wealthy can retain the services of the city's most distinguished speechwriters, and many jurors are

largely biased in favor of spirits over mortals. Great Forks' elite also use the courts against political and commercial enemies, bringing cases in hopes of subjecting their rivals to large fines or even having them exiled. The poor, on the other hand, must argue their case without any formal rhetorical training or legal education.

Economics

Great Forks exports the fruits of centuries of intermingled artistic traditions: high-quality finished goods, religious accoutrements, jewelry, musical instruments, sculptures, patterned textiles, and medicines. The most successful artisans receive funding from wealthy patrons or temples in exchange for a percentage of their earnings. Slaveowners sell food crops and drugs on foreign markets, as well as liquor distilled from their crops.

In turn, the city imports a wide range of raw materials: yarn, ore, lumber, quality stone, and the like. Slaves are purchased from foreign traders in massive quantities, while prodigious quantities of imported foodstuffs supplement the yield of farmers, fisherfolk, and slave laborers. The wealthy import luxury goods from across the Scavenger Lands and beyond, both for their own use and as temple offerings that make a conspicuous display of wealth.

The constant ebb and flow of visitors — pilgrims, merchants, diplomats, savants, scavenger princes, and now those seeking Exaltation — creates enormous demand for lodgings, food, and entertainment. In addition to Great Forks' many caravanserais and hostelries, families often put out a shingle offering room and board to visitors during major festivals. Restaurants near commercial lodgings often have foreign food on offer, whether fried rice, fish balls, and noodle dishes from Nexus, milk-fed mutton and savory fried potatoes from Clovina, or pastries from Port Calin.

Military

Great Forks' military is largely made up of citizen volunteers, chosen by lot on a monthly basis from all applicants deemed fit. In wartime, the Commission of Kingdoms and Nations often conscripts lakkoï to bolster its ranks. The rank and file's arms are stored in city armories; officers maintain their own arms. Mounted soldiers — including all officers — must maintain their own warhorses; as such, the vast majority of soldiers are infantry, with equestrian ranks dominated by mesoi and koruphai. This volunteer army is supported by an auxiliary standing military drawn from cults of the city's war-gods and other martial spirits.

Spirits and other supernatural beings play a significant role in warfare. Their presence deters neighboring polities that might otherwise consider besieging the city, due to their supernatural power and religious significance. Spirits, God-Blooded warriors, and Exigent champions are Great Forks' greatest strength in battle, historically elevating its military forces to rival or exceed most in the Scavenger Lands, save for Lookshy's Seventh Legion.

Great Forks' military has long been a largely defensive force; the Grand Mythopoeia's prohibition on unprovoked warfare hasn't entirely prevented wars of aggression but makes them immensely politically unpopular. The civil service often hires mercenaries for such deployments; it's still unpopular but easier to conceal from the public. In peacetime, Great Forks' military suppresses riots, guards the city's gates and walls, and patrols nearby roads for bandits. Military parades and processions often take center stage in festivals of war-gods and other bellicose spirits.

Great Forks' army suffered a crushing defeat fourteen years ago at the Battle of Mishaka, the final conflict of a war where the military powers of the Confederation of Rivers united against newly

expansionist Thorns, backed by the Realm. Great Forks suffered massive losses, including almost all of its experienced soldiers. Its army is still recovering, with major shortfalls in leadership, numbers, discipline, and field experience, a worrying sign as tensions rise across the River Province.

Prominent Figures

Ciade, Hierophant of Warp and Weft, is both one of Great Forks' foremost poets, famed for her surreal formalist compositions, and high priestess of Weaver of Dreams of Victory, blessed with prophetic visions. She fears for Great Forks, her patron, and her own power, for she's dreamt of the city in flames and of a figure who could only be the Chosen of Dreams, War, and Looms — a figure who isn't her. Fearing war from within and without, she advocates for strengthening Great Forks' military and recruiting Exigent guardians for the city, while privately purging Weaver's cult of potential rivals and abusing Great Forks' courts to have potential Chosen of her god exiled.

