

Ussura™

Nations of Théah: Book Seven

by Ree Soesbee



7th Sea™

~1668~

Roleplaying Game



Ussura™

Primal forests cover mile after mile of landscape, stretching through barren plains and snow-swept mountains. The country of Ussura is a raging bear, ruled by a white-haired beast and guarded by pacts of blood. Her church defies the Vaticine, and her people call for strength from an ancient goddess deep within their shifting lands. Uncounted legends lie within her borders, hidden beneath ice and snow. She has many secrets – ancient ruins undisturbed since the dawn of time, walls of fire that tower over a man's head, and animals that race through the night laughing at the simpleness of man. Ussura is untamed, but she is not unaware. She dares to educate her peasants, commands no standing army, and relies on the tremendous power of Matushka, an immortal being that defies definition and fiercely protects the nation she calls home.

The Vaticine cannot control her.
Montegue cannot conquer her.
Where will you stand when the snows fall?

The *Ussura* sourcebook includes:

- A lengthy history of the country, as well as the five ancestral kingdoms which comprise her borders.
- Complete descriptions of the land, its people, and their culture, from the wild horsemen of the east to the fierce guerrilla fighters of the west.
- New details on Matushka, the tragic tale of Gaius Ilya, and comprehensive information on the Ussuran Orthodox church.
- New rules for Ussuran Heroes: unique skills and abilities, an axeman's fighting school, and expanded details on the shape-shifting magic of Pyeryem.
- Rules and background for the *Fhideli*, Ussuran gypsies who call no man their master.



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Ussura

The Living Wilderness



“Better to break than to bend.”
– Pyotyr Siev Andropovich







7th Sea

Writing

Ree Soesbee

Additional Writing

Kevin P. Boerwinkle

Loren Dean

Lee Garvin

Celia Tite

Editing

DJ. Trindle

Rob Vaux

Kevin Wilson

Art Direction

Jim Pinto

Cover Design

Brendon Goodyear

Cover Art

Terese Nielsen

Interior Art

Two-Page Spread

Carl Frank

Full-Page Titles

Dærick W. Gröss

Chapter Two Who's Who Art

Cris Dornaus

Other Interiors

Cris Dornaus

Dærick W. Gröss

A. Bleys Ingram

Celia Tite

Graphic Design and Layout

Brendon Goodyear

Steve Hough

Line Developer

Rob Vaux

7th Sea Created By

John Wick & Jennifer Wick and Kevin Wilson

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Winter Shadows

You can never know true cold until you have lived through an Ussuran winter. The chill seeps into your joints like a trickle of ice water, freezing their motion and shivering into your very soul. Even when the sun spreads through the deep gray blanket of clouds, it does not warm you. The rays shine blindingly white from snow-covered trees, and the world seems like a tremendous forest of spun glass. When the winter has reached you, truly covered you in ice, you feel as though you may never know warmth again...



Rurik – 1667

Ketheryna fingered the small globe that hung from her neck, looking out at the wilderness that surrounded her *troika*. Three dark horses pulled the carriage-like sled through high snowdrifts, their hooves sinking deeply into the crust of the winter's breath. The horses' movement was punctuated by heavy tread of their hooves upon the ground, frozen solid beneath the snow. Otherwise, they were silent – Ketheryna had ordered the bells removed from their harnesses. Silence, like the snow, was her ally.

"More tea, m'Lady?" asked Leonore, Ketheryna's maid, leaning over the small iron stove in the center of the *troika*. A chimney led up from the small covered blaze, carrying a

thin stream of smoke out the *troika*'s roof. Leonore took a teapot from the stovetop, pouring the liquid into a porcelain teacup for her mistress. "You should drink. You are too pale, and it is cold outside." Leonore's voice was soft, like a kitten's gentle calls. Ketheryna smiled as she accepted the tea, and Leonore glanced out the *troika*'s curtained windows. "We are nearly there."

"I know." Slowly sipping from the cup, Ketheryna felt the *troika* slow. The forest around them went dark as twilight slowly fell across the land. Ketheryna had always hated the time between day and night, just before dawn or at the last rays of a dying sun. In some parts of Ussura, the twilight lasted for days. Looking up at the gray and orange sky, Ketheryna shuddered.

The *troika* slowed to a stop, the horses chafing at their harnesses as great plumes of breath steamed from their nostrils. "You are certain of this?" Leonore whispered, peering out the *troika*'s window once more.

"Is he there?" Ketheryna asked.

"I see... a shadow. By the tree."

Ussura's Empress nodded. "If he is certain enough to risk his life, then I must have the same courage and resolve."

As the *troika* driver opened the door, Leonore reached for Ketheryna's hand. "Take this," she whispered, pressing a small firearm into her lady's glove.

"No, Leonore." She looked down at the pistol, then placed it on the cushion beside the *troika*'s small stove. "He is the greatest soldier in Théah. It would do me no good... and besides, I walk in Matushka's lands. He cannot harm me here." Ketheryna embraced her companion, then reached to take the driver's hand. As Ketheryna stepped out of the covered sled, Leonore shook aside her tears.

Her red boots broke the icy crust of the snow, sinking into the softness below with each step. The Empress of Ussura motioned to the driver to remain at the sled, and touched the small crystal globe at her neck once more as she lifted her fur-lined hood to cover hair as black as a raven's wing. "Be careful, little *dochka*," the driver whispered to her, his

Introduction

old eyes touched with fear. Many boyars would have been offended at his use of the familiar Ussuran term for 'daughter', but to Ketheryna, it was a blessing.

"I will, old father. And thank you." She smiled beneath her hood, setting her shoulders back with resolve as she turned to walk into the dark wood that surrounded the road. Small lanterns on the troika illuminated the snow of the road, and the last light of the sun showed Ketheryna her path.

Her steps were slow and heavy, weighed down by the snow and her thick skirts. As she moved into the trees, she brushed aside branches of pine, feeling their cold sharpness against her gloved hands. The smell of pine was rich and wonderful, and for a moment, Ketheryna thought of days spent fishing with her brother on the banks of the Südlache. The thought lasted only a moment, and was gone. Her life was no longer that place, those people. Her life, like these trees, was now covered in Ussuran snow.

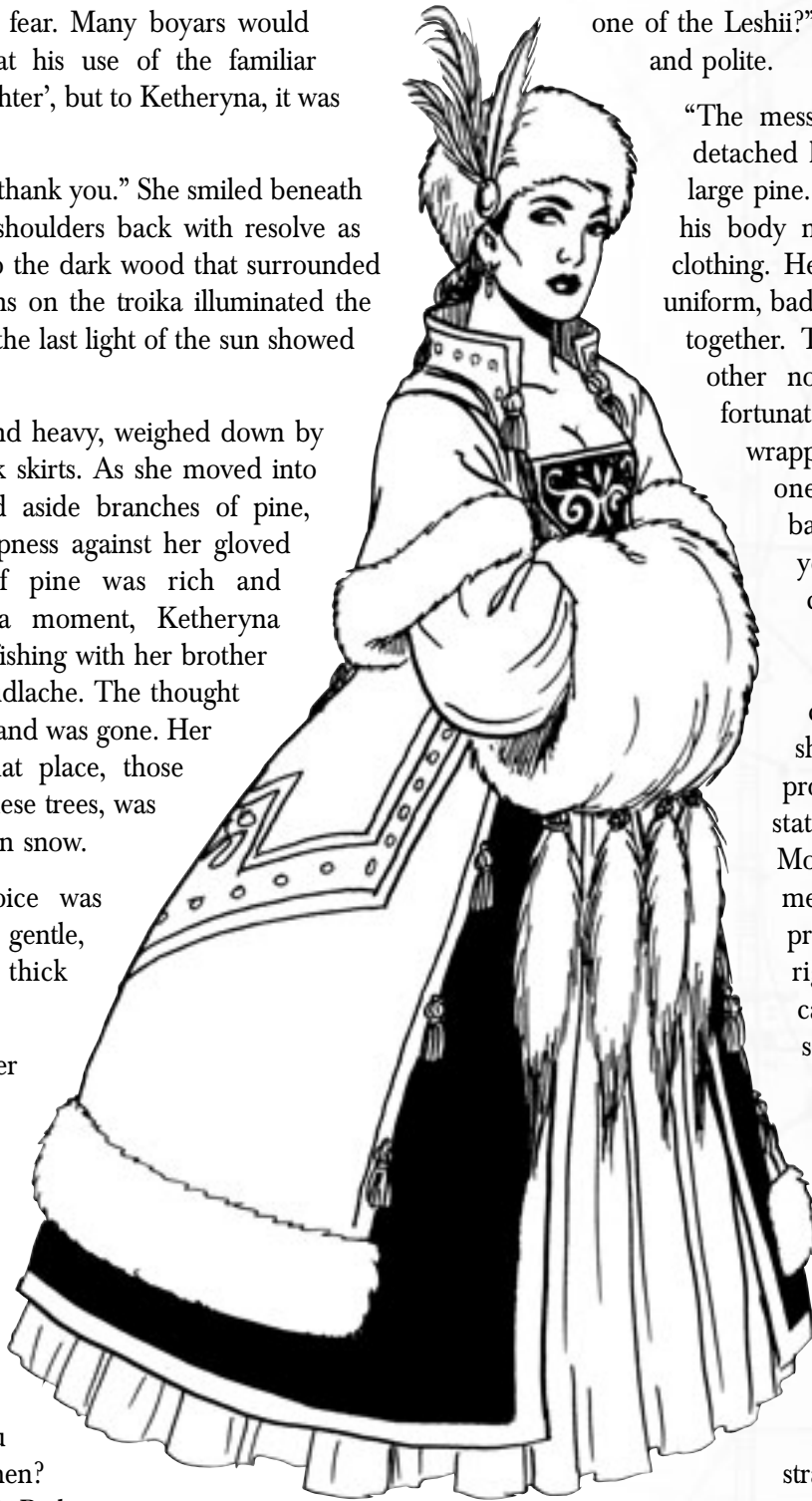
"A woman?" The voice was mildly confused, but gentle, touched with a thick Montaigne accent.

Ketheryna smiled. Her Montaigne was apparently better than his Ussuran. She spoke to him in his native tongue, and the tension in his shoulders relaxed – but only slightly. "Yes, a woman. Did you expect a battalion of men? Three talking wolves? Perhaps

one of the Leshii?" Her tone was gentle, teasing and polite.

"The message did not say." The man detached himself from the shadow of a large pine. He was slender, but not thin, his body muscular under the layers of clothing. He wore a Montaigne soldier's uniform, badly ripped and roughly stitched together. Two coats, one his own, the other no doubt taken from a less fortunate comrade. His boots were wrapped in bandages, but he was one of the lucky ones. The bandages were still clean, not yet stained with blood. A captain's badge decorated his lapel, and his musket was perfectly cared for, its wool carrying bag slung from one shoulder as his hand rested protectively on the butt. "It only stated that a messenger from Montegue was to come here, to meet an ally. You are that ally, I presume?" He bowed slightly, rigid formality trapping his casual motion. Ketheryna smiled. He, too, had been born a peasant, and such things came no more easily to him than they did to her brother, Faulk. In a way, the two were very much alike.

"Montegue chose me to meet you. My name is Jean-Amonde du Rois et Reines..." he began, straightening stiffly.



Quietly, Ketheryna sighed. He must think her an idiot – or did he not know that his picture had been circulated in every court in Ussura? “Your name is Montegue du Montaigne, General. And no doubt we are surrounded by your loyal men?” Ketheryna squinted through the trees, smiling slightly.

Montegue, recognized despite his guise, nearly blushed. “The message said to come alone.” A smile escaped his stoic features, hiding behind the shadow of a half-grown beard. “So I brought only three.”

Ketheryna laughed. “Very well, General. Considering that you have an entire army less than two miles from here, I believe three men is ‘alone’ enough.”

“Why did you summon me? In your message was half of a letter from from my wife. Where is the rest?” Montegue stepped closer to Ketheryna, eyeing the troika behind her. “And who are you?”

“For now, General, you will have to trust me a little. You may call me,” the name spilled forth from her lips almost without thought, “Dochka.”

“Dochka.” He nodded.

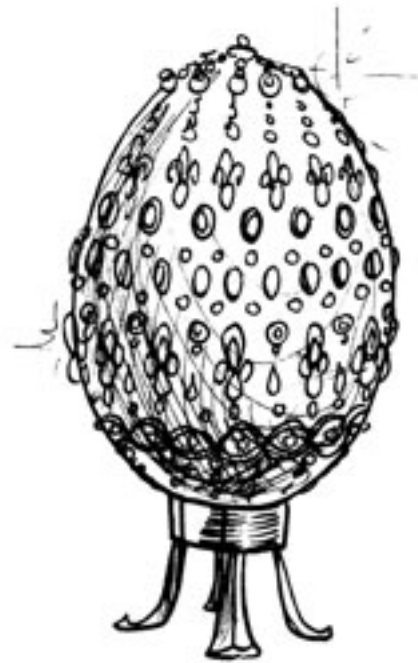
“I have something for you.”

“Wait.” Montegue interrupted, “First, I have questions, or this goes no farther.” Ketheryna nodded. This was a strange land, filled with enemies he could not see or fight. The very woodlands rose against him, the rivers went dry, and his men died of a sickness caused by bad waters and rotted food. “Are you an Ussuran traitor?”

“No.” She answered truthfully.

“How did you get my wife’s letter?”

“It was captured with a messenger at the border near St. Andresgorod. I retrieved it from the other items seized with him. Here is the rest.” Ketheryna handed him a small scroll-tube. “The seal was already broken before my boyars found the letter.”




“Of course the seal was broken. *L'Empereur's* government reads all my letters. For my protection, of course.” His voice was bitter with irony. “So you are Voevoda? A boyar?” Montegue’s questions came as swiftly as musket fire. “Someone with the power to investigate the capture of a Montaigne messenger. Or do you work for a boyar? A servant, perhaps?”

Ketheryna shook her head. “It does not matter who or what I am, only that those whom I represent wish to stop this war as much as you do. And from your wife’s letter, I know that you are a good and honorable man. I know you do not wish to make war on us, and that when any of your men die, you feel it as keenly as if he were your brother.”

Montegue placed the scroll tube back into his coat pocket. “You read the letter? Then you know that I will do as I have been commanded. No matter what I believe about this war, I serve *l'Empereur*.”

“Your men are dying.”

“Better our lives than our honor.” His voice was unsure, the answer by rote.



Introduction

Ketheryna stepped toward him. "I know you don't believe that." Her voice was passionate, and she touched his arm compassionately. "I am here to help you. All I ask is that you trust me."

"Trust you? I don't even know who you are." With a swift gesture, Montegue seized Ketheryna's hood in his hand, drawing it back to reveal her face. Ketheryna froze, her wide blue eyes staring into his deep brown ones as stunned recognition dawned upon the General's features.

At that moment, a sharp *crack!* sounded in the woods nearby, and a shower of bark sprayed from the nearby pine. Ketheryna spun, hearing the sharpshooter reloading, as two more men leapt from the bush nearby. Another man, this one an Ussuran, lumbered from the trees just north of them, hurling his axe through the air with a wild shout. It sank deeply into the chest of one of the Montaigne, and the man fell with a choked scream.

The Montaigne sharpshooter fired again. In seconds, Montegue's musket was in his hands and he was taking aim. Another Ussuran followed the first, only to fall to the ground as the report of the sniper's weapon echoed in the dark forest. Sprawled in the snow, the Ussuran pulled a pistol from his belt to fire at Montegue. Before the trigger clicked, the Montaigne general had blown a hole in the Ussuran's head. Ketheryna heard a groan from the man beside her, and looked to see blood seeping through the thick coats covering Montegue's arm.

"You are injured..." she began, but before she could continue, the Montaigne soldier had shoved her to the ground. He stood over her, putting his musket to her head.

"Three Ussuran men in the woods, Gen'ral. Ambush. On orders from this one, I'll bet." The man's Montaigne accent was crude, thick with the touch of city streets and dark wharves. "I say we kill 'er."

"No." Montegue was firm. He reached to cover his wound, his musket dangling in a limp hand.

"Too late, mon'sur." The Montaigne tensed on the trigger.

Another sharp report broke the forest's stillness, and the Montaigne staggered. Ketheryna stared first at the hole in the snow beside her head, then over the man's shoulder as he fell to his knees. Behind him, she saw Leonore standing in the road beside the troika, a smoking pistol clutched in her shaking hands.

"You are well, Empress?" Montegue asked.

Ketheryna nodded, gathering her courage. "I did not bring those men. They must have followed me."

"No, they followed *me*. I've seen them before. They make a habit of sneaking into my encampment like rodents, following my every move. They must have mistaken this for a good opportunity to end my life." Montegue did not seem shaken now that the moment of pain had passed.

"Let me bind that," Ketheryna said. Tearing a strip of cloth from her petticoats, she reached beneath his jacket to tie the makeshift bandage around the Montaigne general's arm.

Staring at her in concern and amazement, Montegue demanded, "Why are you here? I could have taken you prisoner, used you as a hostage... killed you."

"I was willing to take that chance." Ketheryna raised her head, her eyes calm. "For my people."

The woods were silent for a moment as blood from the dead soldiers spread into the snow, staining it with death. Montegue nodded curtly. "I fight for my people as well."

"Then take this." Ketheryna drew an ornate golden egg from her pocket, offering it to Montegue. He took it, and as he did, the top twisted and opened, and a faint song could be heard – the chirping of a golden bird within a jeweled cage. Montegue lifted a piece of carefully folded paper from the bird's beak, looking at it quizzically. "Your men are dying, General, and they are in pain. The recipe which that paper contains will cure their plague and heal their wounds."

"You would cure my armies?"

"I would ease their suffering. No matter who they are, they do not deserve this pain." Ketheryna smiled. "Do not worry,



I would not betray my people, Montaigne. The antidote will not heal your men completely; they will still have to return to Montaigne. But they will not suffer... and they will not die." Ketheryna paused, her warm breath hanging in the air. "Those men have families. Take them out of Ussura."

"I cannot... *l'Empereur*..."

"Did not command you to murder your own wounded. I'm certain that if you will send a unit to escort your injured and sick back to Odyesse, you will find their route safe. That is the price I ask in exchange for their lives."

Montegue smiled thinly, seeing wisdom in her words. "Done."

"I cannot stay. The shots will bring your sentries." Ketheryna took a step back toward the troika. "You will hear from me again."

"When you can find more ways to get my men out of your country?"

The Empress smiled, pulling her hood over her delicate features. "Exactly."

"I'm certain *l'Empereur* would be honored by her Majesty's concern for his militia." Montegue bowed again, his coats flapping in the bitter wind.

Ketheryna's eyes were as much fire as ice. "As I'm certain he has honored you, General." As she turned to march toward the troika, she spared a single glance over her shoulder at the sturdy Montaigne. "May the True Prophet go with you."

As the Empress swiftly stepped back into her troika, Montegue looked down at the golden egg that lay in the palm of his hand. Its contents would save the lives of a more than a thousand men. "And may he walk with you, Dochka. We will both need his wisdom before there can be spring."



As the troika drew away, a light snow began to fall upon the forest. In a short time, it would cover all evidence that anyone had ever visited the clearing. Even the bodies of the dead would be covered with snow and ice, lost in the woods until the spring thaw. No one would ever know what had occurred.

Almost no one.

To one side of the road, Koshchei's raven squawked a thin call, landing impatiently on its master's hand. "Yes, yes," the old one said. "Our little dochka did well, did she not?"

The bird *churrupted* indignantly as Koshchei looked back toward the road. The troika moved almost silently through the thick snow, its horses less weary than they should have been. It would be a long road back to Pavtlow, and a dangerous one. Montaigne soldiers guarded the outposts, and Ussuran raiders moved through the forest. A dangerous journey for a two women and an old man, troika or no.

As the covered sled disappeared into the great pine trees of the ancient forest, three massive wolves slid out of the shelter of the trees. Their leader, a black wolf as large as one of the horses, growled commandingly, and the others lifted their heads to his call. Then, as one, they turned and faded back into the forest, silently following the troika's path.


"Oh, I see," Koshchei murmured. "Matushka thinks of everything, doesn't she?"

The raven cawed again, and began to stroke its beak against his fingers.

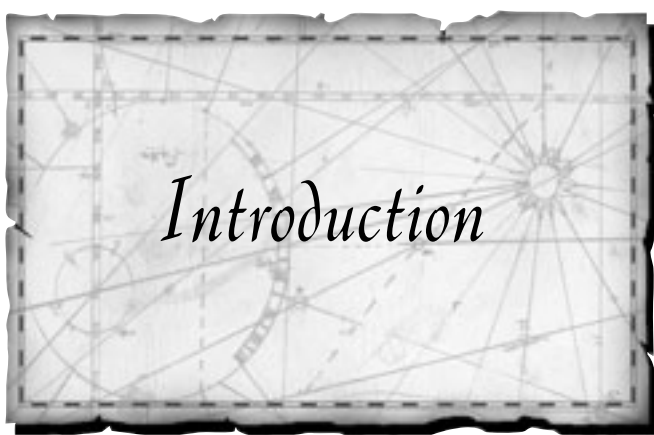
The old sorcerer drew his robes closer to his immortal skin, feeling the bitter sting of the Ussuran winter. "Enough, then. It is begun. Even a sick wolf can kill a lamb, and if the Montaigne are fool enough to continue on their quest, we will find a way to still them." Koshchei lifted his arms toward the sky, and his eyes flashed a brilliant green.

Then, as the darkness settled upon Ussura's deep forests and high mountains, a pair of pitch-black ravens circled the battlefield, their voices a cacophony of laughter against the snow-torn sky.





Introduction



Introduction

Dark Ussura, a land of mystery and superstition, where *muzhik* peasants shudder beneath the bloody reign of *boyar* tyrants. The very name conjures images of men impaled on spikes, dark castles hovering over tall cliffs, and mad overlords who bathe in blood and whisper ancient prayers living goddesses.

It is a land of thick forests and high mountains, divided from the rest of Théah by cultural as well as geological barriers. While the other nations descend from the Western Numan Empire and follow the united Vaticine church, Ussura's roots are firmly in the east, and her faith blends the Prophet's teachings with veneration of the goddess known as Matushka. Their "pagan" faith and eastern culture often makes Ussurans suspect in other countries, treated as second-class citizens or heretics.

But step across the border, and an entirely different image appears. Man and beast work side by side; noble and peasant both grind the same bread. The advances of the modern world have no place among her people – not because they do not understand them, but because they choose to live on simpler terms. Everyone, from the mighty Gaius to the lowliest child, understands their place in the world, and human arrogance vanishes beneath the unbending power of the land.

In Ussura, appearances cannot be trusted. Any animal may be a ferocious boyar, and even the geography changes

when Matushka wills it. Creatures of ancient myth still live beneath the ground, and suspicions come true if you believe in them. Fierce Kosars still ride across her plains, and bloodthirsty warlords hide behind a civilized veneer. Ussura is the untamed steppes, the towering mountains, the merciless sea. It is the laugh of the *muzhik* and the howl of the wolf. It is the naked face of life at its most cruel... and most vibrant. It is the last shelter of the world against an apocalyptic future, a stronghold of faith and strength that cannot be broken.

This is Ussura. There is no compromise.

This book is divided into four chapters. The first details Ussura's unique culture, land features, history and geography, including each of the five provinces of the Ussuran Knias, their histories, and their current rulers. **Hero** gives you a look at Ussura's most important residents, the terrible and the powerful as well as the *muzhik* that influence the nation. **Drama** introduces new rules, a new axeman's school, several new advantages and skills, and increased knacks for Pyeryem users. Finally, **Lifeblood** provides a more detailed look at Ussura behind the enigma, describes Matushka and her history in detail, and gives players several thoughts on the uses of Pyeryem. It also includes some new monsters unique to Ussura, as well as secrets of the NPCs in Chapter Two which the Heroes probably don't know. Lastly, you will find an expanded map of the nation, along with series of templates for Ussuran characters at the rear of this sourcebook, ready to be integrated into your current campaign.

Ussura is not the "backwards stepchild" that the other nations would have you believe. It is a ferocious place of death and adventure, where myth and superstition have not vanished beneath the false veil of civilization. Ussura may be the last bastion for wilderness, the last place where forests are still impenetrable and mountains are shrouded by eternal smoke. Only the brave dare venture into her deepest heart, where dreams themselves become reality.

Welcome to the edge of the world.





Ussura



History

*"Ussura, Ussura, racing on
Like a spirited troika that none can pass –
Everything on earth is flying by;
Other nations look askance,
But step aside before you."*

– Gregor Ekaternava Pietrov, Poet of the Empire

Ussura. Distant land of ice and snow, enigmatic behind a veil of mountains and mist, it has stood for generations on the edge of Théan civilization. Rich in history, tradition, and magic, Ussura has refused to bow to kings, emperors, and even Prophets, standing like her unshakable mountains in the face of those who would have her kneel. Her faith is a dizzying blend of ancient pagan tradition and a formalized following of the First Prophet, her culture shaped by internal forces as well as invasions from Cathay and Eisen.

