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Family & Peers for Houses of the Blooded

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Coronets

but never crowns

Family and Peers for Houses of the Blooded

Josh Roby
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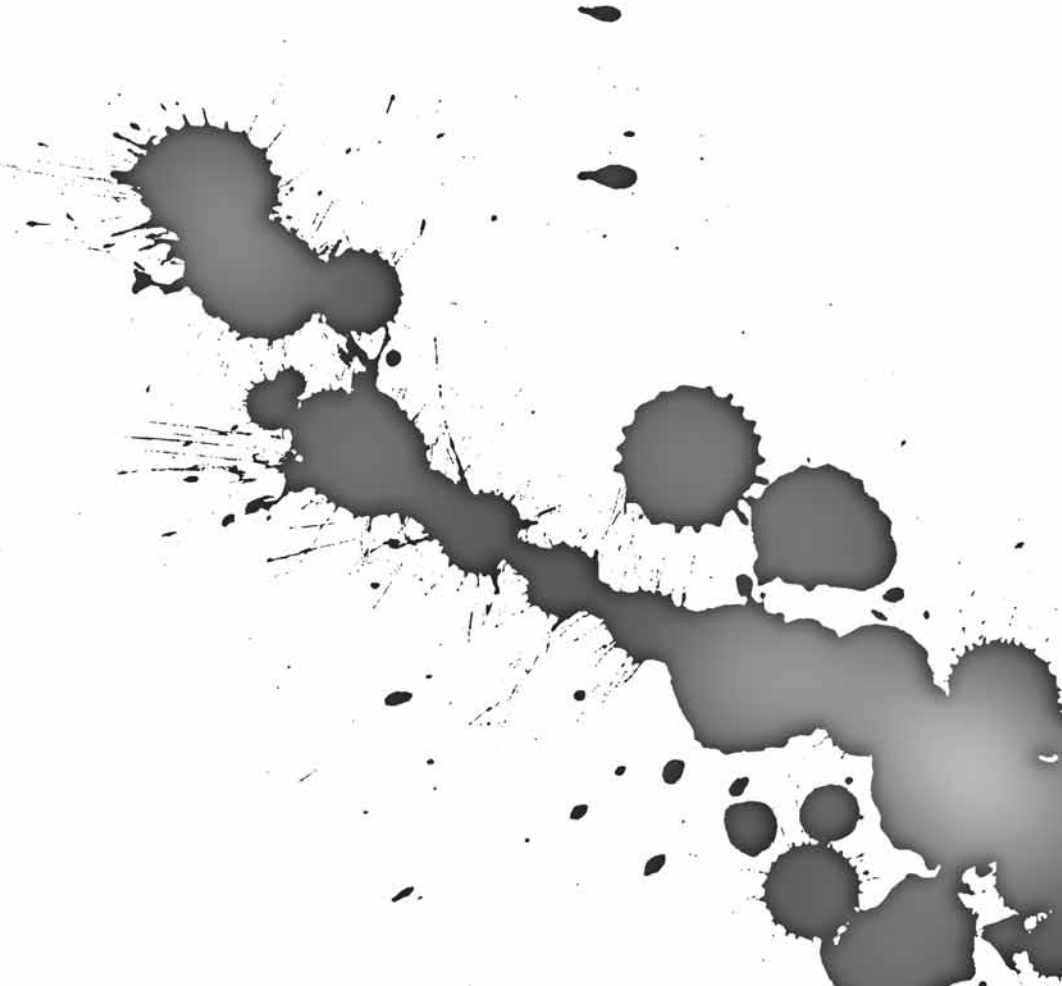
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Portions of this book will be released as Open Content; please see www.housesoftheblooded.com for more information.



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THE GAME OF CORONETS

IT WAS NOT OFTEN THAT VEN NOBLES WORE THE CORONETS OF THEIR OFFICES — WITH THE DEMANDS OF FASHION CHANGING EVERY SEASON, NO DESIGN OF CORONET WOULD REMAIN IN STYLE FOR LONG — BUT NEARLY EVERY VEN WORTH THE NAME HAD, HIDDEN AWAY IN SOME CHEST SOMEWHERE IN THE CASTLE, THE GLITTERING RING OF JEWELRY WHICH MADE THEM A BARON, A COUNT, A MARQUIS, OR EVEN A DUKE. THE IMPORTANT THING WAS THAT, IF A VEN'S CORONET WAS NEEDED, IT COULD BE FETCHED. OF COURSE IT WAS NEVER NEEDED, SO IT WAS NEVER BROUGHT INTO THE LIGHT OF DAY. IT WAS THERE, UNDER LOCK AND KEY, JUST IN CASE THERE WAS A NEED.

By contrast, only some ven had, hidden away in some other chest somewhere deep in their castles, another ring of gold and jewels, this one with the gracious arcs and whorls of metal reaching up to connect at the top. These were crowns, the jewelry not of nobility but of royalty: suitable only for kings and emperors. They were also illegal, insofar as kings and emperors were illegal, and the possession of such an item could only be considered preparation for a bid to put it to use and be crowned. Thus, crowns were never worn, regardless of fashion. No one admitted to having them. But they were there, under lock and key, just in case an opportunity might arise in which their owners might put them to use.

This will serve us well to illustrate the curious nature of ven politics, referred to in their own literature as *kval dyr*, or the Game of Coronets. There were intrigues, alliances, betrayals, plots and counterplots, pawns and feints and gambits: each move

To play a “Game of Coronets” you must already have or have access to the original *Houses of the Blooded* book. *Coronets but Never Crowns* provides rules to play in a highly-charged spider web of dangerous politics, vicious intrigue, and family rivalry. You can get *Houses of the Blooded* at www.housesoftheblooded.com or wherever you find quality roleplaying games.

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gossiped over in and out of court, always referred to as moving and playing Coronets. Ostensibly, and as far as anyone would actually speak about it in public, the prizes and goals were only ever counted in the petty titles of nobility. Buried deep in their hearts, however, the ven knew the hunger that could only be sated by the crown: the forbidden rank, the heady summit of all ven society.

No one would admit they wished to claim royalty.

Everyone wanted to wear a crown.

Of course, from our perspective in the present day, the time of ven dominance is at best a hazy memory. Neither coronet nor crown has survived; all we have are our few historical records, many of which are operas and pillow books of dubious factual reliability. However, the Game of Coronets was a subject of great interest and frequency in ven opera, and its fallout was often recorded in ven pillow books. No scholar of the period should be surprised that, for the ven, politics' most indelible marks were on the stage and in the boudoir.

I was first made aware of the ven through the work of Mister John Wick, whose research served as the foundation of his roleplaying game, Houses of the Blooded. It seems only fitting that the fruits of my own research should, after their appropriate scholarly review among my peers, return to my interest's source. Thus, my considerably longer and more pedantic work on ven politics has found itself transformed into this short work, offering additional content, techniques, and strategies to add to your roleplaying at home. Everything that follows provides fodder for your own Game of Coronets.

This work is sectioned into a handful of parts, each of which presents a different facet of ven politics. Each of these facets can stand on their own, or be used in conjunction. Please be warned, however: in my experience, the more chapters of this work in use, the steeper the slide becomes towards the creation of a ven emperor or high king — and again in my experience, this has never been a good thing, in history or in game. It only leads to tragedy.

And nobody wants that, right?

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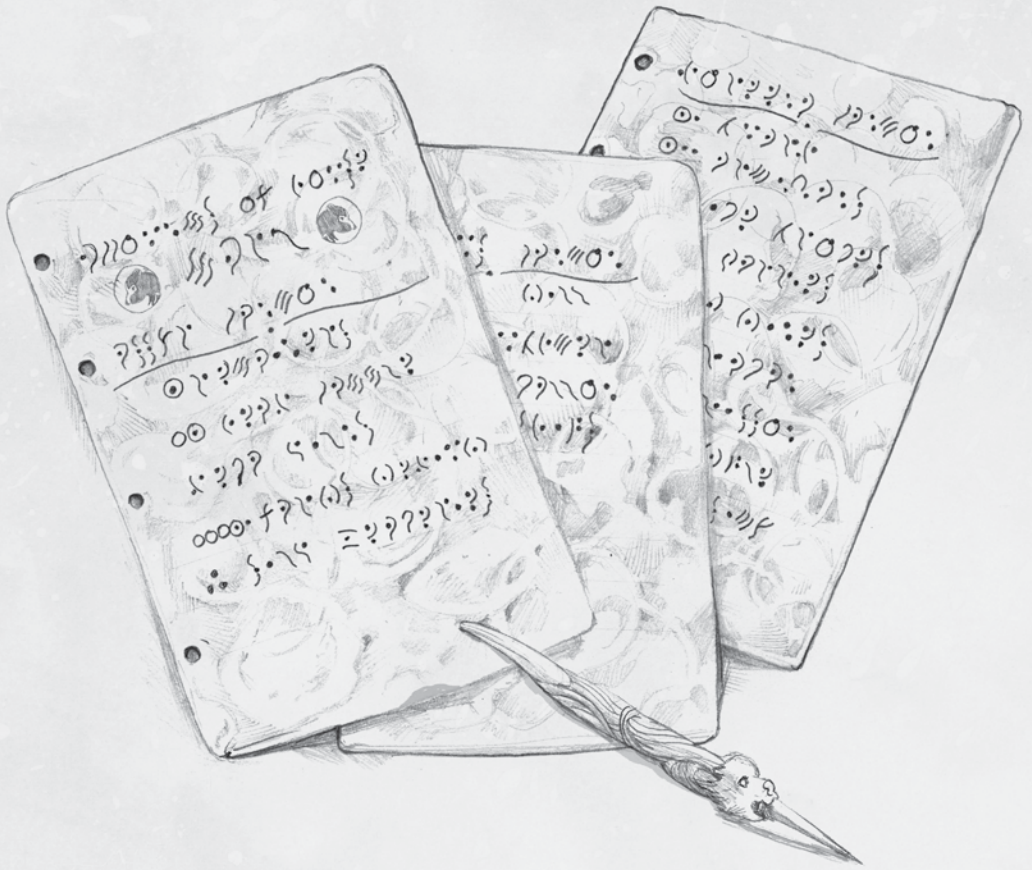
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The Reinhold Manuscript! I can't believe we found such a long segment of extant ven writing. Of course, it merely matches what got passed down through Tyre, but it goes a long way to verifying the authenticity of the rest of Tyre findings.

It also underscores the cut-throat nature of ven families. We've been right all along! -s

You accept things at face value too easily. Let's have the plates tested and dated. It may be that one of the Tyre researchers- Kasuspedas, for instance- wanted to shore up their reputation and wasn't above a little forgery to make it stick -j

FAMILY

IT IS DIFFICULT TO ACCURATELY DESCRIBE THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY IN THE WORLD OF THE BLOODED VEN. IN AN AGE WHERE ROMANTIC LOVE WAS A NEW AND NOT ENTIRELY WELCOME DEVELOPMENT, FILIAL LOVE — THE LOVE OF PARENTS, SIBLINGS, AND CHILDREN — WAS IN MANY WAYS THE CORNERSTONE OF SOCIETY. YET THE VEN LOVED THEIR FAMILIES IN WAYS THAT MIGHT SEEM STRANGE, EVEN ALIEN, TO OUR MODERN SENSIBILITIES.

The journals of Godfren Reinhold, a patriarch of a proud Bear family, is our best chronicle of ven filial love. The surviving pages are filled with accounts of his all-consuming love for family. He loved his two sons so profoundly that, when they grew old enough to raise a sword to chest height, he arranged for the pair to be lost, alone, in a puzzle house known to harbor orks. He loved his three daughters so deeply that he married each of them to a noble whose wealth was only surpassed by his distance from Reinhold's lands. After his third daughter's wedding, he never saw her in the flesh again. He was also a loving son himself — when his father began to succumb to solace, Godfren seized control of his lands and bricked the aging noble into his chambers at the top of the castle tower.

It is all too easy for our modern minds to misunderstand Godfren's actions as paranoid, self-serving, and power-mad. However, Reinhold was a paragon of ven family virtue. His actions outline not how he betrayed that love, but to what extent he went to prove it.

Godfren's sons emerged from the puzzle house, each missing an eye, but strong and sure of themselves — capable of taking and holding lands of their own. Godfren's three daughters found their feet in their new homes — one by binding her husband to her will, one by poisoning her husband and marrying a younger man, and the last by careful diplomacy and tact. The five domains of his children became Godfren's staunchest allies in the political machinations of Shanri — including a plot to hoodwink his addled father into losing his lands.

That is the crux of the ven's love of family — in a hostile world filled with rivals and threats, family is often the only thing a ven can rely on. And in order to safeguard one's family from that world, in order to prepare one's children for that world, the ven often had to be harder on their families than the world would be.

As one last note, one might wonder about Reinhold's wife. He loved her so dearly

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that he seduced her handmaidens and made them his spies on her day-to-day activities. With his future relying on the loyalty of his children, he could not risk the possibility that they might not actually be his, their loyalties vulnerable to someone else. Why didn't he trust her? Simple — she was family only by marriage, not by blood. The bonds of blood are far stronger, after all, than a little metal ring.

IMMEDIATE FAMILY

The ven grouped their family relations into two groups: *tsalta*, or immediate family, and *tsonsa*, extended family. *Tsulta* included parents, siblings, and children; *tsonsa* was everything else, but primarily cousins, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, grandparents and grandchildren. The value they placed on each can be neatly summarized by the popular phrase, “*Tsulta* are beloved problems; *tsonsa* are friendly tools.”

Spouses, by the by, were neither *tsalta* nor *tsonsa*. As they were family by contract, they merited neither honor.

After much reflection, I found that the best way to present the complexities of ven familial relations was to put you, the reader, in their seat. Think of yourself a ven noble as you read, and consider what follows a primer on how your family is organized and why.

Much of what follows strays into generalities, and we know that specific circumstances created many exceptions; however, these principles were generalities for a reason. Ven families were organized in this way because it worked: it kept the family safe, prosperous, and, perhaps most importantly, propagating into further generations. Expectations of what family members would do were passed from father to son and mother to daughter, replicated again and again, for literally hundreds of years. It is hard to argue with success like that.

YOUR SONS AND DAUGHTERS

Children are the reason that ven marry. With a faithful spouse, you can manufacture your own vassals: vassals you can — usually — trust. Ven employ their own children in nearly every position of power in their domains. Children make excellent Heralds, speaking to your people not only in your name but also with your face... minus a few years. Your children can also protect your peasants from orks, foreign nobles, and bandits as the Master of the Road or the Sheriff. The Seneschal position is custom-

tailored for training your sons and daughters to manage their own domains. And what better way to secure a trusted Swordsman than to make one of your own child? It takes a few years to progress from cradle to utility, but the investment of time and effort is worth the payoff.

Of course, many if not most ven children have ambitions of their own, and have little desire to stay at Mommy and Daddy's side forever. Savvy ven nobles know and recognize this, and use their children's ambitions to their own advantage. When the bonds of domestic duty begin to chafe, clever parents take their children aside and begin to make plans. Borrow half my personal guard and see about those farms over there that our neighbor is always neglecting. We've acquired a map showing a pass over the mountains to virgin territory. There's a fine young man-or-woman two domains over looking for someone to fill the throne next to theirs. This isn't altruism; this is calculated self-interest.

A vassal who is your child is a vassal you can trust — until they start thinking they can fill your throne better than you can. Then they are most useful to you, not at your side, but out in the wider world. Make no mistake: you will not send them from your home to become masters of their own destinies. They are sent into the world to act as your pawns and catspaws, to continue to serve you — just at a safe distance, and with enough power to sate their ambitions. Whether they pledge fealty to you or not, they will always retain some filial loyalty, and even innocent letters home can bear you news and information you can put to use.

Even that is not the end, however. The winter will come and solace will take you. Your mind will wander, your limbs atrophy, your voice dry up into a whisper. Hopefully, you will be put into a tomb to dream your way to eternity — and who do you think will be putting you into that tomb? The last task that ven need their children for is to remember their names, sleep in their temples, and seek their guidance. Your children are the ven most likely to give you power as a suaven, so do right by them and keep them happy. Otherwise, you will end up a forgotten memory.

**Sons are pillars;
daughters, pedestals.
Take care not to rely
too much on any one for
support, lest you find
yourself trapped atop
their shoulders.**

— HER LADYSHIP CLIONA
JALAN, THE BARONESS
OF TATTERS

You will be the best herald you can for Mother, and when the time comes, Mother will make you the best baron she can. If you're not the best herald you can be, well... what kind of baron will Mother make you then?

— RALI YVARAI

YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER

Your mother and father love you and depend on you. They are also using you for their own advantage. Most ven have realized and accepted both these truths by the time they reach adolescence. You might have even been told, simply and explicitly, by your parents. Doing your duty to your parents is a basic virtue among the ven, and rarely causes resentment. It's the "when the time comes" part of Mother's speech that creates problems.

For many young ven, the time comes long before their parents acknowledge it. You might feel that you have paid your dues and should be rewarded with your own lands. Your duties become chores and your parents turn into tyrants. Which makes you a Spymaster's favorite species of pawn, providing an easy opportunity to infiltrate your parents' domains. The force of ambition can also propel you to strike out on your own without your parents' support — sometimes to great effect. Sometimes you never come back.

On the other hand, though, you might not be quite ready when your parents decide "the time has come." Perfectly content with a quiet life serving as the Court Scholar, you find that, next season, you will be married to a noble you have never met. Or enjoying the freedom of serving as a roadman, you are informed that the next road you ride down will be the road to conquest — and the road ends with you shackled to a throne. Your comfortable world of manageable details is about to become the scheming nightmare you've dismissed for years as your parents' business.

Happy or not, even after you have left home, your parents are never gone. They send advice. They send guests. They send potential spouses. They have need of the resources you have pried out of your own domain. They need your support in the Senate. They need to borrow your guardsmen for a little argument with the neighboring Count. Sometimes, the relationship is mutual — the advice is good, they support you in the Senate, they lend you their court scholar to deal with those pesky sorcerers. Other times, you may chafe under the expectations of your distant parents — or worse, under the dictates of your parents, your liege lords.

There comes a time in every noble's life when they confront the following decision:

do I put up with my parent's "help" until they fall to solace, or do I "help" them on the way to their dreams? There is no shame in removing your parent from power. By ven reckoning, if you can do so, they should not have been in power, anyway. More than one ven looking winter in the eye has simply abdicated rather than put up with the violence and destruction of some young noble, perhaps their own children, coming for them. Far better to finish composing that opera before the end comes, anyway.

YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS

Siblings are tricky, which you probably already know if you have any. They are simultaneously your friends as well as rivals, and this is especially true for the ven. You squabble with your brothers and sisters over your parents' favor, over positions of power, over lands, and over lovers. Of course, on any given day you might be your brothers and sisters' co-conspirators in winning that same favor, position, region, or lover.

Siblings often share a long and rich history of growing up together and graduate from childish adventures stealing apples from the cook to adolescent escapades with the attractive nobles from the next domain over. And as many fond memories as you may have, you might also harbor savage grudges right alongside cherished nostalgia.

Once you reach maturity, wise parents will goad you and your siblings to seek opportunities and lands in different directions. You head west while your brother heads east. You be my Master of the Road while your sister becomes Seneschal for your uncle. The potential for rivalries and needless competition is lessened. Especially wise parents won't send you too far off, however, since if one of you ever comes back with designs on the familial domain, your parents' best and most natural allies are the rest of their children. They need you as checks against each other — so fostering a little enmity between you and your siblings is a good strategy, as well.

As adults, your siblings can become powerful allies, drawing on common experiences from childhood as a strong foundation for trust and cooperation. (And if your parents did their job right, you're far enough apart that you won't have much to fight over.) It would not be strange for you to employ your brothers and sisters' children in your households, both to keep them at a safe distance from their parents, your siblings, and also to give them exposure to the wider world. Many arranged marriages use aunts and uncles as intermediaries. These interactions are described in detail in the Extended Family section on page 11.