Araz Who-Feeds-Us-All, the Scavenger Lands' Prefect of Rice, is the most prominent of Great Forks' many fertility gods. His temple on the Hill of Hollyhocks is second only to the thearchs' own. He's worshipped by koruphe slaveowners and lakkos tenant farmers; by bakers, restaurateurs, and food stall vendors; and by slaves seeking ease in the next day's labors and opportunities for wealth with which to buy their freedom. He's used his power and influence to advocate on the Immaculate Order's behalf, for he craves the veneration of the Realm, an empire built on rice. His proposals have made him a pariah to many of his fellow gods, but few can safely speak too harshly against a spirit revered by most of the populace; even the thearchs hesitate to oppose him openly. Having recently received a spark of Exigence in payment from a minor god, he seeks to choose an Exigent emissary who can help him sway the city's mortal and spirit populace.

Hokae Prin, Chosen of Fever, is a gregarious Exigent eager to fraternize with fellow Chosen. An inveterate favor-trader and power broker, he offers to guide Exigent newcomers, introducing them to the city and securing them introductions with potential backers and allies. Once they've established themselves, he'll request repayment in kind — most often when he's found himself in over his head, whether in Great Forks' politics or in battle against the Scavenger Lands' supernatural perils. His amiable nature belies both his troubled past as an outlaw and charlatan and his terrible power: if he wished to, he could dissolve thoughts with a touch, burn foes' flesh from within, or imprison rivals within hallucinated worlds. Instead, he's honed his power as a socialite, spreading contagious fads and rumors and inflaming the impulsive desires of those he bargains with.

Neighbors

The Confederation of Rivers

Great Forks, along with **Lookshy** and **Nexus**, is among the most prominent members of the Confederation of Rivers, an alliance of the Scavenger Lands' kingdoms, city-states, and principalities formed over two hundred years ago. While the Confederation is formally led from the port city of **Marita** by the Council of the Concordat, made up of representatives from each of the confederation's member nations, the Council holds little real power. It's commonly seen as a proxy for Lookshy, though Great Forks and Nexus also have considerable influence within it.

Great Forks goes to great lengths to maintain good relations with fellow Confederation members, exempting them from duties and tariffs, and fêting visiting diplomats and nobles. They once deployed their military in mutual defense, but that practice ended with the Battle of Mishaka.

The Triune League

While Great Forks' political, economic, and religious influence spans the Confederation of Rivers' many polities, it's strongest in the Triune League, a politico-religious bloc within the Confederation defined by proximity to Great Forks. Some member polities synoecized out of Great Forks' outlying villages, their populations still composed largely of its three founding peoples. Others depend on it as a trade partner, worship gods whose cults center on Great Forks, or have large emigrant communities. A scarce handful are military conquests from the time before wars of aggression become politically untenable.

League members benefit from Great Forks' political and financial backing within the Confederation of Rivers and are protected against aggression and invasion by its army — though Great Forks' willingness to continue such deployments has gone untested since Mishaka. League members' gods receive communal festival days in Great Forks and tax breaks on their temples and shrines.

In exchange for these benefits, League members pay an annual tax to Great Forks and maintain temples to the thearchs and many other prominent gods that are overseen by priests from Great Forks. Beyond these formal obligations, Great Forks has largely subordinated the Triune League to it politically, economically, and culturally. Diplomats counsel member polities' rulers against decisions contrary to Great Forks' interests, offering suggestions that are all but orders. Priests ingratiate themselves with local spirits, securing their cooperation in upholding Great Forks' hegemony. Merchants invest in businesses across the League, fostering economic dependence.