She is an enigma wrapped in a mystery, a tale in a shroud of snow. She is Ussura, and these are her stories.

Matushka

The nation began its life in the dark of prehistory. It began with Matushka.

No one knows exactly who she was, or where she started her life, but she has been a part of Ussura since its inception. She was old when humanity was young, and her power infused the land when the world's primitive tribes took their first shaky steps.

Long ago, before the first human came, Matushka was one with the land. Ussuran legend states that she was born when the mountains rose, and that the rivers ran with milk to nurse her when she was a babe. She walked the green fields of Théah, and in her wake, the animals of the earth and forest were born. She drank from the oceans, and the fish of the sea were given life. Yet she was alone.

And in her loneliness, she sought solace in a deep sleep, far beneath the earth's crust. She rested there, trying to find purpose in her solitude and wishing that there were more. One day, her wishes took shape and the human race was born. They tamed the world around them, civilizing themselves and building vast cities and empires. Matushka smiled in her sleep, for such creatures could give her the solace and comfort she needed.

Humanity was not the only beneficiary of her power. Even though Matushka slept, some of her magic still infused the land. Where she had walked, the earth remembered her, and reached to be near her. A forest – the Azov – sprang up around her cave, covering the land with thick brush and high trees to shield her from prying eyes. The animals, instinctively remembering their origins, came to the opening of her home and sang to her.

Four animals in particular kept vigil over Matushka's dark cave. These animals, a bear, a cat, an eagle, and a wolf, seemed to absorb some of Matushka's magic, and while they remained in her presence they did not age or die. Eventually they would travel throughout the world, bringing Matushka tales of the humans and their Empires. They became fully sentient, and passed on a limited awareness to other members of their race within Matushka's influence.

While the goddess slumbered, humanity spread far and wide, warring with one another and seeking dominance over each other. Most traveled west, to populate the land and found great empires. But a few remained behind, instinctively drawn to the comfort of their dreaming matriarch. They became her true children, favored above all with her blessing. So it remained for untold centuries.

The Old Empire

AUC 1–250: Seeking Stability

Recorded Ussuran history begins with the Zakut. Most scholars hold that the Zakut are not one people, but instead a vast array of small tribes springing from a common source that is lost to history. Savage and tribal, they dressed in fish scales and dog fur, and eked out a living hunting and fishing in the vast Ussuran wilderness. Little is known of them, though their remains have been found in sites throughout Ussura.

The Zakut made their first contact with the outside world during the early rise of the Numan Empire, which spread north in the form of missionaries, conquerors, and scattered explorers. Impressed with the foreigners' sophisticated culture, the Zakut opened her arms to trade and adopted many Numan beliefs. For a while, the body of southern Ussura (the lower Somojan ranges) considered themselves an ally of Numa. (The Numans considered the province they called "Somojez" to be a client-state, not officially conquered but still offering tribute and taxes to Numa.) Their allegiance brought them new cultural advances, including architecture, waterways, and Ussura's first significant roads.

From 236 to 255 A.U.C., Numa launched a series of campaigns against the barbarian tribes of Eisen. Ultimately, however, the Numans were turned back, pushed by the barbarians to a point far below the Great River. To prevent further barbarian invasion, the Republic constructed a great wall on the southern bank of the River to keep the northern hordes at bay. While it kept Numa safe, it also isolated Ussura from her more sophisticated ally. Denied the ripe targets of northern Vodacce, aggressive tribes such as the Brutovskaya and Alyuskar soon turned against Ussura, which was forced to fight the pillaging marauders alone. A series of battles erupted through the Drachenbergs, as the southern Ussurans desperately fended off the invaders.

AUC 250–698: The Novgorov

During this period, several tribes of the Vestenmannavnjar fought a bitter war for dominance. After the battles ended,

one tribe stood victorious above the rest. Another of the stronger tribes was exiled because of their part in the war, so that their hatred would not taint the rule of the new sovereigns. That exiled tribe, known as the Novgod, found their way to the shores of northern Ussura. The peaceful Zakut residents of the coastline were quickly conquered, and the Novgod turned their attention to the fierce barbarians from the west.

At first, the Novgod were hard-pressed to keep the Eisen tribes at bay, but they soon found allies among their neighbors to the south. The native Ussurans welcomed Novgod assistance, for they themselves could barely keep the Eisen in check. The Novgod collected the peasants within fortified villages, teaching them the art of defense. They also added their forces to the remaining Numan-inspired troops of Yarlyk and Sousdal, fighting a recurring series of wars to stymie the western invaders. After almost a century, a final massive battle took place around the year AUC 365, at the fields west of modern Donskoy. The Novgod devastated the Eisen tribes, allowing Ussura to throw off the barbarians for good. They then changed their names to Novgorov, to better match the culture surrounding them.

To prevent further Eisen incursions, the Novgorov founded a city on the island at the mouth of the Ekaterina river, and named it "Ektar." This name eventually changed as more and more of the area's residents flocked to the city, and now it is known by a more Ussuran appellation: Ekaternava.

Although the Novgorov had been exiled, they had not been forbidden to trade with their former homeland. Using their ties with ancient allies in Vendel, they founded supply lines, trade routes, and open doors to the west. The influx of trade quickly made them wealthy, and they shared their good fortune with their allies to the south. The provinces of Rurik and Somojez were formalized, bound together by war and loyalty. Together, they formed a rough feudal government, led by a pair of "Knias" (kings) who ruled through a series of noble boyars. Ussura's current form of government traces its lineage all the way back to these two Knias.

AUC 698–724: The Second Peace

While western Ussura slowly began to organize, distant Numa was entering an age of power and decadence. In 698, General Gaius Philippus Macer declared himself Emperor and seized power from a corrupt Numan Senate following an extensive campaign in Eisen. His successful military campaigns opened the way for more Numan trade with Ussura. Things had changed over the centuries, however, and the Numans found the two Knias less subservient toward the Empire. It took incredible machinations to draw Rurik and Somojez into the Numan sphere, and their tribute was nearly non-existent. The Numans considered these provinces to be the “Northern Empire,” a proud people, difficult to understand, and impossible to invade. However, Rurik and Somojez’s distant alliance with Numa brought peace throughout the continent, and western Ussura once again enjoyed the fruits of Numa cultural advances.

AUC 724–774: The Bargain

Then in 724, an act took place which shook Théah to its very core. In an effort to regain power, a small group of senators in Numa bargained for sorcerous powers, forming the foundation of Théah’s modern sorcerous bloodlines. With their newfound abilities, the Senators forced the Emperor to give up his authority.

On the day that the Bargain was made in Numa, Matushka awoke from her slumber.

No one knows the details of her initial return to the world, but the Ussuran Orthodox Church believes that she was met there by the First Prophet, fifty years before his appearance in the Senate. They spoke for a long time, discussing the rise of sorcery, the future of Théah, and the arrival of another Prophet: one who would come in wrath and destroy the world. Matushka swore to prevent his coming, and to guide and guard her people. Or so Ussuran Orthodoxy maintains.

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding Matushka’s revival, her return could be felt throughout Ussura. She couldn’t stop the Senators from capitalizing on their

Bargain, but she could protect her own lands – the lands that had cradled her during the long sleep – and she could reach out with her magic and give her people the gift of understanding the animals who were their brothers. She learned what she could of the Ussuran people – and prepared to forge them into a nation that would stand against any threat.

AUC 735–774: The Test of Fire

Matushka was not the only one who disapproved of the Bargain. Disagreeing with his Senatorial peers but afraid for his own life if he should publicly speak out against them, Senator Edwardus Ajax Gallen fled Numa with his family and a small phalanx of guards. They traveled far to the east, beyond the Empire’s grip, and settled in an area that would one day become the city of Sredbirskyoye. Their descendants founded Gallenia, the third of Ussura’s five great provinces.

Unfortunately, even that far-flung corner of the world had troubles. For reasons unknown, the mysterious rulers of Cathay erected a huge wall of magical fire along the border. It happened quickly and without warning. The locals simply awoke one morning to find it stretching along the eastern frontier. Anyone approaching the wall was instantly burned to a crisp and no means of crossing it could be found. The Firewall forever separated Cathay from the rest of the world, leaving behind scattered tribes, suddenly empty trade routes, and the largest mark of sorcery in the world.

Among the Cathayan tribes separated from their homeland was a group known as the Tuman, savage brutes who sealed intertribal pacts with toasts of blood drunk from human skulls. Now cut off from Cathay, they commenced a brutal campaign of conquest. Led by their ruthless Khans, they rode freely into northeastern Ussura on their short muscular horses and swept away much of the native Zakut people and their culture. Some they enslaved, most they killed. The remaining Zakut, totally incapable of offering resistance to the Tumens, fled to the far ice plains of the north, where their descendants continue to live to this day.

With a new stronghold in what would later become Molhyna, the Tumens then turned their attention south. The growing province of Gallenia looked like a tempting target, and the Khans thought they could easily add it to their holdings. They thought wrong. Bolstered by Numan tactics and fierce courage, the Gallenians fought a series of brief battles against the raiders, and drove them back into the frigid northern steppes. Those Tumens who continued to fight Gallenia were struck down by mysterious plagues and famines, while the more cautious tribes settled in the lands around Lake Vigil, and slowly integrated with the native Zakut tribes. Gallenia, meanwhile, used its security to become a dominant power in eastern Théah. They remained that way until the rise of Jaala Khan in the fourth century AV.

The Eastern Empire

AV 1–311: The Rise of Rurik

In the calendar year 774 AUC – the first year of the new calendar, AV 1 – the First Prophet appeared on the floor of the Senate, advocating an end to sorcery, and the worship of a single deity called Theus. The Senate arrested and executed him, leaving his followers to tell the stories of his faith. They traveled far and wide, eventually arriving in western Ussura.

The province of Rurik welcomed the Prophet's messengers, and quickly integrated their teachings into the culture. The worship of Theus spread rapidly throughout Ussura, becoming the primary faith of Rurik, Somojez, and even Gallenia. Those who did not choose to follow the Prophet's faith slowly emigrated to the central lands of Ussura. Foremost among them was a vicious fighter and master tactician named Vladimir Aryov, who launched a brief war of conquest and founded a pagan principality known as Veche ("Blood"). For centuries thereafter, Veche became known as a savage land full of darkness and bloodshed.

Facing this new and potentially dangerous enemy, the province of Rurik began mobilizing its army. As the eastern

Pyeryem

When Matushka awoke, the magic of the land awoke with her, and Pyeryem was born. Matushka knew the thoughts of the animals that had lived in the woodlands with her and those of the people who had fed from the land and returned generations of the dead into the arms of her earth. Her awakening caused magic to rise, as well. But this magic was not born of the Bargain or the sorcerous powers from Beyond – it was born of Matushka's essence, her dreams, and the part of her that had become Ussura.

Pyeryem is not carried through the "noble" lines of Ussura. Instead, it is carried through the bloodlines of the oldest families, whose power developed over hundreds of years of contact with Matushka's dreams and reveries while she remained in her cave deep beneath the earth. Typically, these tend to be the nobility, but occasionally a commoner with ancient blood appears with some amount of Pyeryem. The boyars usually snatch up such individuals and give them positions as retainers. Because Pyeryem is actually part of (and thus, granted by) Matushka, she can give, increase, or revoke Pyeryem at any time, as easily as a man snaps his fingers. She has passed this power to the Gaius, and it is one of his strongest methods of punishment against the boyars.

Matushka can give Pyeryem to anyone she wishes, so long as they have become part of Ussura. While she cannot give it to a Castillian who has never set foot beyond the Drachenbergen, she could offer it to someone who had shown her proper respect for many years, or chosen to live off the land and spend time in Ussura. This gift is not given often; indeed, Matushka has seen fit to grant Pyeryem to someone not born on Ussuran soil less than a dozen times in history. It is possible that it could occur again, but it would be a gift of divine proportions. Such a gift would touch the foundations of the Ussuran Orthodoxy and could provide unshakable proof that the person to whom she bestowed Pyeryem truly does Matushka's will.

It could change the destiny of the nation.

part of the Numan Empire crumbled, Rurik began to take up the slack. They secured their borders, improved trade, and launched quiet incursions against their neighbors. Soon Somojez, parts of upper Vodacce, and even some Crescent lands became part of the Rurik Empire. They formed a bulwark of civilization sandwiched between the fallen remains of Numa to the west and the fierce Tumen tribes to the east.

AV 306: Jaala Khan

In 306, a Tuman tribe known as the Kosar united under a powerful leader named Jaala Khan. Jaala firmly settled in his position as absolute ruler of his people, marshaled his massive army near Lake Vigil, and set about conquering the world. His horde swept across Molhyna and upper Gallenia, and his warriors so terrified the Caliph of the Crescent Empire that he sent to Rurik for assistance.

The Rurik Knias had his own troubles with internal strife (see “Blood for the Cause” below), and could not spare many soldiers. He sent a token force of 500 men to stop the Kosar as they traveled through the Gora Bolshoi passes to the banks of the Mirror. At the fortress city of Sousdal, the Knias received dire news. The Crescent army was in chaos – a coup had claimed the life of the Caliph and no heir could be found. Because of this, there would be no help for the Rurik. They were alone against the Khan’s mighty horde.

The Battle of Demetrian’s Pass

The Rurik commander, Demetrian, realized that if the Khan passed through the mountains, he would be free to maneuver against the Crescent Empire, the Rurik Empire, and the whole of western civilization. Demetrian knew the Khan’s army had to be stopped at Sousdal, and put his men to work. Fortunately, Demetrian had a group of engineers with his small force, who had been brought to construct war machines. In an epic effort, they built stone fortifications in the passes in a matter of days, and determined to hold them at all costs. “We will hold the pass or die in the attempt,” Demetrian’s last recorded statement, is carved within the corridors of the mountain pass known as the Gates of Fire.

The next three months brought endless waves of bloody fighting, as the Khan ordered assault after assault. Demetrian’s forces held on with all their might, using their superior position to repulse every incursion. In the end, they were all but exterminated, but they held the passes long enough for the winter snows to fall. The Khan was forced to withdraw, and did not advance further into Théah. By the time spring arrived, reinforcements from the Crescent Empire were sufficient to stem his advance for good. The snows had claimed the last remnants of Demetrian’s forces – not a single soldier left the passes – but the people of Sousdal remember the battle even in modern times, and celebrate the day the Khan retreated as “Demetrian’s Day,” with great feasting and pilgrimagining.

Jaala was forced to content himself with ruling the areas north and east of the mountains. He kept the Tumans united under his command and established a line of Khans that lasted for another century. Since his rule, the Tuman tribes have been collectively referred to as the Kosars: a lasting testament to his power.

AV 305–399: Blood for the Cause

As Jaala’s hordes rose in the east, the Rurik Knias also faced a threat from within. The Second Prophet appeared from the Crescent Empire, preaching new words to Theus’s faithful. The Prophet’s message caused a deep schism within Rurik; some believed him to be a fraud while others – particularly in the north – hailed him as a new messiah. The two sides were unable to reconcile their differences, and civil unrest spread throughout the Empire. The Knias responded by rejecting the Second Prophet’s legitimacy and brutally repressing his followers. His efforts severely weakened his regime, but he kept his kingdom from degenerating into civil war.

In the year 312, Emperor Corantine came to power, conquering most of western Théah. He declared the Faith of the Prophet to be his Empire’s official religion. For a while, he lived in peace with an allied Rurik, maintaining open trade and helping the Knias strengthen his rule. Reunification of the Empire seemed to be a possibility. Had it occurred, Corantine’s Empire would have reached from



the Frothing Sea to the Wall of Fire, a unified Théah beneath a single man's law.

Then, in 325, the Corantine Convention presented the Vaticine Credo, unifying the cults of the First and Second Prophets. Corantine ordered the Knias of Rurik to come to Numa and sign the document, thus signaling his support of the Vaticine church. The Knias sent word that he would come, then traveled over 1500 miles to the Numan capital. He was greeted with great celebration and expectation – Corantine expected the Rurik king to bow on one knee before the unified wisdom of the Vaticine.

Corantine was deeply mistaken.

Knias Oscor Pavtlavich Nikolai Novgorov arrived in Numa, knelt before the Emperor, then spat at Corantine's feet and tore his copy of the Credo in two. He refused to recognize the validity of the Second Prophet whose words had caused his kingdom so much strife.

The Knias and his entire guard were executed for his audacity, but Oscor's scribe, Cyrus, escaped. He wrote the transcript of these events in an alphabetical code to protect it from the Numan guards, and delivered it to his grieving nation. From there, the story – and the code – spread slowly throughout Ussura. Cyrus' code eventually become the modern Cyric alphabet (which remains the standard alphabet of the Ussuran tongue today).

Following the debacle, Rurik and all her provinces rejected the Corantine Convention, and their ambassadors, merchant powers, and nobility removed themselves from Corantine's courts. In the city of Sousdal, the Grand Duke Vsevolod (a heavy drinker who was horrified by the Second Prophet's ban on alcohol) declared his city a safe haven for "all those of the true faith." Corantine's forces attempted to invade Sousdal, but Vsevolod and his followers, the Tyomny, successfully repelled them in a vicious battle that lasted nearly two days.

When news of the battle reached the Rurik capital, Prince Oscor's widow Domitrova gathered an army to invade Corantine's territory in retaliation. Before she could, however, a strange woman arrived at the palace gates. No

Teodoran and Cyric

The Cyric alphabet used by Ussura is different from any other alphabet in the known world. The alphabet was named for St. Cyrus, who supposedly created it when smuggling the account of St. Oscor's defiance from Corantine's court (see below). Before Cyric came along, most "civilized" Ussurans spoke Teodoran, the official court language of Rurik. Following Cyrus's escape, the code slowly supplanted Teodoran in common usage, eventually becoming modern Ussuran. Teodoran is still used by a few scholars (and occasionally serves as a secret code), but remains largely obsolete.

The Cyric alphabet closely resembles the Teodoran alphabet, with about a dozen additional letters invented to represent Numan sounds not found in the native tongue of Rurik. Many of its letters seem reversed, strangely ornamented, or taken directly from ancient Numan texts.

guard could hold her; no beast would stand in her way. The very gates of the palace swung open on their golden hinges, allowing the crone to enter on her steed of iron. When she had finished speaking with Domitrova, the old crone left much the way she came. She did not return for nearly two hundred years, but Rurik did not invade the Empire, and instead used its military to stabilize its own borders.

Following Rurik's break with Corantine, the Novgorov nobility established the Orthodox Church of the True Prophet of Theus. The Second Prophet's works were declared heretical and all references to the Second and subsequent Prophets were struck from the Book of True the Prophet. Because of his valor and loyalty, Duke Vsevolod received the title of Tabularius, 'Guardian of the Faith', a title carried by every Somojez Knias since. His followers, the Tyomny, became a knightly order within the Church, and the city of Sousdal became Orthodoxy's new capital. Knias Oscor became the first confirmed saint of the Orthodoxy, and he is today considered a holy martyr, nearly a Prophet in his own right, and the foremost saint in the canon.



AV 400–523: Five Kingdoms

In the fifth century, the first appearance of the White Plague spread across Théah like wildfire, and nothing seemed to be able to stop the widespread deaths... nothing except Matushka. A series of massive ice storms and freak earthquakes sealed the mountain ranges surrounding Ussura; just south of Sousdal, through the Gora Bolshoi and Drachenbergs, walls of stone rose mysteriously. The brutal storms continued throughout the spring, summer and fall, and the Empire of Rurik found itself completely cut off from the rest of Théah. Because of this, the White Plague never spread farther than the coastal cities of Odysse and Ekaternava – and even there, outbreaks were scarce. Trade into or out of Ussura occurred only through sea travel (Malaya, Odysse, Ekaternava, Sousdal and Sredbiskyoye) for nearly a hundred years.

Though safe from the Plague, Rurik's isolation sparked a period of gradual decline. Unrest grew, while outlying principalities demanded more and more independence. In 446, the Komnenian family seized full control of the fading kingdom, and began to enslave its peasantry. This seemed to be a dying effort on behalf of the Rurik Empire. In 492, the peasant class began to revolt, and Somojez declared independence. The fall of the Novgorov was complete.

Free from the remnants of the Rurik, Somojez quickly set about creating its own kingdom. The new kingdom formed through several city-states, joining together for mutual protection. The nobles signed the Somojan Treaty, providing the precedent for later Ussuran law. The Treaty contained several 'truths': honor to your fellow man, loyalty to one's nation and one's lord, and true fellowship between those of like minds. It also restated the Rurik belief that the First Prophet is the one true prophet, and provided a framework for its member-states to trade with outside forces.

Molhyna

Meanwhile, in the distant east, another upheaval was brewing. Tired of living under the savage rule of the Kosars, the Molhyni tribe fomented a revolt in the year 452. The chief of the Molhyni, Pietr, led his forces against a horde of savage Kosar warriors. In a fierce battle at the city of

Goroduk the Kosars were soundly defeated, though Chief Pietr lost his life. His son, Anton, took the surname Pietrov, rallied his people, and united the many settlements into a single nation, which he called Molhyna. Adopting the ruling title of Khan from the Kosars for its value as a recognized rank, he kept a standing army, and warred constantly with the remaining Kosars.

The area remained volatile until Koshchei Pietrov became Khan of Molhyna in the year 520. More a scholar than a warrior, he had traveled widely in his youth and was deeply impressed with what he saw. He vowed to make his homeland as glorious, and returned with great plans. He moved the seat of power to Sladivgorod, though the Pietrov family had traditionally been centered in nearby Goroduk. He then constructed a castle which would evolve into today's sprawling Pietrov Castle, and began many reforms. The Kosars still caused trouble, but for the first time Molhyna had stability and legitimacy.

With Koshchei's rule, the land east of the Drachenbergs now consisted of five distinct political entities: Rurik, Somojez, Veche, Molhyna, and Gallenia, collectively referred to as the Five Kingdoms. Some lay in near-ruins while others seemed to be emerging into an era of newfound strength. But all five served to create political cohesion across the entire area for the first time in history. It was that moment that Matushka chose to act.

United Ussura

AV 520–999: Birth of A Nation

From 520–525, each of the rulers of the Five Kingdoms received a visit from Matushka. The old crone easily swatted aside their defenses, and spoke to them as would an angry mother to a child. She warned them that difficult times lay ahead, and gave them a single option: unite with the other kingdoms, or die when the Last Days of Théah arrived. Rurik and Somojez received her openly, eager to regain their lost sense of purpose, while Veche and Molhyna resisted her advice. Gallenia remained neutral, content to wait and see while the other Knias argued.