PUTTING YOUR IMMEDIATE FAMILY TO GOOD USE

There are a number of ways that your character's immediate family can be used in your game. First off, immediate family members count as free Contacts — you can always trade resources with them for free and you gain two dice whenever you defend them (and they you).

Additionally, whenever you take an immediate family member as a vassal, their Loyalty starts two ranks higher than normal. If your immediate family member is someone else's vassal, their Loyalty counts as two ranks lower than normal in your espionage actions involving them.

Last but certainly not least, you can make your immediate family members into temporary Friends using the Kinsman rules described below.

“SHE’S MY SISTER!”

Any player may use wagers from a Wisdom roll to declare that an NPC is a family member — just like any other fact you can introduce with wagers. However, in the case of long-standing NPCs, this may take a little explaining or may not make enough sense to be feasible.

Generally speaking, this should not be done more than once per NPC — if she's my sister, she can't really be yours, too, unless we're already related, in which case she was already your sister. You get the picture. Your fellow players should feel free to throw dice at you if such a new fact strains credibility and you don't sell it well enough.

There is also the corollary case, the “She's Your Sister!” declaration. If the suggestion sounds like it could make for an interesting twist, or cause some trouble, you're probably best off playing along. However, if the sudden addition of a sister (or whatever) is going to destroy your plans or your character concept, you should feel free to veto the declaration with a style point.

GOING HALFSIES

While an NPC can be made a brother or sister with a simple wager, taking an NPC that is already a brother or sister and revealing that they are merely a half-brother or half-sister is a little more complicated. This is important because a half-sibling is not immediate family; they are at best extended family, and fall under those rules. In order to make an NPC a half-sibling, you must convince one or both of the siblings that they do not share both parents. This requires its own risk. Notably, the truth of the matter

is not especially relevant; all that matters is getting one or both sides to believe that they are not full siblings for the family camaraderie to start crumbling away.

Of course, you can also do this to parents and children — revealing to a man that the boy he raised as his son isn't actually his son. That makes the young man not immediate family, not extended family, not family at all. Just an interloper — and a threat.

EXTENDED FAMILY

The ven maintained vast networks of family connections well beyond what we today would call the nuclear family. These ties threaded throughout all of ven society, and on more than one occasion it was obscure blood ties that prevented a war — or started one.

YOUR AUNTS AND UNCLES

Parents' siblings are always something of an enigma to children, and this is certainly the case with the ven. Whether ruling in a distant domain or serving as a vassal at home, aunts and uncles relate to you through their relationships with your parents. That is, they are your parents' staunchest allies and most dangerous rivals — and this makes you catspaws for both sides. You can be a helpful proxy, an innocuous spy, a strong arm for assistance, a recipient of largesse, or a vulnerable target — often without knowing which role you are filling.

Your parents might have sent you to an aunt or uncle to serve as a vassal in their domain, perhaps more than once. This got you out of your parents' hair, gave you some exposure to the world, and allowed your parents to extend their influence beyond the borders of their own domain. In exchange, your aunt or uncle got a free vassal whose loyalty was more trustworthy than someone entirely outside the family. Your relationship only developed from there, and in later life, you might have found your aunts and uncles arranging marriages for you or directing you to available lands.

You also probably have aunts or uncles who are your parents' unambitious siblings with no domain of their own. Instead, they serve as vassals in your parents' domains or even in your domains or your siblings'. They may never have controlled a domain, or they may have lost or abandoned it as the shadow of solace overcame them. Dependent on their families for their standard of living, they can be fiercely loyal — and suddenly treacherous when they see an opportunity to seize control themselves. Much more dangerous is when such an aunt or uncle has children of their own: children who need a place in the world when they come of age. The ambition for one's child, discovered late in life, can be a thousand times stronger than the ambition for oneself.

YOUR COUSINS

It is hard to typify the role of cousins in the ven social structure, as they came in many varieties. Some of your cousins are probably distant figures, somewhat like siblings but seen only once every few years. Other cousins grew up in the same castle as you and may have become your fastest friends. And some cousins were the disturbing and treacherous relatives who arrived in the familial home one day with a thirst for lands and power. Perhaps the tenuous basis of the relationship — your mother and my mother are sisters — only provided a foundation, and the true nature of the relationship blossomed in any one of many different ways.

One common thread in the relationships of cousins, though, is becoming caught up in the machinations of ones' parents. You provide back doors into your immediate families, a means to ferret out secrets, secure support, and plot sabotage. And when sibling rivalries come to blows, it is often their children, cousins to each other, who face off on the battlefield or the dueling ground. Perhaps you and a cousin pledged a blood oath when you were young in the hopes of forestalling such an inevitability. Many cousins like you were surprised to find how little those pacts meant in the face of your parents' dictates.

It should also be noted that, generally speaking, the ven do not marry their first cousins. This is not due to fears of inbreeding, but rather of social disgrace. Marriage is an opportunity to expand your family's power; the only reason a ven would marry a first cousin is to consolidate that power. Power that needs consolidating is power that is not firmly in hand. More than one domain has fallen to outside pressures shortly after cousins married — such a wedding puts blood in the water. Consequently, cousins do not marry. It is "bad luck," or more accurately, it shows weakness.

YOUR NIECES AND NEPHEWS

Your siblings' children are like your own children — just more disposable. They are also slightly less likely to try and take your domain from you, given that they're probably more invested in their parents' domain (assuming their parents have one). Consequently, nieces and nephews make fantastic vassals. Their parents are often all too willing to get their own children at a safe distance from themselves, and while they serve in your domain they pick up skills and experience that will serve them in the future. Their loyalties to their own parents, and the slight possibility that they may betray you to them, is often considered an acceptable risk.

In fact, courting the lasting loyalty of your nieces and nephews over their loyalties to their own parents might be something of a past time for you, as it was with many ven. Nieces and nephews occupy a unique social niche as safe beneficiaries of affection, who you can lavish with attention, luxuries, and personal tutelage. Such a favored niece or nephew was often referred to as *asan*, or “child in spirit.” Of course, it’s only natural that your actual children might become jealous of the attention their *asan* cousins are receiving. This can easily lead to blood and revenge if you are not careful (unless, of course, that’s your intention...)

My nephew has all the best characteristics of a vassal: competence, loyalty, disposability.

— XANDER YVARAI

PUTTING YOUR EXTENDED FAMILY TO GOOD USE

Like immediate family, your character’s extended family can be incredibly useful in play. Whenever you have an extended family member as a vassal, their Loyalty starts one rank higher than normal. If your extended family member is someone else’s vassal, their Loyalty counts as one rank lower than normal in your espionage actions involving them.

You may also use extended family as “free” vassals. It works like this: you declare that your cousin is your Master of the Road. The Narrator creates your cousin as an NPC. You can give your cousin season actions to perform. More often than not, he will do them. He will also be taking other season actions of his own. The Narrator will keep track of these, and also whether or not he is taking the actions you are relying on him to do. You’ll be informed about these actions when your character stumbles across their results or when your spy network checks up on your cousin. You probably should only take one “free” vassal: more than one is a lot of bookkeeping, and to avoid that work, your Narrator might just hand him to another player as a spy in your household. The other player decides what season actions he takes.

Additionally, you can make your extended family members into temporary Contacts using the Kinsman rules, below.



KINSMAN

Blood ties knit ven society together, as much or more so than the ties of fealty or loyalty to house. It is the father-to-son, aunt-to-nephew, grandmother-to-granddaughter connections that, time and again, prove the most durable, the most potent, the most dangerous.

Families have a handful of useful bonuses from the start, but clever ven can build upon those connections to make them stronger and even more useful. A ven can make his brother not just a contact, but a friend; he can make his cousin who he hasn't seen in years into a contact. To do this, use the following Kinsman rules.

The ven starts by talking with the relation in question. She talks about their shared history, stories from their youth, other family members and their recent travails. By sharing these details, the ven underscores the bonds of family and prepares them as a foundation for a tighter bond. This is a risk; if both ven come from the same house (they're both Bears), they use their house Virtue (for Bears, Strength). If they're from different houses, the risk defaults to Beauty. The player may set aside any number of wagers. Importantly, however, the player must also describe the family stories that the character is sharing. Narrators, take note of all these juicy details for use later.

Next, the family member in question reciprocates, sharing another story or continuing on where the player character left off. He must then make a risk of his own (Beauty or your shared house virtue), with the same number of wagers as the first risk. He's not trying to one-up his relation; he's trying to participate. The Narrator should, of course, add his own details to the family backstory.

If both ven win privilege (these aren't contested risks: they're two separate risks), they may decide to improve their relations with each other. Immediate family members become friends; extended family members become contacts. This status lasts for a number of seasons equal to the wagers they set aside. Both ven must decide to improve their relations; if either one decides not to, neither ven gains the other as a contact or friend. In addition, each ven gains a number of style equal to the wagers they set aside.

These feelings of camaraderie only last so long, however, and when they lapse, they don't fade. They collapse. When an improved relationship reaches its end, each character selects an aspect to apply to the other ven. They may declare that they are Uncooperative Kin, Overbearing Kin, a Disgrace of Our Kin, depending on how the relationship progressed. A ven who considers himself ill-used might claim the other was Overbearing; a ven who took issue with the other might call him a Disgrace. The aspect

lasts for as many seasons as the improved relationship did.

Luckily, avoiding such family fallout is simple: the ven in question only need to spend a season action to make the improved relationship permanent. One season action on either ven's part gives both of them the Contact or Friend for the rest of their lives. If you use these rules to make an extended family member a Contact, you can use these rules again to make them into a temporary (and then permanent) Friend.

You might be reading these rules and thinking that this is just another cost-free benefit that families get. This is where I remind you that Friends get a bonus for stabbing each other in the back.

FAMILY SUAVEN

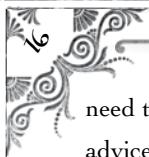
The inevitable grasp of solace claims everyone. When ven are overcome by solace, it is their families that enshrine them. Most suaven then join the small host of departed family members that are collectively venerated by their descendants. Their whispers are faint and distant; they rarely visit anyone's dreams. Without a shrine specifically dedicated to their memory, their power is limited to filling the background noise of the ven's collective unconscious. Their families remember them for a generation or two, and this might provide some common ground for the family for a while. In time, though, they just become one forgotten face in the ranks of the many dear departed.

Those family members who have left a lasting impression on their descendants, though, may enjoy a different fate. If in life they won the affections of their family — sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, grandchildren, sometimes even spouses — one of their survivors might build a shrine just for them. This is the only toe-hold the new suaven need.

With a single shrine and proper maintenance, the suaven can appear in the dreams of those who remember them. To maintain their hold on the afterlife, though, they must ensure their memory into later generations. They

Fellow Cultists

If you have a Devotion of a rank higher than the Suaven you are devoted to, you are probably in a small suaven cult trying to establish your patron suaven, quite possibly a family cult. For each rank of Devotion beyond your suaven's rank, you may make a fellow devotee a Friend for one season. This requires an action, usually dialogue but sometimes simply a look and a ritual sign to establish your common ground. Your new Friend need not have ranks of Devotion higher than your suaven; even just one will do.



need those still living to build shrines. The only thing they have to give in exchange is advice and perhaps a blessing — but they are not above using old ties of affection, guilt, and fear to forward their building plans, either. The ven most likely to respond to those tools are, of course, family.

Suaven cults most often begin as family cults, with the descendants of the departed keeping their memory alive. The rites and rituals of family cults are unique and idiosyncratic, often providing a secret language of symbols and significance among the devoted. The demands and entreaties of family suaven can unite the devoted in collective action: questing for a lost relic, making a pilgrimage to a distant sacred site, building shrines and temples (or destroying rival shrines and temples). Recently-departed suaven tend to have unfinished business, too, which can range from delivering goodbyes to avenging nearly-forgotten slights. Any of these can be used as the basis of a story, or fuel the reminisces of family bonds.

FAMILY AS CAST

Family is not only useful to the players; family members can be valuable additions to the Narrator's box of tools and tricks. The player characters' family members can, in fact, serve as the vast majority of your cast of NPCs. It is even possible to run an entire game using only family members of the player characters. What follows are some simple steps to utilizing the player characters' families as much as possible.

The first steps of character creation can provide you with a long list of characters to begin to populate your game. Each character, after all, has two parents, up to five siblings, perhaps a spouse, and up to two children. Jot down the immediate family members of each player character, and be sure to note the Houses of their parents. You can also note shared grandparents and the implied ancestors further back and claim them as suaven. This list can be very useful to you later.

If the players come up with more details about their immediate family, pencil those details in, as well. Do the players give their family members names? Is the elder brother a Wolf like father, while the younger sister is unblooded as of yet? Jot it all down. As the players develop their Domains and list their vassals, be sure to also note when they employ a family member as a vassal.

Importantly, resist the temptation to name everybody and give each of them Three Things from the outset. Sure, this gives you a great deal of details, but it also restricts you for later improvisation. Name and flesh out some family members, but leave others

sketchy or even blanks. “I have another sister” and an empty space on a family tree are perfectly fine starting points.

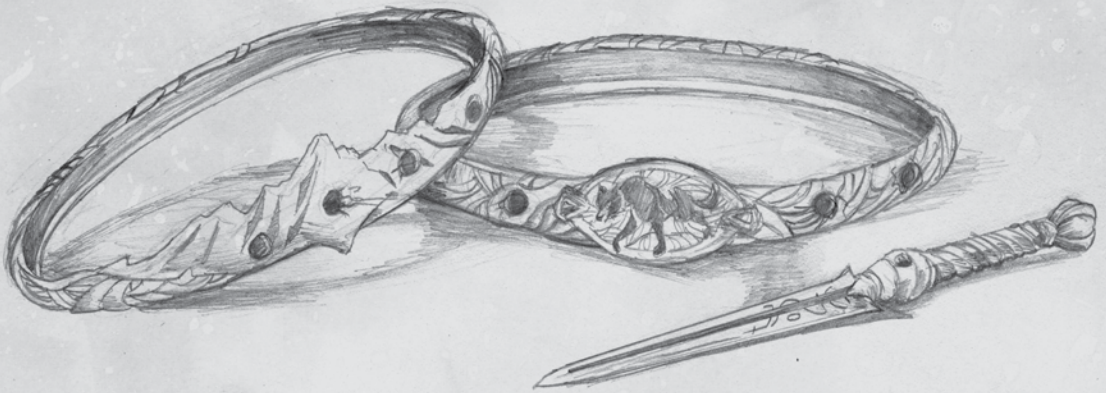
The players may decide to create characters who are related: siblings, parents and children, cousins, spouses, or what-have-you. That’s great; they’ll share some family members. If your players don’t leap to this conclusion on their own, you might suggest some links. Adam’s character’s father might be the brother of Belinda’s character’s mother (which makes the characters cousins, and each others’ parents their aunts and uncles). Alternately, Charlotte’s elder sister may have already married Dexter’s younger brother (which gives them nieces and nephews in common). And so on.

Be mindful that, as you tie the characters’ families together, you are shaping the scope of the game. If everyone in the game is a brother or cousin, that is going to strike romance between player characters right out of the game. On the other hand, this may be exactly what you want: a game where all the characters are siblings can be very rewarding. It will just be a different game than the game where two families are about to be linked by a new marriage, or the game where no bonds of blood unite the characters at all.

At the end of this process, you will have a big long list of NPCs that you can use in your adventures. Some of them will be vassals, some will be unattached, but all of them can be used by you to make what happens in the game more immediate for the players. Use them as antagonists, as allies, as rivals, and as colorful background. Using a family member is always more interesting than using a random stranger.

There’s another trick to using family members — if somebody shows up in Adams’ domain stirring up trouble, only Adam really cares. However, if it turns out that it is Belinda’s sister making a ruckus, now both Adam and Belinda care.

Drawing out a family tree may be useful to you and your players, but keep in mind that play will almost certainly wreak havoc on that tree. As players use wagers and risks to develop their family background, new links will be created and apparent links will be revealed as false. Some family members will pass into solace or be murdered. Nothing is set in stone in a Houses game, least of all family!



More coronets!

Did everyone have one of these? They're certainly ubiquitous enough, although we have yet to uncover two that are even remotely similar... Strange that so much effort went into crafting what the operas tell us were hardly ever worn. -S

You have yet to really understand the nature of the men. These had to be of the most fantastic make in case they were ever required.

Being caught flat-footed in fashion often had the same consequences as when in battle. -J

PEERS

SHANRI IS A DANGEROUS PLACE, AND IT IS MADE MORE DANGEROUS BECAUSE OF THE BLOODED WHO POPULATE IT. THE BLOODED SCHEME AND PLOT AS A MATTER OF COURSE, BUT THEY ALSO PUT THOSE SCHEMES AND PLOTS INTO ACTION. VEN PLANS ARE NEVER DISCOVERED BEFORE THEY HAVE BEGUN: AT LEAST, NOT IN THE OPERAS AND PILLOW BOOKS. RATHER, VEN HEROES AND HEROINES DISCOVER THE PLOTS AND SCHEMES AGAINST THEM WHEN THEY ARE ALREADY IN MOTION, ALREADY RIPPING THEIR DOMAINS APART, ALREADY HOLDING A KNIFE TO THEIR THROAT.

While Houses of the Blooded is a game in which the players can and will destroy their own lives without any outside help, it is also a game where they have that help anyway. Neighboring nobles, fellow house members, old rivals, new romances, suaven high priests, and the rest — all the blooded NPCs that you might populate your game with — these are Peers. It is peers that act against the player characters; peers who plot the demise of their families; peers who covet their lands; peers who seethe with hatred over a half-forgotten slight.

Now, one way to go about adding colorful antagonists to your game would be to spend hours creating them using the character creation rules, maybe fudging a little in terms of how large their domains or how powerful their spy networks. And this can be loads of fun. It can also become a frustrating waste of time when your player characters decide to run off in the other direction, befriend the Big Bad with a wager, or decline to fall in love with the damsel you have put in such compelling distress.

The Peers rules allow you to simply and seamlessly invent and develop these NPCs in the middle of the game. No need to painstakingly prepare them before play begins; you can invent them on the fly, as you go, and these rules show you how. And when they don't work out like you might expect them to, you lose nothing — you invested no time, no effort, no number crunching in them. The player character wants to marry the sorceress? Sure, that works — and then you just keep going from there.

While the Family rules allow you to kick off an entire Houses campaign without any more prep work than the players' character creation, it is the Peers rules that allow you to keep that campaign going, introducing fresh faces and revealing deep secrets of familiar friends, all without spending hours in between game sessions figuring out your next step.

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INVENTING PEERS

When you first introduce a peer into your story, the peer needs a first name and Three Things (HotB, page 371). That's it; that's all you need to start. You might jot these things down on some blank paper, with some space to elaborate as play adds details to the character. You could also just start off a Peer sheet, which is at the end of this book (p86). It has all the space you will need to track the changes and additions to the peer as you go.

You can even start off with a small library of Peer cards, each with a name already printed at the top of the card. When you need a new Peer, just grab a card at random, add Three Things, and off you go. That library of named Peer cards? Available for download here: [<http://joshroby.com/downloads/peercards.zip>].

At first, a peer looks a lot like an empty character sheet. They don't have any virtues, aspects, or other things. All they have is a name and their Three Things. Your job as a Narrator is to play them as if they weren't four bullet points. If you do your job right, in short order they won't be just four items on the page.

It should be pointed out that Peers are always blooded, and often control lands and vassals. Peers are never veth, dirt. Veth don't have virtues, aspects, and the like; they certainly don't have lands and vassals. Veth NPCs might have a name, or more likely an occupation, and a single descriptor: the dirty farmer, the excitable shepherd, Terule the old craftsman. They don't need anything more than that — and they'll never have more than that, either.

VIRTUES FOR PEERS

Virtues work sort of backwards for Peers. Whenever you invent a new peer, leave space for their five virtues. You may not know what they are yet, but leave six spaces for them. In front of each space, write a number: write one 4, two 3s, and two 2s. Then add a space with a 0 in front of it. Underneath this space, write in their House, or leave a space labelled "House."