In this time of tumult, existing friction and fractures among the League's polities threaten to tear it apart. The more powerful and wealthy city-states chafe against Great Forks' dominance, resenting how its religious and cultural authority has grown into political power. Others have strong ties to neighboring polities that oppose Great Forks or other League members. **Kleithe**, City of Sacred Geometries, is ruled both spiritually and temporally by the philosopher-priests of Nisca, the Scavenger Lands' god of formal logic; popular uprisings against Great Forks' hegemony have seen the thearchs' temples defiled. Some in **Fallen Petal**, holy city of Sunipa, Eastern Goddess of War, believe their city's sacred mercenaries are more than a match for Great Forks' weakened army, agitating to lead the rest of the League in an armed uprising. **Osiard**, whose river traders intermarry with water spirits, has been courted by shrouded emissaries from Thorns.

The Triune League also maintains the Consistory of Presbyters, an ecclesiastical court composed of representatives from each member city's priesthoods. The Consistory meets thrice yearly in Great Forks to preside over crimes committed against spirits that cross over boundaries, most often because the offender has fled to another member polity. Its remit isn't limited solely to offenses against a god's personage; acts of violence against priests, defilement and looting of temples, violations of sanctuary, and other misdeeds are construed as crimes against spirits.

The Consistory's decisions are binding on all League members: resolving disputes over jurisdiction, arranging extraditions, imposing punishment, and — on rare occasions — declaring holy war. In cases of offenders who are themselves spirits or other puissant beings, the Consistory recruits God-Blooded, outcastes, and Exigents to aid in dispatching justice. The Consistory is unpopular among Great Forks' mortal populace, both because it infringes on the city's cults and because it punishes offenders by execution. The Eight Commissions recognize its necessity as a political concession. The city's gods value it for bringing distant offenders back within their reach, though the Consistory's verdicts have at times outraged Great Forks' spirit populace.

Other Neighbors

Despite its proximity to Great Forks, **Privation** has rebuffed diplomatic efforts to bring it into the Triune League, secure in the strength of its famed spear dancers and the patronage of the eerie spirit Lady

Ichneumon. The city's pillar-saints appease her with perpetual veneration, that she might continue to bless their fields with strange abundance and never remove her mask of lead and jade. She's greatly feared by Great Forks' gods for reasons they speak not of; no spirit dares set foot in Privation without her invitation. Its diplomats maintain permanent embassies in many League polities, seeking to court Great Forks' allies away from it.

Once the heart of a flourishing forest, the wooded hill of **Nine Groves** is now encircled by farms and pastures. Gods of the once-great wilderness linger here: somber Munushkor Saena, a bird-goddess and patron of haruspicy; Starveling, a petty god of fallen leaves who drank in the death of each felled tree, making him one of the hill's most powerful gods but tainting his spirit with death's Essence; the skillful mediator Kabai of the Rhizoma, an elder greenmaw on the verge of dragonhood; and others. They offer sanctuary to outlaws and exiles both mortal and divine, causing intermittent strife when they harbor enemies of Great Forks. The court is worshipped by local hunters, herbalists, and others seeking the hill's bounty and by those who take sanctuary there. Iron Bell, a God-Blooded assassin exiled from Great Forks, serves as their high priest, counseling vengeance against their former home.

The unsettled **Gyrae** inhabit arid highlands above the Rolling River's alluvial plain, raising goats, sheep, and cows in mountain pastures. They trade with outlying Triune League villages, exchanging livestock and raw materials for grain, worked steel, pottery, and textiles. Despite a reputation as raiders, they only rarely plunder neighboring communities — instead, after initial raids, Gyrae envoys negotiate truces, desisting from raiding and providing protection against other upland raiders in exchange for tribute. Since the Battle of Mishaka decimated Great Forks' army, the Gyrae have ranged nearer to the city, raiding slave-worked fields and retreating to the highlands before soldiers can mobilize. The Gyrae have historically accepted escaped slaves, impoverished tenant farmers, and other refugees into their society; they're seen as outsiders, but may join in raids, share in their spoils, vote in councils, and participate in the rites of the Gyrae pantheon's rites: Kalla of the Atlatl; the wrathful protector Boar Mother; Ookalis, death-god and bear-speaker; and others.