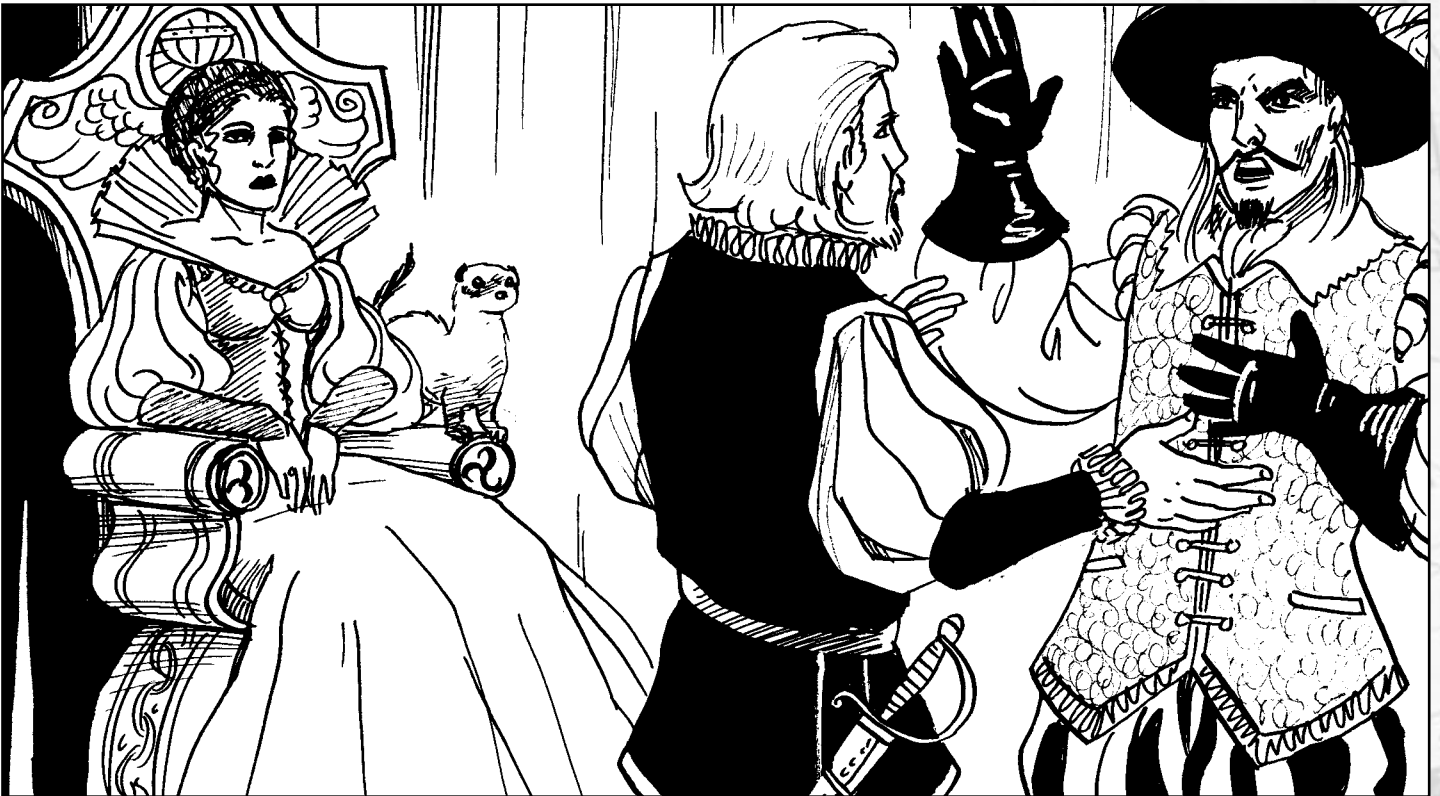
Then in AV 523, a warlord named Johann von der Velde launched a massive invasion. It was the first incursion from the Eisen barbarians in centuries, and it caught the Five Kingdoms completely by surprise. Von der Velde had a keen tactical mind, and he easily swept aside the kingdoms' feeble defenses. For a moment, it looked as if they would be united after all... under the banner of a conqueror.

Before that could happen, however, disaster struck the invaders. As they advanced north towards the Ekaterina River, they were hit by an ice storm that appeared in the middle of the summer. The army vanished beneath a hail of snow and frost; those who tried to flee became mired in bogs which had sprung up overnight, or trapped in dead-end valleys which hadn't existed before. The storm lasted a week and claimed the life of every Eisen soldier. Their bodies were found frozen solid when the snows finally melted.

When news of the disaster spread, peasants hailed it as the work of Matushka and clamored for their rulers to heed her words. Grandmother Winter reappeared shortly thereafter,

and this time the nobles listened to her. The Knias of the Five Kingdoms came together in the city of Pavtlow, where the old crone met them and told them to put aside their differences. They emerged with a new system of government, five nations united under a single banner: Ussura.

Matushka herself chose the new ruler, referred to as the "Gaius" after Gaius Philippus Macer, the great Numan ruler. His name was Baveroc Fyodovich, a peasant herdsman from the plains of Rurik. Matushka personally escorted him to Pavtlow, where the five Knias swore oaths of fealty to his rule. Despite his rough background, he proved an immensely capable leader. His first decree created the council of the Knias Douma as advisors and lords of their provinces. With their assistance, he established a unified system of law based on the Treaty of Somojez, and created a solid foundation for the new nation's social fabric. When he died, Matushka selected a new Gaius from the ranks of the peasants, signaling her choice by turning his hair snow white.



This system has continued in the same basic form for over a thousand years, the wealthiest era in Ussuran history. Matushka's blessings caused the land to prosper, ensuring that the people prospered as well. Dozens of Gaius have come and gone, guided by Matushka's wisdom and the advice of the Knias council. Under them, Ussurans have slowly left behind their fractured past to become a unified nation.

AV 1000–1350: The Age of Gold and Silver

Unfortunately, the outside world didn't always respect Ussura's newfound sense of purpose. Nearby rulers saw a backward land, sparsely populated but overflowing with resources. Occasionally, foreign nations would resolve to make those resources their own. Vestenmannavnjar raids constantly plagued the northern coast, and the wild tribesmen's strange rune magic often made an effective defense against Matushka's wrath. Carleman the Great briefly flirted with attacking Ussura before dismissing it as "too barbaric." But the greatest threat has come from Eisen, whose rulers often viewed Ussura as a ripe target for the plucking. Between the years 1000 and 1350, the Eisen launched three invasions into Ussuran territory, each one intent on conquering the nation for the Emperor.

In all three cases, the armies perished before they could reach the Ekaterina River. Matushka unleashed her wrath in a slew of earthquakes, floods and unrelenting blizzards. Two of the invasions retreated before they were destroyed. The final one, led by a particularly stubborn general named Ernst Heilgrund, pushed relentlessly forward towards the Ekaterina. The banks of the river flooded in a massive rainstorm, washing the entire army away. Not a single soldier survived; Ussuran farmers found bits of detritus from the invasion as far away as Odyesse. Following the disaster, the Emperor refused to endorse any further invasions, a policy that has remained more or less intact to the present day.

Despite these unpleasant incursions, Ussuran life remained largely unaffected by the outside world. The Orthodox Church expanded to all corners of the nation, merging many of its teachings with the "pagan" worship of Matushka. The Church forged common bonds between the

various provinces, adding to the strength of the Gaius and his council. Modest technological advances crept into the nation during this time, as various rulers improved roads, expanded townships and overlaid a thin veneer of civilization on Ussura's vast wilderness.

1350–1600: Renaissance

The Renaissance came later to Ussura than to the rest of the continent of Théah. The principles of science, theology and improvements to political systems had little value to the insular Ussurans, and the Vaticine Church's decrees — so important elsewhere — meant nothing on the steppes of Théah's frozen nation.

Objectionism

Ussura dealt with the emergence of Objectionism in the 1500's with a sort of bemused detachment. Matthias Lieber continued to adhere to philosophies considered heretical by the Orthodoxy, but his complaints against the Vaticine received a great deal of sympathy in Ussura. They provided unspoken support to Lieber's followers, and Orthodox religious tolerance lead to an influx of refugees. Those declared heretical or excommunicated by the Vaticine often found new homes in Ussura's frozen wastes. All the while, the nation quietly laughed at the Church's folly, keeping a healthy distance from the developing schism.

1636–1666: The War of the Cross

There was one result of Objectionism which Ussura couldn't ignore. Since Ernst Heilgrund's failed invasion, the nation had gingerly developed trading relations with Eisen. By 1600, goods traveled back and forth between the two countries with relative speed, leading to increased prosperity for both countries. When the War of the Cross tore apart the Eisen Imperium in 1636, Ussura was forced to end its reliance on Eisen trade. The civil war provoked strong feelings on both sides of the battlefield, and the Gaius did not want to appear supportive of any one particular side by encouraging trade. Instead, he turned to the rising Vendel merchant guilds, who proved an ideal substitute for fostering trade. Within a few years, Vendel merchants could be found throughout northern Ussura, bartering for goods

and attempting to impress their new currency – the Guilder – upon the populace.

Although the Ussurans did not publically support the Objectionist war against the Vaticine, numerous nobles from Somojez and Rurik sent troops to “aid and protect their treaty agreements” in the troubled states. Despite their presence in Eisen, Ussura remained untroubled by the conflict. Matushka continued to guard her borders and ensure that none of the combatants mistook any of Ussura’s holdings for Eisen’s.

Ussura’s Modern Age

Ilya “Grozny”

Since the founding of Ussura, Matushka has chosen each new Gaius from the ranks of the *muzhik*. The current Gaius, Ilya Sladivgorod Nikolovich – called “Grozny” (the Terrible) by his people – represents a single anomaly in that line. He is the son of the past Gaius, breaking the tradition of peasant birth and placing a nobleman on the throne for the first time in Ussuran history.

Those boyars who know the full story realize why this Gaius is not like the others. They tell the tale only around cold fires, when the shadows cling close to hide the speaker’s face, and stone walls stand between them and the listening ears of Ussura. It is said that Nikolai, the past Gaius and father to Ilya, tricked Matushka into allowing his child to become Gaius and continue his father’s line. Nikolai had married a woman from Montaigne named Chevaliene. She had no sorcerous powers (which was why her family married her off to a “savage” Ussuran), but a very prestigious and extensive lineage. Her cousins mocked her and her peasant husband, and she quickly became the laughingstock of the Montaigne court. Angry at her lot, Chevaliene spent her life tearing apart her husband’s works. He loved her for her beauty and grace, but she hated him and used her power over him to ruin his confidence and self-esteem, constantly reminding him of his humble birth and peasant lineage.

Eventually, Nikolai became overwhelmed by his wife’s constant haranguing, and offered her a solution. He promised Chevaliene that her children would live in luxury and begin a new age for Ussura – an age in which a noble line would continue to rule the nation, rather than the peasantry. Half-satisfied by his promises, Chevaliene consented to his ministrations, and gave birth to a boy in 1649, on the fifth anniversary of their marriage.

At the celebration of the boy’s birth, Matushka herself came to his father to give a gift. Although she only met with the royal couple itself, the outcome of that encounter has become legend. Nikolai and Chevaliene tricked Matushka into promising to give the boy anything in her power. Once she had done so, Nikolai demanded that his son reign as Gaius after he died. Matushka left the palace like a storm, her anger swelling into roaring winds and pounding hail, but there was nothing she could do. She had made her promise and was bound to obey it. Furious at the trickery, she retreated into the forest, leaving the boy and his parents alone in the palace gardens.

When Gaius Nikolai died with his wife in 1658, his demand came true – his nine year old son’s hair turned as white as snow, the mark of the next Gaius. Ilya was seized by the boyars, and raised to be the new leader of the Knias Douma. They held him for seven years, from the time of his father’s death until his sixteenth birthday, when he would formally assume control of the country. Few people know exactly what happened in that time, but speculation holds that the boyars tortured and humiliated him in an attempt to break his will. If that is the case, they failed miserably. When he turned sixteen, no law or force in the country could hold him, and he returned to Pavtlow to rule uncontested. One of his first commands was to have Markov Petranski v’Novgorov – the noble in charge of his “education” for the past seven years – fed to his own dogs while his horrified family looked on. Ilya declared that it was fitting tribute to their years of hospitality. No one has ever questioned his action.

Bitter and angry, the new Gaius seized upon any excuse to persecute the nobility; his efforts had the unintentional effect

of unseating some cruel and savage boyars, earning him immense popularity with the common people. However, his actions earned him many enemies among the boyars, and laid the groundwork for a dark and troubled reign, one befitting a ruler with such grim origins.

The War With Montaigne

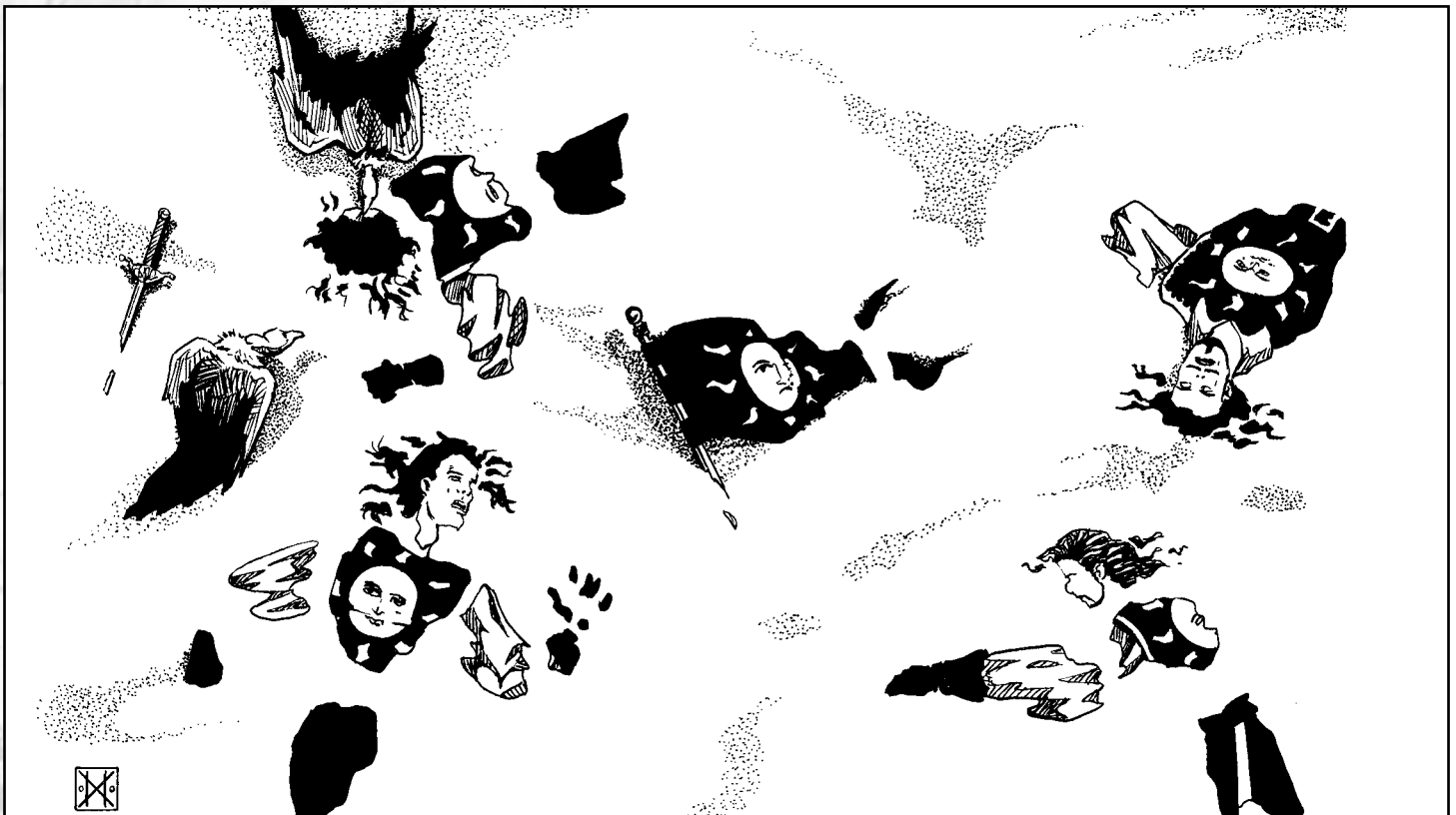
The new Gaius soon proved to be the least of Ussura's problems. In 1667, the Montaigne general Montegue was recalled from his nation's attack on Castille and ordered to invade Ussura. He arrived by ship in the city of Odyesse with 100,000 men, who quickly overwhelmed the city's meager defenses. With a firm base east of the Drachenbergs, Montegue installed a military governor and headed inland. Then, as she had countless times in the past, Matushka made the invader feel her wrath.

The peasants tell stories of crops bursting into flame for no reason, the fires sweeping across forest and plain toward *l'Empereur's* troops. Following the flame came a massive

assault of ice and snow, and the land which had once been blackened by fire now became white with ice. Montegue's soldiers died in droves, but still he pressed on, using his uncanny military mind to compensate for the setbacks.

It wasn't easy. When he reached Ekaternava in the lowlands of Rurik, Montegue found that the streams and rivers had turned to salt brine. Only the Ekaterina river still held fresh water. His men hunted Ussuran game to supplement their meager rations, but all the animals they killed began writhing with maggots before the bodies could be stripped for flesh. The few edible beasts proved tragic for Montegue's cavalry contingent: plague broke out through many of his finest troops, halting the army's progress at Ekaternava.

While Montegue struggled with these developments, the Ussuran militia launched a series of counterattacks. Using guerrilla tactics, they harassed the Montaigne army at every turn. They fought like shadows, killing without warning, then blending into the woods. No opposing force ever faced the



Montaigne – no musketeers challenged their advance – but the enemy could be felt with every step they took.

And still, they advanced. Despite all their hardships, despite the wrath of Matushka herself, the Montaigne continued to press forward. His efforts have begun to bear fruit. Montegue left behind a token force to besiege Ekaternava – more to prevent aid to Pavtlow than the actual hope of capturing the city. Should he take it, then the Ussuran capital would be within his grasp. If Pavtlow falls and the Gaius is captured, Ussura will kneel to *l'Empereur*.



Government and Social Classes

Ussura Today

Ussura today stands between the ancient traditions which has kept her safe and the modern powers which have arrived bearing a musket. The Montaigne hold the northern swath of the country, but threaten to take more if Montegue's brilliant leadership continues. The Ussurans intend to stop him in his tracks.

In the Derevyanniy Forest, the first true Ussuran "army" is forming. Led by a muzhik known as Drutsky Kethna Pastovich, peasant and bogatyr troops gather outside the city of Donskoy, ready to halt the invader by any means necessary. Their force will be the last line of defense between the Montaigne and Pavtlow. Although none of the small standing militia of the Knias Douma have joined them, Ussurans from all five Douma fill their ranks – and it is said that a number of the Knias have sent their personal bodyguards, relieving them of their duties at home until this "minor conflict" is resolved. And certainly, they have help in the Gaius's court – and from Matushka.

Montegue has already made it farther into Ussura than any other general in history. His struggle has become famous, even in Ussura (where he is seen as a sort of anti-hero, a determined man fighting for a lost cause). Still, Montegue must soon choose between his life and conquering Ussura. When he turns his troops east once more, he will find the unified army awaiting him, ready to make the Montaigne pay for the damage they have done to the Motherland.

That will be a day all Théah will remember... and repent.

Ussura is a land of contradictions, where a man born as a peasant leads the nobles, and where the needs of the land must take precedence over the needs of the people. While other nations boast of the long and proud lineages of their ruling families, the Ussurans boast of the wealth and prosperity of their land. Nobility means nothing to their most powerful ruler – the Gaius – for, traditionally, he is born of peasant stock, and does not know what his role will be until the day his hair turns white as snow.

The Gaius, equivalent to another nation's King or Emperor, is the final justice in Ussura. He rules the nation with an iron hand, serving as the chosen voice of Matushka. When the old Gaius dies, his children do not assume the throne. Instead, seven riders leave the capital city of Pavtlow and search through the land for the next Son of Matushka. The riders do not search through the noble families of the *boyars* (lords), but rather through the peasantry of the land. Invariably, they find a young man (or woman) whose hair turned as white as snow upon the moment of the old Gaius's death. That individual, be it a grown adult or a child, has been chosen to rule by Matushka. The riders take him back to Pavtlow with his family, and give him the rulership of the land.

To many outside Ussura, this has no more credence than a fairy-tale. A young child, a peasant, whose parents work hard all their lives and raise their son to be honest and

noble suddenly becomes the ruler of one of the most powerful nations in all of Théah? And worse, it happens once in every generation? Even the Inish, trapped under the chaotic rule of Jack O'Bannon, prefer their own brand of madness to that of Ussura's Gaius.

Yet in all the years of the Ussuran nation, Matushka has never chosen incorrectly. The chosen ruler invariably demonstrates an innate talent at statesmanship, a sound military mind, and a just and charitable nature. Matushka never chooses someone that would not benefit her country, so the Ussurans trust her judgment. Even the dark circumstances surrounding the current Gaius, Ilya, have not dimmed the nation's confidence in Matushka's chosen.

The Power of the Gaius

The Gaius's power is not absolute. He rules Ussura and makes decisions for the peasantry and universal law, but he is not the unquestioned master of the Five Kingdoms. Rather, he unifies their law and custom and provides a constant system of justice over all Ussura. He is the high Lord, with little land of his own, but with power over those who do control the land. The leaders of the Five Kingdoms meet periodically as the Knias Douma, the advisory council to the Gaius, and keep their lands beneath his watchful eye. He does not rule them – but he does command them.

In this manner, the five Knias rule their territories independently except on occasions when the Gaius directly intervenes for the sake of the larger nation. The Gaius can only make decisions for the Five Kingdoms in cases of national interest. Though the lords of the Knias Douma pay him lip service and obey his direct commands, they do not turn to the Gaius for internal policy. He truly rules Pavtlow, as the City of the Gaius, but nothing more.

Still, the Gaius's control has increased over the last few generations, as the Knias lend him more power and the peasantry comes to rely on his decisions more and more. Some members of the Knias Douma believe that this is a good trend, leading Ussura into true prosperity, while others see it as an usurpation of their rights. Ilya, in particular, has hungered for such control, using his authority as Gaius to

stretch his influence as far into the lands of the Five Kingdoms as possible.

The Knias Douma

The Knias Douma, or Council of Kings, was established in 525 as a gathering of neighboring lords. The Douma consists of the five kings of Molhyna, Veche, Somojez, Rurik and Gallenia. It originally served as a common meeting place and bargaining table, but when the first Gaius was chosen, it administered Ussura's initial unification, and later legitimized and stabilized the Gaius's rule. Because the Gaius is typically a peasant's son with no real understanding of law or social precedent, the members of the Knias Douma retain a great deal of power over their kingdoms, including their titles, authority and control over local events. The Gaius only steps in when the issue becomes national – or when Matushka's interests are at stake.

Currently, only the leaders of the five ruling families are admitted to the Knias, able to exercise executive, military, and judicial authority. Other nobles are relegated to lesser provinces, cities, or small territorial states within the body of the Ussuran nation. Although they are not considered Knias Douma members, they do serve as a larger council to the Knias. Many boyars meet regularly to present their views before their ruling Knias and advise him or her on a course of action. Most of the boyars summoned to sit as advisors to the Douma are generals and larger provincial governors.

In modern times, each member of the Knias Douma has been the leader of his or her noble family. The five families of the Knias are the Novgorov, Pscov, Vladimirovich, Pietrov and Riasanova, each of whom holds a seat on the Douma and controls their territory as Knias, or King. These five families tend to be widespread, with many children along a direct inheritance line. Therefore, the individual ruler of the country is known as *the* Pscov, rather than just a Pscov. To the inhabitants of the five kingdoms, the title of their ruler is, by default, his family name. To be *the* Pietrov or the Riasanova is worthy of great respect, and woe to any foreigner who forgets the difference between Fyodor Vladimirovich and Fyodor *the* Vladimirovich.

The Social Classes

Life in Ussura can generally be roughly broken down into three social classes: the *boyars*, or nobility, the *vyeche*, or merchants and freemen, and the *muzhiks*, or peasantry. Each one comes with responsibilities and duties to the land; Matushka demands much of her people, but no more than they are able to bear.

Nobles: Boyars and Bogatyr

Beneath the Knias Douma stands a rigid order of nobility. The *Knias*, or Kings of the Five Provinces, rule their territories and command their noble boyars, all of whom are landholders. Their power and prestige is directly associated with the amount of land they own, rather than their monetary value or a long lineage. The boyars rule parcels of land determined and given to them by the Knias of their kingdom, and approved by the Gaius himself. If the Gaius does not approve of the choice of the boyars, he does not have the authority to remove them from their position. However, every boyar that the Gaius has disapproved of has found it impossible to keep his land – rotten crops and bad harvests plague them, and their livestock are slaughtered by wolves and other wild beasts. Though the Gaius has no statutory authority, his connection to Matushka and the land is enough to enforce his will.

Typical boyars have an estate within a city or at the center of their provinces, and the legal right to tax their peasantry and gather the taxes to be sent to the Knias Douma and the Gaius. Boyars who actually lead a province, city, or small territorial state hold the title *Voevod* and form the crux of the Knias council's support.

Boyar lands and titles pass down to the first-born or most capable child – Ussura has no time for petty squabbles over timeliness of birth or the gender of a ruler. Those children who do not rule have a choice: swear fealty to their sibling and serve his commands, or leave the area and live the life of a traveling *bogatyr*, or knight, seeking their fortune elsewhere. Unless they choose to swear, the new boyar has no obligation to his siblings either legally or financially. They are cut off from their old life and turned away to prove themselves elsewhere.

The bogatyr are the wandering nobility of Ussura, seeking their fortune among the cities and open land of the nation. Traditionally, the difference between a boyar and a bogatyr is land: a boyar usually has extensive holdings and does not need to sell his services, while a bogatyr has no land and must rely on the generosity of his or her lord. Many bogatyr are sell-swords, using a noble's training with the sword and axe to join the military and rise in rank, or to become the captain of the guard for some Ussuran town. Others become merchants and draw on their courtly contacts to trade among the provinces. These bogatyr become members of the *smerdi*, or landless merchant class, and their children are no longer considered nobility. A few bogatyr travel outside Ussura's land, seeking fortune and wealth in Eisen, Vodacce, or even distant Castille. When they return, they may have amassed enough money to purchase a boyar's house and estates and create their own lineage – but this is rare.