Whenever the peer needs to roll dice, consult this space. If they need to roll Courage and they don't have a Courage virtue yet, pick one of the empty spaces and write in Courage. Roll that many dice for that risk, and whenever they need to roll Courage again, you have a number assigned to it. If their House is known (which tends to happen earlier than virtues), you know if they get one more die when rolling that virtue.

Alternately, whenever a player uses a Wisdom risk or the Espionage action Spying on

People (HotB page 270) to discover the rank of one of a peer's virtues, consult this space. If the virtue in question has been assigned, report that information back faithfully. If the virtue has not been assigned, ask the player if they would like to use their privilege to assign a rank to the virtue. If they decline, decide what sounds best to you then and there and tell the player what it is.

Over time and as you play, the peer's five virtues will get ratings, and you'll also find out which virtue is their weakness. It's really that easy.

House after Virtues

What happens when you define a Peer's house after you've already rolled the associated Virtue? You rolled the wrong number back then! Oh horrors!

...it's just one die. Don't worry about it.

ASPECTS FOR PEERS

Aspects are very simple for peers. Start with the three descriptors that you gave them at the outset. Pencil those into the first three Aspect slots. You've already mentioned them once, when you introduced the character. Whenever any of the players mentions one of those descriptors a second time, they become an aspect. Draw a little box in front of the new aspect to denote that it's "live." You can check the box when the aspect is invoked so you know when to spend style. Convenient!

Sometimes the players don't really latch on to your first three descriptors. Rather than let them fade away, try giving them a nudge. Don't be subtle. That cane you gave the peer going into solace? Jab the youngster player characters in the ribs with it. The beautiful raven tresses you gave the love interest? Have them find a lock of it at the scene of the grisly murder. If they grab the cane or inspect the hair, voila — you have another aspect to use!

In the mean time, though, you may feel powerless without aspects to invoke. I invite you to look at it another way: you have lots of aspects to tag. Get yourself a list of your players' aspects and tag like mad. Picking at the holes in your players' armor is a great way to introduce new characters and ensure that they'll be memorable.

Of course, peers aren't limited to just three aspects. Keep some more spaces open: six or so. These are for things that come up in play later. These can be just about anything, and can come from you or from the players. If they call the peer a slob, or use a Wisdom roll to determine the peer is from the Eastern Isles, or imply to someone else that the peer is a sorcerer, pencil these details in. Then, when anybody at the table — including you — mentions that a second time, you can draw in that box to make it into an aspect.

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DEVOTIONS, ARTIFACTS, AND MANEUVERS FOR PEERS

Most Peers can run off of Virtues and Aspects entirely, but sometimes they need that little extra something. Peers can have Devotions, Artifacts, and Advanced Maneuvers just like player characters. There are two ways you can go about adding these to your peers, and you can use these interchangeably.

First, you may convert an aspect into a Devotion, Artifact, or Maneuver. The aspect in question should have something to do with the new resource you are giving the peer. The aspect “Gravely pious” could easily turn into a devotion; the aspect “Singing blade” could be converted into a bloodsword or into a maneuver. Simply strike the aspect from the sheet and write in the new resource, which may have any rank necessary. Yes, an aspect can turn into a rank-5 devotion. Yes, an aspect can turn into a rank-5 artifact. The aspect’s slot is also freed up, and can be filled in with something new once it’s been mentioned twice in the game.

The second method is to buy these resources with style points. This is especially appropriate for maneuvers, which might not be foreshadowed in earlier, more peaceful points of the game. Simply have the Peer spend the style point and write in the devotion, artifact, or maneuver, again at whatever rank necessary. How does a Peer get style points? Just like a player character does — by getting aspects compelled or by having wagers vetoed.

PEER DOMAINS

It’s a good idea to jot down notes about a peer’s domain as they are revealed in play. Do they present gifts of spices? Then they probably have some swamp regions. Do they talk about hunting deer? Then they probably have some forests. Be doubly sure to note down the names of places whenever they are mentioned; these can be used as quick and easy region names. Ignore the “mentioned twice” rule, here — anything and everything gets jotted down. All of that will get you a very sketchy idea of what the peer’s domain is like, and generally speaking, that’s all you’re going to need ninety percent of the time.

Most of the time, the domains of peers are not very important to the game — at least, not in the specifics, and not before the player characters’ spy networks show up. In fact, the Espionage action Spying on Regions (HotB page 270) is the primary means by which peer domains are developed. Whenever a player character makes a successful Spying on Regions action, they get 1-4 pieces of information. If they made any wagers, they can spend those wagers to declare what information they get, and that information is true.

So if a player was looking for that elusive Secret Army, won the roll, and had a wager involved, they can declare that they find the Army in question. If it's incredibly important, you could give them a style point and tell them there is no Army there, but where's the fun in that? Let the players keep you on your toes and figure out why there's an Army there — it will certainly make for a more interesting game.

By relying on players' espionage actions to develop the landscape of foreign domains, you avoid a whole lot of work that might otherwise go to waste. The only bit of information you really need for this technique is the domain's security rank for the espionage risk. Instead of figuring out what sort of spy network the domain has, if it's using an action this season to increase security, if the regions have a loyalty above five... just substitute the peer's Cunning. If you happen to have invented a spymaster for that domain, use that Cunning rank instead.

Contrariwise, sometimes you need the loyalty rating of a region or vassal for the inevitable attempts at conquest by player characters. Use the peer's Beauty, or the Beauty of his herald, if you've invented one.

PEER SEASON ACTIONS

Peers, like the player characters, are usually hard at work plotting and scheming to further their own agenda. However, the Narrator should not be doing all the considerable bookkeeping to keep track of twenty Peers' season actions as if they were player characters. That is a lot of work, most of it completely immaterial to the game. The only thing that matters is when those season actions impact the player characters — which of course means espionage actions and conquer actions.

*Go back to your
castle. Forget your
indiscretions today.
But know this: I will not.
I will plot, I will scheme.
I await the moment.*

— TALLOS

ANGRY PEERS

If the results of a story dictate that a Peer will be going on the offensive against a player character, the Narrator should assume that the Peer has a number of season actions up to his full Cunning. Some of those actions, you can assume, are performed by his seneschal, spy network, personal guard, and (hopefully) secret army. If this proves to be too few season actions to do much of anything, the Narrator might invent a savvy vassal for the vengeful Peer — however, try to introduce this character within a

story first. An unseen antagonist pulling strings without cropping up anywhere in play is bad form.

For these vengeful and active Peers, just sketch out their season actions as if they were a PC. This level of detail is especially appropriate if there is some back-and-forth conquering or espionage going on. However, once the immediate hostilities fade, drop the bookkeeping like a hot potato. It's really not worth it.

VALUE, DEFENSE, AND DANGER

Outside of Peers swearing undying enmity against the player characters, the season-to-season existence of the ven also entails a background level of hostile incursions, as well. In order to gauge this sort of activity, you will need to calculate your provinces' Value, Defenses, and Danger levels. This is math that the players should do for the Narrator — many hands and light burdens, after all.

To find your province's Value, total up ranks of all of a province's Regions. If you have a Forest-2, Mountains-3, and Shore-2, you would have a Value of 7. Yes, cities count as 4. Do not add in Castles.

Then total up your ranks of Roadmen, Personal Guard, Spy Network, Mayor, Sheriff, Spouse, the province's Castle, and the lowest Region Loyalty in the Province. This is your province's apparent Defenses. (No, Secret Army does not help your apparent defenses — nobody is worried about your secret army stomping on them, because it's a secret!)

Puzzle Houses contribute to neither Value nor Defenses; they are both a prize and an obstacle to invaders. The pros and the cons make them a wash.

Divide the province's Value by its Defenses. Yes, division is hard, but suck it up and use a calculator. Round up to a whole number. This is your province's Danger rating. You want your Danger to be low — low and little and unremarkable so that none of your neighbors notice what a big, fat target you are.

Once a season, the Narrator will roll a number of dice equal to the province's Danger rating. She may or may not let you watch the roll. For each die that comes up 1, a peer is taking action against the province. That might mean scouting your land, undermining your vassals, or out-and-out invading your regions; it depends on the peer. The Narrator will decide who is doing what and tell you (or not) what has happened.

How does the Narrator do this, you might ask? By listening to her gut and sense of story. In most cases, there will be an obvious answer. The ven with the biggest axe

to grind. The ven who you just started a Romance with. Your closest neighbor. The brother of the ven you just started a Romance with. Another PC's vassal. The last jilted lover of the ven you just started a Romance with. The ven who, up until this point, has been the most honorable and trustworthy Peer you have met. Your own father. And if more than a single 1 is rolled, then it might be more than one of these at the same time.

The Narrator will probably want to jot down what each Peer has done. The Peer card is a good place for this, or along with wherever you keep your peer write-ups. If a peer takes action one season and there's another incursion two seasons later, it's probably the same peer following up. Scout the land, then soften up the loyalty there, then bring in the guardsmen.

FAMILY PEERS

Here's where we put the peanut butter together with the chocolate. As you should well know, making characters also churns out a ton of family members. If you've taken down names and descriptors as your players created their characters, you have a nice long list of NPCs. Each and every one of those names can be a Peer.

Beneath each name, I like to jot down how the Peer is related to whom. This saves time later when you pull out a Peer and wonder where they came from. This is Albert's sister; this is Beatrice's aunt; this is Claudia and Drew's grandfather.

For a good chunk of your Family Peers, you'll know what House they're in, but you won't necessarily know their virtues yet. Just jot down "+1 to Beauty" or suchlike at the bottom of the virtues list. When you assign the virtue a rank, you can add the +1.

All those little things that your players mentioned about their family members should go into their Three Things. If a player calls his sister the black sheep of the family, write that in. If a player says that they're the black sheep of the family, write in on her brother's write up that he's the favorite son. It doesn't matter how trivial and petty the notes may seem at first; get them in there. Your players have been telling you what kind of characters they want the story populated with. Don't waste that sort of feedback!

I shouldn't need to say this. I probably don't need to say this. But I'm going to, anyway. Family Peers are just as dangerous for the player characters as any other Peers, if not more so. They're family, sure — that doesn't mean they won't invade the players' domains, let alone commit lesser affronts like a little espionage or stealing their lovers away from them. The fact that they're family only means that they know where and how to hit the player characters for best effect.

You knew that, right?

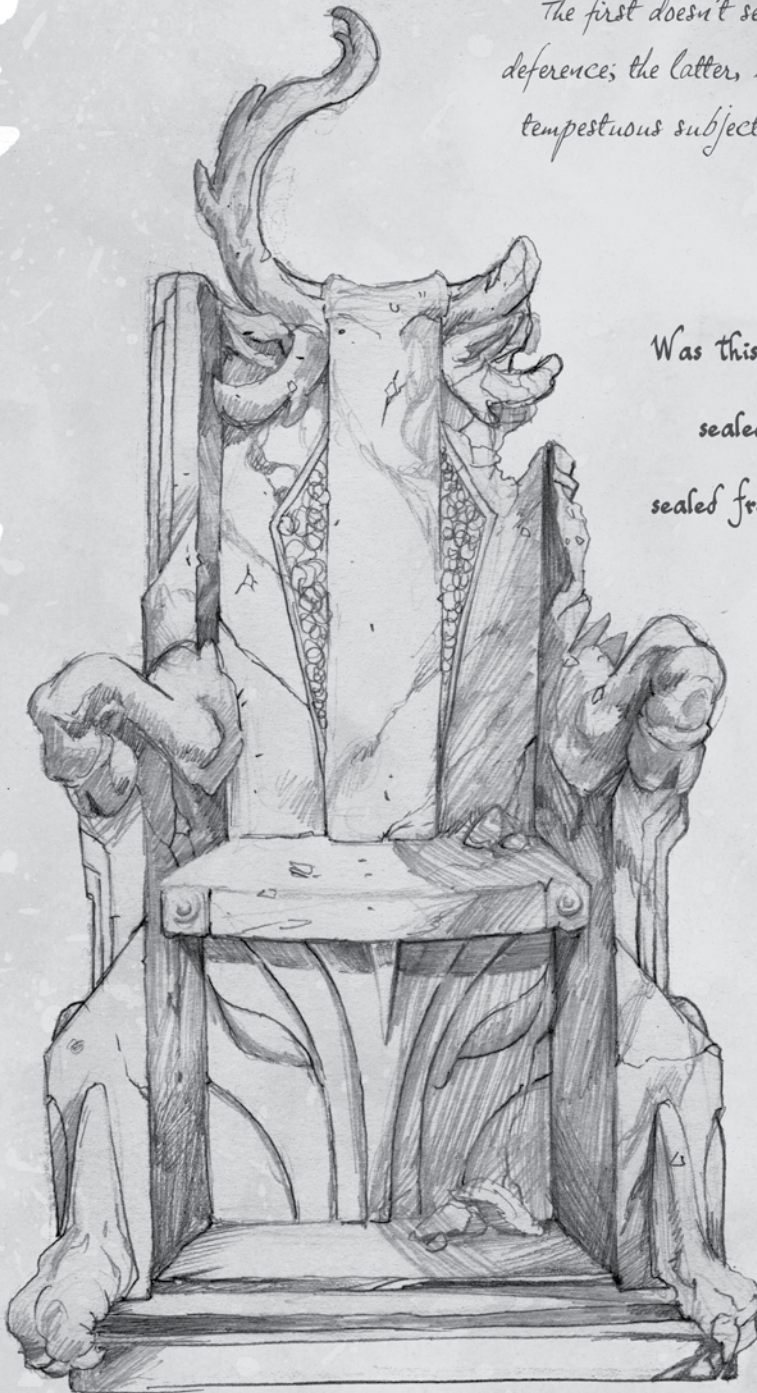
The most interesting aspect of this find, for me, is where we found it, in a wide chamber devoid of all other ornamentation. If it's a throne, did petitioners stand, or sit on the ground?

The first doesn't seem to require much deference; the latter, more than I'd think our tempestuous subjects would cooperate with

-S

Was this found in the sealed chamber? The one sealed from the outside?

-J



FEALTY

THE VEN DON'T HAVE A MAGNA CARTA OR CONSTITUTION TO DIRECT THE GOVERNANCE OF THEIR SOCIETY; INSTEAD, THEY HAVE LOTS AND LOTS AND LOTS OF FEALTY CONTRACTS. THE LEGAL FOUNDATION OF VEN SOCIETY, THE FEALTY CONTRACT DESCRIBES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIEGE AND VASSAL. NEARLY EVERY VEN IN SHANRI IS BOTH A VASSAL TO SOMEONE AND A LIEGE TO OTHERS; EVEN BOLD VEN HAVE VASSALS. THESE CONTRACTS FORM A NETWORK OF OBLIGATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES THAT KEEP SOCIETY FUNCTIONING.

In gross overview, a fealty contract describes how the liege will protect the vassal and how the vassal will serve the liege. For instance, nearly all fealty contracts require lieges to protect his vassals from threats above their station — when a count invades, barons call for their own count to back them up. However, even the few contracts that have survived to the present day reveal a wealth of variety. Lieges required resources, backing in the Senate, sorcerous counsel, even requested the advice of their inferiors. On the other side of the coin, some vassals were supported with resources from their liege to establish their territories while some stipulated in writing that their liege would protect their good name. There is even an extant contract in which the liege demands access to his vassals' daughters for "training" purposes.

DEVELOPING FEALTY CONTRACTS IN PLAY

When you create your character, the game's default assumption is that you are playing a baron or baroness, presumably with a count for a liege and a fealty contract binding the character to his service. If there are any elements of your fealty contract that are important to your conception of your character, you should make sure to talk these details over with the Narrator. However, it's not necessary to specify any of the details of your fealty contract before play begins: you can develop it in play as you go.

A fealty contract is, at the end of the day, just another contract. An important one, but a contract nonetheless and created with Beauty risks just like any other contract (HotB 134). When we're talking about a contract that's already been drawn up and signed, though, we enter the realm of Wisdom and Cunning wagers. Beauty is used to make the thing in the first place; Wisdom is used to recall all those clever provisions and Cunning is used to exploit them to advantage.

Whenever you might need to call upon the details of your fealty contract, it is a Wisdom risk. Each wager allows you to “remember” one detail of the contract. These details are a little finer-grain than the whole terms created by Beauty risks; instead of “the baron will furnish the count with lumber biannually,” you might recall “I owe him lumber” or “I only have to pay him off every other season.”

Remembering is one thing; twisting things to your advantage is another. When you use Cunning, you’re not determining or changing what is in a contract; you are arguing how what is in the contract is applied to reality. This is almost always a contested Cunning risk, and most lieges with poor Cunning have a seneschal or scholar around to back them up. Each wager allows you to argue how a certain detail from the contract applies or does not apply to your present situation.

After you and the other side spend all your wagers, you both choose whether to accept the other’s argument or not. If you accept their argument, you receive a number of style points equal to their wagers. Take care: it’s all too easy to argue your way into giving your liege a stack of style points and a grudge against you!

Also be careful what you argue for. Your liege might accept your argument that you do not need to furnish him with your guardsmen to fight off Count Kether because your own lands have not been invaded. All he needs to do is invite a neighboring baron to invade your lands and then claim, by your own argument, that you must support him against Kether... and then deal with your “petty” invasion when he gives you your guardsmen back.

GAINING VASSALS IN PLAY

If you are so lucky (or devious) to pick up a PC or NPC as a vassal in play, you will need a fealty contract. This is a contested Beauty roll, and both sides might employ a negotiator more versed in Beauty than they are. Each wager adds one term to the contract. Especially useful terms you might consider include: “You will defend me and my name against all attacks,” “You will support me in all endeavors with the full might of your court,” or “You will furnish me with X resources of Y type every Z seasons.”

Once all wagers have been spent, both sides decide if they will sign the contract. Signing the contract awards both sides a number of style points equal to half the total wagers. Once they sign, they are your vassal — and your responsibility. All their lands become part of your domain. All their drama, trouble, and ill-advised romances will shortly become your problems (remember, NPC vassals have their own agendas

and make their own mistakes). And presumably whoever used to be their liege might not take kindly to this new arrangement you worked out. Good luck!

Once you have conquered your way into a second province, you may also hire a vassal to serve as that province's baron. This is described in detail on page 66. He's not as shiny and cool as a PC or NPC baron. He doesn't come with his own lands; you entrust some of your own lands to him. On the other hand, he has a Loyalty score, so you can be moderately sure he's not betraying you as long as you keep him in wine and spices. And spy on him. Just in case.

I pledge my loyalty to you, my liege, and my strong right arm. Use me as you will, and know that my ambition is forever yoked to yours.

— UL RU, LATER KNOWN AS THE USURPER KING

LIEGES

What discussion of fealty would be complete without touching on liege-lords? Lieges are the Narrator's tools for making your life difficult (like orks and sorcerous artifacts and vengeful lovers weren't enough). They will have expectations and demands of you, often impossible ones, and it's your job to make them feel like you're being a good, loyal vassal. Note that fulfilling their demands isn't necessarily your job: just make them feel like you have and you'll be fine.

Sometimes your liege will be friendly, even supportive — but that won't change the fact that they will be pushing you to perform. They'll still want you to go invade that village or produce that Opera or marry that brat from the next province over. They'll just be doing it for your own good, now. Which doesn't make it any easier, and more often than not just makes it harder.

In addition to what's been outlined in your fealty contract, your liege might make additional requests based on goodwill. Keep in mind that there are all sorts of ways that your liege can make your life a living hell. He can ignore you in the Senate. He can neglect to mention that he's flushing orks out of his lands... and into yours. He can give you his third son, the one who isn't all there in the head, for a position in your court. He can send his other vassals and not you on a profitable conquest. He can tell his neighbors that he won't be looking very hard at your frontier. The only thing preventing his ire is your maintaining his goodwill. So do what he says unless you want to pick a fight.

INDIRECT LIEGES

Unless you're already a marquis, your liege has a liege of his own. If you're a lowly baron, your liege's liege has a liege, too. These are known as *fin altrex*, or indirect lieges. Unless specified in the fealty contract, a vassal does not have any formal duties or obligations to his indirect lieges. This of course means there are all sorts of informal demands that you'll be bombarded with.