Since the Heron's defeat, **the Field of Endless Raitons** has been fiercely contested by neighboring kingdoms, city-states, and federations of the dead. Its location within the Scavenger Lands makes it a valuable asset for ghosts of widely differing agendas, not to mention the coveted treasures abandoned by the Heron in her flight — though none remain today. Great Forks' interactions with the shadowland have varied as different Underworld powers have seized and lost control over it — under the Rag-and-Bone Parliament, it flourished as a hub of economic and cultural exchange between living and dead; occupied by the ghostly warlord Needle Saint, it unleashed a procession of undead horrors to test Great Forks' walls. It's currently held by the Obsidian Pentad, an upstart power in the local Underworld. Still struggling to consolidate control over the shadowland, they've formed an alliance with Great Forks' ancestor cult and brought in mercenaries from Nexus to help fend off ghostly rivals.

Exigents of Great Forks

Great Forks was founded long after the flames of Exigence dimmed. For much of its history, Exigents have been nothing more than occasional curiosities and local celebrities. Now that word of the Exigents' resurgence has spread across Creation, countless pilgrims seek Great Forks in hopes of winning Exaltation from one of its many gods, while divinities hoarding sparks of the Exigence likewise seek worthy champions there. In the last five years, the ranks of Great Forks' Exigents have swelled to exceed those of Uluiru and other Exigent polities.

Gods bearing sparks of Exigence host contests and trials to seek worthy champions: pankration tournaments, labyrinths filled with wild beasts and supernatural perils, riddling contests, duels to the

death, and other challenges to winnow the ranks of would-be heroes. Great festivals surround these trial grounds, a hair's breadth from breaking out into riotous cheering and carousing at the moment of Exaltation. The city's law enforcement watches for signs of skullduggery — unless the god has told them to permit it.

Many who win Exaltation remain in Great Forks, acting as their patron god's champion, emissary, or prophet. Gratitude and obligation often play a part in this, but there's much for Exigents to enjoy in the City of Temples. They're welcomed with the same obeisance shown to the city's gods, seen both as celebrities and holy personages. Those whose patron god's temples lack suitable accommodations can find luxurious lodging in Little Yu-Shan's preeminent caravanserais and can secure estates on the Hill of Hollyhocks.

Getting the Circle Together

Each of the Exigents presented in this book has reason to appear in Great Forks. **Strawmaiden Janest's** journeys across Creation might bring her to the City of Temples, either to experience its wonders as she passes through or to make a permanent home. **The Puppeteer** hails from distant Zhaojūn but might be forced to flee if her schemes are discovered there (potentially before play begins); Great Forks is a natural refuge for an Exigent.

Architects of any of the Scavenger Lands' many cities or of Great Forks itself might be called to defend the city against peril. While the **Sovereigns of Uluru** dwell in the far-flung Northwest, some have traveled as far or further; they might seek to establish diplomatic relations with the thearchs or recruit Exigent allies for their native city's succession crisis. The city could also be home to a Sovereign-in-exile.

The other Exigents discussed briefly in this book (pp. XX-XX) also have reason to be in Great Forks. It's home to **the Thousand Venoms Mistress** and **the Chosen of Masks**. **The Bleak Warden** might pursue here a forbidden god that's escaped his gaol, while **the Foxbinder of Shifune's** duties to the Immaculate Order might bring her here hunting Anathema. **The Torchbearer's** wanderings might lead her to Great Forks, especially if there's word of a threat to the knowledge preserved by the city's priesthoods and the Violet Meadow academy. **The Chosen of the Dice** resides in nearby Nexus, and might seek wealth, excitement, or glory in Great Forks' streets.