Merchants: Vyeche and Smerdi

Beneath the boyars and bogatyr are the merchants, which technically form the first ranks of *muzhik* peasants (though the occasional business-minded bogatyr blurs the division somewhat). The *vyeche* (a catch-all term for those freemen who control their own lands or are the headmen of towns) are the more prestigious of the middle class. They are the men of the town or large farm, whose contributions to society can be measured by their full grain silos and well-fed peasants. They serve as the voice of the people, bringing their concerns to the boyar and carrying out his commands among the *zakupi* peasants. They raise the towns, follow the tenets of Orthodoxy, and serve Matushka with their hearts and hands. Vyeche ruling councils typically have authority over a single city, a small group of townships or a large area of farmland comprised of many small holdings.

The *smerdi*, on the other hand, are merchants, artisans, craftsmen, and bureaucrats. They are less respected, but their contributions keep the wheels of society turning. Some members of the smerdi class rise to prestige through the beauty and fine craftsmanship of their work: such workers are known as *Typov*, or "Masters" of their labor. In modern times, the term smerdi has come to include merchants with

no land, those who sell their wares in cities and maintain little contact with the countryside. Although less prestigious than the vyeche, they are nonetheless respected for their prestige and position in society. Few of them are born noble, and those who are descend invariably from the wandering, landless bogatyr.

Both the smerdi and the vyeche learn to read and write, to be fluent in numbers and recite their psalters. The schools of the Orthodoxy require that any middle-class child being apprenticed to a trade must spend three years of his seven-year tenure going to classes within the church. This law was created in order to educate the middle class and teach them the concrete knowledge common to Théah's other learning centers. Despite their rough exteriors, most of Ussura's middle class can hold their own in philosophical and mathematical arguments.

Peasants: Zakupi and Kholopi

Beneath the vyeche are the true muzhiks. First the *zakupi*, landless laborers, itinerant workers, and others who live on and work the land belonging to a rich vyeche or smerdi. The *zakupi* are technically free men, but remain bound to the land they work. Some are indentured servants, others are simply lower peasantry.

Beneath the *zakupi* stand the lowest form of peasantry — the *kholopi*, who serve as virtually slave labor on the farms and in the towns of Ussura. These peasants are so indebted that they no longer own their freedom, but live from day to day at the command of a vyeche or boyar. Their lives, while not necessarily unpleasant, remain severely limited by the Law of the Vyeche — no *kholopi*, and no *kholopi*'s child, may leave his master's land without permission. Any *kholopi* who does so forfeits his position within his master's household. He is turned out upon the land and left without food, water, clothing or a home. In the harsh Ussuran weather, this sentence predictably ends in death.

Because the Gaius normally comes from these classes, the boyars cannot completely ignore them. Though higher education in Ussura is woefully lax, the Orthodoxy imparts rudimentary learning to almost everyone. The common

Ussura peasant can count, add and subtract, and both read and write simple letters. This tradition began over three hundred years ago, when the Gaius came from the *kholopi*. Because it took him a great deal of time to learn to read and write once he had inherited the nation, he demanded that the church provide a rudimentary education to all levels of society. The Ussuran Orthodoxy thus imparts the basic practices of their religion as well as simple letters and arithmetic to every child. In so doing, they prepare the next Gaius (whoever he may be) for the task ahead of him.

The Ussuran Army

Ussura has never needed a standing army. Matushka outlined the nation's borders and the people have never wished to expand beyond them; therefore, they had no desire to launch wars of conquest. Similarly, Grandmother Winter has provided for Ussura's defense in the form of storms, earthquakes and in some cases the very earth itself. Since they didn't have to worry about an armed defense, Ussurans turned their attention towards other endeavors.

Because they do not have an organized army, however, does not mean that they lack armed forces. The Knias of each province maintains a "personal guard" which enforces the laws, hunts bandits, and performs other military duties. Each of these forces has its own command structure, rules of conduct, and edicts (usually handed down by their particular Knias) which it must obey. Though not strictly armies, they serve many of the same functions in their respective provinces, and in some cases can grow quite large. Gallenia, for example, maintains a large number of troops in order to defend against incursions from the Kosars.

The Stelets

The greatest of these "personal guards" are the stelets, an elite brigade formed by Gaius Ilya to represent his authority throughout the nation. The men and women of the stelets enforce the Gaius's will, ensuring that Matushka is revered and respected, her holidays remembered, and each of the five kingdoms well maintained and governed. Typically the stelets roam the countryside, administering the Gaius's

justice and enforcing Matushka's will. They also directly protect of Pavtlow, the Gaius's city, and personally attend and guard the Gaius and his family. They are adventurers, sworn to keep back the invasions of Ussura's over-eager animals (and greater beasts). It is considered a great honor to be a stelet; their initiation rites are severe, and they do not allow the weak or unfit to serve. Rules for creating stelets can be found on page 101.

Other Nations

Ussura's lengthy isolation has made it a wild, exotic land in the eyes of most Théans. The Ussurans, for their part, treat outsiders with vague distrust. They get along quite well with Avalons, and the Inish and Highlanders find ready companions in Ussura's wastes. Similarly, both halves of the Vendel nation receive Ussuran support. They respect the Vestenmannanvjar's struggle to keep their way of life alive, while Vendel merchants have made admirable trading partners for Ussura's economy (though the country has yet to fully embrace the guild).

Ussura feels less kind about other Théan nations, however. Castille is dominated by the Vaticine Church, which has always squabbled with the Orthodoxy, and Ussurans dislike Castillian pride. Eisen is treated with a mixture of compassion and pity; their broken land elicits sympathetic looks, but Ussura hasn't forgotten that nation's aggressive past. Most sensible Ussurans avoid Vodacce, fearful and contemptuous of the deadly political games that nation thrives upon.

Ussura's greatest scorn, however, is reserved for Montaigne, the nation that currently defiles her borders and seeks to bring the Gaius to his knees. Montegue's army has advanced further than any invader in history, and the Ussurans battle his forces with every breath they can muster. Even if his army did not occupy their lands, Ussurans have never felt right around the Montaigne. Matushka intensely dislikes Porté magic for some reason, and her people share that dislike. Porté mages usually find a chilly reception within Ussura's borders, and *l'Empereur* has learned not to send sorcerers there in any diplomatic capacity.



The Land

One could easily spend several decades getting to know the wide country of Ussura, from her terrible ice wastes to her warm southern hills. Much of the country consists of spectacular and nearly virgin terrain, making Ussura an adventurer's dream. For the truly intrepid, the country presents a lifetime's worth of unexplored territory – but only for the cautious, and those who respect the power behind the breathtaking scenery.

Western Théans have a difficult time grasping the sheer vastness of Ussura; her rolling hills do not seem to end, flowing ceaselessly through forest after forest, over wide plains, and into taiga and steppe of the farthest north. The island of Avalon could fit comfortably into one of her inland lakes. Montaigne is the size of a single internal province, and the Vendel archipelago barely scratches the surface of one of Ussura's smaller mountain ranges. With climates ranging from arctic icecap to subtropical forests, the Ussuran land is much like her people – rugged, tough and stubborn. Anyone who seeks to “master” Ussura has a great shock in store; the only way to survive is to live in harmony with the land, to respect its bounty and the power that lives within its hidden valleys.

The Ussuran *taiga*, in the central part of the country, consists of a gigantic woodland forming an almost impenetrable belt which accounts for over a third of Théah's forests. The insulating effect of the taiga ensures

that in its deepest corners, the snow never melts and the sun never shines. The result of such density and depth results in a unique phenomenon that the Ussurans call “the Drunken Forests,” where heavy trees rise at crazy angles, tilted in the thin topsoil and reaching madly for the sun through the other trees and branches.

The northern end of the country forms a fearsome tundra of snow and ice, covering flat plains that stretch for miles in every direction. Sometimes called the “White Wastes,” these ice flats are extremely deadly, concealing numerous dangers beneath their deceptively smooth, placid surface. At times, the snow on Ussura's tundra reaches as much as fourteen feet in depth – on a typical summer day.

South and east of the wide taiga forest belt lies rich farmlands and open, grassy plains. This land, known as the Ussuran steppe, produces much of Ussura's farming and agriculture. Animals of every sort fill the steppes, from the small marmots and lemmings to the majestic elk, antelopes and wolf.

In the southwest and the southern border regions lie the Drachenberg and Bolshoi mountains: cold, rugged ranges with alpine valleys ringed by evergreens and carpeted with wildflowers. In the Sorivdgrastov mountains, travelers can see the dramatic volcanic peaks and steaming hot springs of the Korena plateau. Gentle slopes and dappled birch forests invite daylong walks in the woods to the warmer south, while sharp peaks and rising clouds of volcanic steam turn the northern Sorivdgrastov into a wall of ice and rocky cliffs, buried in eternal clouds.

Although it is possible to trek by foot through much of Ussura, experienced travelers prefer to ski, decreasing journeying time by nearly half and allowing swift trade even in the winter months. Wealthy travelers must abandon their carriages and riding horses in the winter, for wheels do not turn in thick snow. Heavy draft horses with thick hair coats pull steaming *troika* (covered sleds pulled by three-horse teams) through Ussura's forests and plains. The familiar jingle of their belled trappings scare away any animals that would approach the road, and alert muzhik travelers and woodsmen to the passing of a noble.

Some peasants raise tremendous elk for use as steeds, breaking them as one would a horse. Such animals are fleeter than horses, but do not have the reserves of stamina necessary for long trips; they are primarily baggage animals, useful for short distance travel.

Hunting and fishing in Ussura are apt to astound the visitor. The bounty of Ussura's seas and forests seems limitless – yet an Ussuran peasant takes only what he needs, remembering to thank the forest, the animal, and Grandmother Matushka for his prize. Throughout the nation, the rivers and mountains of Ussura teem with fish and game, even near large cities and mountain towns. Opportunities for fishing and hunting are unmatched, particularly in Lake Vigil and near Bear Lake.

Many species of animal are unique to Ussura, their habitats covering the plains and valleys of this wide nation. Some have migrated from the rapidly growing civilizations of other parts of Theus, while others flourish only in Ussura, and have never been seen elsewhere. This lends the Ussuran wilderness an exotic aura, where monsters and creatures both rare and unique still live in the wild and threaten travelers who do not keep close to the roads.

Among the most dangerous species found in the deep forest of Ussura is the great Arkanun tiger, the world's largest cat. Arkanun tigers can reach lengths of up to 20 feet long, including the tail, and weigh as much as 1650 pounds. They are, in their natural habitat, one of the most magnificent sights in nature. Even the shapeshifting Pyeryem mages avoid these great cats, and only the Gaius himself has the ability to their form; it is a spirit skin reserved only for the king of men.



The Five Douma

The five Kingdoms of Ussura, now internal principalities beneath the unified rule of Matushka's Gaius, still retain a great deal of independence and self-government, similar to Eisen's *königreichen*. Each of the kingdoms is a unified whole; almost a separate subculture beneath Ussura's crest. They have their own histories, myths, and political structure, but they have certain solid similarities upon which the entire nation is built. Each kingdom has its own leaders, who retain a seat at the Knias Douma, but they all respect the will of the Gaius, and through him, Matushka.

Pavtlow

Ruler: The Gaius, Ilya "Grozny" Nikolovich

Population: 70,000

Standing Army: Stelets (2,000)

In the year AV 525, the Matushka chose the first Gaius, uniting the Five Kingdoms under a single rule. The city of Pavtlow, site of that decision and meeting place of the great Knias Douma, was decreed the Gaius's city, under his personal control. Since then, the Gaius has ruled Pavtlow as the capital of all Ussura.

Pavtlow's name comes from an Ussuran epithet meaning "faith," and truly, the heart of Ussura's twin faiths lies within the city's bounds. Besides the home of the Matushka's chosen Gaius, it also contains one of the largest Orthodox churches in the country. With careful political negotiations, the two faiths have lived in harmony for several hundred years, and rarely seem to be at odds. Beneath their benevolent gaze, the city flourishes and grows.

Few visitors to the city expect Pavtlow's air of authority or commercial trade; most seem to believe that Ussura's capital city consists of nothing more than a series of huts and woodpiles. They are sadly mistaken. Pavtlow's wide streets

are paved with stone, and an intricate and advanced sewer system serves its tall buildings. *Shkola Pravda*, one of the nation's only true universities, stands in the shadow of the Gaius's palace. The peasants are well-fed, and aware of the world beyond their walls. The nobility knows all the details of Eisen's ruin, Montaigne's war with Castille, and Vodacce's intense trade machinations. A tremendous wall surrounds the city, built over one thousand years ago and supposedly finished on the day that Numa fell to Eisen invaders. The youth of the city whitewash the walls every spring as part of the celebration of winter's ending.

The Aitskaya Bashnya (Familiar Tower) serves as the main entrance into the city's central district, guarding the homes of powerful boyars. Outside the central plazas, the solid stone houses of muzhiks line cobblestone streets, organized in efficient rows along the city's perimeter. The deep roots of the Ekaternava river (called Lake Pavtlow or just "the lake") guard Pavtlow's southern boundary.

The Gaius's palace rises like an eagle above the rest of the inner city, its gilded onion domes reflecting the brilliant light of the sun. Separated from the rest of the city traffic, however, the palace is not the true heart of Pavtlow. That distinction rests with the Gaius's Square, which contains thousands of shops and covers nearly sixteen blocks of the city's structure.

Pavtlow's steam baths are another a major feature of the city's design. Built on the hot springs near the volcanic Gora Sorivdgeastov, Pavtlow has three tremendous buildings with naturally heated springs, bathing facilities, and snowy courtyards. While not as luxurious as the famous steam baths of Vendel, the Pavtlow baths are open to all, and muzhik and boyar alike come to soak themselves in the replenishing steam.

The stelets form Pavtlow's primary means of defense, though the city had little need of protection until recently. Now, they stand constant guard along the walls, preparing for Montegue's army. Pavtlow's residents don't believe it will come to that — and life in the capital continues pretty much as normal — but the increased presence of the Gaius's elite speaks volumes about the threat Montegue presents.

Gallenia

Ruler: Tamara Breslau Fyodnava v'Riasanova

Crest: A gold field, with red flames flickering from the bottom, covering 3/4 of the field's length. Three white knives, blades downward, stand in the flames.

Standing Army: 15,000 Lyontosh (Ice Knives)

Relatively unchanged for centuries, Gallenia has one of the last remaining horse-based, nomadic cultures in the world. Travelers through this province find temperatures ranging from warm and balmy in the far south, to frigid and inhospitable among the northern mountains. Spontaneous encounters with nomadic families are the norm, and such families literally live atop their horses and drawn troika.

Many bands of Fhideli (see pages 59–63) wander the steppes as well, preserving their unique culture under the Knias' relative tolerance. The people of Gallenia are a hospitable folk, and have a long and revered tradition of offering food, shelter, and friendship to wanderers. Gallenia nomads greet strangers with hearty welcomes, warm smiles and generosity, and if you are tired, they will even give you a place among their traditional *gers* (felt tents). But the nights in northern Gallenia are among the coldest and most dangerous in the world, and intelligent travelers always take warm clothes and a handy weapon when journeying through the wastes.

The Gallenians have few churches, and fewer constant congregations. Instead, the country reveres the True Prophet at dawn and dusk, when the eyes of Theus are said to be watching the world most closely. Gallenia's culture also contains the remnants of a rich meditative tradition known as Sud'ya, which has incorporated many ancient shamanistic practices. Although a few Sud'ya monasteries survived the centuries, many were destroyed by Cathayan invasion and religious persecution. Today, their faith is slowly dying, though a few adherents can still be found. More on Sud'ya can be found on page 34.

The countryside is wide and open, untouched by intensive agriculture or architecture. Few villages dot the landscape, although Gallenia has a population of several million. Most permanent structures lie along the southern coastline, where isolated fishing communities ply the Mirror for their sustenance. The remainder of Gallenia has one of the lowest population densities in the world.

The Firewall

No other border in Théah has the absolute permanence of the eastern edge of Gallenia. Since the year 735, the Firewall has lingered as an impenetrable barrier to Cathay. No one knows why the Cathayans raised it, but it has stood for two thousand years, cutting off trade, travel, and exploration through Ussura to Cathay.

The wall itself stands over fifty feet tall, and is said to be 20-25 feet wide, possibly wider or thinner in places. It shimmers with heat and the force of magic, and has a

certain “ripple effect” that causes it to weave in its location by up to a mile. This area of ground, a strip that extends from the northern Corridor of Flame through the tributaries of the Mirror, is called the Rteshoi Desert, a place of fear and fire. The local Gallenians rarely travel there, making the sign of Theus when they speak of it, and claiming that mighty salamanders — rivaling even the Eisen Drachen — walk there uncontested. They claim that the ground holds not sand, but with ash — the ashes of the land burning far beneath the surface, and the ashes of those who have tried to pass through the wall and failed.

Enigmatic Cathay stands on the far side, a distant land about which little is known. Occasionally, caravans arrive from the far side, using unknown means to traverse the curtain. But they never journey beyond the city of Breslau (see below) and have yet to divulge the secret of their miraculous transport. Legends of Cathay still circulate among the Gallenian nomads, and there are those who



claim to have visited it through some breach in the Firewall. None of these stories has ever been verified, but the rumors and tales of Cathay remain popular campfire tales among the Gallenian people.

Knias Tamara v'Riasanova maintains a huge force of men in Gallenia, who guard against Kosar incursions and quietly monitor the Firewall for signs of activity. Though technically, the Knias' personal guard, the Lyontosh legions number almost 15,000. They are never removed from Gallenia, although individuals or small squadrons may be sent on missions throughout the known world, acting under the Knias's orders. They are known to be fierce and uncompromising in battle, relentless and unforgiving, and considered to be among the best-trained legions in Théah.

People and Culture

The people of Gallenia descend from three basic ethnic groups: the Tumens and other ancient Cathayans, the Numans who journeyed there with Senator Gallen, and the indigenous Zakut. Although the three groups have not completely integrated, they live in relative peace within Gallenia's borders.

Gallenians traditionally lead a nomadic lifestyle. Because of the climate and short growing season, animal husbandry defines their lives, with agriculture playing a secondary role. Goats, sheep, cattle (including yaks), camels, and horses provide food, dairy products, transportation, and wool. The horse holds the preeminent position in Gallenian hearts and legends. Outside the capital, Sredbirskyoye, the horse is the main mode of transportation and children begin riding as

young as three years old. Few nomadic families could exist on the wild steppes of Gallenia without a horse, and travel from city to city on foot would leave Gallenians vulnerable to many dangers. The nomads are extremely proud of their riding skills, and horse racing is a favorite pastime. The most prestigious tests of these superb animals are the horse

races at the annual Naadam Festival, Gallenia's national games. Families travel for days to be able to participate or just attend this grand event.

Nomadic families follow a seasonal routine, moving their herds to certain grazing lands at certain times of year. Historically, each clan has various chosen grazing grounds, which they use exclusively year after year. Families return to the same locations at the same time each year, traveling at the end of each winter from a specific sheltered valley to a particular area on the high plateau of the steppes. Disputes over land are rare, but when they arise, the Knias takes decisive action to settle the issue.

Matushka's Steed

Many of the legends about Matushka speak of her great steed, which carries her through the land with the swiftness of the winter wind. Some say that it is a great iron horse, larger than any in the world, with steam for breath and steel-shod hooves. Others say that it is a pestle and mortar, or a cauldron to rest in and a hammer with which she beats the ground as she passes. Still other legends whisper that it is a troika made entirely of human bone and drawn by sixteen black elk.

Whatever method of travel she uses, Matushka may travel to and from any point in Ussura as swiftly as she likes. It is known that she may enter the Thrice-Tenth Kingdom (see page 48) at will. A hero who can "borrow" Matushka's steed (in whatever form it takes) would also be able to travel to any place — be it mystical or real — within the blink of an eye.

Sud'ya

The ancient tradition of Sud'ya is a dying practice, rarely followed today by even the most traditional Gallenians. It traces its origins back to Cathay, centuries before the Firewall rose. Sud'ya represents an array of naturalistic practices, shamanist and animist worship, and reverence for all things in nature. When the Cathayan tribes rode west into Ussura, they brought with them a reverence for nature and a meditative religion. They considered themselves part of a great cycle of death and rebirth, and displayed powerful abilities for concentration and understanding, accepting their place as a part of a larger whole.

These beliefs translated very easily into the Ussurans' attitude toward Matushka. To the practitioner of Sud'ya, Matushka is not a single entity, but rather a collective of every tree and rock, every river, and every storm that passes overhead. It allowed Sud'ya practices to thrive in Gallenia, and by the time the Kosar tyranny ended, Sud'ya monasteries and temples sprouted throughout eastern Ussura. Several Numan scholars undertook the extensive task of translating the Sud'ya scriptures into their language.

Sadly, those days are long gone. Over the centuries, Sud'ya practitioners have slowly integrated into Ussuran Orthodoxy and more "traditional" reverence for Matushka. But the pure form can still be found here and there amid the scattered nomads of Gallenia who still remember their ancient heritage.

Cities

There are few Gallenian cities; most of the population is either nomadic or lives in one of the tiny fishing villages along the coast. Their two major cities, Breslau and Sredbirskyoye, have nevertheless made significant contributions to Ussuran culture, and can be exciting locations for adventurers to visit.

Breslau

Ruler: Voevodova Dauntaina Bourdillion v'Riasanova
Population: 18,000

*"The Night has a thousand eyes,
The Day but one;
Yet the light of the bright world does not die
Beneath Breslau's ever-Sun."*

– Dauntaina Bourdillion v'Riasanova

Built on a high pass just above the tremendous Cathayan Firewall, Breslau has no real night. Miles of flame from the wall shadows the stars, and even the moon's light dims under the brilliance of the terrible flames. Breslau is the only city on the edge of the Firewall, protected by its position in the pass (the Firewall ripples within 100 feet of the city's walls, but has never reached it). It is extremely warm; the

Firewall melts the ice that one would normally expect, and the city's residents know nothing of the blizzards that occur only a few score miles to the west of their fair city.

Breslau's privileged position allows it to capitalize on the slow trickle of rare and wondrous artifacts from Cathay. Occasionally, travelers from beyond the wall appear, bringing with them items for sale or trade. They only come to Breslau, which seems to hold some significance to them, and exchange their goods for food, weapons, or other western equipment. When their business is concluded, they depart as quickly as they came. They never interact with the locals beyond these exchanges, and the Breslau citizens take care to treat them with the utmost courtesy.

From this strange relationship, Breslau has formed a vibrant economy. Its narrow streets are crammed with shops selling Cathayan artifacts of every variety. Some of these objects rival the Syrneath for cunning and ingenuity, while others have perfectly normal functions, but bear unique Cathayan designs. Rare animal and plant extracts can be found in Breslau's stores, some from creatures long-thought extinct. Travelers from all over Théah come here in search of Cathayan artifacts, and price is rarely an object. A single sale can keep a Breslau merchant in business for years.

Breslau belongs to the Grand Duchess Dauntaina Bourdillion v'Riasanova, sister to Knias Tamara Breslau Fyodnavá v'Riasanova. Dauntaina has wed an Eisen noble, the Grand Duke Brutger Housen v'Riasanova. Their marriage seems happy, and they have four children. Dauntaina considers herself the poet laureate of Ussura, and annually sends collections of her poetry to the Numan library in Vodacce.

One of the central structures in Breslau is the Spire. Though technically part of the Duchess's palace, it can be accessed without entering the palace itself. In the past, only the nobility, boyars and Knias could climb it, but Tamara has recently ordered it opened to the public, so that its view might be shared by all. Fifteen Lyontosh guardsmen patrol the Spire, and the only door from it into the palace is sealed with a lock the size of a small child. Entrance to the palace beyond the Spire is strictly forbidden, and the guards carefully monitor all those who visit.

Stairs lead up the spire through five museum-chambers detailing Gallenia's ancient relations with Cathay, and providing historical samples of Cathayan art; literature in strange tongues; and weapons of unique make. The view is spectacular. From the top of the city's walls, only vague outlines of mountains and bright flames can be seen through the wall – but from the Spire, a viewer can see over the Firewall directly into Cathay. The land beyond is much like the land surrounding Breslau, with mountain ranges and nearby hills. A single road travels through the hillsides to a huge city in the distance. Occasionally, a caravan of some sort travels along the road toward the city. Some scholars write treatises from this vantage, detailing the caravans, the distant towers, or other details. Such treatises are rarely more than lists and hypotheses, however.