On the one hand, doing favors for powerful ven — especially powerful ven who have your own liege on a hook — can be a good idea. On the other hand, indirect lieges tend to use their indirect vassals like toilet paper. Disposable. To make matters worse, it's considered bad form to ask your *fin altrex* for the return favor in writing. Don't you trust them?

At the end of the day, most ven jump when and where their indirect lieges tell them, because someday they may need some muscle to deal with trouble with their direct liege. In the mean time, they daydream of the day that they'll be the *fin altrex*...

SURPASSING YOUR LIEGE

When a liege seizes or otherwise acquires enough land to progress from count to marquis, he often elevates his vassals along with him, from baron to count. The same holds for the (much rarer) progression to duchy. So if your liege moves up in the world, he'll take you along for the ride. That's the ideal progression: it doesn't happen often.

More often, a baroness collects lands and vassals and is ready to progress to count long before her own liege is ready to make the jump to marquis — if he's even interested in progression in the first place. Such a liege lord is referred to as *danatrex*, a "useless master." That doesn't change anything, though: bonds of fealty still apply, and the vassal still owes his liege his loyalty, support, and taxes. The vassal must find a way out of their fealty contract.

The key to getting out of a fealty contract is to prove that the liege is unable to live up to his side of the agreement. If the liege cannot protect his vassals from greater threats, fails to provide the material support he'd promised, reneges on promises of favor, or otherwise fails to do what he contracted to do, the vassal can argue that the fealty contract is rendered null and void and seek a new, more powerful liege... one who will recognize the ambitious vassal at a greater rank than she has now.

Sometimes such a breach falls into the ambitious vassal's lap — by which I mean, of course, that a situation arises that the vassal can twist to her own ends. A liege rarely

sees eye-to-eye with the departing vassal, but, assuming she really has the lands and vassals to claim greater title, the former liege might refrain from acting against her. It also helps if your new liege is powerful and intimidating.

However, serendipity does not always present itself. Ambitious ven often have to create the situation that breaks their fealty contract.

If the ambitious vassal already has a potential new liege in mind, he can convince the new liege to invade the old liege. Legally, the vassal can't materially support such an invasion without violating her fealty to the old liege. On the other hand, if no one finds out and the new liege wins, the vassal has lost nothing. The vassal then swears fealty to the new liege. In the next Senate session the vassal stands for progression, and the new liege accepts her — assuming he doesn't betray her. He might keep her around as a mere baron or reject her title entirely.

The most direct, if difficult, route is for the ambitious vassal to simply invade the liege's own domains herself. After all, by ven law, if you can't hold it, you don't own it. And if the liege doesn't own his lands, he can't fulfill his obligations to protect and support his vassals. Those vassals are free to find a liege who can — and there's this ambitious ven who just proved she can take down a bigger foe on the battlefield. How convenient! The downside to this tactic is that it's all or nothing: if the invasion fails, the vassal will be stripped of all title and probably exiled. Nobody will want her after that.

It also doesn't always come down to steel and blood. Fealty contracts are full of non-martial stipulations. If the liege is obligated to employ the vassal's relations in court and said relation is stupid enough (or word gets out that he is sleeping with the liege's wife), the liege might send him packing. The temple he pledged to build for his

The ven who desires to be Earl defeats his enemies before they realize they are his enemies; the landless ven makes enemies before ever meeting them.

— CALIBAN RU

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vassal's suaven grandfather might keep running into setbacks, delays, and sabotaged from unidentified bandits. Or resources that the liege promised his vassal might go missing. Or the vassal's husband might seduce the liege, but the story that goes around is that it was the other way around, and now the liege has dishonored your marriage contract. And so on.

Some fealty contracts include an explicit exit clause, which usually entails paying the liege lord a large sum of resources for the right to seek a new liege elsewhere. The rationale is simple: escape clauses let the liege to avoid the hassle and destruction of ambitious vassals wriggling, ripping, and tearing their way out of the agreement.

However, the price of freedom is always prohibitive — lieges figure they might as well make a profit off this, after all — and the exit clause usually imposes perpetual trade rights, stipulates a lasting military alliance, or dictates that the old liege lord gets to pick the new liege lord. Yes, you can pay for the right to be sold to the highest bidder. For these reasons, some ven finagle their way out of their contracts even when there's an exit clause available to them.

MULTIPLE LIEGES

Generally frowned upon, there were still a few periods in ven history where ven pledged fealty to more than one liege lord. This may seem ridiculous, but the principle, assumed at the time, went like this. Pledging love, support, and duty to one lord would only conflict with pledging love, support, and duty to another lord if those two lords were in conflict, or in other words went to war with each other. War, by decree of the Senate, was illegal. So there should be no reason why a ven couldn't swear fealty to multiple lords, pick up multiple titles, rule multiple chunks of land, and generally make the political hierarchy an absolute mess.

It should be said explicitly: when you decide that your character is picking up a second liege, you're asking the Narrator to find a way to put your lieges in conflict with each other. Do not expect such an arrangement to last for more than a few sessions before it gets difficult or impossible. Splitting liege loyalties never ends well — but it does often end in blood, tragedy, and drama, and who doesn't want that?

VASSALS

Almost all player characters in Houses of the Blooded have vassals. Some have a host of attendants maintaining their standard of living, others have a handful of retainers comprising their household. Some treat their vassals like family, while others treat them like slaves. Whichever the case, ven nobles rely on, are even defined by, their vassals. Without vassals, the ven would be unable to maintain their castles, their martial power, their trade networks; they would lose their access to fine goods, would be unable to host their lavish parties, would no longer be able to spend days and days refining their opera opus. Without vassals, ven wouldn't be ven.

RANKED VASSALS

Ranked vassals, such as a Herald-2 or Apothecary-1, are listed on your character sheet because they are resources for you to call on. They are (relatively) reliable, and will perform tasks for you without interference from their own agendas or goals. As long as they are on your sheet (and have a positive Loyalty rank), their agenda and goal is to make you happy.

These vassals are colorful background details that add context and weight to the story; they'll never do or say anything that challenges the player characters or change the course of the story. These vassals might have names or go without; they don't need Three Things, but it never hurts to add some grabby details.

NPC VASSALS

Unlike ranked vassals, NPC vassals have their own agendas and goals — and those are never “make my liege happy.” Their goals may be complementary to yours, like “win the affection and support of my liege” or “be the biggest, baddest vassal in my liege's court,” but even then their agenda will create a frission of conflict that drives the story. Of course, they might also have goals like “kill my liege and take his place” or “seduce my liege's husband,” and that's when the fun shifts into gear.

Narrators take note! When a player turns a vassal into an NPC, it's your cue to give that vassal their own goals, and to play them pursuing those goals.

Alternately, if you're playing through a story and you make an NPC one of your vassals, expect them to keep pursuing their own goals under your banner!

Some possible goals and agenda for NPC Vassals include: “create the greatest opera of all time” (hopefully not about you), “bed that beautiful herald” (your daughter, the

herald?), “display the discipline of Manna Renay” (by chastising your guests), “prove my valor and become my liege’s first baron” (great in a Swordsman; less great in a court gossip), “discover all there is to find in my liege’s ruins”, or “collect children for Mahl” (ork babies, how can you go wrong?).

BEING BOLD

No ven wants to see a bold noble prosper. A bold noble claims land and title on his own, without recognition of the Senate and without a liege of greater rank sponsoring him. Ven of great title despise bold ven for not toeing the line and recognizing their superiority. Ven of small title envy bold ven for getting lands and title without jumping through the hoops they did. Ven of no title sneer at them for thinking their fake titles make bold ven better than them.

But there were always bold ven in Shanri, and in some ages quite a few of them. Every surge of expansion saw bold ven striking out into the wilderness and claiming lands by their own names; the frontier was often littered with barons who were barons only because they said they were.

After each of these bursts of expansion, though, the ranks of bold barons dwindled. Some pledged fealty to lieges back in the bosom of civilization, either by force or by desperation: Shanri’s frontier is not a welcoming place, and support from established power is tempting. Others were conquered outright, displaced by the well-equipped sons and daughters of counts and marquises back home. Most, however, simply disappeared after a flare of self-produced glory. Shanri hates bold ven, too.

The few bold ven who survived are a hardy lot: self-reliant to the point of disdain, fiercely loyal to the handful

Bold

Invoke to strike out on your own, without assistance or backup.

Tag when the legitimacy of your title is questioned or disdained.

of vassals they've managed to acquire, and possessing freakish levels of competence or luck or both. Bold ven owe no fealty to anyone, although they may have vassals of their own who owe fealty to them.

Not all bold ven are barons, of course. Many claim greater titles, either because they have seized enough land to have vassal nobles of their own, or because they fancy that 'Count,' 'Marchioness,' or even 'Duke' sound better in front of their names. They may claim any title they like, although they do not enjoy the benefits thereof (such as declining duels) except to their own vassals.

Bold ven make an interesting addition to any game and especially to a Coronets game. Representing power from outside the established structure, the inclusion of bold ven often throws more light on the politics that they are not a part of. They may be wildcards, foreign threats, or hapless prey, but they are never neutral and never just another neighboring peer.

When used as player characters, bold ven must confront all the power of the recognized nobility without any support from a liege. They may or may not have the Bold aspect (to the left). They may or may not survive.

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Clearly this mosaic is an elaboration of reality, using stylized imagery to evoke a greater sense of awe than the real city have garnered.

-J

Perhaps, but Taylor's translations include a passage of grief-stricken countless throwing herself from the top;

the description gives her "seven heartbeats" to hit the water, and the math holds up. That's how long it would take to fall five hundred feet...

-S

SENATE

ON THE FIRST NEW MOON EACH SEASON, THE VEN GATHER AT DAVFANNA ALDRENA TO SIT IN THE SENATE, DISCUSS WEIGHTY MATTERS THAT CONCERN THEM ALL, MANEUVER FOR POLITICAL ADVANTAGE, DECIDE ON COMMON ACTION, AND THEN RETIRE TO DRINK AND ROMANCE UNTIL THE SUN RISES. THEN THEY DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN. THAT'S THE SENATE IN A NUTSHELL.

The Senate cares about one thing: one. The Senate exists only to protect the power of its Senators. Forget this at your peril!

— SENATOR AJAX,
PRAGMATICS

THE DUKES' COUNCIL

Presiding over the Senate is the Dukes' Council. Every Duke in Shanri is a member, and they have the closest thing to control in the Senate. They don't decide who speaks, but they do decide how long they speak. They don't decide who votes, but they do decide when the votes are tallied. They don't decide where Senate roadmen will go, but they do decide which vashna will go to which assignment. Theirs is a subtle power, and they use it carefully and dexterously. In many ways, they're the only thing that makes the Senate function.

The Council is made up of all the Dukes who have been recognized by the Senate, which sounds pretty and relatively fair. The truth of the matter, however, is that only ven of higher rank can recognize a ven who wishes to progress to a new title. As there is no rank higher than Duke, it is the Duke's Council who recognize new Dukes. This makes the Duke's Council something of a private club that selects its own members. Of course, that's exactly what the Senate is, as well. This is just the first of many ways in which Duke's Council is a microcosm of the larger Senate that it presides over.

THE SENATE OF RITUALS

As with all things ven, the Senate is steeped in ritual: the same steps repeated every quarter, infused with so much significance as to border on the religious. It's no coincidence that the high priests of the suaven open every session of the Senate: to the ven, the Senate is like High Mass.

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THE SUNRISE INVOCATION

Each Senate session is opened with rituals performed by the Dukes Council and the high priests of the greater suaven. These proceedings start just before dawn and last until mid-morning. Devout Senators arrive in time for these festivities; others treat the Sunrise Invocation as a time to mingle outside the Senate gates and take their time finding their seats.

The Sunrise Invocation is, technically speaking, the reveal of a work of performance Art (HotB 61). The aspect that the invocation grants vary depending on which priests are leading the ritual (and they indulge in all sorts of internal politicking to win that honor). When Manna Renay's priests command the floor, the aspect might be Tactful Disagreement; when Falvren Dyr is honored, those who watch might gain something more like My Words Are Backed With Steel.

Of course, Senators may only pick up the Invocation's aspect if they attend; if they have any last-minute details to attend to — like garnering support or lining up votes — they'll be otherwise engaged when the reveal occurs.

THE REPORT OF THE VASHNA

After the rituals of opening the Senate session are performed, the first order of the Senate is to hear the report of the vashna, the Senate's Roadmen, who were assigned matters to investigate in the previous session.

Each vashna returned from his mission stands before the Senate clad in black and silver to declare his findings. The report is purely factual; it does not include the vashna's opinions and it never suggests courses of action. The vashna has taken on the black: he has no identity, no standing, no opinions. He is a servant of the Senate, and reports only facts.

It's also worth noting that nearly every report is followed by Senators claiming that the vashna was biased one way or the other.

*May our words be
guided by the wisdom
of those who have gone
on to solace before us.*

*May we remember their
travails and deeds and
call upon them to inform,
inspire, and enrich us.*

*May the decisions we
make here honor their
memories and live up to
their expectations.*

— A COMMON SUNRISE
INVOCATION

GAINING RECOGNITION

Anyone may speak before the Senate: ven, veth, nobles, their spouses. Anyone — except maybe orks. Before they may speak, however, they must be recognized by at least three Senators of higher rank than they themselves hold. Theoretically, this is a gauge of the credibility and pertinence of the potential speaker, and sometimes a speaker is recognized for these reasons. More often, though, this is a gauge of their connections in the Senate.

Finding superiors to recognize you is often performed long before the Senate session. For most, it is a minor favor to be repaid later: “I recognized you before the Senate last Autumn; will you now clear up those bandits who have taken up roost in my forest?” Alternately, the favor may be repaid with political support in the form of votes in the same Senate session. This is especially the case with barons and counts, who often require occasional favors and extra votes. The recognition of marquises and dukes, however, usually comes at a higher price — more than one devil’s bargain has been struck simply for the right to speak.

Some naively believe that such prices cannot interfere with the purity of their purpose and avoid such political wrangling. Those who come to the Senate expecting to speak without having arranged for his three superiors to recognize him is often disappointed.

Dukes never need to be recognized to speak; they just start talking.

Gaining recognition is a Beauty risk. Each count who recognizes you without previous arrangement costs one wager; marquises cost two wagers, and dukes cost three. Senators who you have arranged to recognize you cost nothing — assuming they do not double-cross you, of course.

When you are recognized, you gain Style. Each ven who recognizes you gives you one or more points. One point if their recognition was simple and procedural, more points if they speak to your credibility, honesty, or good name. This works both ways, too: if you recognize another ven, it costs you style. If you make a Beauty risk to talk them up, though, you can convert your wagers, one-for-one, into style that you immediately give to the ven you’ve recognized. Then at least you don’t have to spend your own style.

Once a ven is recognized, he may speak on the matter before the Senate. More than one ven may be recognized at the same time, in which case the various ven are expected to argue the matter back and forth. Senators are expected to defer to each other based on the ranks of those who recognized them. If you were recognized by three counts and

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another speaker by three marquises, when they start talking, you stop. Alternately, the Dukes may call for a dachanau, or “dance of words” (see HotB page 68).

Matters of progression (covered handily in the HotB book, page 52) are resolved simply by gaining recognition and having a ven of superior rank accept you as a vassal. They do not require discussion, verdicts, or ballots: just recognition and acceptance. Of course, neither of those are easy to come by. On more than one occasion, the Dukes recognized a handful of ven seeking progression and let them argue their relative merits all at once, competing for potential lieges’ attention.

VERDICT

When discussion approaches its conclusion, any Senator who has been recognized may request the Senate pass a certain verdict regarding the matter at hand. Other ven may be recognized and speak after a verdict has been requested, but there is a certain sense that once verdicts have been introduced, further statements should be brief and bring discussion to an end. Because of this, it is entirely possible to call for a verdict too soon for some Senators’ liking, losing their votes for the verdict in question.

Verdicts usually boil down to a handful of options. First, the ven may request the Senate legitimize a claim to revenge — in other words, sanction personal violence. In less personal matters, the ven might request that vashna investigate the matter. The speaker may also push for the Senate to direct a ven to take on the black or declare certain lands to be Fair Game. Senate records include other verdicts that fall outside these, but they were rare indeed, and even rarer that they passed.

Calling for a verdict is a contested Beauty risk between all recognized speakers. If you are calling for the verdict, you may substitute Courage. If you fail, you are drawn into further discussion despite your best efforts. If you succeed, you may put as many wagers as you like into the free scene aspect, Verdict Called. If two or more verdicts have been called, their wagers are all invested in the same Verdict Called aspect.

Alternately, it costs one wager to stipulate that verdicts before yours were called too soon. If more than one verdict preceded yours, it costs one wager for each of them, and there’s no picking and choosing: either you chose the right moment to call for a verdict or you didn’t. If a ven called for a verdict before yours and spent a wager to claim the right moment, though, you can’t do the same. You’re late to the party.

CASTING BALLOTS

Any Duke may call for discussion to end and ballots to be cast on the verdicts introduced. Dukes may also stand, speak, call for a verdict, and then call for immediate ballots. That sort of display of power, though, is only rarely exercised. It makes their stranglehold on the Senate too obvious. Any Duke may veto a call for ballots, too, at which point the Dukes confer.

Senators may vote for one of the proposed verdicts or for natenne, which means “No Action,” if they don’t like anything proposed. There is no write-in option: if you wanted some other option, you should have spoken up.

There are no secrets ballots in the Senate, and there is strong influence to toe the line. Each Duke stands and declares his votes, then calls for his Marquises to do likewise. Each Marquis stands and declares his votes and then calls for his Counts. The Counts declare their votes and call for their Barons. Finally, the Barons declare their votes. Voting differently than your liege is certainly permitted, but it is always noticed. Any ven who votes differently than his lieges — direct or indirect — gains the Free Aspect Schismatic for as long as the Senate is in session.

It is also permitted to split votes. A ven may devote a portion of his votes to one verdict and another portion to a second. You must control multiple domains, and therefore multiple votes, to do this; “half-votes” are not acceptable. If a high-ranking ven splits his votes, his vassals do not gain Schismatic no matter how they vote. Some dukes and marquises regularly reserve one of their votes for No Action to signal to their vassals to vote as they please.

The verdict with the most votes carries and is entered into the Senate record. The matter is closed for that

***I am the Count of Cavala,
and I invest my ballots,
as all reasonable ven
must, to the verdict of
Fair Game.***

— Y'VAN TAL

Schismatic

Invoke whenever you rally support against established power or the status quo.

Tag in any social or political situation in Davfanna Aldrena.

Verdict Called

Tag to disparage further discussion.

Compel to force a speaker to surrender the floor.

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But Who Wins?

There is no game rule for determining which verdict carries. The Narrator is the final arbiter, here. There are a lot of factors to consider: who spoke for which verdict, and who recognized them? Which verdicts were called too soon, and which one was proposed at the right moment? How well did the senators speak, and how much did each speaker portray his verdict as being in the best interests of the ven holding the most votes? I could write a big, complex system to take all this into account, but your Narrator will know which verdict is right for the story. Of course, you can always offer him style or spend wagers, too...

*The wise and just
lords of the Senate call
on wisdom at sunrise
and cunning at sunset.
Such is the way of
things.*

— WYEL UVAN

session of the Senate. Attempting to raise the question again is bad form. Wait until next season, or take action on your own.

THE SUNSET COUNCIL

Once all Senate business has been concluded, the Dukes Council meets to sort matters into actionable tasks. They meet publicly in the Senate building as the other Senators file out. This is the Sunset Council, although unlike the Sunrise Invocation, it rarely takes place during the time of day it is named after. More often than not, the Sunset Council is called to order well past midnight.

The Sunset Council is perhaps the Dukes' greatest source of power. There they determine who will steward the lands formerly controlled by those who have been ordered to take on the black. They manage, at great distance, the lands that the Senate is currently stewarding, sending orders to the seneschals and other Senate vassals in far-flung lands. Then there are always a thousand little decisions to be made, from disciplining Senate vassals to how to stock the quarterhouses for the next session.