Plot Hooks

The Decide Case: A prominent god is found murdered; her cult blames the deity of a neighboring temple. Unless the player characters uncover the true culprit, these tensions soon spill over into outright violence. But others wish this mystery to remain unsolved: maybe a baleful shrine-gang, a conspiracy of koruphai, or one of the city's major gods — perhaps even a thearch.

An Eye for an Eye: A shrine-gang has pooled their power to create a patchwork Exigent, the Chosen of Wounds. Harrowed by her Exaltation even as it gives her power over the body's frailties, she seeks revenge against her divine patrons. The shrine-gang's members have turned to the player characters for help, but the player characters may side with the gods' wrathful Exigent.

In the Heron's Shadow: An outbreak of hauntings and monstrous ghosts have overwhelmed the local ancestor cult's exorcists and ghost-talkers. They've beseeched the player characters to track down the hauntings' source and put an end to it, fearing they presage the Black Heron's return. She remains absent from her former shadowland lair, so it seems unlikely — it might be the work of a death god, an Exigent necromancer, or a ghostly crime syndicate. But the cult may be right; the Black Heron may well have dispatched one of her deathknights — or even a full Circle — to infiltrate, sabotage, and subvert her hated foes' city.

Matchmakers to the Gods: A heartbroken cave-god has abandoned her cult, locking herself away to grieve in her cavernous sanctum. Her cult has turned to the player characters for help. They might seek out the god's former partner — perhaps a raucous rain-god, a God-Blooded priestess of a rival cult, or a talented mortal poet — to learn why they fell out and repair the relationship. Or they might take the cave-god's mind off her troubles with a new paramour. Successful matchmaking can yield considerable political power — they might elevate a potential backer or ally to that coveted role to secure her favor, or one of them might romance the god themselves.

Power Plays: A prominent god has fallen from grace and fled Great Forks, leaving behind a power vacuum in the neighborhood surrounding her temple. Will the player characters exploit it to establish themselves as political players or consolidate a following? Will they play divine politics, elevating a new god to prominence and securing his patronage and backing? Or will they seek out the exile god to discover why she left Great Forks, and perhaps try to return her to power?

Shattered Manacles: A slave rebellion has seized control of many of the fields surrounding Great Forks, taking the harvest hostage as leverage for their demands of freedom. But they face opposition from the city's wealthiest families and many gods, all the way up to the thearchs. With so many supernatural forces arrayed against them, the enslaved rebels will need puissant allies of their own.

The Siege of Great Forks: A Vanehan army marches on Great Forks, seeking to conquer the city and make its decadent gods swear fealty to the Imperial Cult of the Ninety-Nine Stars. Reinforced by martial deities of the Ninety-Nine Stars, God-Blooded and outcaste mercenaries, and the Exigent known as the Dread Assessor, Chosen of Taxation, the Sword Prince's forces threaten to crush the City of Temples unless its guardians and allies are powerful enough to drive back Vaneha's forces.

Strife on the Hill of Hollyhocks: Great Forks' thearchs have fallen into discord, arguing and feuding over how best to steer the city through the Time of Tumult. Their cults have sought out the player characters to broker reconciliation between the thearchs.

Taming the Dragons: While Great Forks' Immaculates maintain largely peaceful relations, a Sworn Brotherhood of Lookshyan Dragon-Blooded passing through have decided to drag the city's gods back into their rightful place in the Perfected Hierarchy. A faction within the Immaculate Faith's temple has reached out to the player characters to help avert the mass sectarian conflict that would result, but many of the city's Immaculate adherents have rallied behind the Hearth.

Treasure Hunt: A priestess of Amoth City-Smiter, God of Ruins, has received a vision of Lost Ormolu, known in the First Age as the Counting House of Creation. Untold riches, potent artifacts, and forgotten lore await the player characters if they can brave the ruins' perils and lingering defenses — bound demons, automaton soldiers, sorcerous curses, and worse. But they aren't alone; they'll face competition from other Exigents, scavenger princes, and Amoth's cultists.