Outside Breslau, hidden in to the south of the city, stands a small and ancient shrine with a small hotspring. The Sud'ya priests of Breslau often bathe in the waters and offer prayers. A statue of a strangely dancing man with three faces on his head stands covered with moss. Once a year, the Sud'ya priests bathe the statue, removing the grime and moss, and then replace it. They cannot say why they perform this ritual, or what its significance may be; it has been done for centuries. Some say that the dancing man is a Cathayan god known as the Yama King, keeper of the past, present and future. Others say that it represents the Prophet, who visited Ussura in dreams before his death and was immortalized by the sculptors of Breslau. Still more imply that it is a statue of Matushka's only son, who died because of Cathayan treachery – and because of his death, Matushka herself erected the Firewall to keep Ussura safe from Cathayan heresy. No one truly knows.

Sredbirskyoye

Ruler: Voevod Andros Paropovich Trentsky Riasanova
Population: 16,000

Though Sredbirskyoye is the Gallenian capital, it is not considered as influential or civilized as its cousin, Breslau. It lies along the coast of the Mirror, a few hundred miles west of the Firewall of Cathay. The city is, in many ways, the lowest point of Ussuran civilization. Slaves are common here,

some even tacitly owned by Ussuran freemen and bogatyr, as well as visitors from the Crescent Empire. Nomad tribes come to trade their livestock and sometimes settle old scores away from the prying eyes of outsiders. Crescent pirates intermingle with criminals on the run, and it is said that the infamous Kheired-Din makes regular appearances on the city's wharves.

Gladiatorial pits comprise one of the most well-known public attractions in Sredbirskyoye, where freemen and sponsored slaves fight for prizes of gold and weapons. Spectators pack the pits, placing bets and urging the fighters to greater feats of strength. Actual fights are often interchanged with tests of physical strength, stamina or speed. Organizers gather contestants the day before, and the winner of the challenge is given a prize for his prowess. All of this is strictly illegal, of course, but no one in the city seems interested in enforcing the laws.

Technically Sredbirskyoye is the capital of Gallenia, but all practical governing takes place in Breslau. The Knias rarely visits the city, and governing councils take place even more infrequently. Some boyars say that Tamara does not visit the city because she disapproves of its blackguard ways and intends to make Breslau the new capital despite the wishes of her late father. Others say that she has some business in the north that keeps her constantly away – or that she has found some way to enter Cathay, and remains to the north so that the mysterious foreigners in Sredbirskyoye do not discover her secret. Whatever the reason, Gallenia's capital continues to wallow in human degradation... and its inhabitants wouldn't have it any other way.

Other Important Sites

The Firebird, symbol of the Riasanova family line, is said to live in the northern parts of Gallenia. Those who have seen its brilliant flames say that it rises and lands in the peaks north of Breslau. Those who pursue the firebird and capture it supposedly find themselves blessed with a feather – and a single wish. Many adventure-hunters have scoured the plains and hills, but none have come back with any sign of the Firebird's passing. Even in the high mountains along the



northern crest of the Firewall, no sign of the ancient eagle has been seen in years.

Another important site in Gallenia is the Kosar Hall of the Dead, located somewhere in the southern passes near Sredbirskyoye. The Kosar tribes bury their dead heroes and leaders here, within a twining labyrinth of passages. Jaala Khan, the ancient Kosar leader, is said to have been buried there, along with his greatest treasures and his enchanted Cathayan weapons. Occasionally, the Kosars hint that their burial chambers conceal a secret passage that travels under the Firewall and into Cathay, their ancient home. Recently, a group from the Explorer's Society paid the Kosars an exorbitant fee to see the labyrinth beneath the mountains. They have not been seen since.

Molhyna

Ruler: Vladimir Goroduk Drakov v'Pietrov

Crest: A white field with a red chevron, three white stars on the chevron in a V pattern.

Standing Army: Oprechnina (5,000)

Molhyna has always been remote. The province is so huge that communication to and from it is very difficult. Only two good roads exist. The first runs from Sladivgorod around Lake Vigil to the north, through Eniseisk, and from there to Breslau. The second runs from Pavtlow all the way to the Cathayan border. The ports on the Trade Sea are small, icebound for half the year, and have poor access to the interior. Because of this, there has been very little opportunity (or desire, for that matter) for the other provinces to make any sort of overture to Molhyna. No invasions have been carried out since the days of the Khans. No wars have been fought. The rest of Ussura is content to leave the inaccessible province alone, and the Molhyni are content to be left alone. They have plenty of problems to keep them occupied as it is.

What really ties Molhyna to the rest of Ussura is her vast cropland and her unique fishing industry. Molhyna's rich loamy soil produces bumper crops of hardy red wheat every year. Enterprising merchants from Rurik, Veche, and Gallenia travel the flat expanses in great pack trains to trade for as much wheat as they can. In addition Lake Vigil houses an odd fish called the *golomanka*, or oilfish, so named because half its body weight is oil. The extract from golomanka burns particularly pure and bright, and is highly prized for its medicinal qualities. The fishing villages on Lake Vigil bring in good catches, in spite of the golomanka's solitary nature. There are always traders willing to barter for the fish.

With only a few exceptions, life has continued in Molhyna in very nearly the same form it did in 525 when Koshchei abdicated. Carleman's conquest of the west went unheard of in Molhyna. The White Plague never reached the northern plains. Muzhiks continued to cultivate the land using centuries-old methods. Kosars continue to raid the farming villages, while boyars beat the Kosars back and kept their muzhiks safe. The ancient Pietrov family still rules Molhyna, descendants of the immortal Koshchei who watches over his descendants like a spying raven. All of it goes on much the same way as it has for millennia

Or at least it did. A generation ago, Drako Goroduk Stanimirov v'Pietrov took the Molhyni throne. His reign was a heinous exercise in brutality. He kept an army, backed with his personal guard, which he called the Oprechnina (which translates roughly as "blackness of hell"). Drako enforced his rule ruthlessly, openly executing any who opposed him.

Drako's son, Vladimir, began his reign in the exact opposite fashion of his father. Vladimir was calm and wise, and seemed intent on undoing the horrors Drako had inflicted... until an accident at the castle several years ago turned him into the son his father would have been proud of. Sequestered in his castle, Vladimir has become a cold-blooded tyrant who cares nothing for the muzhiks he rules or the activities of their boyars. Because of Vladimir's lack of ruling desire, each individual boyar effectively holds



absolute control over his lands and muzhiks. The only remaining vestige of the Petrov's authority is the annual tribute, collected by the Oprechnina who ride forth on missions of barely-disguised banditry. Some boyars have taken to resisting them, turning their territories into semi-independent kingdoms. Between the autonomous boyars, the raiding Kosar tribes (see below), and the Petrov's "legitimate" forces, life in Molhyna is rapidly descending into chaos.

Ozero Bodrustvovany (Lake Vigil)

Lake Vigil is an inland sea of massive proportions, roughly the size of the isle of Avalon. Its depth is unknown, and no equipment yet exists to measure it. It has never been sailed across – no ship in the region has the proper navigational tools or expertise. Freshwater streams once fed it, but scholars have concluded that those streams shrank or disappeared thousands of years ago, causing the lake to increase in salinity. The Zakut maintain that Vigil was once a great freshwater body, but that Matushka cursed the waters with the coming of the Tumen, rendering them undrinkable.

In spite of the lake's inhospitable waters, it hosts several odd sorts of aquatic life. Golomanka-fish thrive within the waters, living singly rather than in schools, and giving birth to live young rather than laying clutches of eggs. Another small lifeform is the episura, a tiny crustacean no more than an eighth of an inch long. Uncountable billions of these tiny creatures live in Vigil, feasting on the algae growing in the saline waters. As a result of the episura, Vigil has extremely clear water, which makes its bitterness that much more jarring to the visitor.

Vigil's waters do not freeze. It is at once too large and too saline. Winter in the Lake Vigil area brings fearsome storms, and the local fishermen stay off the lake when there is no sun. Because the water is so clear and sunlight penetrates so deeply, many fishermen tell stories of creatures lurking deep in the lake. They speak of great shapes and dark forms moving in the depths, though nothing has ever surfaced to prove or disprove these claims.

Legends abound concerning Lake Vigil – enough to fill several volumes. The waters are considered home to the malevolent Vodyanoi, creatures of great power, holding sway over all rivers and bodies of water in Ussura. The Vodyanoi and their servants are said to live in a great palace at the bottom of the lake. Stories hold that the depths contain a series of underwater passages that allow the Vodyanoi to access any other body of water anywhere in Théah. Locals also tell stories of several great islands in the lake that do not connect to the bottom – they float in odd patterns across the Vigil's surface. Certain bold (or foolhardy) fishermen claim to have seen one or more of these islands – though few speculate on the nature of what might live that deep within the lake's serene waters.

Cities

Molhyna is a wide land, primarily used for farmland and hunting grounds, and covered with wandering bands of Kosars. Because of these features, her cities tend to be small, spaced many days apart, and rarely populated by the wealthy. Some few cities have actually established peaceful trade agreements with the marauding Kosars. Those who keep their treaties have attracted more and more of Molhyna's outlying populace. Soon, some may grow to the size of the cities of Rurik or Somojez – provided the Kosars don't burn them down, of course.

Eniseisk

Ruler: Viacheslav Tchernivich

Population: 35,000

Lying on the eastern edge of Lake Vigil, Eniseisk serves as the center of the lucrative Molhyna fish trade. Merchants come to purchase golomanka oil, and most of the inhabitants make their living by either fishing in Lake Vigil, or extracting and selling the oil from the catch. Eniseisk's ruler, Viacheslav Tchernivich, once served as captain of Molhyna's small army under the old Petrov, Drako, and made a career out of fighting the Kosars. When the former Petrov died, Tchernivich retired to his province and married the fabulous beauty Palladia, who is less than half

his age. She has borne him a daughter, and he has begun to worry that he will not have a son before he dies.

Tchernivich is a good man, deeply concerned at the state of his country. He is considering severing ties with the Pietrovs and declaring Eniseisk independent, but wants to see if Timurbek of Kosara can maintain control. If the Kosar holds, Tchernivich may declare sovereignty. If Timurbek fails, he will not be so bold. For now he keeps his own counsel, pays his tribute without complaint, and watches.

Kuzetsk

Ruler: Efiopskaia Svatikova Virineia

Population: 1,500

Kuzetsk is a farm town standing for all intents and purposes in the middle of nowhere. The plains stretch on for an eternity in every direction, the red wheat waving like a scarlet ocean. There is no wall, and no central fort, though the town's central bell tower can be seen from a great distance.

Kuzetsk is haunted by a bizarre spirit known as the Fair Lady, who abducts innocent men from their homes and families. Her power resides in her "platter," which can be any reflective object, especially a puddle of water. The platter can also be a household object, and the people of Kuzetsk keep careful track of their possessions to avoid being "gifted" with the Fair Lady's platter. The phrase "stepping on the Fair Lady's platter" means that one has invoked the wrath of the Fair Lady, and is not long for this world.

The Fair Lady targets men exclusively — if a woman incurs her wrath, she will take it out on the woman's husband or other close male relative (or friend if no relatives are to be had). People who step on the Fair Lady's platter generally disappear. No one is sure how they are taken or where they go, but everyone knows better than to step in a puddle. A band of Kosars attacked the town ten years ago. Half their number disappeared in the night, and the rest fled. The Kosars of the area now believe Kuzetsk is cursed, and will not go near the town even to trade. The Oprechnina do not collect tribute from Kuzetsk.

The Fair Lady cannot stand the sound of a bell, and so the townspeople ring the bell in the town's central tower at dawn and dusk every day to keep her at bay. Cows and other livestock have bells hung around their necks as much to protect the herder as the beasts. Bridegrooms in Kuzetsk wear vests with dozens of tiny bells sewn on to avoid the Fair Lady's attentions.

The town's governor, Efiopskaia, attained her position when the spirit abducted her husband years ago. The men of the town accept this arrangement as safer for all concerned; a female ruler provides stability that a vulnerable male cannot. Efiopskaia's daughter Virineia is the designated heir to the leadership of Kuzetsk. Though stunningly beautiful, she has yet to receive a marriage offer; the young men of the town are all afraid to court her.

Sladivgorod

Ruler: Vladimir Sladivgorod v'Pietrov

Population: 40,000

Until recently, the capital of Molhyna was pleasant, sleepy throwback to an Ussura's misty past — a bit out of step with the times, perhaps, but cheerful in its simplicity.

Those times are long gone.

Sladivgorod now serves as the heart of the Oprechnina's reign of terror. The city gives the visitor absolutely no reason to feel safe. Armed thugs in uniform "tax" citizens for the right to certain areas. Those who speak out often vanish in the night, never to be seen again. Footsteps resound strangely, sounding now near, now far away. The people of the town hurry about their business, lingering between buildings as little as possible.

And then there is the castle.

Castle Pietrov is a sprawling, towering work of architectural madness. Nearly every Pietrov boyar has added to the structure, and over the generations it has grown to mammoth proportions. Its central spire reaches hundreds of feet into the air, a thin finger against the grey sky in which a light burns every night. A wreck of halls, walls, arches,

towers, keeps, and flying buttresses roil beneath the tower – the exterior layout can make an observer dizzy.

The interior is even worse. Just as every Pietrov boyar has added to the castle, every one has tried to subtly outdo his predecessors. Every grand gallery is followed by one even larger and more opulent. Hallways have been closed off to accommodate new construction. Staircases lead to blank walls. Secret passageways honeycomb the castle, and some areas can only be reached by those who know the right series of passages. The Pietrov lives here, and the castle has barracks for 2,000 men. It is also said that a leviathan series of catacombs runs beneath the castle, housing denizens of a more sinister nature.

The Kosars

The Kosars are the remnants of the Cathayan brigands that invaded Molhyna over a thousand years ago. Although considered Ussuran, they owe little loyalty to the Gaius or Knias Douma. They rule themselves, keeping their own land and rarely bothering to pay taxes. The Kosars are



dangerous, self-reliant, and rebellious. They rarely travel outside of Molhyna, and the province's other inhabitants consider them lower than even the basest Ussuran slaves. Tell that to a Kosar's face, however, and you won't have time to apologize before he cuts your throat.

The Kosars eat a good deal of meat, tending herds of cattle or goats wherever they wander. They also eat the horses that are too old to ride. They are masterful horse breeders, and trade their stock for Molhyni grain and liquor (they brew a drink of their own from goats' milk that, while nauseating, packs a significant punch). The Kosars live in leather tents, lacking permanent structures. The idea of building things from brick and other materials is fairly new to them, and they have little skill in this regard. They have taken to living in the deserted buildings of the Molhyni they have driven away.

A year ago, a Kosar Khan named Jyrgal Timurbek overthrew the powerful Verkhotov family and proclaimed a Kosar nation, Kosara, on their lands. Timurbek based his claim on the largely dubious evidence that this area was a former homeland of his people, who Anton Pietrov drove off in the 400s (see page 20). No one knows the exact nature of Timurbek's "proof", but it has led him to claim a swath of land from the southern tip of Lake Vigil to Bear Lake, framed on the south by the fork in the Volog river.

Regardless of the legitimacy of the claim, Timurbek appears to have tapped a vein of latent nationalism in the Kosar. A half-dozen other tribes have united to back his claims, and the non-fighters of the tribes are doing the unprecedented – settling down. They have planted crops and raised food, while Timurbek has begun issuing laws for his people. Kosara gives the distinct impression of a newborn nation.

Unfortunately, while the Kosars ride the euphoric wave of nationalism, the native Molhyni fare less well. Centuries of hostility are bearing bitter fruit in Kosara, and the new majority has heavily persecuted the local Molhyni. Refugee trains constantly stream out of the region, swelling the populations of the surrounding provinces. Many have fled to Sladivgorod, and others have gone south into Gallenia. On the positive side, Timurbek's attacks have slowed



considerably. Now that he has a nation to rule, the wily raider finds the responsibilities of governing quite time-consuming. Still, his subordinates continue to raid nearby communities. He hopes that by showing enough force, he can keep Kosara intact long enough to allow the nation to survive.

Rurik

Ruler: Aleksi Pavtlow Markov v'Novgorov

Crest: A field divided vertically, silver and black. In a circle, four orbs; each opposing the field (white on black, black on white). The second and fourth are divided by the field.

Standing Armies: Rurik has two standing armies. The personal guard of the v'Novgorov prince and family are known as the *Adaryat*, or White Legion. They number some 5,000 men, hidden throughout the Rurik provinces. South of the Reka Ekaterina, another army is forming, this one led by Drutsky Kethna Pastovich. Although supposedly under the Knias's command, it currently acts entirely on its own... with the help of Matushka, of course. The common populace has no reason to believe that it is not sponsored and guided by the v'Novgorov family in defense of the motherland, however.

Rurik is one of the most celebrated provinces in Ussura, and most commonly associated with Ussuran stereotypes. The province is closest to sea trade, accessible by the Trade Sea, and has active treaties with Eisen, Avalon, and the Vendel League. It takes advantage of its accessibility by securing ambassadors from other nations, making gestures toward peace and trade, and capitalizing on her ports and trade goods during the warm half of the year.

It has also become much more "civilized" than the rest of Ussura with both large and small cities, open trade routes, and scattered rustic villages. The muzhiks are well cared for and traveling bogatyr often begin their careers in Rurik's

borders, preparing to go on some journey into the "wilderness" of their land. The roads are excellent in Rurik, encouraging travel by troika, and the largest cities have libraries and prominent cultural centers. Taxes are high, but not stifling, and the average peasant in Rurik makes nearly twice as much per year as his counterparts in any other province of Ussura.

Recently, Montegue has marched from northern Somojez into Rurik. The province has suffered intensely, both from the invading army and from the devastating weather which slows its progress. The Ekaterina river has sealed with thicker ice than has ever seen before, defying all attempts to clear it and preventing swift travel up the river's shore. Peasants flee south through Rurik and move east into Veche to escape the Montaigne invasion and the wintery wrath of Matushka. Those left are either too stubborn to leave, or making ready to defend their country from General Montegue.

Reka Ekaterina

The river which flows between Pavtlow and Ekaternava is the most traveled in Ussura. During the winter months, great ice boats sail along it, carrying men with sharp pikes which they use to cut away the ice as it forms along the river's edge. The pikes, called *utka*, are over 30 feet long, and require at least three men to operate. Thus, the river stays open more than nine months out of the year, and trade flows steadily through the province.

Derevyanni Forest

The forest between St. Tremult and Pavtlow is a dark and ancient place, storm-ridden and wet. Ancient Rurik natives considered the forest the home of Peroon, the Thunder God, due to the thunderstorms that clustered above it year-round. Currently, the Derebyanni serves as the meeting point for the army of Drutsky Kethna Pastovich, bogatyr leader of the united Ussuran forces. Their current goal is to harass and slow Montegue's march to Pavtlow with whatever resources come to hand. The woods are a perfect place for guerrilla assaults on Montegue's men. It covers Ussuran tracks, hides their movements, and provides



numerous animals to harass and steal from Montegue's supply trains. Soon, however, the two armies must meet, and when they do, the Montaigne will still drastically outnumber Pastovich's gathered forces.

Cities

The cities of Rurik are large and populous, despite Montegue's assault. Most of the northern cities are completely untouched by the body of Montegue's armies, suffering only the occasional bandit attack and ministrations from the press gangs that follow the armies northward.

Ekaternava

Ruler: Voevod Vassily Piotr Ekaternava Novgorov v'Novgorov
Population: 57,000

The second largest city in Rurik, Ekaternava once served as the province's lifeline to Vendel. Now, besieged by the Montaigne, the city is suffering. One-fourth of Montegue's army is stationed on the island surrounding Ekaternava, constantly guarding the walls and entrances. They have maintained the siege for more than six months. The populace of Ekaternava is surviving – but barely. A few ports to the north remain open, and the sewer grates beneath the city are still somewhat accessible to an intrepid adventurer, but they aren't enough to halt the city's slow strangulation.

As for Montegue's army... they are faring significantly worse. After several earthquakes struck the mainland, and a large piece of coastal land suddenly slid into the sea (taking over 300 of Montegue's men with it), the army moved directly to the huge island on which Ekaternava sits. Still, they are plagued by snow, ice, and poor food, and they have little access to fresh water, as the river has turned bitter. For them, the siege is the Abyss itself.

Montegue himself has moved on with the larger portion of his army, driving toward Pavtlow and trusting in his generals to keep Ekaternava from sending any Ussuran reinforcements. He has left one of his most cunning

Generals in charge: Yves-Theron del' Sices du Sices, cousin of Lady Jamais Sices du Sices. Lady Jamais ridiculed him at a long-ago court appearance, costing him his commanding commission and relegating him to this "Theus-forsaken war." He hates her, and longs for the day when he can return to Montaigne for revenge. Yves-Theron has over 15,000 men at his command, all stationed on the island of Ekaternava.

Donskoy

Ruler: Voevod Andreev Pavtlow Malenkov
Population: 29,000

Donskoy is located on a major crossroads within Rurik. The two roads which intersect in Donskoy lead north-south, from Sousdal to Ekaternava, and east-west, from St. Andresgorod to Siev. This makes Donskoy one of the principal trade centers of inland Ussura, and a powerful bastion in the fight against Montegue.

This city teems with soldiers from all areas of Ussura, gathering and heading north in legions of 1,000 or more to join the growing army near Reka Ekaterina. They currently number over 13,000 men and women, led by Drutsky Kethna Pastovich, a stalwart Vechean with experience in the War of the Cross. Any loyal Ussuran, whatever his lineage or background, is welcomed into these legions, and receives adequate arms and equipment to join the fight.

Beyond the growing army, Donskoy is known as a center of learning and trade. Long ago, it held the seat of the Rurik Empire, and the center of Novgorov power. It still retains many of those trappings, though in more "modern" forms. Donskoy contains the palace and council of the Novgorov Knias, as well as the ancestral home of the ancient princes of Rurik. Golden onion domes shine from the four corners of the city, where ancient brass gongs ring three times a day, to celebrate the dawn, high sun, and dusk. Its marketplaces swarm with activity, and muzhik still come from great distances to trade their wares. The influx of soldiers has temporarily bolstered the economy, allowing it to flourish despite the trade lost to the war.



St. Tremult

Ruler Voevod Kalman Vitov Zakharii

Population: 12,000

St. Tremult serves as the current lifeline from Pavtlow to the outside world. Only the dedicated efforts of the citizens of have allowed supplies to make it to Pavtlow despite Montegue. The city is a small one, pitifully so when compared to others, but it has certain advantages. A large forest lies between Tremult and Pavtlow, shielding movement and allowing small caravans to make their way through the thick brush undetected by Montegue's scouts. The forest was once bright and open, but has recently grown thick and foreboding, as if masses of new trees and glens have sprung up in only a few months. The Prince of Rurik has all but forbidden travel through the forest, saying that it is too dangerous for mere peasants to attempt. Aleksi's own personal guardsmen have taken over any travel through the Derevyanniy Forest.

And of course, Aleksi's men have only the best intentions.

Somojez

Ruler: Borin St. Andresgorod Sergeiov v'Pscov, the Tabularius

Crest: Red spots on a white ground, bearing a Drachen, coiled about itself, claws extended.

Standing Army: Tyomny (7,000)

Somojez stands between the border of Eisen and the deep woodlands of Ussura. The land is almost entirely mountainous, reaching from the northern coast of the Trade Sea down through the Drachenberg mountains to the southern river that is known to the Ussurans as Vlaststrakh. The body of the kingdom is mountainous and rugged, with fertile valleys and rich forests dotting the expanses between high mountain ranges.

Somojez has been invaded repeatedly, yet every time it has denied entrance to even the most intrepid armies. The Drachenberg mountains formed a natural barrier between the cities of Somojez and the barbarian raiders in the time of Numa, and have been equally successful in deterring even the strongest Eisen Emperor. For centuries, Théah has assumed that Somojez is unconquerable – until the coming of Montegue.

Thousands of miles from their homeland, buffeted by ice, snow, and Ussuran troops, the Montaigne have continued to make headway. Military theorists believe that this is because Montegue has no interest in holding the ground he gains. He does not fight to claim land or possess villages and cities. Montegue strikes directly toward Pavtlow, and is using any resource he can find to bring him closer to the Gaius's city. If he can capture it, the Montaigne believe they can bring Ussura to her knees from within.

In his wake, Montegue leaves a blistered, blackened swath of death, twisted and burned by the passing of his armies. His men claim the resources of peasant villages for their own use, leaving the muzhiks to starve. Montegue has no interest in Somojez's peasants or their boyars; he only has interest in its roads.

The northern provinces of Somojez are nearly empty of civilization. The blackened land is covered in snow and ice. Those who lived in the north have made their way south, away from the coast and Montegue's armies. Only raiders and Ussuran soldiers currently dwell in Somojez's northern lands, fighting against the Montaigne with all their skill and strength.