The Dukes also decide which vashna will attend to which problems the Senate has requested they see to. The devil is in the details, here. Matters which concern the Dukes directly get the most capable vashna assigned to them, and also tend to simply get more vashna on the same mission. Those matters which the Dukes are less concerned with — or those that the Dukes deliberately want to obfuscate — get the least capable ven. Sometimes, other matters are “too pressing” and require the attention of all available vashna, leaving some matters completely unattended to. This is why some Senators stay to watch the Dukes Council's deliberations: it is possible, after pushing a verdict through the Senate, to have the

requested investigation evaporate into thin air. The only recourse at that point is to offer to take up the black oneself: forfeiting your title and lands until the matter is settled — to the Dukes' satisfaction.

DAVFANNA ALDRENA

The City Whose Walls Challenge the Sky: Davfanna Aldrena, the capitol of ven civilization. Once the stronghold of the greatest of the sorcerer-kings, in their fall it became the refuge of the ven. Slowly and tentatively at first, they have spread out across Shanri from the city, but the city has always held them in its sway. This is where the Senate meets; this is where all ven return again and again; this is where the power lives, where it rests, where it breathes and feeds and plots and schemes.

Davfanna Aldrena: the Shining Star at the center of the Hub of all Revenge.

THE UPPER CITY

The space within the city's mammoth walls is dominated by a giant outcropping of basalt with a broad, flat summit. This is the Zen'sin, the Stone of Ages, suspected to be some locus of power of the ancient sorcerer-kings. The ven have built their capital on top of it. Dozens of sorcerer-king puzzle houses are scattered across the stone peak, as well as later ven construction in and around the ancient architecture. The Stone is not one seamless whole; great fissures run across its length, opening chasms that fall down to the sea or even deeper. There are many bridges, both ancient and modern, as well as winches for raising and lowering passenger boxes — the primary means of travel to the Lower City.

At the center and the summit of the Stone of Ages is the Senate building, a wide bowl-shaped space open to the sky. What the sorcerer-kings used it for is anyone's guess, but the ven have filled the space with seats and stairs, lecterns and stone tables. Surrounding the Senate are the grandest puzzle houses, themselves outfitted with ven accommodations. Between these great looming artifacts of a forgotten time huddle stone castles and villas built by the ven.

Gardens are fashionable accessories in the capitol, but they are kept private and pristine behind tall walls. Nearly everything is hidden in this way, making the streets of the Upper City a maze of stone canyons. Few landmarks are visible over the walls, and it is easy to become lost. Stumbling into one of the rare plazas, the minarets and spires you can spy never seem to be where you would expect them to be.

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Even veteran Senators try to keep to the two reliable thoroughfares of the Upper City: the Golden River and the Avenue of Moonlight. The first of these is two broad avenues flanking both sides of a canal of golden water. The canal starts at a font near the Senate building and flows to the edge of the Stone of Ages, where the water spills out to the harbors far below. The Avenue, by contrast, describes a long oval cut through the Upper City, made of some milky-white material that resists all ven attempts to cut or work it. The plaza where the Avenue arcs over the Golden River is one of the few public gardens in the city, filled with trees trapped in perpetual autumn. Their leaves are all bright orange and red but never quite fall from the branches. This is the Ysil Commons: a favorite dueling ground.

CAPITOL CASTLES

Lesser counts and barons rarely maintain castles in the capitol, but any Senator with a trace of ambition will want to have one. The ability to host parties in Davfanna Aldrena while Senate is in session — while nearly every ven of note is in the city — is a potent political advantage.

Claiming a castle in Davfanna Aldrena requires the same sorts of season actions that taking a castle anywhere else requires. You cannot ‘explore’ to obtain a castle in the capitol; they’re all already taken. If you take a castle as your own, you are taking it from someone else. Admittedly, some ven hold claim to three or four castles in the capitol; surely they won’t miss the one they never use anymore, right? And some of the castles are claimed by ven long dead or fallen to solace; surely the claim is not maintained by the suaven they’ve become... or their heirs...

THE LOWER CITY

With so many castles, villas, and manors perched high above in the Upper City, a small army of labor is required to keep them stocked and cleaned and fashionable. The veth who see to such details live in the Lower City, at the base of the Stone of Ages.

Like the Upper City above it, the Lower City is built on the ruins of the sorcerer-kings. These ruins, however, are half-sunk into the harbor waters, and the living quarters and working spaces of the veth are built on top. There is no soil in the Lower City, no ground except the roofs of ancient ruins. Catwalks and rope bridges knit these ramshackle islands together, and canal boats glide between them carrying goods and passengers. The greatest ven constructions here are the docks: long piers radiating out

into the deep harbor waters, taking the incoming trade from all across Shan'ri.

Only a slight portion of the trade here fuels the Senate, however. Davfanna Aldrena's location at the hub of civilization makes it a massive port-of-call, and the Lower City is the home of brisk trade in all manner of goods throughout the year. The veth of the Lower City are technically servants of the Duke's Council, but in that body's neglect, they enjoy significant liberties. This makes the city a breeding ground for unblooded merchants and businessmen; more than a few "proud dirt" barons who went on to buy their titles got their start here. The Lower City, therefore, is one of the few places in Shanri that enjoys essentially unregulated capitalism. Anything can be bought here, and most anything sold. The prices are high — sometimes devilishly so — but to the ven who think they own the world, the costs are rarely weighed until it comes time to pay the bill.

THE UNDERCITY

Not all the ruins that the Lower City is built on are flooded. Some still have a level or two above the water line; others are water-tight and go down level after level. There are many rumors about what lurks in these depths: orks, cults, black markets. Hidden pleasure-palaces of the ven. Forgotten artifacts of the sorcerer-kings. Some whisper that the ruins connect to the chasms that riddle the Stone of Ages.

One thing is known for certain, however: the Duke's Council has decreed that no one is to enter the Undercity. One wonders what they're hiding down there.

Niassa the Red Spider, King of the Undercity

Sometimes he was described as a ven who had lost his lands and turned his men into crimelords. Other times, he was veth who didn't know his place and led a legion of whispers. And there were other stories yet, less savory and more terrifying: he was something... unnatural.

Whatever his purported origins, there were always rumors about a "King of the Lower City," who hid at the base of Davfanna Aldrena among the vet who served the Senate. He ran protection rackets; he commanded a fleet of smuggling ships; he bought and sold the servants who worked in the quarterhouses and ducal palaces. He had his finger in everything... and maintained his shadowy presence through a ubiquitous spy network and ruthless violence.

Of course, they were only ever rumors, right?

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THE VAULTS

There is nothing underneath the Upper City. You may have heard rumors, but they are just that: rumors. None of the castles have secret tunnels into the Stone of Ages below. There are no vaults, no catacombs, no secret temples.

No self-respecting ven would ever smuggle their family's unwanted suaven down there to be forgotten. There are no suaven down there now. Besides, even if such an unthinkable blasphemy occurred, the suaven discarded down there would be incomprehensible after lying in isolation with their dreams for so long. Wailing, screaming, inconsolable. Mad, insane... and very, very angry.

SENATE CUSTOMS

In addition to the myriad procedural rules, the ven developed a number of customs surrounding the Senate and Davfanna Aldrena. Like all the rituals of the ven, these were adhered to strictly except where they weren't. Breaking these might cause other senators to look down their nose at you, but you won't be ordered to take on the black. Probably.

QUARTERHOUSES

Approximately thirty years ago, in the wake of an alleged conspiracy hatched by the Blooded of the Elk, the Senate voted to prevent the Earls from hosting the lower nobility of their own House. This had been the way of things for all of living memory: each blooded House would see to its members' needs, often resulting in the members of each House socializing exclusively with their own. Such a gathering the day before the Senate allowed the Earls considerable influence over the votes of the barons and counts of their House. Evidently, the possibility of the Elks acting as one coordinated political body was dangerous enough for the other houses to abdicate their ability to do the same. The Senate restricted Earls from hosting more than a handful of their fellow ven in the capitol.

However, this created a problem. Few counts or barons maintained castles within Davfanna Aldrena, and in order for the Senate to function, all of these nobles required housing in the city. The Senate bestowed the Dukes' Council with stewardship over any unclaimed property within the city and charged it with finding space for the lower nobility. Thus began the phenomenon of the quarterhouse. The Senate maintained a number of manor houses and castles within the city and assigned incoming nobles

rooms within them. The Dukes (and the Dukes' staffs) monitored each other to prevent too many members of a single House from staying in the same quarterhouse. The stereotypical if not usual result was that each castle would host one noble of each house.

Of minor but amusing linguistic concern is the term itself, which I have rendered as "quarterhouses" to preserve its double meaning. The nobles who stayed in the quarterhouses maintained that the name was derived from the fact that they were only used four times annually, once per quarter. However, the greater nobility had a less complimentary etymology: the Senate's manors and castles were where the barons were quartered, as if they were common soldiers.

PROXIES

This disdain for the lower nobility was one of many reasons for the system of votes-by-proxy that came into vogue around the same time. Many nobles found reasons not to attend Senate: matters to deal with at home, studies and gambits that required attention, avoiding the perceived shame of staying in a quarterhouse, or simple disinterest in Senate politics. These nobles would bestow their votes onto others, handing over carefully-worded letters that empowered the bearer to vote in the noble's name. Barons often sent their single votes off to the Senate, and occasionally a lowly baron or even a roadman would arrive in the city bearing the votes of ten nobles.

More rarely, greater nobles would bestow their wealth of votes on their vassals. This did allow established nobles to spend more time managing their lands, and was often used as a means of introducing young nobles to politics in a moderately controlled fashion. A Marquis' son, newly claiming status as a Baron, might normally be ignored in

*I give you my proxy and
my trust. Invest both
wisely ~ betraying
either will anger me.*

— LORD JAGASH

the Senate, but not if he wielded his father's votes as well as his own — at least for this session. Votes-by-proxy also allowed Senators an increased flexibility to trade votes as political favors, and it was not uncommon for one Senator's votes to be split on both sides of an issue — because half of his votes had been bought by one side and the second half bought by the other.

Sadly, these curious artifacts of history were short-lived. The Fox-Wolf alliance twenty years later saw the quarterhouses skewed out of their original purpose and the votes-by-proxy abused to a horrific extent. The Senate quickly struck down these practices before another strategic alliance could amass even more power and elect a new emperor.

TRADING AT THE SENATE

The Senate is a lot like a very large party with over half of Shan'ri's nobility in attendance. Many Senators use this opportunity to trade with other Senators. Unlike a normal party, which requires each attendee bring a gift to the host, all a Senator has to do is get his goods to the city — which means a Transport Resources & Goods season action. Since it is all going to the same destination, one action will move any number of resources and goods.

SPOUSES AT THE SENATE

Spouses traditionally remained behind to govern the senator's lands while they are away. Over time, that pragmatic tradition became a matter of etiquette. Today, it is considered bad form to bring one's spouse to Senate. After all — it interferes with the illicit affairs.

APPEALS FOR HELP

Sometimes, a ven comes to a difficult situation which they do not possess the power to resolve themselves: orks, cults, the threat of invasion by a powerful ven, even untapped trade possibilities. Their liege lord is either similarly powerless, disinterested in helping, or not someone they actually want help from. The Senate is not the venue for helping out ven who can't help themselves. There is no charity in the Senate. If you can't hold it, after all, it isn't really yours.

Regardless, troubled ven flock to Davfanna Aldrena in search of help — because while the Senate as a whole might not help them, the scores of Senators in the city are all

candidates for assistance. With so many resources and proxy votes available for trade, Senate sessions turn the city into a fantastic place to cut deals.

A REDUCTIVE OVERVIEW

The Senate only rules on the following matters:

- Criminal cases: should this ven wear the black?
- Revenge: should this ven be allowed to pursue revenge?
- Investigation: should the vashna be dispatched to investigate this subject?
- The Balance of Power: should this ven's land be declared Fair Game?
- Progression: should this ven be recognized as a baron/count/marquis/duke?

The Senate only controls the following:

- Vashna, the Senate's Roadmen
- Lands of ven who have taken the black
- Portions of Davfanna Aldrena

What is actually illegal:

- breaking a contract — and that includes breaking your word
- threatening dynastic lineage (which is breaking your marriage contract)
- random violence (righteous violence, sanctioned violence, is A-OK)
- raising a Secret Army — the one thing the Senate is terrified of

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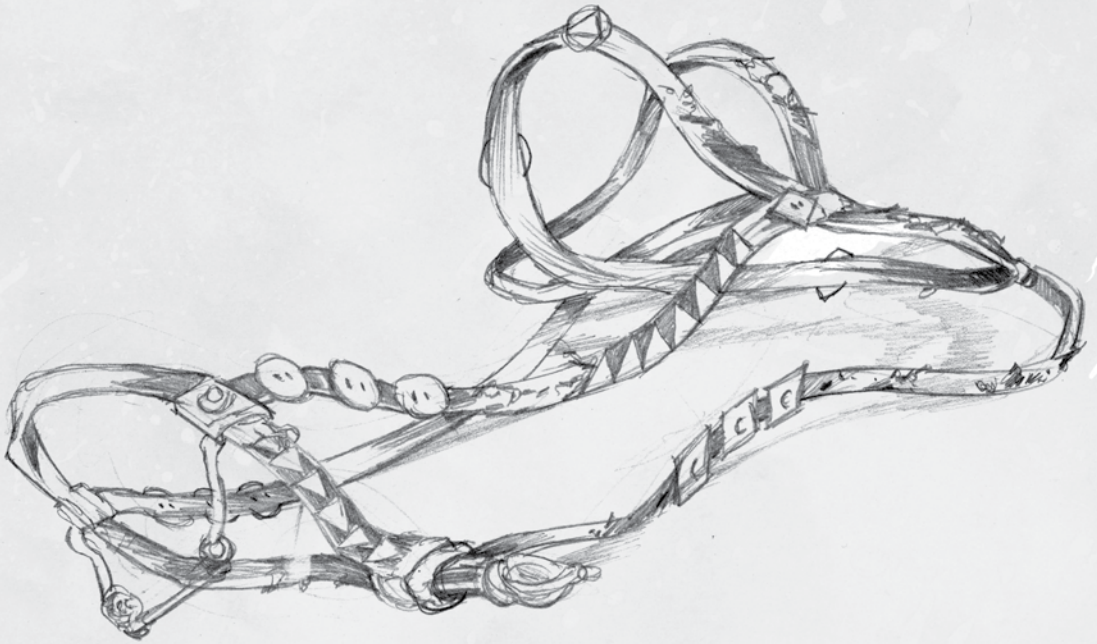
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This can't be a real bridle. The measurements are too small and with all this ornamentation it weighs a ton. Perhaps it went on a statue or carving as embellishment and sign of conspicuous consumption? -S

The proportions are all wrong for a horse, but just right about for ven.

A ritual punishment tool.

-J

VASHNA AND THE HOUSE OF THE HORSE

SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, THE BARON MORYANDAL VASHNA, BLOODED OF THE HORSE, DISCOVERED A SECRET PLOT. IT INVOLVED FOUR EARLS AND SIX DUKES, SOME OF THEM AS WILLING CONSPIRATORS AND OTHERS VIA BLACKMAIL AND THREATS. SORCEROUS INTIMIDATION. WIVES PLOTTING AGAINST THEIR HUSBANDS. A NEW EMPEROR. HE COULD HAVE BOUGHT HIS WAY INTO THE CONSPIRACY WITH HIS KNOWLEDGE, BUT INSTEAD HE REVEALED EVERYTHING ON THE SENATE FLOOR.

The plot was stymied, but the conspirators, especially those of high rank, managed to scramble out of danger. A few patsies were executed (torn apart on the Senate floor, in fact). The dukes remained in power, and they retained a soul-deep hatred for Moryandal. Unable to pursue proper vengeance, they made a target of his House, the blooded of the Horse. The conspirators sabotaged their lands, fabricated evidence of terrible crimes, and stonewalled them in the Senate. Finally, when the Horses had been battered and bruised beyond recognition, the conspirators veiled the House as reprobates and incompetent rulers — unfit to hold lands.

Many of the House's families — Bowen, Uvan, Sinjin, Q'n, Ru, Tal — were subsumed into other houses. What were once Horse family names are now common in every other house. And for the most part, their descendants accepted their new families, adopted their ways, and

*For we, lords and ladies
of the Senate, blooded
of our Houses, are
the greatest bloom
of civilization. It is
we who protect those
who cannot defend
themselves. It is
we who provide for
those who cannot feed
themselves. It is we
who employ idle hands
so that together we may
lessen the worries of the
next generation. That
is our sacred purpose.
But there are those
who would subvert that
purpose, who would
threaten the defenseless,
steal from the wanting,
and whisper poison in
the ears of the gullible.
There are those who
plot treason not just
against the Senate, but
against civilization itself.*

— MORYANDAL VASHNA

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forgot they ever knew any others. A few, however, retained their devotion to the ways of the Horse. They practiced their own rites and rituals beyond others' view. They taught their secrets to their children. They held clandestine Bleeding ceremonies and kept the house alive.

In the meantime, Moryandal's family name became a byword for nosey, interfering interlopers: vashna. It was only a matter of time before it was applied to the Senate's Roadmen. The blooded of the Horse took this as high praise. The Senate Roadmen embodied many of the values of the Horse: service, selflessness, the betterment of all. Horses began to come to the Senate from their many adopted families. Without revealing their heritage, they volunteered to take on the black and become vashna.

Today, an untold number of Horses work as vashna, keeping their numbers in the organization a carefully-guarded secret. They use signs and countersigns to recognize each other, extending to each other a level of cooperation unknown to the "outsiders" from other houses who serve alongside them.

HORSE'S SERVICE

The lost virtue of the veiled house of the Horse is Service: the desire and dedication to pursue your civic duty, to better the lives of your fellow man, to serve your neighbors without expectation of recompense. To do what is right instead of what benefits you.

If you choose Service as one of your Virtues...

The Service of All is the highest aspiration.

You are selfless, generous, charitable, even kind. You care about the well-being of others, and you act upon that concern with alacrity, power, and grace.

If you do not choose Service...

You generally act in your own best interests, occasionally in the interests of your family or liege. Strangers are only worth your attention if they might become useful to you.

The ven are selfish creatures. Self-promotion is essential. Now, I'm not going to put a mechanic in this game that makes your character a self-serving ass... but if he neglects Service, it's going to be harder for him to accomplish particularly selfless deeds.

Before any ven can take an action that does not somehow benefit him, he must first make a Service risk. Helping a stranger, defending an disliked innocent before your peers, just extending a hand. Danger. Potential Loss. Risk.

Most Service risks are simple risks. The only thing you are competing against is your own avarice. Target number 10.

FAILURE

If you lose privilege, you must spend a style to act selflessly. You have to pay to overcome your own greed. Asking for recompense, demanding quid-pro-quo, expecting payment — doing any of that is free.

SUCCESS

If you gain privilege, a couple different things happen.

First, if the selfless action that you are about to take is not a risk, but an action (no dice rolled), you convert your wagers into style. This represents the stolid dedication with which you perform your civic duty.

Second, if the selfless action that you are about to take is a risk, every wager you set aside adds an additional die to the forthcoming roll. If you cannot use your wagers in the subsequent action, you can convert them to style as normal.

For example, Moryandal stood before the Senate with a terrible secret that he could exploit to his own incredible gain. He had a choice. He could keep quiet, be a good little ven, and get in on the conspiracy at the ground floor, or he could shine the bright light of day on the conspiracy that threatened the rule of the Senate. The Narrator would have told him that doing the latter required a Service risk.

Moryandal's Service was 5. He got to roll five dice to roll against 10. He opted not to add in any Aspects, and kept two dice as wagers.

Roll. 4, 5, and 6. A total of 15.

Moryandal stepped forward to be recognized and speak before the Senate; he got to use those two wagers as bonus dice for the following roll, which helped him carry the day, spill the beans, and foil the plot.

You may not use Service if your intent will benefit yourself. You may not use Service if your intent will benefit your domain or your ranked vassals. You may not use Service if your intent will benefit your liege. You may not use Service if your intent will benefit your family. You may not use Service and then spend wagers to benefit yourself, your domain, your vassals, your liege, your family. Service is for the unselfish betterment of all; if you use the virtue, that's what you use it for.

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HORSE SUAVEN

Perhaps because their house has been veiled and all but destroyed, the remaining blooded of the Horse cling to their Suaven with fervent devotion. In many ways, the suaven of this house are the only things that still remain that don't have to hide what they are.

ÆLON VALERON

House: Blooded of the Horse

Favored Virtue: Beauty

Titles: The One Handed, Smithlord, Father of Tools

The one-armed brother of Falvren Dyr, Aelon Valeron is the most well-known of the Horse Suaven; he even has devotees outside of the Horses. He is, however, the suaven of craftsmanship, and such physical toil is no longer looked upon kindly. This, combined with the Horses' veiled status, often leads Aelon to be demeaned when he's included at all.

This doesn't seem to bother the suaven himself, who dreams of fantastic works of the forge, the woodshop, and the stoneworks. When his devotees see him in their dreams; he is always at work on one of these projects, and seems to barely have time for his dreaming visitors. What few words he does impart seem gruff, curt, and irrelevant... until much later, when the devotee is hard at work himself. Then Aelon's guidance rings true, revealing the way around or through a pernicious problem.

His temples always include mosaics and statuary, but like all other works of the Smithlord, these are not merely beautiful art, but serve a purpose. They tell stories of the suaven's life, of how he built a forge from the skull of a fallen sorcerer-king and there crafted the first tools the ven would use to begin conquering Shanri. How he forged for his brother a suit of fantastic armor and the sword that slew the Darkness, a terrible beast that ravaged the land. Most temples also have functional workshops for craftsmen; Aelon wouldn't approve of his sacred workshops sitting empty, even if it was to honor his memory.

Symbol: Aelon's symbol is a smith's hammer ringed by fire.

Blessings: Horse Shames the Elk, Respect the Work, My Goal is Greater Than Myself, No Fool, Pain is Today, Honor is Forever

Aelon's Blessings are nearly always the result of hard work, a sort of enlightenment gained through sweat and toil. This was how Aelon lived his life, and it is how he directs his devotees to live theirs.

MORYANDAL VASHNA

House: Blooded of the Horse

Favored Virtue: Service

Titles: Enemy of Secrets, Forgotten, The Willing Tongue

When Moryandal Vashna passed into solace, a mob of rioters assailed his castle, demanding that his widow produce his cocooned body so that it might be burned. His brethren, however, had already taken him away, up into the mountains where they hoped his temple would not be found; his secret location remained secure for less than a year. Through a miracle attributed to Moryandal himself, his body was removed to another temple prepared for him. He stayed there for little more than two years before security demanded another move. For fifty years, Moryandal has been moved again and again, always to a new location. The constant movement is trying on his cult, but it also means he has a string of temples behind him, all across Shanri. Moryandal Vashna has quickly become a very powerful suaven.

As might be expected, Moryandal is the patron suaven of revelation: he despises secrets and goads his devotees to find and root them out wherever they may be. This makes him an enemy of Tyane Bran, and their cults have been at each others' throats for all of living memory. His worship is very popular among the Horses within the vashna, and it's a common claim among his devotees that insinuating themselves into the Senate's service is his idea.

Symbol: Moryandal's symbol is the black cloak under which he spied on the conspirators and under which his devotees work as vashna. Given the underground nature of his cult, his cloak is often portrayed as a circle of inky darkness, or even a single brushstroke of black paint.

Blessings: Horse Shames the Elk, My Goal is Greater Than Myself, Hitched Together, Who Pulls the Wagon

Revenge of the Horse

The Senators who persecuted the Horse have long since passed to solace, but that does not mean they are beyond the reach of justice. They slumber in solace in their own tombs... which can be burned down. They left children in the world... who can be divested of their parents' gifts. They established legal precedents and raised up their own Houses on undeserved privilege... those precedents can be dissolved; those Houses can be brought low again.

And perhaps, when all that is done, the Horse will be unveiled again, able to run free.

And then, perhaps, the dreams that Moryandal Vashna shares with his followers will finally be at peace.

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HORSE BLESSINGS

Rare to vanishing, there are still Horse Blessings in the world, provided by the few Horse Suaven still remembered by their scattered house.

HORSE SHAMES THE ELK

Spend five style points after a Cunning risk is made against you. Discard your wagers; take your opponent's. Success and failure are unaffected. You may spend the wagers to dictate details even if you are serving as vashna.

RESPECT THE WORK

Spend a style point after you have succeeded in a Service risk (whether or not you succeed in the following risk). You may make any one ven who saw your dedication your Friend for the remainder of the season.

MY GOAL IS GREATER THAN MYSELF

Dedicated civil servants know that they serve a cause greater than their own aches and pains. Spend a style point to cancel any tags of your Injuries as long as the rank of the Injury is lower than your Service.

HITCHED TOGETHER

Only ven who are Blooded of the Horse may participate in this Blessing.

All Blooded of the Horse involved must spend a style point if they want the benefit of this blessing. When making a roll that would qualify for a Service risk before it (whether or not anyone made such a risk), the losers do not lose half their wagers.

The total number of Blooded of the Horse who may participate in this Blessing is equal to the Devotion of the Horse performing the Blessing.

WHO PULLS THE WAGON

Vashna who investigate questionable activities often get a sense of who pulls whose strings. This Blessing helps.

Spend a style point at any gathering of more than three persons (including yourself). You immediately perceive whose interests each ven holds dearest: their own, their lover's, their child's, their suaven, whoever. You will also immediately know who among them is the most dedicated and is doing the most work. (Most ven, though not all, will appear self-serving to this Blessing.)

VASHNA: ROADMEN OF THE SENATE

Black cloaks, silver trim. They never come to your door when you expect, never when you're prepared. With the Storm at their backs, they ask for hospitality — not mentioning that you might be implicated in an ongoing investigation. Or they arrive just in time for the grand party you've been planning for an entire year, and one of them is the daughter of your liege, so you should probably invite them to attend. Or they come at night and creep through your castle; you never see them, but they leave behind a letter addressed to you. It doesn't list demands, it lists... suggestions.

The vashna, the Senate's Roadmen, are a thorn in the side of everyone they visit. They investigate questions for which the Senate wishes answers. They are also authorized to mete out justice. What justice they choose to exercise will be reviewed at the next Senate, but that's often weeks away. In the mean time, the vashna investigate and judge, protected by their status (attacking vashna is attacking the Senate; guess how well that's received). Are they honest civil servants, or do they have their own agenda? The ven they investigate often never know until too late... if they ever know at all.

In operas, vashna are never the good guys. They ask uncomfortable questions, uncover embarrassing secrets, and reveal the depths of compromise and betrayal that the other characters are steeped in. Sometimes they're just doing their job; sometimes they're driven by more personal goals. Whatever the case, they are always agents of change, and never for the better: the chaos they churn up only ends in tragedy.

Contrast this, though, with their appearances in the few plays that we have recovered. Here, the vashna are usually bit parts, coming in at the end of the story, to witness or punish the wrongdoing of the play's villains. They prop up the protagonists of the play or avenge their untimely and tragic deaths. They restore the status quo and promise an end of corruption in the future. It says a great deal about the ven that theaters and plays were disparaged, even occasionally made illegal, since they were common entertainments. And the common entertainments made the vashna their heroes.

VASHNA WISDOM AND CUNNING

Vashna are not the masters of their own fate. They do not create their own stories. They are the faceless investigators of the Senate. As long as you are wearing the black as a vashna, you may not spend your own wagers in Wisdom and Cunning risks. You must hand those wagers over to your fellow players, who spend them for you and reveal the facts your character knows and the details your character notices. However, you

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also gain style for every two wagers your fellow players spend for you. So for two wagers you get two facts and one style.

This goes for the Narrator, too: when vashna come to your door, you (or your friends-slash-rivals, I mean the other players) will be supplying the Narrator with the dirt that they turn up. Be sure to make it good!

HORSE VASHNA

It's difficult to gauge exactly how much of the Senate's roadmen are blooded of the Horse, especially since this number fluctuated significantly over time. Conservative estimates put them at a significant minority, perhaps 30% of the standing vashna. Other researchers — prone to excitement — argue for numbers as high as 75%. Whatever their numbers, however, the blooded of the Horse constituted a shadow organization within the official order, identifying themselves to each other with hand signs and passwords, doing their House's duty whether the Senate liked it or not.

The greatest impact of these secret Horses was the revenge they inflicted on ven outside their house who served as vashna and exploited their position. This revenge was hardly inescapable — many vashna abused their status — but if the Horses caught up with their target, the results were terrible.

Senate roadmen would “just happen” to travel through their target's lands en route to their assignments, digging up secrets and pulling skeletons out of closets the whole way. Whenever the target or his allies fell afoul of an actual investigation, all the details they thought were hidden were brought out to the light. Whenever there was any connection, no matter how tenuous, between the target and an ongoing investigation, that connection would be faithfully reported on the Senate floor. More than one reputation was destroyed simply by proximity to scandal.

And sometimes, the Horses would simply come for their target in the night; no one believed the stories of rogue vashna attacking “law-abiding” Senators. The one thing that the Horses would not do was implicate their targets in crimes they did not commit; after all, that would only further sully the office they strove to protect. Murder was okay; lying to the Senate, though: that was beyond the pale.

USING VASHNA IN YOUR CAMPAIGN

You could play a game in which everybody plays vashna, blooded of the Horse or not. They would be assigned matters to investigate, and they would sweep into hotspots with all the power and authority of the Senate at their backs. Everywhere they went, they would upset the status quo, challenge authority, and topple the arrogant. They'd technically have lands and vassals, but they'd all be stewarded by the Senate. (Vashna don't take season actions.) It would be just them against the world. That's the vashna campaign.

Let's be clear: the vashna campaign is not a Coronets campaign. It's another beast entirely. A coronets campaign is about ambition and secret plots; playing vashna is about selflessness and exposing secrets. Which is not to say that vashna have no place in a Coronets game. On the contrary: they make fantastic antagonists. A couple of vashna dropped into your lands by a rival in the Senate might just happen to trip over that Secret Army you've been hiding. Or discover where you practice your sorcery.

On the other hand, a short dalliance as vashna fits into a Coronets game perfectly. Ven may take on the black as vashna if the Dukes' Council comes up short on manpower at the Sunset Council. Your liege may also command you to take on the black as punishment and loan you to the Senate for a while. During your term as vashna, you can find out all sorts of things. Secrets that you can use once your term is over. Secrets you never quite reported to the Senate. Your Senate report could also include things that weren't quite true, as long as you didn't mind the blooded of the Horse on your tail for the rest of your life.

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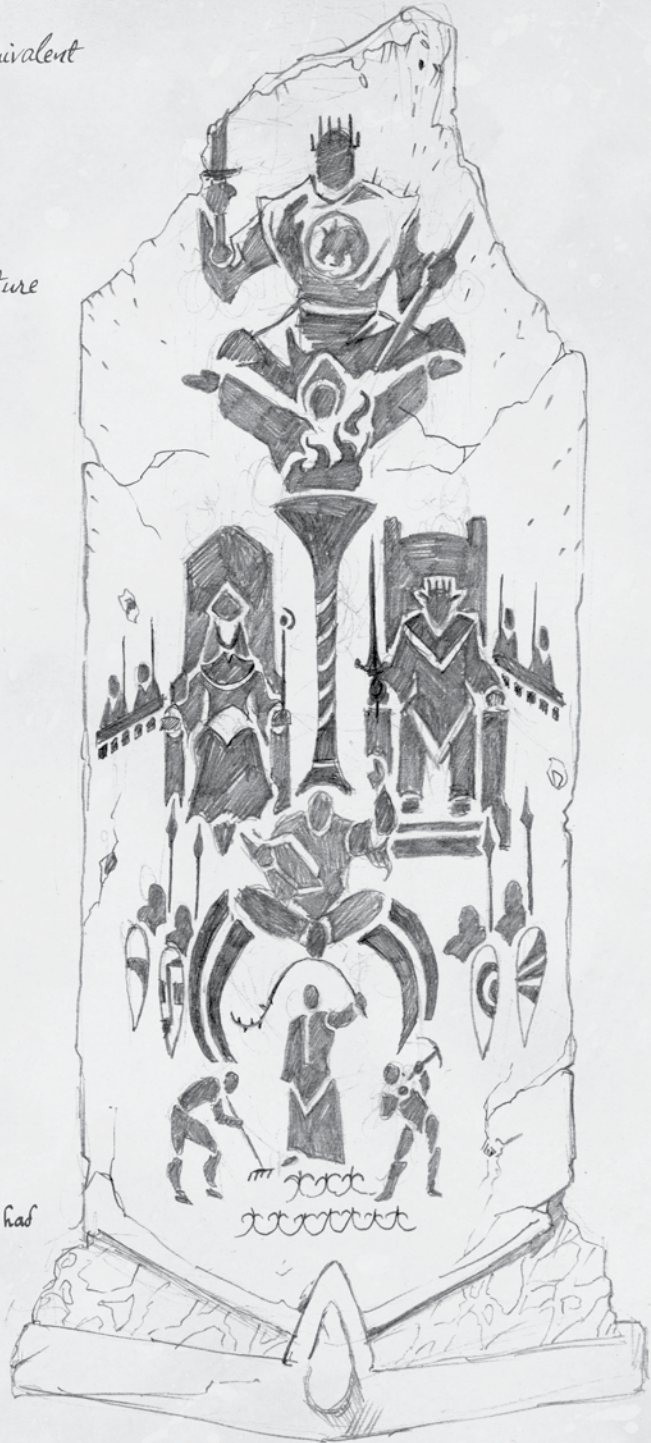
This frieze must be the ven equivalent of the Great Chain of being, with the veth commoners at the bottom and successive tiers of nobility as the sculpture rises higher. Note the increased presence of military strength. I am a littled stymied at the robed figure, though; what is that tier supposed to represent? What ven is powerful enough that they need no outward displays of power?

-S

One of the saure-ven, or a representative thereof, most likely.

See Heinig's work on

the Falavren Dyr Figure. These cults had their fingers deeper in ven politics than initial research suggested. -j



CORONETS CHARACTERS

SPYMASTERS, MASTERS OF THE ROAD, AND OTHER VASSALS SWORN TO THE SERVICE OF ANOTHER PLAYER CHARACTER. COUNTS WITH VASSAL BARONS (OR MARQUISES WITH VASSAL COUNTS). HIGH PRIESTS OF THE SUAVEN. VASHNA. THE PILLOW-BOOKS, PLAYS, AND OPERAS ARE LITTERED WITH CHARACTERS FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS AND WITH MANY DIFFERENT AGENDAS.

The character creation rules in *Houses of the Blooded* will give you strong characters that have a solid grounding in what you might call the default situation of the game: young barons with many opportunities and dangers set before them. These sorts of characters always serve as the backbone of ven literature. If you want to shift things around, however, you may want to play the other kinds of characters that you'd find in your own research.

In order to give you the flexibility to create the kinds of characters you might find in a Coronets style game, I've put together something I call Step C.

STEP C

Coronets characters are created following Steps 1, 2, and 3 (Background, Virtues, and Phases) as described in the *Houses of the Blooded* book. Stop there. Do not assign Devotions, create your Domain, or spend Bonus as normal. Coronets replaces the standard Steps 4-6 with Step C.

In Step C, you make 20 season actions. If a season action would require a die roll, all the dice are considered to have rolled 6. This gives your character a domain and accoutrements roughly equivalent with what Steps 4-6 give you, but also affords you a much greater flexibility.

Perform Step C, as with Steps 1-3, collaboratively with the other players in the game. Why? Because you'll want to trade resources, for one. You might also want to keep an eye on your fellow players — both to make sure the lot of you have your bases covered, and to make sure they don't get too far ahead of you.

**Step C:
Make 20
Season
Actions.**

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What follows is a master list of season actions, including a new action, Produce.

- Build a Holding (HotB page 242, Castles on page 252)
- Craft Goods (HotB page 246)
- Create Art (HotB page 247-249)
- Compose Opera (HotB pages 249-251)
- Develop a Region (HotB page 255)
- Explore a Region (HotB pages 252-253, Ruins, 295)
- Gain Devotion (HotB pages 306-307)
- Hire a Vassal (HotB page 253)
- Make a New Contact (HotB page 254)
- Spend Luxuries (Regions, page 263; Vassals, 264)
- Personal Training (HotB page 254)
- Research Sorcery (HotB page 286)
- Research an Artifact (HotB page 295-301)
- Train a Vassal (HotB page 255)
- Transport Resources & Goods (HotB page 255)

Produce — You may use one of your Step C Season Actions to make each of your Regions and Holdings produce resources and goods equal to their rank. Resources produced in this way can be turned into Goods or traded (through Shorelines and Ports) for different Resources in the same Produce action. You may not use this action as a normal season action once the game begins (although see Tyrant, page 270).

Quell Trouble (HotB page 254), **Espionage Actions** (HotB pages 267-270) and **Conquer Actions** (HotB pages 245 and 271) are generally not used in Step C. If you like and the Narrator permits, you may use Espionage actions to obtain intelligence about your neighbors in preparation for action or as a precautionary measure. If you want to control regions that once belonged to another noble, simply use the mechanics of the Explore Action and note that it was, in fact, conquered from somebody else.

As you build your ven's Domain and Vassals, keep an eye on what your Danger rating will be once you enter play. The Narrator will not be making Danger rolls during character creation, but he will be once play begins. Establishing a vast empire of land with nothing and no one to defend it is a great way to give all your neighbors some shiny new lands.

MORE THAN 20

If you would like to play a “high powered” game, especially one in which the players are not assumed to start off as lowly barons and baronesses, you may kick off the game with more than 20 actions per player. 30 actions works well for new counts and countesses; 40 actions can produce established power. 50 to 60 actions might give you playable marquis and marchionesses, and 70 or more may produce player character dukes and duchesses. Notably, not all these actions may have been performed by your character in the seasons before play begins; any powerful noble has a host of capable vassals supporting him. It is safe to assume that your ven’s seneschal, vassal barons, and other vassals performed some of these actions.

Alternately, you might modify how many actions each player receives by the phase of life they start their character at. 15 actions for spring ven, 20 for summer, 25 for autumn, and 30 for winter ven are perfectly reasonable totals. If you choose to modify these further, it is not recommended to start play with fewer than 10 season actions, otherwise the ven in question will have hardly anything to make them ven!

VEN WITHOUT CASTLES

If your character controls land but has not built a castle, it is assumed that her castle is under construction. Or she is drawing up plans. Or getting around to it real soon now, in any case. Without a castle, your character cannot host parties, extend hospitality, or entertain guests. She’ll also be something of a joke among other ven: a baron without a castle. That gives you a status of *shivazh*, translated as “barely a noble” or “mockery”. The loyalty of all of new vassals start at 1 until your castle is built, and the security of your domain is 0, no matter what your spy network does. In other words, you and your domain are a big, fat target.

Coronets characters can also be made without Domains entirely. This allows you to make Spymasters, Masters of the Road, Swordsmen, and those wandering Falcons who always muck things up for everybody else. You can dump your Step C season actions into vassals, rituals, devotions, and artifacts, instead. If you do not control lands, the fact that you do not have a castle is understandable, and your vassals’ loyalty is calculated as normal.

There is one, rather large, drawback to not having a Domain — you don’t control any means of production. You will still need to feed your vassals. Your rituals will require herbs. Your suaven will require sacrifices. You will need to present gifts in order to

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attend parties as a guest and not merely as some other guest's servant. You will either need to constantly trade with NPCs for food for your own vassals or figure out some arrangement with your fellow players. Perhaps you can swear fealty to them...

NEW SEASONS OPTIONS

Here are a few additional options for vassals, holdings, and season actions.