Although northern Somojez is a wasteland of burned ground, the southern provinces continue to prosper. Peasants who have relocated from the north find warm ground to sleep on, and plenty of grain to feed them until they can begin to farm for themselves. The cities are filled to the bursting point, and trade with Eisen thrives – despite the bitterness that exists between the Knias and his western neighbors. The belief that Eisen allowed Montegue to pass unhindered through their lands dies hard in Ussuran hearts. Though Montegue has sailed most of his troops into the



northern Drachenbergs in order to seize the city of Ekaterina. But Ussuran peasants, if asked how they feel about returning one day to the devastation in the north, will shrug and say, “Matushka will heal herself... in time.”

One day, Montegue will have to return home.

Gora Bolshoi and the Drachenbergs

The Ussurans refer to the Drachenbergs simply as Bushka Gora – which means “Mother Mountain.” Though the range is said to be rich in dracheneisen, no Ussuran has ever found a vein. Only the farthest western ranges, controlled by the Eisen, seem to give up their riches to the miners there. The Ussurans believe that this is mostly for lack of trying. Without the knowledge to smith the precious metal, dracheneisen is useless. The Ussurans have no need for it, and do not have the resources to mine it without purpose. However, granting the Eisen more land in Somojez has always helped improve relations with them, and some Eisen princes have even received the right to mine in Ussuran mountains in exchange for rich trade measures. This arrangement continues to the present day, even in the face of Eisen’s current political chaos.

The Gora Bolshoi divide the body of Ussura from the seas to the south, and from Vodacce and the Crescent Empire, her two closest southern neighbors. The southern Bolshoi, whose peaks reach 7,500 feet, become all but impassible during the winter everywhere except for the banks of the Prolog Paterya, a river in southern Veche that carves the Bolshoi mountains in two. Somojez’s major trade center in the Bolshoi is the city of Sousdal, which organizes and filters all Crescent influence into Ussura.

The Trade Sea and The Mirror

Somojez is the only province that borders both oceans which touch Ussuran soil. The Trade Sea, to the north, provides ample fishing and trade with both Avalon and the Vendel, and the Mirror brings ships from far-away Vodacce and the Crescent Empire. Somojez receives trade from both, and thrives on exports of fur, ale, gold, minerals, and lumber.

Cities

The cities and villages of Somojez are frequented by travelers from other parts of Ussura, Eisen, and even the distant lands of Vodacce and Castille. Once in a long while, a traveler from the Crescent Empire comes through Somojez’s southern lands, trading rare spices and silks for Ussuran gold.

St. Andresgorod

Ruler: Voevod Alik Andresgorod Fedulyov

Population: 40,000

The most famous of Ussura’s religious centers, St. Andresgorod (or St. Andreton to the nearby Eisen) stands in a wide vale, forming part of one of the few passes through the Drachenberg mountains. It gained its name from one of Ussura’s most famous saints, Andre of the Scarlet Oak. Legend states that St. Andre came upon two woodcutters who were chopping down one of Matushka’s holy trees. He stepped between their axes and the wood, and was killed by their swing. The two woodsmen were changed into trees themselves, and St. Andre’s blood stained the great oak scarlet.

Near the city stands a holy grove where this event purportedly took place. A small stone chapel has been built in the shade of the forest, beside a massive white-leaved oak tree with scarlet bark. To either side of the tree, two smaller oaks grow, each as white as snow. Visitors to St. Andresgorod consider this site sacred, and although no priest tends the chapel, visitors keep it clean and free of debris. It is said that those who sleep here will have good luck, provided that they tell their dreams to the first traveler they see after leaving the church in the morning.

St. Andresgorod also contains the Church of the Prophet’s Breath, a massive gold and silver building with multicolored onion domes. Once a year, the Patriarch of the Ussuran Orthodox Church visits the city for the festival of St. Covratski, martyred while fighting against the barbaric Eisen tribes in the dawn of Ussuran history. He was canonized shortly after the founding of the church, and now serves as the patron saint of the Tyomny guard of Somojez.



The Academy of Tyomny stands on the southern edge of town, guarding the main road. Despite the sheer cliffs and high mountains that surround St. Andresgorod's forested valley, few of the mountain beasts that inhabit the area will venture near the city – another sign, inhabitants say, of St. Andre's piety.

Sousdal

Ruler: Bogdan Khmelinkisirov

Population: 25,000

For such an influential city, Sousdal is rather small. She is governed by a commoner, as well, which has made Sousdal the object of ridicule by the other boyars of Somojez – though all must admit that Sousdal makes up for her peasant beginnings through rich trade and excellent treaties with the Crescents and Vodacce. Some say that Sousdal is the beginning of the rise of the bourgeois class in Ussura. With Vodacce architecture outnumbering Ussuran, and both Orthodox cathedrals and smaller churches to the Vaticine, Sousdal makes a number of broad steps beyond “traditional” Ussuran policy.

Sousdal is the home of Ussuran Orthodoxy, and has been since Duke Vselvod defied the Vaticine church and renounced the Second Prophet. The Patriarch resides here, running the Church from a towering cathedral in the city's main square. It is surrounded by churches and more mundane structures belonging to the Orthodoxy; their gaudy towers stand in stark contrast to the simple dwellings in Sousdal's outlying neighborhoods.

The town also holds the bulk of Ussura's fishing fleet. Countless vessels – mostly small one- or two-man boats – leave her ports for the waters of the Mirror, returning with seafood of all varieties. The Sousdal shipyards do a brisk business, although they lack the facilities to build large vessels. The Gaius is considering stationing a group of stelets here with a warship or two, to serve as protection from the occasional raid by Crescent pirates.

The Tyomny

The Tyomny, or Dark Guard, are the Tabularius's personal military. However, unlike the standing armies of the other Knias, these guardsmen are more than simple soldiers: every one of them is also an ordained priest of the Ussuran Orthodoxy. The Tabularius, Guardian of the Faith, takes his position of the Church's protector very seriously. Only those who show prowess with the sword as well as faith in the Holy Mother Church may join the guard. The Tyomny are paragons of faith and loyalty, tested and blessed by the Patriarch himself upon their ascension to guard duty. Each year, those cadets who have earned a place within the Tyomny travel to St. Andresgorod's high square, where they are blessed by the Patriarch during the celebration of St. Covratski (a martyr who fell defending Orthodoxy from the newly founded Vaticine church in 347).

It has been said that the Tyomny had been bitter enemies of the fallen order of knights known as die Kreuzritter, but since the destruction of that order the Tyomny have claimed that their own continued existence proves Theus's judgment against such heretical bands.

Rules for the creation of Tyomny can be found on page 101.

Odyesse

Occupational Governor: Marquis Allivohn Valroux du Martisse

Population: 30,000

Legend states that the city of Odyesse was founded not by men, but by giants: the Giants of Estermarch, also known as the Firbor. The Firbor were said to be tremendous warriors, each standing nearly twice the height of a man. The walls which surround Odyesse are over 85 feet tall, higher by far than any other fortress in Somojez. The archways into the city consist of heavy blocks of solid stone, each as large as a peasant's hut. The cobbled roads hold chips of stone as large as a small pony, and the stone catacombs beneath the city are said to be nearly a hundred feet high. Legend says that the Firbor were driven out of Odyesse by the great





hero of Somojez, Svyatogor Muron Pscov. Their southern brothers supposedly wait deep beneath the mountains for their time to recapture Odyesse.

Today, Odyesse is a beautiful city, simple and open to all forms of trade. Montegue did not destroy it in his passage from Montaigne because it served as a useful port. The lightest of Montaigne “guards” currently occupies it, keeping the city safe while Montegue continues his march to Pavtlow. The ports remain open, and trade has not ceased – the Vendel merchants used their leverage to ensure that Odyesse’s occupiers maintained the trade agreements between Ussura and Kirk.

The populace of Odyesse is supposedly enslaved by their Montaigne guards, but in truth, very little has changed. With little knowledge of the Ussuran language, the Montaigne have difficulty enforcing the laws they create. The Ussurans, on the other hand, have absolutely no luck learning the Montaigne language. Thus the city remains in an unspoken standoff. Since the occupation, it has become a haven for smugglers and black marketeers, carrying out wares under the noses of the Montaigne. Eisen mercenaries come to sell their swords, while pirates and spies arrange clandestine meetings within her towering walls. Vendel merchants have a field day selling their wares, helped out by the native Ussurans who proceed about their business as if the Montaigne didn’t exist. The occupiers keep the streets orderly (violence here is practically nonexistent), and nick enough careless criminals to preserve the illusion of control. But with the constant leverage allowed them by the Vendel, the Ussuran populace otherwise manages to live fairly uninterrupted lives.

Yarlyk Ruins

Governor: None

Population: Unknown

The ruins of Yarlyk lie in the south of Somojez. Long ago, it was a magnificent city with great onion domes of brightly colored tile, and a palace whose entire roof was made of gold. It served as the capital of Somojez, and held the bravest nobles in the province – until the Firbor came. They



Ussura

destroyed the city, pillaged the area, and tortured the citizens. Worse, they seemed almost immune to Matushka's wrath. Later, the muzhiks learned that the people of Yarlyk had worked with the Firbor in exchange for a powerful protection against Matushka. They had sought freedom from Matushka's will, opening the gates to the Firbor enemy. Once inside the city, the giants turned on them, slaying and torturing everyone they could find.

But Matushka was far from helpless. Though she could not strike the city itself, she sealed Yarlyk and ravaged the land around it with fires and earthquakes. Her anger burns there still – and some say that the Firbor General and his men still live, trapped within the city, unable to leave or to die.

The city itself is built atop a great mountain, looking down over a sullen river. Storm clouds shroud its brow, and thunder shakes the mountains for miles in every direction. The land is not still here – it shifts, moves, and changes intermittently. Visitors seeking the city find themselves unable to approach it – the land always twists and turns, leading them back the way they came. The only local feature that does not change is the river; it passes warily by, trailing through the mountains on its own implacable course. Wise travelers know to stick close to it and not tempt Matushka's wrath by approaching the ruins.

Other Important Sites

The fields of Garim lie north of Sousdal, a stoic tribute to Orthodox defiance of Vaticine doctrine, and to the freedom of Ussuran religion. Thousands of monuments have been erected across one large portion of the field, marking the place where Ussuran soldiers of the faith fell and were buried. Among them lie the bones of Voevods, Bogatyr, and even one of the Princes of the Douma. Their monuments are marked only with a name, if known; nothing else distinguishes one from the other. A stone pillar marks the entrance to the graveyard; its inscription reads "All who fought for the Glory of the Prophet will claim a place in his Sanctuary."

It is one of the most revered locations in all Ussura.

Veche

Ruler: Staver Siev Aryaov v'Vladimirovich

Crest: A white bear rampant-guardant, on a red shield; at the top of the shield, three silver trees on a black bar.

Standing Army: Claws of the Bear (10,000)

"Theus has turned His face from them. Perhaps now, perhaps long ago. The only salvation left in Veche is death."

– Cardinal Teodoro Ciosa, Vodacce

Matushka is nature, and nature can be a predator. Nowhere is this adage more true than in Veche's dark, damp territory. To the north stand the tremendous Gora Sorvidgeastov; to the south, the Gora Bolshoi, divided only by a thin river that allows trade to flow to the bright ocean of the Mirror. A tremendous and mystic forest swells through Veche's valleys and leaves little room for crop growth in the southern lands of the province. Stone is the building material of choice, but is difficult to come by, as little of the mountain range to the north has been quarried. Thus, stone is reserved for the rich and the powerful, and all others make do with wood.

The people of Veche embrace the Orthodox promise of a rewarding afterlife with open arms and desperate faces. For centuries they have lived under a series of tyrants, and even after a thousand years of Gaius rule, Veche still bleeds, still suffers, and still shudders at its memories. Those who visit Veche have the sense that civilization ends there. Protected by thick forests and foreboding dark rivers, Veche is inhospitable and unkind. Its history is filled with dark tyrants, bloodfeasts, sadistic counts and overlords, and the savage sweep of Kosar invasion.

The people of Veche are superstitious to a fault. They were the last province to convert to Orthodoxy, and in a sense they have not yet left behind their old ways. The worst part of Veche is that many of these wild superstitions are true. Fog rolls over Veche's lowlands, through her hills, and across the Mountains of Smoke like a blanket, covering the corruption and evil that lies beneath the soil. Where the



forests retreat into plains, dead trees stand vigil over withered grasses. The water tastes sour and dark, and the clouds gathered by the Mountains of Smoke never part to reveal a single patch of blue sky. Even bustling Siev holds an atmosphere of purposeful ignorance – ignorance of the atrocities of Veche’s past rulers, ignorance of the bitterness that floods the land, and ignorance of the darkness and danger that lurks in her forests and behind every shadow.

The Thrice-Tenth Kingdom

Ussuran legends say that if you travel very far and very deep into any Ussuran forest, you will reach a point of no return. They call this point “Matushka’s teeth,” the turning point between worlds. Those who can reach it, and yet go farther still into the darkness of the wood, will find the road to the land of Murom.

Murom, called the Thrice-Tenth Kingdom, or the Kingdom beyond the Thrice-Nine Lands, is a city of gold and amber whose spires rival even the sun itself. Ussuran soldiers who have grown too old to make it through the winter, are said to live here, as well as all members of the Gaius’s personal guard (Stelets) who die in the line of duty. No simple overland journey can take a hero to this afterworld, and no mere wish to leave can take him home again. Like the enchanted land of the Sidhe, the city of Murom is unreachable by those of mere mortal blood, awaiting those heroes of legendary status to pierce its veil and share in its reward.

Legends say that heroes who eat, drink, or sleep there will forever become part of the festivities of Murom, trapped to live as a man by night and as an animal by day, without knowledge of who they were or why they came to the city. Only Matushka herself – or perhaps the King of Cats – can free them from this state.

The hero of Murom is a man known as the Iron Sentinel. He stands, it is said, over seven feet tall and wears armor made of black coal. He is Matushka’s envoy, training her armies in Murom and preparing for a war that legends say will signal the end of the world.

The Mountains of Smoke

Veche covers the majority of the Gora Sorivdgrastov, the Mountains of Smoke. Bitterly cold and covered with snow year-round, the Mountains are also the site of one of the greatest Ussuran legends: that of Romain Tomiech and his daughter, Saska.

Over a thousand years ago, when Veche was an independent kingdom, the Tomiech family ruled the mountains with an iron fist. Their stone palaces were cold and dark, and their dungeons held all manner of secret horrors. Once, to stop an incoming horde of Kosars, the Veche Domiator slaughtered thousands of his own peasants, strewing their corpses across the roads and passable trails and covering his own land with blood. The Kosars, fearing the madman who so callously disposed of his own people, did not invade.

This did not stop the Tomiech family from ruling with their own form of elite sadism. It is said that Saska wielded magic brought to her by Legion itself, that she bathed in the blood of young maidens to stay forever beautiful. Her father – who also became her husband after the death of Saska’s mother – celebrated their wedding with a grand bath and salon, at which over 1000 village girls were slaughtered for the young princess’s pleasure.

When Matushka came to unite Ussura, Romain had already died of old age. His daughter, however, still lived – along with their child, a boy named Ihyna. Their palace, the Tara Oasului in the northern mountains of smoke, swirled with dark magic. When Grandmother Winter appeared, Saska snarled her defiance, prepared to summon Legion’s hordes rather than surrender to the crone.

Matushka faced the dark sorceress on her own terms that night, and according to peasant legend, froze both Saska and her son in a block of solid ice at the mountain’s core. That block is said to be the source of the constant smoke that surrounds the peaks of the Gora Sorivdgeastov.

The Azov Forest

The Azov forest – the largest in Théah – harbors a tremendous amount of strange magic, powerful creatures,



and some say, Matushka's own home. It is the heart of Ussuran legend, its untamed boundaries stretching across over a quarter of Veche's land space. The trees here range from dark evergreens to towering oak, all stretching high enough to blot out the sun from the sky. It is a wild place, a savage place, but also vibrant and full of life, home to animals of all varieties. Here, alone in all of Veche, the land seems lush and fertile, and some whisper that the Azov holds the quickest path to the Thrice-Tenth Kingdom. Woe be to any traveler who doesn't respect its power, however; those who journey too deep into its confines may find themselves hopelessly lost, easy prey for whatever creatures live there. One of every three interlopers never emerges from the Azov, and woodsmen know better than to journey more than a few hours into her borders.

The Volog and Paterya Rivers

The Volog river remains frozen for more than three-quarters of the year, and even when it thaws, the waters run in icy torrents through the land. However, it provides the source for much of Veche's farmland, and forms a natural divider between the "educated and cultured" northern territories and the "dangerous and provincial" south.

The southern river, called the Paterya, flows for hundreds of twisting miles through the Bolshoi mountains to the Mirror Sea. Most other rivers in southern Veche are tributaries of the Paterya. The river's basin forms the one open trade route from Ussura to the Mirror, other than Sousdal's natural port. Even the ports of Gallenia must first travel eastward to cross through the Paterya basin. They take this significant detour rather than risk the salt-water swamps and summer avalanches that make travel extremely treacherous throughout the mountains of southern Gallenia.

Ozero Medvyed (Bear Lake)

Bear Lake is named for the numerous bears who arrive at its shores every spring during spawning season. Ussurans have been known to fish right next to them without incident so long as the fisherman throws an occasional catch to the bears. Some fishermen claim that they have spoken to the bears, and learned valuable secrets from them. Others say

that the bears speak of an ancient hero who sleeps at the bottom of the lake. A few tales say that Bear Lake was created from the tears of Matushka, shed in happiness at the coming of the First Prophet. It is doubtful that any of these stories are true.

Cities

The cities of Veche are widely spaced and thinly populated; most inhabitants live in scattered homes across the northern plains, rather than in established villages or cities. The villages of Veche act as little more than trade centers and direction-posts, establishing trade routes and providing a central location for outlying peasants to pay their taxes and sell their homespun wares.

Siev

Ruler: Voevodova Zabol Maksakov

Population: 55,000

The city of Siev is the largest in Veche, and served as the capital when Veche was an independent republic. No other part of Veche has Siev's level of civilization; no other part of the province is as advanced, or as cultured. For the most part, Siev represents the one area of Veche that "keeps up with the times" – much of the rest of the province still lives in Ussura's version of the Middle Ages.

Despite its location, Siev is a magnificent sight. Ancient Numan texts describe the city – then a small village – in glowing terms and time has not tarnished it. One of the most important sites in Siev is the great tomb of Ivanich Gostyny Syn. Said to be the last true giant in the Ussuran mountains, the tomb itself is the size of a small cathedral, and is entirely sealed. It is said that Ivan's giant wife still sits by his body, weeping eternally, and that the interior walls are lined with gold and silver.

The woods to the south of Siev cluster on the other side of the Proliv Volog river, and the mountains to the north are considered haunted by the brutal spirits of the last Domiator. Fantastic, dangerous and sentient animals supposedly live in the forests, though the average modern



traveler does not see talking bears, stags who grant wishes, or even the elusive Danyogor wolves (known for tearing apart horses and carrying away children in their teeth). Even so, the wilderness surrounding Siev is a wild, dangerous place — a stark contrast to the city's golden spires

Malaya

Ruler: Voevod Andrei Kolodenko

Population: 35,000

Malaya is one of Ussura's major trading ports: a bright and prosperous city, despite the sulfurous smell of the tremendous saltwater bog known as the Myerskny Swamp. The Proliv Paterya breaks into numerous fords at the delta, turning the whole of Malaya's shipyards into sandy, boggy pits. However, the Malaysians have come up with a solution: ships that come into Malaya do not actually make their way into the fords, but dock at floating wharves anchored just outside the bog. Small, flat-bottomed longships carry wares (and sailors) into the heart of the city, providing both security for the wharfs and a means of transportation through the city's southern harbors.

Myerskny Swamp has many dark legends attached to it. Some sailors say that they have seen waving lights in the bog, while others speak of ghostly voices that speak in strange tongues. Sirens definitely live within the brackish waters, and other "creatures" supposedly escape its dark confines to carry away hapless victims in the dead of night.

Another problem haunts Malaya's streets: the Crescent Empire frequently sends their missionaries, merchants and nobility to trade at the port. The cultural stigma of the Crescents is greater in Malaya than in small Sousdal, which leads to tension, anger, and often open fighting in the streets. Recently, a Crescent ship belonging to Kheired-Din's feared Corsairs sacked one of the other boats in the wharves and took its entire cargo. The Malaysians were outraged, and if the pirate or his men ever return to the city, town guardsmen have orders to shoot first and ask questions later. This has increased stress between the guardsmen and Crescent travelers — a situation that could erupt in violence at the slightest provocation.

Kuloi

Ruler: Voevodova Apraksia Siev v'Vladimirova

Population: 8,000

Kuloi is a fairly small town at the western edge of the Azov Forest. Though it has little political significance, its trade routes through Somojez and to the edge of Rurik serve as Siev's link to the western reaches of the Ussuran nation. The ruler of this small city is the daughter of the Knias of Veche, his only heir, and currently in disgrace. When her father commanded her to marry a man twice her age, Apraksia spit in her suitor's face. Since then, she has been "exiled" to this town to reconsider her decision.

But the ploy failed. Apraksia governs with wisdom and insight, and deals firmly with those who disobey the city's simple laws. In the two years she has ruled Kuloi, it has grown by almost 1000, and doubled trade with Somojez. Apraksia is pleased; her father is spitting nails. The peasants whisper that she is having an affair with the King of the Cats — a man-spirit living deep within the Azov Forest — but most travelers believe those are lies spread by her rejected suitor.

Recently the city has begun suffering attacks from brigands: Montaigne deserters from Rurik following the trade routes east. With little to live for now that their military pension has been lost, they have turned to robbery to survive. With them comes rain, bitter cold and all manner of plagues sent by Matushka to try to rid the Motherland of the infestation. The Voevodova has turned aside as many as she can, using her small town guard to protect the commoners, but her protection will not last forever. She has begun construction of a large stone wall, hoping that the improved defenses will be enough to stem the attacks.

Podshiversk

Ruler: Lazlo Magidovich

Population: 1,000

Podshiversk is a logging town just inside the border of Azov Forest. Their timber travels up the river to Siev, where it is used for building and trade. They also trap furs in the forest, and their famed furriers have clients as far away as Vendel. The citizens of Podshiversk are wild to the point of savagery.

They are hard folk, living a hard life in unforgiving conditions. As a result, they have a strange pastime involving a peculiar style of fighting called “gouging.” The point of gouging isn’t just to win – it is to maim the opponent permanently. Most Podshiversk males are missing a facial detail – an eye is gone, an ear has been bitten off, or the tip of the nose is missing.

The town’s leader, Lazlo Magidovich, does not rule because he was born to it. He rules because he has beaten the stuffing out of anyone who argues with him – and he looks it. Both ears are mangled stumps, his nose no longer really exists, and one of his eyes has been scooped out (he opts not to wear a patch because he looks more fearsome that way). He is older now, and his sons have begun to take on his mantle, but he is still more than capable of pounding his opponents into submission.

Other Important Sites

Valaamzhensky Castle, ancestral hall of the Vladimirovich family, looms forebodingly on a cliff in the Mountains of Smoke like a vulture perched for the kill. Though small, its

name has a chilling effect on all those who hear it. Huge gargoyles guard the pass that leads to the keep, and muzhik and boyar alike find reasons to stay away. Still, some say that Valaamzhensky’s tall spires have captured something that can be found nowhere else in Veche. From there, one can almost see the sun.

Deep beneath the palace, its original owner still sleeps in torpored death: Saska Tomiech and her infant son, encased in bitter ice, captured for all time and sentenced to eternal imprisonment. Every night, Fveryot, the son of Staver Siev Aryaov v’Vladimirovich, makes his way past his sleeping servants, and enters a secret chamber that he found two years ago. He passes deep into the mountain, through a labyrinth of twisting corridors and past a series of stone gargoyles that do not harm him, until he comes to a chamber of frozen beauty and polished snow. There, he sits and looks upon Saska’s unearthly beauty until he can no longer stand it, escaping from madness to the dawn above.

One day, he may do more than just watch.





Religion

Ussuran Orthodoxy

"I am no one," the Prophet said, "yet I bear the burden for all."
– Canon of the True Prophet, XI, 23

Over seven hundred years after the founding of the first city, and almost fifty years after the first sorcerous bargains were made, a man walked into the halls of the Numan Senate, and spoke. The man was the First Prophet, the only prophet recognized by the Ussuran Orthodoxy as the true messenger of Theus. With his life (and death), the Vaticine Church began, but when his words merged with the teachings of the Second Prophet, Ussura as a nation rejected the Vaticine Credo and began its own independent faith.

Ussurans believe that the First Prophet spoke metaphorically when he spoke of "those to come," meaning all the generations of mankind that would follow and learn the word of Theus. The book compiled by the Nine Witnesses is known as the Orthodox Canon of the Prophet, the "true" record of Ussuran belief in Theus and the cornerstone of the Orthodoxy. Not a word has been changed in over 1600 years. Even the Hierophant of the Vaticine has ratified it as the true words of the First Prophet – while simultaneously condemning Ussura as heretical for not integrating those chapters with the faith of the Second and Third Prophets as well.

Orthodoxy has also mingled the Prophet's teachings with stories of Matushka. Ussurans believe that the First Prophet knew about the Bargain, and before he went to the Numan Senate to speak he traveled into Ussura's deepest forest in search of the Thrice-Tenth Kingdom. There he found a deep, dark cave surrounded by vines and brush, guarded by a Bear, a Cat, a Wolf, and an Eagle.

"Go back," said the animals, but the Prophet would not. First he bested the Bear with strength, then the Wolf with cunning, the Cat with riddles, and lastly the Eagle with a test of loyalty that left the Eagle's wings singed and blackened. Defeated, the four animals stood aside and allowed the Prophet to enter, though the curious Cat followed him into the cave.

Inside the bower the Prophet found Matushka, resting in her eternal vigil as she had for aeons past. No man or woman on the earth knows what passed there, but when the Prophet left, Matushka awoke and spread her magic throughout Ussura. There was only one witness to their exchange – the King of Cats – and he is not speaking. But it is said that this knowledge is why cats walk with their tails aloft, and why they stare with such secrets in their eyes. They know the truth of the First Prophet and Matushka, and how they are related, their stories entwined.

But cats are silent, and cats do not tell tales.

The Ussurans believe references to the Second and Third Prophets to be heretical. Like Vaticines, the Orthodox believe that Tobias the Meek visited the Prophet in his cell; but unlike the Vaticines, the Orthodox believe that Tobias's account of that meeting was a tissue of lies. Tobias's addition to the Vaticine Book of the Prophets relates that the First Prophet told him of three additional Prophets to follow, each with his own message and duty. Ussurans call him "Tobias the Betrayer," and spit on the ground at the mention of his name. The Orthodoxy's Canon of the True Prophet states not only that Tobias visited the Prophet, but that the scribe served the sorcerous Senators, who had ordered him to speak with the Prophet.

According to Orthodoxy, Tobias tested the Prophet's virtues, saying he would not be burned if he would simply recant his words and bow before the Senate. The First Prophet refused. Then Tobias threatened to kill the Nine Witnesses if the First Prophet did not recant; still he stood firm. Lastly, Tobias threatened to forever destroy all that the Prophet had built. Again, the Prophet turned away.

When Tobias returned from his visit to the Prophet's cell, he arranged for the First Prophet to burn as a traitor. He secretly hunted down the Nine Witnesses, eventually killing them all. But the most horrible thing of all was that he claimed the First Prophet converted him, and that the journal he carried contained the Prophet's last words, written as he contemplated death in his cell. Changing his name to Mattheus, he created the Book of Mattheus and proclaimed that more Prophets would follow, changing the faith of Theus from the original path.

Thus, the Ussuran Orthodox Church considers itself the last remnant of the true faith of the Prophet, undiluted by Tobias's treachery and deceit. On the coronation of the first Orthodox Patriarch, the Knias of Rurik announced that "Sousdal has become the new Numa, and an era of faith and honor will forever stand in Ussuran hearts."

Legion's Prophet

In the Ussuran Orthodoxy, only one Prophet will follow the first. His coming will be a sign that the world as it has been is over. That man, known to Ussurans as Legion's Prophet, is the Fourth Prophet of the Vaticine Church. Both churches have revelatory scriptures of the Fourth Prophet – herald of the coming of Theus, he who brings revenge for the deaths of the other Prophets in the Vaticine faith. To the Ussurans, he is Legion's Hand, the coming of the final end, and the beginning of the fall of man.

Legion's Prophet, says the Ussuran Faith, will be heralded by a time of great war. The old ways will fall to the new, and the lands of man will be divided into great nations. The seals of Theus will open, and countless dark mysteries will be revealed. To the Ussurans, Legion's Prophet is a figure of fire and devastation; the end of the world and the return of Legion and its children. Ussurans have no love for those who encourage the Fourth Prophet's coming, and they will sacrifice their lives to prevent any such prophecies from coming true. Ussuran Orthodoxy has spent its entire existence attempting to locate and destroy any sign of the Fourth Prophet in order to avert this final doom.

Orthodoxy and the Kosars

In 1334, St. Sergius of Radonezh left his monastery at Siev in order to follow his own quest: to bring the Kosar people into the fold of the Ussuran Orthodoxy. It took over 40 years, but in 1381, the leader of the northern Molhynan Kosars rode with his family and tribe to Siev to be formally baptized into Orthodoxy. Though most Kosars give only lip service to the Patriarch, they can be as fervent as the most fanatic Ussuran when it comes to matters of faith and the First Prophet.

Faith and Honor

In the early years of the Ussuran Orthodoxy, the Church acted as one of the few unifying factors within the Knias Douma. Somojez was universally converted, and Rurik soon followed. Although the faith of the Prophets took longer to spread through Veche, Molhyna and Gallenia, the easy conversion from the old ways to the new faith prompted a wave of church-building throughout Ussura. By AV 600, nearly all of the primary cities

north of the Mirror had at least one major cathedral, and all five of the Knias had been baptized to the faith. At times Ussura's political structure wavered; her belief in the First Prophet did not.

At the head of Ussuran Orthodoxy stands the Patriarch, who serves many of the same functions as the Vaticine's Hierophant. The first Patriarch was Illarion Belafustus Pscov, who left behind his name when he ascended to become Innocent the First (since that day, three other Patriarchs in history have taken the name Innocent, to follow in his path of unification and rebirth). Innocent the First proclaimed that each Knias would assist him in appointing two Pontiffs (the Orthodox equivalent of

Cardinals) in their respective provinces. Beneath the Pontiffs stand a variety of lesser priests and monks, scattered across the country and through the major cities of each Douma.

The Orthodoxy makes quiet efforts to elevate Ussura's spiritual leaders over the Knias Douma, increasing the power of the Orthodox Patriarch. In Ussura's current political climate, the Orthodoxy hopes to establish a strong clerical rule. There are those in Ussura who would gladly transfer power from the Gaius to the Patriarch, and the Church has made potent use of their inclinations.

The Orthodoxy has funded the construction of majestic churches and monasteries patterned after Vaticine architectural advances. Monasteries play a tremendous role in Ussura; their greatest service, apart from their purely spiritual work, is providing rudimentary education to peasant and nobleman alike. In addition, monasteries still record and chronicle all the major historical events in the life of the Ussura people – both muzhik and boyar. Ussuran monks have translated famous and influential works of literature into Ussuran, and spread knowledge of various theological, historical and literary works. Even today, records in Ussuran monasteries provide the most concrete information on history of both Ussuran Orthodoxy and the Vaticine church, unedited and unravaged by time.

The Old Ways

Although the majority of Ussurans revere the Orthodox Church, Ussuran faith is often contradictory and difficult to understand. The same muzhiks that go to cathedral each week and know their prayers by heart can be found whispering of ancient gods – calling them, perhaps, by the names of the Saints or the Angels. The pure worship of nature, Matushka, and the land still exists in Ussura, particularly in the mountains of Veche, Gallenia, and the northern marches of Molhyna, and flourishes both beside and within the Orthodox church.

The Ancient Faith

Matushka herself is a revered figure within the Orthodox Church, and few priests lack icons of both the True Prophet

and Matushka upon their altars. They consider her part and parcel of Orthodoxy, carried over by the Prophet's conversations with her during his year of wandering. Orthodox priests rarely chastise those who worship her – so long as they also give tribute to Theus and his Prophet.

Many of the icons of Matushka's early faith still exist within the Orthodox church, some of which have not been accepted as readily by the Patriarch. These other figures are worshiped in secret, or beneath the cover of Orthodox religion, or by those who do not follow Orthodoxy. Travelers through Ussura may find remnants of the pagan faith still lingering, particularly in uneducated or uncivilized muzhik towns far from the civilization of Pavtlow or Siev.

The Beast Kings

The old stories tell of four faithful servants that followed Matushka as she walked the lands of Ussura. Though their spirit-skins have gone to mortals, their true forms still roam the great forests and plains of Ussura, and according to legend, they can be called upon to give a faithful traveler aid.



The first among the beasts is the Firebird, an eagle who gave up her flight in order to protect Matushka. She challenged the First Prophet to a test of loyalty to prove his worth, and was beaten. For her labors, and her love for Matushka, the ancient crone gave her wings of fire, and set her free. The Firebird is still seen occasionally in Gallenia and Cathay, although many years have passed since the last confirmed sighting. Matushka gave her spirit skin to the Gallenian family of Riasanova, that they might learn from the Firebird's lesson of loyalty and her steadfast heart. Because of the eagle's sacrifice, Matushka considers the Firebird to be first among all her creatures, the most beloved and best favored.

The second of Matushka's creatures, first among the beasts of the land, is the wolf. The First Prophet defeated him in a test of cunning, so he has since been considered a spirit of intellect and trickery. He is revered by muzhiks trying to find a way to trick greedy boyars, and figures prominently in tales of men who wish for just one more silver piece – and are swallowed up by the wolf's great maw. In the Orthodox faith, the Wolf King is known as St. Okam the Wolf, but to peasants, he is the Great Fenris of Rurik, whose spirit-skin went to the most powerful of the Knias in order to support Matushka's Gaius.

The third among the beasts is the Great Bear, bested by the Prophet in a titanic battle of strength. An icon of perseverance, the slow-witted Bear is nevertheless revered as a faithful lord and protective master of the deep forests. The Azov is dedicated to him, and all muzhik who hunt there leave behind a part of their kill to placate his anger. To the Orthodox Faith, the Bear has become St. Usurru, patron of Siev, who supposedly raised the walls of the city in a single day. The Bear gave his spirit skin to the Knias of Veche, the heart of Ussura and the province that contains the mighty Azov forest.

The last of Matushka's favored animals is the King of the Cats, the most reclusive and silent of the Great Beast Kings. He walks alone, with only his own kind for companionship, and rarely comes to a traveler's aid. When he does, he always expects an equal trade for his services, sometimes

demanding all the traveler has and more. He is the spirit of secrets and silence, the only being privy to the conversation between Matushka and the First Prophet. He appears as a simple black cat, though he may take human form if he wishes. There are stories of the King of Cats seducing everyone from Queen Elaine to the Empress of Cathay.



Culture

Few of Ussura's cultural pressures came from Numa and its forebearers, and she remained largely untouched by the rise of the Vaticine church. Her influences range from distant Cathay and the Crescent Empire to the geographical burdens of snow and ice and the difficulty of travel. Insular and distant, Ussura relies on herself for her preservation, and with Matushka's help, she does not need to look elsewhere.

Food

Ussurans eat the same things the rest of Théah eats, though their climate is not conducive to the cultivation of vegetables. Ussurans cultivate large amounts of grain, especially a wheat porridge called kasha. The grimmuk (red wheat) of Molhyna, so named because the heads turn a deep crimson when ripe, is used in baking Molhyni "blood bread." Fish is a staple on the coasts. The fishermen of Lake Vigil catch hordes of tiny episura which they press into small cakes that are considered delicacies. Red meat is rare, but prized. Cows

are not uncommon, but Ussurans value them more for their milk than their meat. Nearly every family keeps a goat. There is always plenty of fresh water from snowmelt, and Ussura brews a whole series of alcoholic beverages: the usual vodkas, a series of ciders and brandies, and a particularly disgusting concoction brewed by the Kosars which is made from goat's milk.

Architecture

For most of its history, Ussuran architecture has fallen into two categories: religious and practical. Practical buildings are meant to last only a generation or two, and are often made of mud or sod, or built of wooden beams and platforms. Religious architecture, on the other hand, is mostly stone, and designed to face the rigors of centuries.

Muzhiks rarely build anything to last more than a generation or two, which fits it well with Matushka's cycle of death and rebirth. Most Ussuran peasant structures are made of mud brick. Wood or stone is used where available, assuming the forest gives permission. The cities of Ussura follow building techniques practiced both in ancient Rurik and the Numan Empire. Streets are long and straight, with little deviation, and palaces stand outside of the city bustle and noise. Walls separate the districts, and some roads are paved with cobblestones in order to keep them from turning to mud in the spring. Most city buildings are made of wood, with sod or clay-tiled roofs, but tremendous stone palaces and cathedrals tower over the smaller houses and businesses. Overall, Ussuran cities are brighter than cities in other parts of Théah. Jewel-toned paints shine from roofs and walls, and brightly painted icons are displayed throughout the merchant districts. Onion domes glisten in the winter sunlight, and many churches in Somojez and Rurik have roofs of shining gold leaf.

Religious Buildings

For centuries, churches were the only buildings to be constructed of stone, and today they are almost the only buildings that remain from its ancient past. The basic elements of Ussura church design emerged fairly early,

around the eleventh century. Churches stand in the form of an open-armed cross, or 'x'; the walls are high and relatively free of openings. Sharply-sloped roofs and onion domes cover the structure.

With the establishment of a unified Ussura, foreign architecture began to appear in churches as trade burgeoned between the nation and the other states of Théah. The first instance of such foreign work is Sousdal's grand Assumption Cathedral, completed in 1479 by the Vodacce architect Presclau Fioravanti. The cathedral actually blends traditional Ussuran architectural styles with classical Vodacce proportions. Long considered an ideal of Ussuran iconic art, it serves as the model for countless versions throughout the nation.

Art

Belief in pagan nature spirits never died out even after Ussurans embraced the word of the First Prophet. This duality caused the country to find ways to merge the two belief systems. One of the methods they use to show this unity of faith is through iconic paintings, a style practiced since before the rise of Numa. Painting modern Orthodox figures in the old style – frequently accompanied by the legends or symbols of the ancient faith – provides a continuity of belief that carries through both religions and into Ussura's very distinct faith.

Icons

The tradition of icon painting came to the rest of Ussura from the Rurik culture. It began as an offshoot of the mosaic and fresco tradition of ancient Rurik churches, adopting their ornate stylizations with each new generation. Nowhere else in Théah is this form of art practiced; it is an Ussuran legacy. During the early centuries of the Ussuran Orthodoxy, a controversy in the church called into question whether religious images were a legitimate practice or sacrilegious idolatry. Although they didn't ban the use of images, they did draw an important distinction between art intended to depict reality and art designed for spiritual



contemplation. Certain kinds of balance and harmony became established as reflections of divinity.

Ussuran icon paintings do not accurately depict physical space or human appearance. They are incredibly stylized, overexaggerated, and picaresque. Icons are intended to aid contemplative prayer and convey meditative harmony. After all, the powers of Theus and his Prophet are beyond human ken; so, too, does Ussuran icon painting carry the onlooker into a place where the world is subtly different – seen, perhaps, through Theus’s eyes. The paintings represent figures in their two-dimensional heavenly form, not their natural form. Artists often invert perspective in order to thrust the central point out rather than draw the viewer to a disappearing point within the picture; light comes only from within the holy person depicted and therefore casts no shadows.

Egg-Painting

From time immemorial the egg has been the object of religious adoration. Ussura has long practiced the art of painting eggs, known as *pysanka*, an ancient word meaning “to write.” In Ussuran Orthodox traditions, the colored egg is one of the main symbols of spring. The reverence of these colored eggs grew into a tradition of painting and presenting the colored eggs on the first day of spring. Pysanka eggs tend to be richly ornamented with two, three or four colors, often covered in ornate designs or patterns. The patterns and symbols of pysanka are well known throughout Ussura, and can form a code of their own. Rarely are these codes used to confer secret information (other than a young man’s wish to woo a young woman), but it is possible to use Pysanka to convey simple messages and ideals.

A rarer variant of pysanka is called “krashenka.” Krashenka are egg-shaped works of art, not generally made of eggshell. Some krashenka consist of blown eggs filled with candy, or eggs carved of wood or made of spun glass. In recent times, some krashenka eggs have been made of gold and precious metals, and some are so complex that they are really small boxes with moving parts, clockwork motion, or incredibly delicate paintings inside the golden shell.

The artisan Leon Ivanov Batist created three of the most famous krashenka to commemorate the coronation of Gaius Piotr II in the late 1200s. The first, a gift to Empress Praetora v’Riasanova, was a rich scarlet color and held a miniature copy of the Imperial carriage inside. Although the egg has been lost, many descriptions of it still remain. The second, called the Knias’s Heart, remains within the grand palace at Ekaternava. It is a self-winding table clock in a form of a pyanska egg, which softly chimes every hour. The egg has a small latch, known only to the Novgorov royal family, which, when opened, reveals a splendidly colored, jeweled rooster. His final egg, named the Windows of the House, was made of pure gold, carved and painted on the outside with the faces of all the Gaiuses that ruled the country before Piotr. There is a globe inside the egg which opens with a small golden key; it contains symbols of the Orthodoxy, entwined within the branches of a miniature silver oak.

Currency

Ussura has no official currency; most of its inhabitants still rely on the barter system or use foreign currency when trading with outsiders. Many areas, however, use a gold coin known as a “grivnas,” an ancient currency which roughly represented the Ussuran price for one month’s labor. The grivnas has never been uniformly adopted, and each province and territory has its own versions of the coins. Some Vendel merchants offer an exchange rate of approximately one grivnas for ten Guilders, but such coins are rarely traded outside of Ussura.

Muzhik Clothing

In frigid Ussura, clothing tends to be more functional than decorative – holidays and feast-days excepted. Generally, muzhik women wear a blouse, skirt and a simple apron-piece that covers the skirt. The apron can be quite elaborately embroidered (most young girls learn to embroider by practicing on their aprons) and has different names according to its shape and region. Most clothing is woven from linen, hemp and wool.



Men's dress is simpler, consisting of a long or short shirt depending on the region, and a pair of trousers which can also be tight or quite baggy according to the region and the man's profession. Men typically wear a woven belt or a leather one from which they hang their work tools. In winter both sexes wear thick cloth coats or cloaks of beautifully decorated sheepskin.

Gift-giving

Ussurans are tremendous gift givers and commonly exchange tokens and other small items. Ussurans give presents to guests, to those who wish to conduct business, or as a transfer of small tokens of generosity. This is an ingrained tradition, and visitors to Ussura ignore it at their peril. Many times an ambassador has been turned away from a boyar's home simply because he bore no token of esteem for his host or host's family. The best gifts have some small rarity or value: sketches of one's home country, small porcelain or semi-precious statuettes, useful household trinkets such as kitchenware or knives, children's toys or clothes, picture books, and any truly practical items. Gifts are also used to "grease the wheels": for instance, to encourage someone to listen to a political proposal. Many Ussurans give gifts as a way of asking someone to be their host for the evening — a sort of reverse invitation.

Laws

Ussurans take the issue of law very seriously, and those who commit crimes on Ussuran soil are rarely spared. The *Pravda*, or laws, of the Ussuran people are simple and straightforward (the literal translation means "truth"), and are respected in every city and province. Although the five Knias have additional laws, and provincial governors add to the *Pravda* as necessary, the basic laws of Ussura are widely known and do not change. Likewise, capital punishment is still common in Ussura — a gallows can be found in most towns and stocks stand outside every courthouse, even in villages. Those who break the law in Ussura can expect to be reminded of their penalty by scars and lash marks.

Superstitions

The magical nature of Ussura has no face, yet those who break Matushka's rules find themselves devastated as certainly as any who cross one of Avalon's Unseelie. In Ussura, all woodlands are the same — Matushka's forest. If you enter one and grow lost, you may emerge anywhere in the country, dozens or hundreds of miles away from where you began. The trees whisper in the night wind, and if you do not walk straight through the forest, you *will* lose the path. This is not mere peasant superstition — it is *fact*. Matushka's land is magical, her people are the trees and the animals, and beast-kings live within the forests and the mountains, awaiting the next naive visitor. The *Zalozhniy* still roam the countryside, the lost souls of those who entered the forest, grew lost, and never returned. Peklo, the land of the dead, waits in the Mountains of Smoke, hidden from prying mortal eyes. Sometimes spirits escape the underworld and search the mountains for a wanderer that they can condemn to take their place in the rolls of Peklo. If they succeed, the spirit is freed, and the poor mortal never returns to the land of the living.

Be careful what you believe. Matushka is listening.

Ussuran Holidays

To pacify and live within the complicated supernatural world of gods and spiritual creatures, the ancient Ussuran tribes worked out a schedule of prayers and rituals. As civilization advanced, the calendar of seasons, holidays and traditions coagulated. Ceremonies were connected to the seasons and agricultural events, and are still observed today as they were a thousand years ago.

The year starts on Primus 1st. New Year celebrations (Theustide) lasts through a full 12 days of festivals and feasts. In ancient days, the 12 days of Theustide were known as Matushalia, the celebration of Mother Matushka and her eleven children. The Orthodoxy co-opted this time to create a celebration that honored both Matushka and Theus.

The largest "pagan" holiday is Shrovetide — a wild, raging welcoming of spring, with all that that implies, amid



preparations for a new farming season. The Church has taken steps to eliminate the celebration of Shrovetide along with its wild revels, but has not managed to stamp it out. Another major pagan celebration is the night of the Summer Equinox — a grand celebration, coupled with prayers to Matushka, calling for a long harvest season.

During the Winter Equinox, people in Ussura refuse to sleep through the longest night of the year. Instead, they stay awake, lighting large fires and carrying torches through the village while playing musical instruments. According to folklore, if people fall asleep during that night, they will be swallowed up by Vrost Dvoya, the spirit of nightfall. The evil spirit will carry them away, and they will never awaken to see the returning sun.

The last important holiday of the Ussurans is Thundermas, the day dedicated to Peroon, ancient god of thunderstorms. Unlike other Ussuran holidays, Thundermas is a sad and frightening holiday, reserved for fervent prayer and sacrifices of harvest fruits and toys. Thundermas placates Peroon, since the harvest has almost grown and any accident or brutal weather could destroy the crops before they could be harvested. The Orthodox church has altered Thundermas into St. Ilea's day, and holds the celebration (usually a somber and regal procession through the center of town), on Julius 20th.

The Fhideli

Ussura is composed of many ethnic minorities, all of who have (more or less) joined together beneath the unified banner of the Gaius. Only two groups have refused to conform to the dominant cultural standards, remaining true to their old beliefs and traditions. The first is the wild Kosars, discussed on pages 40-41. The second are far less brutal, but equally fierce in maintaining their independence. They call themselves the Tibesti; the Ussurans call them Fhideli, wandering nomads whose

brightly-colored caravans can be seen from the Drachenbergs to the Cathayan Firewall. They are known throughout Ussura for their festive music, acrobatic performances, traveling carnivals, and trickster's hearts. Those surface impressions, however, reveal very little about the vibrant culture beneath.

No one knows exactly how the Tibesti came into being, not even the Tibesti themselves. They claim to come from an island in the middle of the Mirror, exiled after an ancient war, but no proof of such a tale exists. What people do know is that a little over three hundred years ago, scattered bands of a mysterious, dark, foreign people began to wander the roads and countryside of Ussura, walking among the natives, but remaining forever outside. The first recorded encounters with them were in Somojez, in 1329. Over the centuries, they have been known by many names. Some call them "Tinkers," out of respect for their great skill in blacksmithing and craft work. Judgmental people sometimes call them vagabonds because of their nomadic lifestyle. The more romantic simply call them Travelers, a name they find quite endearing.

The last three hundred years have been an endless stream of distrust, mistreatment, and tragic misunderstandings for the Fhideli. Prejudice and bigotry against the Fhideli exist everywhere. Western nations consider them dangerous criminals who need to be brought under control. Only in Ussura have the Fhideli been allowed to truly thrive, but even there, they are looked on with pity and scorn. Because of this, Fhideli presence outside of Matushka's realm is very rare.

The Fhideli refuse to speak of their dead, limiting any discussion of their history to the recent past. What is known is that, almost from their first appearance in Ussura, they have enjoyed a special relationship with Matushka. Non-Fhideli (or *gadjo*) Ussurans sometimes look on this with envy, but don't begrudge them the frequent visits Matushka pays to various Travelers around Ussura.



Vitzi

There are four major clans (or *vitzi*) wandering in Ussura, and perhaps a dozen others spread out through the nation. The most influential and most famous are the Vitzi Basulde. They also happen to be the largest caravan in all of Théah. The Basulde's traditional migration route takes them through northern and western Ussura and sometimes even eastern Eisen (though the caravan has stayed out of Eisen since the War of the Cross). The Basulde have steadily increased their numbers over the past ten years, and what began as a large caravan has grown into a massive wagon train. Some of the new members undoubtedly belong to smaller vitzi who joined with the larger one for security. Others may be adopted from some of the *gadjo* villages that remain empty after the war in Eisen. Wherever the newcomers have come from, the Vitzi Basulde has more than doubled in size in the last decade. The Basulde are famous not only for their size, but also for their musicians. A visit from the Basulde can spark a festival atmosphere in the most dour town.