ACTION: GOSSIP

Rumors are things whispered behind backs and laughed over in private. They're also one of the ways that the ven spread news. The "news" may be true, it may be false, but as long as it's entertaining, no one minds much about its veracity.

If you'd like to start a rumor about someone or something, it costs a season action. The rumor becomes common knowledge within your domain. Everybody knows it, whispers about it, spreads it along to their friends. But it stops at the borders of your domain.

If you'd like to spread the rumor elsewhere, that's another season action. Each season action spent spreading the rumor brings it to two more domains. You or your spouse, your herald, or your court gossip may do this; it requires visiting the domains you want the rumor spread. Of course, you may not take this action if your weakness is Beauty, but that's why you have vassals. You can also spread rumors that you haven't started, as long as the rumor has spread to your domain

or a domain that you've visited this season.

Rumors have a tendency of getting picked up and repeated. Whenever you spread a rumor, roll dice equal to your Beauty or the rank of the vassal. Any dice that roll 1 indicate that someone else is also spreading the rumor. The Narrator will decide which domains it spreads to (or accept style for your suggestions).

A rumor is an aspect. Its rank is the number of domains it has spread to. Rumors always have tags, never have compels, and sometimes have invokes. If you start a rumor and give it an invoke, its rank counts as one higher than normal. You may only tag or invoke a rumor in a domain to which it has spread. The tag yields dice equal to half the rumor's rank; the invoke yields dice equal to half of that.

Rumors quickly become old news. If any season passes without someone spreading the rumor, it loses half the domains it is whispered in. If you're not spending one of your season actions, you might want to offer the Narrator style so that someone out there keeps it going. Of

course, if you want a rumor to die off, you can offer style in the hope that nobody spreads it for that season. Additionally, all rumor ranks are halved at the end of Winter.

HOLDING: RANCH (PLAINS OR FARMLAND)

Building a ranch allows the region to produce Horses instead of other resources. In one season, the ranch can produce a number of Horses equal to the region's rank. These are unbroken Horses; in later season actions the ranch can tame and train them. Each season action spent training a horse raises its rank by one, up to the rank of the region. Training a horse does not prevent the region from producing other resources (including more horses). Why do you want a well-trained horse? Horses bank style just like clothing and other goods.

HOLDING: SHIPYARD (SHORELINE)

A shipyard can turn lumber into Ships. It's assumed that your shoreline and ports have ships; a Shipyard builds Ships. Ships, in turn, make your shorelines, caravans, ports and marketplaces function more efficiently. Ships improve your trade by traveling farther and faster, finding better deals.

However, in order to enjoy this benefit, the first Ship must be of a higher rank

than the region it is assigned to, and every subsequent Ship must be of a higher rank than those that preceded it. Finally, you can only assign a number of Ships to a region equal to the region's rank.

Each Ship you assign to a region that produces Trade increases the resources that you receive when you use them to trade. So a Rank-3 Shoreline with two Ships (which must themselves be Ranks 4 and 5) can trade three Stone for five Spices.

Assigning a Ship to a caravan or a city's port increases the speed of commerce. Instead of waiting for the end of the season, you get the new resources immediately. The rank of the Ship limits the number of resources you receive early, one resource per rank. You may assign any number of Ships to your caravans and ports.

To build a Ship, you must first create a plan; this is a Beauty risk, the wagers of which determine the potential of the Ship to be constructed. This costs 1 Wine or Spices for inspiration or 1 Lumber for prototyping. Then you may spend season actions overseeing construction at your Shipyard. Each season of construction costs one lumber, and only one action may be spent on any given Ship per season. Each season action you spend increases the Ship's rank by one. You may not deploy the Ship until its rank equals the potential of the plans: a half-built ship is

of no use.

You may always re-use plans to make additional Ships of the same design. You may also build a number of ships at the same time equal to the rank of the Shoreline.

In case it wasn't obvious, you may reassign Ships from one region to another. That Rank-2 ship at the Shoreline-1, once the region is improved, can move to the city port or work with your caravan. Ships (and plans) may also be sold, traded, or gifted to other ven. Or stolen...

HOLDING: BROTHEL (ANY URBAN REGION)

A nicely-appointed building with a few private rooms, staffed with pretty young things. Once per season, the Brothel gives you Style equal to the rank of its region. You may claim this style at the start of a story or any time you can get away to visit the brothel. You may also give another ven visiting privileges; that season, they enjoy the style bonus instead of you.

Brothels are more often maintained by male nobles. Be sure to read Sex and Children (HotB page 272) to find out why.

VASSAL: ARCHITECT

An architect is a vassal who can build holdings in your regions. Architects may supervise multiple building projects, but the holdings still require two seasons'

worth of work. A rank two architect cannot build something overnight: they can build two somethings over two seasons. Architects may also develop villages and cities as their season actions.

VASSAL: BARON

You may only hire a baron if you have a second (or third, or fourth) domain to hand over to them to govern in your name. The baron may make any season actions you might, but may only make those actions in their domain. They may not help you out Quelling Trouble or whatever else in your domain — at least, not until you train them up to NPC status. They can Transport Goods to your domain, of course. That doesn't violate the only-their-domain rule.

If you happen to be a Marquis or even a Duke, you can give a Baron a greater title. This costs a season action. Once they've been elevated, they can spend their season actions to hire Barons of their own. If you want them to have any vassals other than Barons, however, you must train them up to NPC status.

VASSAL: FOREMAN

Foremen are typically veth, but they still manage to be very handy vassals to have around. A Foreman allows your regions to split its productivity between the two resources they can make. A

Foreman may spend one season action so your Rank 2 Forest produces one Lumber and one Food.

VASSAL: GOSSIP

Court Gossips are useful in two ways. First, they stay up-to-date on all the latest dirt, so can effectively perform Spy on People actions (HotB page 270). They may also Create and Spread Rumors. Because of this, though, they do not always deal in facts. If they fail their Spy on People action, what they report back is a baseless rumor, not the truth. You may act on what they report as you see fit.

VASSAL GROUP: MILITIA

You can put spears in the hands of your peasants. This is absolutely, totally illegal, and will incite some ven into a bloodthirsty rage if they ever hear about it. But a peasant Militia can Quell Trouble and Conquer Regions, so they have their uses. You just have to hide them as if they were a Secret Army. Wherever you do stash them, the region gains one rank of Loyalty. This bonus lasts after the Militia moves on. Of course, even veth with spears and shields are still veth. When a Secret Army enters a region with a Militia, the Militia is displaced no matter what its rank.

VASSAL: SURGEON

A Surgeon can help heal crippling and mortal wounds (flesh wounds aren't worth the bother). Under a surgeon's care, an injury will heal two ranks in one season, but only if the injured ven in question spends a season action for recuperation as well. Each wound the surgeon tends to costs one of the surgeon's season actions. Multiple wounds do not require multiple recuperation season actions, however.



The inscription around the base reads "County Norfrost." Perhaps the Cavallo character in the Wine and Thorns opera fragment is not a complete fabrication. His daughters might have also been more than fictional figures -s

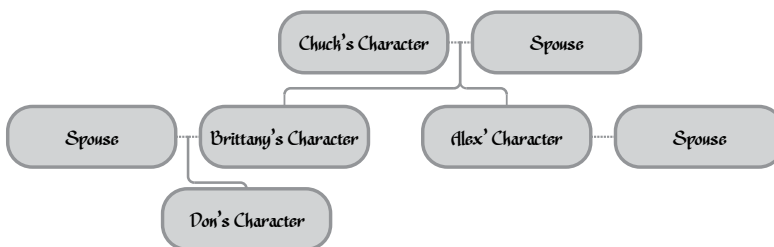
Or you've managed to find ven tie-in merchandise. Remember, even the ven must be suspected of fabricating their own histories. -J

EXAMPLE CORONETS CAMPAIGN

ZOE IS RUNNING A CORONETS GAME OF HOUSES OF THE BLOODED FOR ALEX, BRITTANY, CHUCK, AND DON.

SETTING UP THE CAMPAIGN

They begin by discussing what sort of game they would like to play, and it quickly becomes apparent that they want to focus on local politics and family ties. They chat about character concepts and linking their characters together. Alex and Brittany hit upon the idea of playing sisters. Neither Chuck nor Don are that interested in playing additional siblings, so Chuck suggests that he can play their father. Don laughs and offers to play one of the sisters' sons to make it a generational game. Zoe sketches out a rough family tree to make sure everybody's on the same page.



Everybody nods, and Don makes a crack about calling Chuck “Gramps.” Zoe makes some quick additions to the family tree, filling in blanks for the sisters’ husbands, potential siblings, and Chuck’s spouse.

Don stops her before she pencils in his own spouse, explaining he’s aiming for a wet-behind-the-ears Spring character. She warns him that starting play unmarried means two things: (a) he will not get a spouse vassal to help manage his domain, and (b) a game about family ties will inevitably entail getting him married. He grins and agrees readily.

Chuck suggests they start rolling dice for their characters' backgrounds to flesh out the family tree some more. He begins by rolling for his parents' houses, getting a 3 (Falcon) for his mother and a 1 (Bear) for his father. He rolls for dominance and his father wins out. He decides that his character will be a Bear like his father. He rolls for his siblings, finding that he was the fourth-born child, but only one other sibling remains: a brother. He rolls for his parents' standing and rolls a four. He adds his three modification points to get seven and asks Zoe if he can make his father, now fallen to solace, a former Duke. Zoe agrees readily, knowing that only gives Chuck big shoes to fill.

Because they already know that their father will be a Bear, Alex and Brittany don't need to roll for that. They can roll to find their mother's house, and Chuck agrees to put his wife's house up to a roll of the dice. They come up with a 6, Wolf. Alex is less than excited about playing a Bear or Wolf, but Brittany admits she was already planning to play a Bear. Alex spends one of his modification points to make their mother a Serpent, and takes that as his character's house. Both players roll for their birth order and get a 3. Obviously, Brittany intones, that makes them twins. Zoe reminds them of the terrible things the ven believe about twins, and they get a funny look on their faces. Brittany gleefully rolls more dice and declares that they have three living siblings: two brothers and a sister.

Now it is Don's turn to roll for his character's parents. He knows that the mother, Brittany's character, is a Bear, so he rolls for his father and gets a 4 for Fox. He immediately spends two of his modification points to make Dad a Elk. "I can cause more trouble as an Elk," he tells everyone else. He rolls twice more, finding that he is the second-born child and has one living sibling, a sister. He spends his last modification point to be the first-born child.

Everybody chooses names. Alex names his twin Asvil; Brittany names hers Bajinoth. Chuck goes with Cavalo for the patriarch, and Don names his character Davan. They then assign values to their virtues and select aspects (the twins both take Twin from the book). The twins take each other for their spring contacts; Alex makes Asvil's summer contact Cavalo and Brittany makes Bajinoth's her son Davan. Since Chuck is playing an Autumn ven and has three contact slots, he just slots in everybody. Davan only gets one contact, so he selects his mother, Bajinoth.

FAMILY AS CAST

Zoe then points out that there is a small army of family members who could use names, as well. Cavalo's father gets named Ecc; his mother, Feyla; his sole surviving brother, Gwanal. The twins' brothers are named Haroon and Illydyll, their sister, Jana. Zoe also picks names for their spouses and chooses to roll houses for them as well: Kayamadi Yvarai, Lisle Thorne, and Meza Mwrr. For each couple, she rolls a die and subtracts one to find how many children they have, then rolls evens or odds for gender. Haroon and Kayamadi have two children, their boy No and daughter Olivanna; Illydill and Lisle have three boys Niassa, Obhaz, and Phiso; Jana and Meza are childless. Bajinoth already has Davan, of course, and his sister gets the name Regana. Alex rolls to find that Asvil has one daughter, and names her Shajar.

You may notice that Zoe's group is using a very simple trick on naming — they're just going down the list on HotB p105, picking one name for each letter. They aren't spending a lot of time thinking about what would be "right" or "best." They're just picking whichever one grabs them and moving on. Later, when they're actually playing, the names and their meanings might become important — but they don't have to be important from the start.

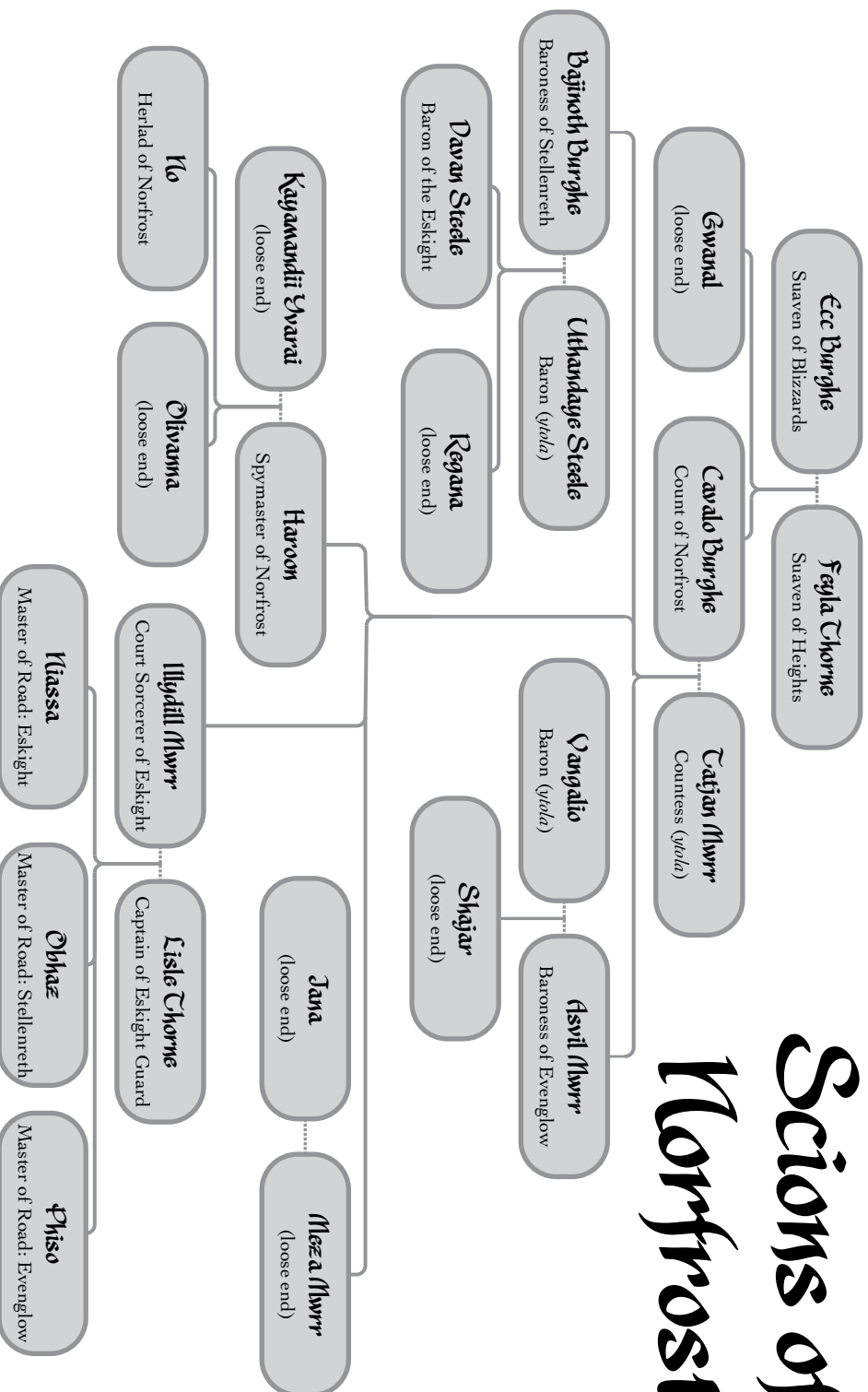
Zoe takes down all the names and adds them to the family tree, reminding the players that Ecc Burghe and Feyla Thorne, Cavalo's parents, are available as family suaven. It may seem like a lot of needless work, but she now has a cast that is fifteen strong — and that's before adding in neighboring peers!

STEP C

Before they start in on the 20 season actions they get for Step C, Chuck speaks up and proposes they all help him become a Count. All a Count needs is three vassal Barons, which he'll have if the other players agree to take him on as their liege. He argues persuasively that it will increase all their statures, that he'll be better than some NPC liege, and it be interesting for the story. He also adds the coup de grace — "If Cavalo happens to die in-game, I'll make a new character and will not move to claim any of county lands. You three can duke it out." Alex, Brittany, and Don all agree to the plan.

So Chuck settles down to blow through twenty season actions. He starts off with the obvious: he explores a forest and some hills, then improves both of these to rank three regions. That's six actions, and for his seventh and eighth, he chooses Produce twice.

Scions of Norfrost



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That gives him 6 lumber and 6 stone. He builds a castle (3 stone 3 lumber) and a village (1 stone 1 lumber) as actions nine and ten, and spends two more actions raising the castle to rank three. He has eight actions left. He hires a Spy Network and trains them, twice, to rank three. He also hires a Staff, a Personal Guard, and a Herald, all at rank one. He declares that he is using his son Haroon to head up his spy network (which gives them +2 loyalty) and his grandson No as his herald (+1 loyalty). Lastly, he trains his spouse to rank three. He ends up with extra resources, so he gives each daughter 1 stone and 1 lumber.

Brittany, like Chuck, starts with exploring — two forests, two hills, and some plains. She then improves one forest, one hill region, and the plains to rank two. With a Produce action, she gets three lumber, three stone, and two wine. She uses the lumber and stone to build a castle for her tenth action. She uses the resources that Chuck gave her to build a village, and then improves it twice to rank three. With another Produce, she gets three lumber, three stone, and two more wine for a total of four wine. This allows her to convert the village into a city as action fifteen. She hires a mayor for her city, a staff for her castle, and roadmen for the rest of her lands. She claims her nephew Obhaz to lead the roadmen for an extra rank of loyalty. For her last two actions, she takes two ranks of devotion for her grandfather, Ecc Burghe.

Alex has different ambitions for Asvil. As his first action, he discovers a Ruin. He then spends three actions exploring the ruin: each action yields the ruin's rank in artifact points and increases the ruin's rank by one. Three actions later, Alex has six artifact points and a rank three ruin. He then spends one more action to convert it into a Puzzle House, which he will use as his castle. Next, he explores two swamps, a shoreline, and one farmland and hires some roadmen to look after it all. He decides that Asvil's nephew Phison leads her roadmen, garnering an extra rank of loyalty. That's ten actions. He Produces for the eleventh action, piping the one Food from his farmland through his shoreline to turn it into a third Herbs. He spends three actions and the three Herbs to learn The Curse, The Eye, and The Tulpa, and then three more actions to create three artifacts using four of his artifact points (we'll skip the details of those). He takes two ranks of Devotion for Asvil's grandmother, Feyla Thorne, and uses the lumber and stone from Chuck to build a shrine for her in the puzzle house.

Now Don has his go. While everyone else has four or six aspects, his spring character only has two. He uses two actions for personal training to fix that. He then explores five regions: a farm, a forest, some hills, a mountain, and some plains, and hits the Produce

button to get himself a Food, a Lumber, a Stone, a Metal, and some Spices. He builds a village with the Lumber and Stone, then turns to Alex and offers him the Food, Metal, and Spices in exchange for the remaining two artifact points. Alex accepts, so Don spends an action transporting the resources. The next action, number eleven, is spent researching his shiny new bloodsword. He then hires roadmen, trains them to rank three, and spends another action to produce a Master of the Road to lead them. He nabs his cousin Niassa to do the honors. Zoe points out that, as an NPC, he doesn't have a loyalty score to get the +1 family bonus; Don smiles and nods. He hires a Personal Guard with his aunt Lisle in charge of it and hires his uncle Illydill as a Court Scholar, pointing out to Zoe how he has mother, father, and son, none of whom have any lands of their own, helping out the family's snot-nosed brat hold down his new lands. Zoe gives him style points for creating trouble for himself. He then points out that he doesn't plan on building a castle before play begins, either. Everyone laughs at him, and Zoe hands him more style. He trains Illydill to rank two. He uses his last two actions to buy devotions for Ecc Burghe and Feyla Thorne: one rank each.

The players talk about what they've put together. Don explains that he's imagining Davan's domain as the highlands above all the prime real estate that the older nobles of the family have already snapped up. Chuck agrees readily, suggesting that his own domain — the heartland of the county — is just downhill from Davan's. Still, he's imagining cold and wintry slopes, white-robed forests, and the like. He's planning to explore the surrounding mountains with his season actions once play begins. He points out that he named his County Norfrost. Brittany picks up on the theme and, since she's sort of a chip off the old block, her lands are similar to father's, perhaps the hardier interior from Cavalo's original beachhead. Alex likes this and says so, pointing out that he's down in the lowlands, with swamps and shoreline. Chuck points out that, as sisters, they would have been pointed in opposite directions when they went looking for land, and they like the sound of that. This puts Cavalo's domain as the central hub of the county, which suits Chuck just fine.

Zoe does a quick family census: Ecc and Feyla have fallen into solace. Haroon is leading Cavalo's spy network, Illydill is Davan's court scholar, Lisle heads up Davan's personal guard, No is Cavalo's herald, the three brothers Niassa, Obahz, and Phiso are all leading bands of roadmen. Kayamandi probably lives in Cavalo's castle with her husband Haroon and their daughter Olivanna; neither of the women have specific jobs as vassals. That leaves at loose ends Cavalo's brother Gwanal, the twins' sister

Jana and her husband Meza, and the twins' daughters Reganna and Shajar. Zoe grabs Peer sheets for the family members not snapped up as vassals and puts their names, their meanings, and their relationships to PCs across the tops — they'll be filled out later, during play.

The group updates the family tree with their family members' various titles and duties. It's only then that they (and, ahem, the author of this example) realize with chagrin that they haven't named their spouses. Chuck names Cavalo's wife Tatjan; Brittany chooses Uthandaye for Bajinoth's husband; Alex grabs Vangalio for Asvil's husband. Brittany also points out that they don't know the house of Uthandaye, so she rolls quickly and comes up with an Adrente. The twins' two daughters Reganna and Shajar do not have houses yet; Alex and Brittany quickly confer and decide that the girls have not yet been Blooded.

INVENTING PEERS

Zoe already has five family members that haven't gone on player character sheets: Gwanal Thorne, Jana Burghe, Meza Mwrr, Reganna, and Shajar. She puts these names at the tops of Peer sheets. She grabs four more Peer sheets and gives them names: Weatha, Xiun, Yari, and Zrudura. She doesn't know who these peers are yet, but she wants to have some names handy if she needs somebody.

Don has trained his Roadman Niassa to NPC status, so Zoe invites Don to create a "suggestion" of Niassa's sheet, spending just ten actions in Step C. Niassa has no domain, after all. When he gives her the character, she makes a few changes but keeps the general character concept the same. She has plans for Niassa.

Before the players get together to play their first story, Zoe gets ready. She needs a neighbor with a pretty young daughter to dangle in front of the unmarried Davan. She pulls two of her unassigned Peers sheets, Weatha and Yari. She jots down Three Things for each of them. Weatha is a Baron, commands a merchant fleet, and is rather portly. Yari is stunningly pretty, incredibly dangerous (Prowess is her highest virtue), and hunts for the ven who killed her lover.

Once play begins, she explains how The Storm has arrived in Norfrost from across the water, and ahead of it has come a battered trio of ships, captained by their neighbor, the Baron Weatha. He and his daughter Yari beg hospitality of Asvil while they wait out the Storm. Zoe reads off the Three Things for each of these characters, and Alex asks if he knows any more. "I don't know," Zoe responds, "Do you? Make a Wisdom risk."

Don lifts a hand and asks if he can roll as well, and throws a Style token towards Zoe to say he is visiting his aunt. Both Alex and Don marshal their dice, set aside wagers, and roll. Alex wins, so he keeps his three wagers; Don loses but beats ten, so he loses half of his four wagers.

Alex has privilege and decides to go first. "Weatha owes me a shipment of goods," he declares. Zoe jots this down on Weatha's card: "Debts Owed".

Don holds up his wager die and declares, "The man Yari is looking for is a vassal in the County." Zoe chuckles and notes this down on Yari's sheet: "Norfrost ven are villains."

Alex lifts an eyebrow. "Thanks for making trouble, Don. Her lover was my herald." Zoe writes: "My Love in Undimmed."

Don's last wager is spent: "I helped the killer dispose of Asvil's herald." The table explodes in gasps. Zoe spins Don another style and adds a note to Yari's sheet.

Asvil welcomes their neighbors into her puzzle house. They have dinner, during which the hostess makes a sly remark that she hopes the goods that Weatha owed her were not lost to The Storm. Since the debt was introduced by Alex, Alex mentioning it in play doesn't make it an aspect, although it is nice that it's brought into play through conversation. Don asks Yari if she is still in school or if she's finally broken free of that prison. Zoe jots down "Recent Graduate" and answers for Yari that she is now at her liberty and plans to find some lands of her own. She had hoped not to do so alone, but... she lets that trail off. Don commiserates with her, and says they all miss Asvil's herald, Jorja. Zoe draws a box next to "My Love is Undimmed." Yari now has her first aspect.

Next, Zoe switches over to Brittany and Chuck, explaining that The Storm reaches even up into the interior, prompting Bajinoth and Cavalo to take refuge in Bajinoth's city, Stellenreth. They're stomping rainwater off their traveling cloaks in a tavern when they spy Meza Mwrr, Bajinoth's brother-in-law, at a table off in the corner. Zoe has also given Meza Three Things, and she reads them off now: He adores his wife Jana Burghe; Despite his house, he is not a sorcerer; and finally, He is dark-complexioned and raven-haired.

Bajinoth's weakness is Wisdom, so Brittany hands Zoe a style point instead of grabbing dice for a risk. "I had Meza before Jana did," she declares, and then describes Bajinoth stalking over to the shadowed table to greet him. Zoe jots down the prior relationship, and tells Brittany that Meza is surprised, and not especially happy, to see her approach. He does ask her to have a seat, though — it's her city, after all — and

waves Cavalo over, as well. Cavalo makes a show of looking back and forth and asks him, “Where’s your wife? You’re not often away from her side.” Zoe draws in a box next to “Adores his wife Jana Burghe,” and has Meza answer that Jana was bitten by an ork and suffers from a slow poison, and that he came to Stellenreth in the hopes of finding an apothecary...

Play proceeds with Zoe bouncing back and forth between Asvil’s puzzle house and Stellenreth. As the story proceeds, Bajinoth is becoming increasingly suspicious of Meza and his motives. She decides to push and see if his story changes. She gathers dice for her name, her Cunning, and invokes her Short-Tempered aspect for six dice. Zoe also gathers dice for Meza. His name isn’t much use, and his Cunning isn’t defined yet. Zoe decides to make it a 3. Brittany already stipulated that Meza and Bajinoth had been lovers, and now Zoe references this a second time to invoke it as the aspect “Knows Cavalo’s Daughters.” She also tags Bajinoth’s “I am not my sister.” — just a different sister than Brittany meant when she wrote it. That’s 8 dice. They set aside wagers and roll; Meza wins, and keeps Bajinoth in the dark except for his one tell — his twitchy smile — that he’s had since he was young. Bajinoth remains suspicious, but has nothing more to go on.

Meanwhile, back at the puzzle house, Davan and Yari are wandering the corridors trying to track down the source of some terrible moaning. When they find it, it’s a spectral apparition of her lost love Jorja, pointing at Davan and wailing. Yari is about to strike down the young noble, but Don declares he wants to talk her into attacking the apparition instead. He asserts his Beauty of 3 and gives Zoe a style to tag Yari’s “My Love in Undimmed” (he discovered said aspect in an earlier scene where his flirting went disastrously awry). That’s five dice, and Zoe tells him to just beat ten. He sets aside one wager and rolls, getting a 12. He declares that he utterly fails to turn her against him, but she does shoo away the ghost before drawing her blade.

Zoe takes Don’s mention of the drawn blade as a reference to her “dangerous” reputation from among her Three Things. She draws in the box, but then spends the one style that Yari has collected to convert the aspect into a Artifact. “She does draw her blade,” she tells Don. “And the blade is gleaming red: a bloodsword.” They both start gathering dice for the fight, and Zoe makes sure to drop in two more for the bloodsword.

And so the story goes, until it’s time to wrap things up and head home for the night.

PEER SEASON ACTIONS

The group has agreed to do their season actions via email between game sessions, so a few days later when Zoe is preparing the next story, she also figures the season actions for the Peers.

Davan certainly earned the enmity of Yari in the story, so she will be working towards his downfall. Luckily for him, she only has a Cunning of 2 and no vassals, so she will only have two actions to use against him. Zoe decides that the girl spends her first action to recruit a spy network, and then the second to recruit a personal guard. Who knows how she'll feed them once winter comes around, but right now she just wants to hurt Davan, and his castle-less lands seem the best way to do that. Next season, she'll send in the spies or perhaps even invade blindly.

No other NPCs are after the player characters, so Zoe needs to use Values, Defenses, and Danger to produce Threats. Cavalo's domain consists of a rank-3 forest, a rank-3 hills, a rank-3 castle, and a rank-3 village. He has a rank-3 spy network and a rank-1 personal guard. That makes the Value 9 (forest-3 + hills-3 + village-3) and his Defenses 7 (castle-3 + spy network-3 + personal guard-1). Dividing, rounding up, gives her a Threat rating of 2.

Bajinoth's domain is large: two forests (ranks 1 & 2), two hills (ranks 1 & 2), a rank-2 plains, and a city (rank 4). That's a Value of 12. She has a castle, a mayor, and roadmen, but each are rank 1: that's Defenses of 3. Twelve divided by three is a massive Threat of 4.

Asvil's quiet little swampland is not much better off. Sure, she only has a couple swamps, a shoreline, and some farmland, each rank one for a total Value of 4... but she also only has Roadmen of rank one to defend it all. That gives Asvil a Threat of 4, as well.

Davan's homestead in the high country is composed of five rank-one regions, for a Value of 5. He has a rank-3 band of Roadmen with a Master of the Road (+1 Defenses) and a rank-1 personal guard. That's Defenses of 5. Five divided by five is one Threat.

Zoe rolls each domain's Threat, looking for dice that roll ones. Cavalo's two dice are 3 and 4, so no incursions. Bajinoth's four dice produce two ones, so she will have two season actions used against her. Asvil's four dice, by contrast, are all fours. Davan's one die rolls a one.

Zoe decides that the first incursion against Bajinoth's domain is actually Meza's spying on the city region. The second will be Jana, not at all poisoned, bringing in

her Personal Guard to take the city of Stellenreth. Brittany won't be too happy to hear about that. Zoe plans on using the invasion as the next story in the season.

As for Davan's single incursion, she decides that Weatha is giving his daughter a little assistance, and has bribed the captain of Davan's personal guard, his aunt Lisle. Since Weatha is a new Peer, Zoe does not have his Spy Network's level yet. She uses Weatha's Cunning, instead, which was used in a risk in the last story, so she has it noted down: rank 4. Weatha is established as a wealthy baron, so he can afford to throw three Wine at Lisle — that's twice her rank, plus one. She rolls four dice for the espionage action and one die for Lisle's rank. It's no contest. She loses two levels of loyalty, which is — surprise, surprise — all she has. Lisle is now a traitor. Zoe decides that Lisle has agreed to join Yari's invasion, but she will keep that little fact under her Narrator hat until a good moment in the next story.

KINSMEN

The next time the players get together, Zoe informs them that the twins' sister Jana has invaded Bajinoth's lands and seized Stellenreth. As the story develops, Bajinoth and her sister make their way to the city to parlay. Jana and Meza hold a lavish feast in the mayor's manor, serving Bajinoth's food to her. Brittany surprises everyone by invoking the Kinsmen rules: she wants to make Jana a Friend.

Brittany gathers up dice as she and Zoe chat in-character at the feast. Brittany asks, "Do you remember, back when Father had just landed in Norfrost, how Mother had to host the party for your Bleeding on wooden plates?" She sets aside two wagers and rolls, beating ten.

Zoe isn't quite sure what Brittany is up to, but she plays along, for now. She gathers dice for Jana: she decides her Beauty is 3, and she tags Bajinoth's Twin aspect for two more. "I remember you and Asvil running around the feast hall scaring the living daylights out of everyone who had come out of respect for Father." She sets aside two wagers to match Brittany, rolls, and beats ten handily. Both Brittany and Zoe write down "Family Friend" on their character sheets and gain two style.

Brittany doesn't miss a beat. "I've always regretted how Father treated you," she says, and she's already grabbing dice. "Forcing you to go find a liege of your own while taking Asvil and I on as his vassals. It's like you were never good enough for him, and that's sad. I suppose it's also why he's bringing his guard in to expel you from my lands." She declares that she is trying to intimidate Jana; she gathers two dice for Bajinoth's



Beauty, invokes her Boastful aspect for three dice, and then claims three more dice from her new Friendship with Jana — she's certainly threatening their relationship. Jana won't get those dice, because not being intimidated doesn't threaten their relationship.

The rest of the story proceeds in much the same fashion: Bajinoth on the relentless offensive, battering Jana with her intimate family knowledge, until her sister is chased out of the city with her guard following after her.

NORFROST CHARACTERS

Here are the four characters used in the example as they appeared after Step C character creation. While making your own characters is always preferred, these four can easily be used for a one-shot to get a taste of the game.

Asvil Mwrr

Blooded of the Serpent

Family Name "Vila"

Secret Name Moshan (whispers)

Mother Tatjan Mwrr

Father Cavalo Burghe

Spouse Vangalio Krev



Strength
3

Aspects

Twin

"I am sure you're mistaken..."

Secrets of Shan'ri

Cold as the Winter Wind



Cunning
3



Courage
2

Rituals, Devotions & Gifts

The Curse

The Eye

The Tulpa

Devotion: Feyla Thorne



Beauty
0



Wisdom
5

Contacts, Friends, & Enemies

Contact: Bajinoth

Contact: Cavalo



Prowess
2

Domains & Vassals

Ruin (3: Puzzle House, Shrine)

Swamp (1)

Swamp (1)

Shoreline (1)

Farmland (1)

Roadmen (1: Phison)

Spouse (1)

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Bajinoth Burghe

Blooded of the

Bear

Mother

Tatjan Mwrr

Family Name

"Cub"

Father

Cavalo Burghe

Secret Name

Woshan ("heart")

Spouse

Uthandaye Steele



Strength
4

Aspects

Twin

"I am not my sister!"

Boastful

Short-Tempered



Cunning
2



Courage
4

Devotions & Gifts

Devotion: Ecc Burghe (2)



Beauty
2



Wisdom
0

Contacts, Friends, & Enemies

Contact: Asvil Mwrr

Contact: Davan Steele



Prowess
3

Domains & Vassals

Stellenreth (City)

Forest (2)

Forest (1)

Hills (2)

Hills (1)

Spouse

Plains (2)

Castle (1)

Mayor (1)

Staff (1)

Roadmen (1: Obahz captains)

Cavalo Burghe

Blooded of the Bear **Mother** Feyla Thorne
Family Name Stoney **Father** Ecc Burghe
Secret Name Takra ("stone heart") **Spouse** Tatjan Mwrr



Strength
4

Aspects

Honorable
"I Never Forget a Face..."
Self-Made Ven
Withdrawn
Regretful
Creaking Knees (Solace)



Cunning
3



Courage
4

Devotions & Gifts



Beauty
0



Wisdom
2

Contacts, Friends, & Enemies

Contact: Asvil Mwrr
Contact: Bajinoth Burghe
Contact: Davan Steele



Prowess
2

Domains & Vassals

Castle (3)	Spy Network (3)
Forest (3)	Staff (1)
Hills (3)	Personal Guard (1)
Village (1)	Herald (1: grandson No)
	Spouse (3)

Davan Steele

Blooded of the

Elk

Family Name

"Buck"

Secret Name

Noshe ("snow mist")

Mother

Bajinoth Burghe

Father

Uthandaye Steele

Spouse

None



Strength

0



Cunning

5



Courage

3



Beauty

3



Wisdom

2



Prowess

2

Aspects

Impetuous

Heart on my Sleeve

Helped by Mother

Piercing Blue Eyes

Artifacts, Devotions & Gifts

Devotion: Ecc Burghe (1)

Devotion: Feyla Burghe (1)

Artifact: Bloodsword

Contacts, Friends, & Enemies

Contact: Bajinoth

Domains

Village (1)

Farm (1)

Forest (1)

Hills (1)

Mountains (1)

Plains (1)

Master of the Road (1: Niassa)

Personal Guard (1: Lisle)

Court Scholar (1: Illydill)

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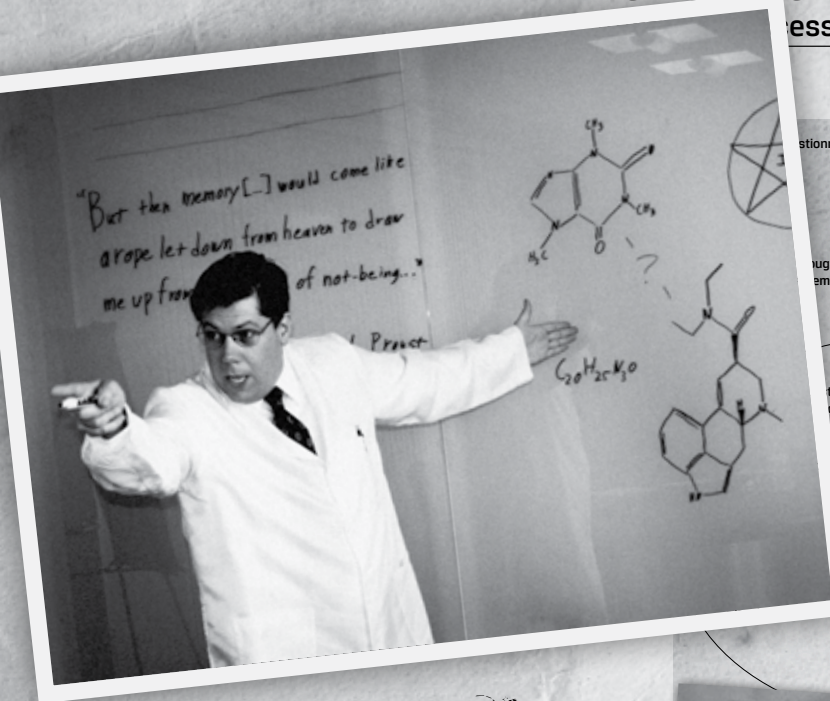
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Peer

blooded
- of the

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- 1 Reading Materials
- 2 Facts and Reassurances
- 3 Create Memory Triggers
- 4 Distribute Pennies
- 5 Choose a Traveler
- 6 Prepare for the Trip
- 7 Begin the Journey
- 8 Describe the Path
- 9 Ask for Guidance
- 10 Conclude the Journey

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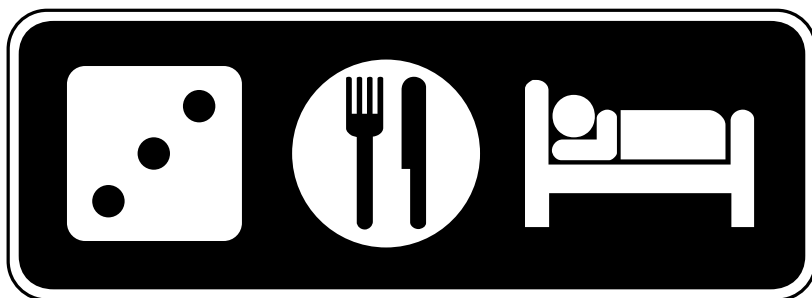
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We've done this before.

We're going to do it again.

Why? We can both just walk away. Forget each other. Goodnight? Goodbye?

No. Every time we meet, you kill me. Tonight, I'm killing you.

I'm starting to realize why I always kill you.

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