Vitzi Curara was once a familiar sight throughout western Ussura. Like the Basulde, they often ventured into Eisen, but during the War of the Cross they discovered that their neutrality meant nothing to either side. They fled into the relative safety of Ussura, adopting Eisen refugees and swearing off travel in Eisen's blood-soaked fields. The Curara are regarded as master blacksmiths, nearly equal in skill to the bladesmiths of Castille.

The Vitzi Munit travels throughout southern Ussura. While the Basulde seem to be the very image of the public face of the Fhideli, the Munit typify their secretive, insular side. The boyars find them even more of an annoyance than the other caravans, because no one can predict where they will appear next. They may camp in the woods outside Sousdal one week and then appear at the gates of St. Andresgorod the next. Some believe they use Porté, but to anyone who understands that form of sorcery the idea is absurd. The other Fhideli claim the Munit simply know where they need to be. Some Ussurans mutter darkly about the Munit's "powers," but unfortunate things seem to happen to those who investigate.



Finally, there are the Ursari. The Vitzi Ursari may not be as large as the Basulde or as frightening as the Munit, but they are famous throughout Ussura as animal trainers. Rumor has it that the keeper of *l'Empereur's* menagerie in Charouse belongs to the Ursari clan. In a country known for its close ties to the natural world, the Ursari have the closest bonds with animals of anyone not gifted with Pyeryem. Many vitzi have animal trainers among them, most of whom trained with the Ursari.

Customs and Traditions

Vayu

Vayu is the term Fhideli use for tradition. It is at the same time a religion, a philosophy, and a set of laws. The dictates of Vayu set down the rituals for every major event in a Fhideli's life. It is difficult to explain just what Vayu represents. Despite the Fhideli's seemingly universal adherence to it, Vayu is incredibly adaptive. If a Vaticine asked a Fhideli about Vayu, they would be told, convincingly, that it was simply the Fhideli way of honoring the Prophets. An Ussuran, on the other hand, would be told that it was based on the teachings of the First Prophet, with respect for Matushka thrown in for good measure. Though both explanations may be true, there is a note of pragmatism in the answers.

The Fhideli find gadjo truth to be unnecessarily stiff. A gadjo finds one fact, brushes away anything that is not absolutely proven, and holds it up as the truth. The Fhideli, on the other hand, do not recognize any single truth. A Fhideli may proudly stand up and say “I am a horse thief!” while the fact is, he has never stolen a horse in his life. That he intends to be is enough to make the statement true.

Under that line of thinking, everyone’s opinion is true. The First Prophet was Theus’s only Prophet. The Third Prophet showed the only way to salvation. The Vaticine is the only arbiter of Theus’s will. No human institution can arbitrate the divine. These statements are all believed to be true by some, which, to the Fhideli way of thinking, makes them true for all.

While some may see this as a charming way to see life, it does cause distrust among the gadjo. If a Fhideli jeweler tells a customer that the bracelet he is selling is pure gold, and the customer believes him, then to the Fhideli way of thinking, he has told the truth. If, on the other hand, the customer does not believe, then the jeweler was “obviously mistaken,” and will change his story.

Leadership

Almost no one in the outside world knows that Fhideli society is matriarchal. The Fhideli take care to hide this fact, presenting the gadjo with men as their leaders while the women run the caravan behind the scenes. The *vadins*, or speakers of a caravan, are usually men, but they rarely make hard decisions. They and the other men scout ahead, hunt, read and make trail signs, and attend to other small matters concerning day-to-day life. The *sanat*, usually the eldest woman, decides the larger issues: when they come and go, where they will winter, and the “serious questions” concerning gadjo.

This partnership between sanat and vadin has existed since time immemorial. The sanat is almost always a woman – only on rare occasions would such a title be conferred upon a man. She is sometimes a healer, or maybe even a *jivanti* (a sort of shaman or witch) but she always has a gift for leadership. She makes the important decisions for the caravan, leaving the vadin to handle the details. The sanat

may call on others for their opinions, forming a council of sorts. The vadin is almost always an integral part of this council, since he and the other men often interact most directly with the gadjo. In a crisis, all the members of the vitzi have a voice – even the unmarried and children. A vote may be taken, but this is not a democracy – the sanat ultimately decides. A sanat who makes bad decisions won’t last long, since her authority is based on respect and the willingness of others to give her responsibility.

In addition to leadership functions, the sanat also judges conflicts between vitzi members. On questions of law she relies on Vayu, and when tradition fails she must consult her own conscience. In Fhideli life has no place for vengeance, which is considered unhealthy and dangerous to the vitzi. Justice, however, is a different matter; if someone wants justice they probably deserve it.

If a conflict between vitzi members degenerates into violence the sanat may use the full force of her authority and have one side or the other banished from the vitzi – to travel on their own or join another caravan. The rest of the Fhideli then actively work to keep the feuding parties apart. Fortunately, such clashes are rare.

Freedom and Duty

Fhideli prize freedom, but consider it both a treasure and a burden. Fhideli freedom means that they may pursue life as they wish, but must accept the consequences of their actions, including choices that break the laws of their host nation, such as thievery. This is called choosing the dangerous path of freedom, and sometimes runs in direct conflict with their other valued virtue: duty.

The highest expression of duty is sacrificing oneself for the continued freedom of the vitzi. The next is marriage and parenthood. These activities are considered the best way to live and assure the preservation of one’s soul, and are called the sensible path, or the path of wisdom. Fhideli children learn that life holds choices, and that each choice holds dozens of consequences. An appreciation of cause and effect, of teamwork, camaraderie and of family, is drilled into their heads.

Fhideli duty also includes helping those in need, which serves as a quiet way of paying back their host nation for any liberties, perceived or real, that the Fhideli have taken. Fhideli pride themselves on being excellent hosts and generously share their meager possessions with strangers in need. They believe that all actions in life eventually meet with consequences and that the balance is constantly readjusting. This scale reflects individuals' actions, as well as groups of people's actions. Theft to Fhideli truly means a borrowed value, for tomorrow or even years down the road, they will return the value, perhaps with interest.

Life in the Caravan

The Fhideli live nomadic lives, and their caravans have developed unique means of meeting their daily requirements. The caravan on the move is often quiet, allowing them to hunt as they go. A caravan encamped for long periods of time in the country will set snares to supplement the hunt. The Fhideli keep constant watch on the road; dangers and threats are dealt with quickly.

Once encamped, the caravan takes on a festive atmosphere. The Fhideli love music and play quite often, both to amuse themselves, and to gain the attention of the gadjo. The music both attracts outsiders and then drives them away when they tire of it. Encamped Fhideli have games, spectacles, and music for the entertainment of the gadjo. They also devote space to crafts such as tanning, leatherwork, lace-making, and blacksmithing. Naturally, with so much traffic and activity of humans and animals the camp rapidly becomes filthy. The Fhideli let it stay that way because it also keeps the gadjo at a distance. In contrast to the music of the camp, the gay colors of wagons, and filth of the grounds, the wagons themselves remain spotless inside, sedate and restful spaces that would satisfy even the most ascetic priest.

Marriage

Marriage is probably the most important celebration in a Fhideli's life. Only those who have been married receive a voice in the vitzi's affairs. This is not to say that the unmarried have no voice, but their status usually negates their vote. Fhideli marriages are often arranged; if the

children are still under ten then there will only be a betrothal ceremony instead of a formal marriage. After the betrothal ceremony the two families build a wagon for the new couple. Courtship or arrangements for the marriage cannot begin if the groom (or his family) cannot provide the horses to draw the wagon. Haggling for marriage arrangements may occupy a whole caravan for months. No child can be forced to marry against his or her will of course, but they may have to work hard for their voice to be heard. Fhideli marriages are for life; to abandon one's spouse — whatever the reason — would be *prastlo*, dishonorable. If a man abuses his wife, her father may come and reclaim her, but this must be done judiciously. A judgment will probably be arranged — usually a settlement with the groom's family to mitigate the loss of the bride's price. Fhideli choose their couplings carefully, so as to avoid untrustworthy fathers who might abuse this system.

Death

The Fhideli celebrate all aspects of life, including death. They usually cremate the bodies, followed by a series of *pacheeve*, or death feasts, which are held about three, six, and twelve months after death. Relatives tell stories of the *mulangro's* (deceased's) life, celebrate the contributions he or she made, and slowly give away his or her belongings to those who wish to honor them by carrying such items. After a year, any remaining belongings must be burned. From then on, the Fhideli do not speak of *mulangro*; otherwise, they might come back as *mulo*, or ghosts.

Gadjo

Gadjo do not understand life, the Fhideli say. They do not understand the balance of things, the way to live life to its fullest and why to do so. The gadjo appreciate some things and discard others with no logic. They talk of honor but fail to appreciate that honor is nothing without integrity. They often forget why they do what they do, especially in matters concerning status. They live their lives unconsciously, with little attention to why they live the way they do. The gadjo forget that life is difficult and requires thought.

Despite that, the Fhideli still watch gadjo culture. On occasion, some sacrifice their freedom by seeking jobs as

servants for the gadjo. They do this in order to gather information for the Fhideli elders. In this way the sanats can keep tabs on what changes are coming that may affect the people. Only the wiliest are sent on this onerous duty; constantly mingling with the gadjo risks having their ways rub off on oneself, or worse, being hurt by gadjo intrigues.

The gadjo have many stories of children being stolen by Tibesti, to be raised as their own, sold into slavery, or worse (the stories warn against eating the stew in a Tibesti camp on nights of the new moon). While none of this is true, the Fhideli adopt stray and lost children quite happily, rarely bothering to check if the child has living relatives – if the family cared, the child would have been found.

Memlo

One aspect of Fhideli culture that gadjo simply do not understand is the concept of *memlo*, or defilement. Memlo defines matters between men and women, and represents a wide variety of taboos. Most aspect of memlo concern distinction and separation. For example, a woman may wash a man's clothing, but it should be separate from any woman's clothing. The water used for washing clothes should not be used for bathing and vice versa. Naturally, neither is used for cleaning dishes or cooking. A man will not touch women's clothing in public. A woman may dishonor or defile a man by touching him with her skirts. A Fhideli woman does not reveal her ankles. This code is less stringent for children and older women but tradition usually encourages it anyway. Failure to adhere to these taboos – and countless others like them – results in disgrace, ridicule and even harsher penalties.

The Grand Kris

The Fhideli gather together every two years for a meeting called the Grand Kris. Sometimes this is within a gadjo city, but if their numbers become too great it moves to the countryside. Gatherings allow for exchange of news, ideas, stories, fostering of children, settling of legal disputes between vitzi, holding of death feasts, and for the most important Vayu rituals. Representatives of all the Fhideli in every nation will also meet every ten years for the same

purposes. It is not uncommon for a Grand Kris to last an entire summer; some vitzi arrive after it is under way, and others leave early for various reasons.

The Naditi

The first of the Naditi were encountered on the Ussuran road as the Vitzi Basulde was just reentering the country, in the first biting snows of fall ten years ago. They were in shock. Most had recent memories of being on a boat, but there was no large body of water nearby. It became apparent that these people, who only spoke the ancient Fhideli tongue, were living shadows of the past. Their fragmented memories were of an ancient war with mythical demons and the loss of the Fhideli homeland. They were adopted into the Basulde Vitzi, and the vitzi has since encountered and adopted several dozen more. Nona of the Basulde (see pages 80–81 and 121) believes that these newcomers have arrived from the true home of the Tisbesti – the mythical island from which they came – and has taken to calling them “Naditi,” which means “free,” for they have been freed from their insubstantial prison.

Matushka and the Tibesti

One of the reasons the Ussurans tolerate the Fhideli is because they seem to have the tacit approval of Matushka. The Fhideli themselves call her Haimati, and have their own set of legends involving her. Like the Ussuran tales, Haimati is seen as powerful, benevolent, terrifying, vengeful, and caring – often in the same story. Haimati supposedly drops in on vitzi without warning, sometimes sharing fire and counsel with the sanat and the vadin. The Fhideli's tradition of generosity partially stems from these stories, for no one wishes to turn Grandmother Winter away.

Once in a great while, Haimati walks into a vitzi's camp with a small child in tow. She entrusts the child to the caravan's care, to be raised as a Fhideli. She never tells anyone where the child came from originally, nor does she react kindly to questions on the subject. The entire vitzi is expected to see to the child's upbringing and welfare. To do otherwise would be to risk Haimati's displeasure.





Hero

The Boyars

Ilya “Grozny” Sladivgorod Nikolovich

Ilya, son of Nikolai Nikolovich is the first Gaius in history who was born to a previous Gaius. His ascension to the throne of Ussura is a tragic tale of deception and villainy, which deserves to be told and retold until Ussura has learned the extent of her dark fate.

Ilya’s father — an unassuming farmer before Matushka marked him to lead — lost his first wife and son in an assassination attempt shortly before his coronation. Unable to allow himself to love another, Nikolai gave in to political pressures and took a noble wife from Montaigne, Chevaliene Rois et Reines. Because of her machinations, Nikolai tricked Matushka and played upon the goddess’s good graces (*see page 23*). Taking advantage of Matushka’s hastily-given promise to give the boy any birth-present within her power, Nikolai demanded that his son become Gaius after him — effectively assuring Ilya the full status of a boyar and the regency of Ussura, something never before done.

Nikolai had no children after Ilya — perhaps a mark of Matushka’s scorn — and because of that, the child grew up favored and spoiled. His mother demanded that he learn from Montaigne and Eisen scholars, not Ussuran. She brought in the finest tutors of both countries to educate him. It served to make young Ilya scornful of all things

Ussuran, and he developed a fascination with the Order of St. Gregor, a famous unit of Eisen military elite. As a boy, he dressed in their uniform whenever he could, donning Ussuran fashion only when cajoled and bribed by his doting father — usually for some official state gathering.

When Ilya was seven, he saw a portrait of a young Eisen beauty named Katerina Fischler — sister to Baron Faulk Fischler — and became instantly smitten. The portrait had traveled through the noble courts in the hopes of earning Katerina a royal husband, and although she was twice his age, he demanded to meet her immediately. Faulk Fischler’s fortunes were slowly declining, and when the Gaius invited Katerina to his court for the winter, the Baron rapidly agreed.

When he saw her, Ilya’s infatuation exploded into full-blown obsession. He commanded his guard to follow her everywhere, and took up all of her time. When the day came for her to return home, Ilya threw a screaming fit, threatening to kill himself if his father did not prevent her from leaving. He swore eternal love to the girl and declared that Katerina would one day be his bride. Nikolai and his wife, terrified by their son’s childish fits, agreed to his demands. They sent a letter to the Fischlers (who were preparing to leave) formally offering a lucrative food-for-arms treaty in exchange for her hand. After a hurried discussion with his sister, Faulk signed the treaty and left her behind. Katerina never returned to Eisen, and the marriage was scheduled for the day of the Gaius’s formal succession — Ilya’s sixteenth birthday.

Then, when Ilya was nine, the Gaius and his wife died. The official record states that they were skating on the nearby river and the ice fell through, but Ilya knows the truth. He watched Pavtlow guardsmen sneak into his parents’ room, binding them and carrying them to the icy Ekaterina. He stood at his window as the soldiers threw them into the fast-running water through a hole that had been carved into the ice, and he recognized each of the men’s faces. They were not stelets. They were Adaryat, servants of the Novgorov family. Ten minutes after Ilya saw his father’s face slide beneath the ice of the Proliv Ekaterina, his own hair turned snow white.

The boyars took the new Gaius and spent the next seven years moving him between the cities of Ekatnava, Sousdal and Sladivgorod. They desired to turn him into their puppet, and began a regimen of unsurpassed cruelty in an effort to break the child's will. They had only a few years to do it – Ilya would formally take the throne at age sixteen – but felt confident that he would break long before then. He was tortured mercilessly, treated like a dog, and kept in a small kennel within the royal chambers. His only mercy came from the churches of Sousdal, where mute monks cared for him during the winter season. Unfortunately, they could do nothing to aid his escape and his suffering continued at the boyars' hands. The Knias Douma, namely Markov v'Novgorov and Drako Goroduk Stanimirov v'Pietrov, ruled Ussura in Ilya's stead, forging his name to certificates and creating false reasons to cover the boy's constant absence from court. The Riasnova, Vladimirovich and Pskov families were apparently not aware of Ilya's trials (although Ilya has since come to believe that the ruling Knias of Somojez turned a blind eye rather than fight against two superior powers).

When Ilya was fifteen he tried to escape his captors, fleeing into the snowy wasteland to the north of Sladivgorod in an effort to cross the Mountains of Smoke to Pavtlow. In the midst of the howling weather, he received a visit from a tremendous flame – a firebird, traveling the region for reasons of her own. The creature curled herself around his body to keep him from dying of the extreme cold. By the time his captors found him, the firebird had gone – but the Gaius lived.

Less than a year later, just before his formal succession, a unit of Tamara v'Riasanova's guards led by their Knias arrived in Sladivgorod. She demanded to pay tribute to the Gaius on his way to his coronation. As a Knias, she could not be refused – and as soon as she approached the boy, she transformed into a terrible bird of fire and flame, the same creature who had protected him on that snowy night. Since that day, Ilya has shown undying gratitude to the Riasanova family, who came to his aid when things looked their worst.

Now freed and in complete command of the nation, Ilya took sweet revenge on those who had persecuted him. His torturers were all subjected to the same cruelties they had inflicted on him, while his boyar "hosts" were impaled upon pikes. Drako v'Pietrov had unfortunately died a few months earlier, but as for Markov v'Novgorov, Ilya had him brought before the Royal court of Pavtlow, and fed to the very dogs with whom he had forced the young Gaius to share a kennel. Ilya married his bride the day of his coronation, as he had intended, but the spoiled young boy he had once been had vanished. In his place was a bitter, cruel, and uncompromising man.



Ilya "Grozny" Sladivgorod Niklovich

Today, Ilya rules with an iron fist. He devours books like starving men eat food, desperate to catch up for the years of study he lost, and his early enthusiasm for Eisen culture has been augmented by a renewed interest in Ussura itself. He studies his nation's history avidly and hopes to make Ussura a dominant world power someday. He has learned to fight in the Bogatyr school, and has mastered the art of Pyeryem. As with all Gaius, he is the only man in the world with the ability to turn into the white-furred Arkanun tiger, and also has the ability to strip the gift of Pyeryem away from any boyar — even in animal form — whenever he wants.

Matushka did not attend Ilya's coronation, an unprecedented snub which has caused a great deal of concern among the boyars — expressed as whispers and knowing nods at court. None dare speak openly, however. Those who suggest that Ilya is not the true Gaius, or that his power does not stem from Matushka herself, have been hanged in Pavtlow's central square.

For all that, he remains hugely popular with the *muzhiks*, who view him as their protector from the tyranny of the boyars. He directs most of his wrath towards the upper class, for whom he has nothing but contempt, and though he has little sympathy for the peasants only a few have suffered his direct anger. Since he does not actively persecute them, they support his rule and treat his title of "Grozny" ("Terrible") as a mark of affection. Should his sadism ever turn on them, however, he may find his popularity vanishing like melted snow.

Ilya is a big man for his nineteen years, with sturdy muscles and a bulky frame built by years of physical exertion and torture. His long white hair coils down his back like unfettered snakes, twisting into curls partway down. His blue eyes are piercing and cold, and his quiet voice holds the chill ring of a tyrant. He speaks very seriously, and tries to keep a tight rein on his emotions. When he loses control, his anger is a truly terrible thing

Ketheryna Fischler Dimitritova

Katerina, or Ketheryna as she is now called, was born in Eisen as the daughter of a poor fisherman. Her older brother Faulk believed that he could find a dracheneisen mine and help his family rise from poverty. His sister idolized him, and firmly believed that if any man on earth could do it, it would be her brother. And find it he did. She stood by his side — a mere six years old — when he carried a sample of the dracheneisen to the Emperor, and received the title of Baron. Their parents had not survived to see the day; only Katerina remained to support her brother in his new life.

As it turned out, he desperately needed her; their old friends saw them as no more than a money-purse, and the established nobles of Eisen looked down on them as peasant-pretenders. Through it all, Katerina stayed at her brother's side, proving a capable means of emotional support — and more importantly, a trusted friend and responsible advisor, for as young as she was, her intelligence and political acumen were quite extraordinary.

When she turned 13, a Montaigne painter rendered a portrait of Katerina which was then carried through several countries in the hopes of finding her a noble husband. Although Katerina did not wish to leave her brother's side, both realized that their new fiefdom would starve if she did not secure a respectable political marriage. Most nations regarded her as poorly as her Eisen peers did, but one had a decidedly different reaction. The Fischler barony was stunned to receive a letter from the Gaius of Ussura himself, asking respectfully for the young beauty to come and visit Pavtlow, the capital of all Ussura.

Excited, but sad at the prospect of parting, Katerina and Faulk began the journey to Pavtlow. They were met in Freiburg by the Eisen Emperor himself at an unexpected gathering. He asked them to dinner; they had no choice but to obey. The Emperor was polite, but seemed to be comparing Katerina to some unknown standard. At last, he allowed them to leave Eisen and continue on their way. His guards accompanied them as far as the border, leaving them with the enigmatic message: "Show the Gaius your steel, girl, and remember your roots are in Eisen."



Ketheryna Fischler Dimitritova

When Katerina arrived in Pavtlow, she expected to be one of many bridal candidates for the young Ilya. She was surprised by two things: first, that the princeling was only seven, and second, that he had already become infatuated with her. A kindly soul, Katerina spent her time with him, helping him with his studies and playing games with him. When the time came for her to leave Ussura, Gaius Nikolai came to her and proposed marriage on behalf of his son – provided she would convert from her Objectionist beliefs to Ussuran Orthodoxy. After speaking with her brother, a tearful Katerina agreed. She would never see Eisen again.

The Patriarch himself performed the wedding ceremony as she formally accepted the teachings of the Orthodox

church, and for nearly two years the newly renamed Ketheryna was the belle of the Ussuran court. Then, the unthinkable happened, and another strand of chaos entered the young girl's life.

The Gaius and his wife died unexpectedly in an accident, and Ilya became so grief-stricken that his advisors isolated him behind barricades of doctors, primitive magicians and priests. Ketheryna demanded to see him, as a wife's duty, but the nobles entrusted with his care repeatedly refused her. His illness was so great, she was told, that it could spread to the court if the Gaius were not kept in strict quarantine. Ilya was moved to Ekaternava, and Ketheryna remained alone in Pavtlow. Though the rightful Gaius, as the heir to the throne and chosen by Matushka (a confusing paradigm to the young girl), Ilya vanished behind his confinement, and his bride-to-be became the loneliest person in the Ussuran court. Should her fiancé return, she would be powerful (too powerful to anger), but if he never reappeared, then she would be no more than the smallest footnote in history – a comfortable exile and nothing more.

Ketheryna would remain alone for seven years, but she did not waste the time. She had only three true friends and allies during that period: her maidservant, a distant cousin to the noble line of Gallenia named Leonore; the Avalon ambassador, Sir Thomas Merriday; and an Orthodox priest, her confessor, Egor Belofsky. Ketheryna read the history of Ussura, studied the politics, memorized the legal treatises, leaned to speak the language like a native, and even studied her husband-to-be's military and strategic texts. She spent her time not with the boyars, but with the muzhiks, using her small influence at court to save the lives of those unjustly accused by the Knias Douma. In her own way, she was protecting her fiancé, retaining his position in the face of Ussura's *de facto* rulers.

When Belofsky discovered that Ilya was being held in Sladivgorod, Ketheryna sent a secret message to Knias Tamara v'Riasanova, via Leonore's family. The information she provided allowed the Gallenian troops to locate and free the young Gaius before his coronation.

Ketheryna expected many things when Ilya returned; what she did not expect was a monster. His incarceration and torture had turned the spoiled, happy young prince she knew into a bitter, vengeful man. Though grateful for her aid, Ilya did not listen to her pleas for leniency as he levied harsh taxes against the boyars who had been party to his captivity. She now fears for the future of the country, and the muzhiks have seen that her heart is true. Though they respect Ilya, they speak in gentle tones about the “doting mother” of Ussura that rules at his side. She is their hope and their savior, and they would do anything for her.

Now, Ketheryna spends her time assisting Ilya as best she can, using her knowledge to advise him privately and to prevent more butchery among the boyars. She is not allowed to sit at the Knias council, but often sews quietly in the corner with her maidservant during their meetings. She is aware of all that transpires in Ussura, and knows that the boyars are deeply ensnared in their war against Montegue.

Recently, she has begun to suspect that one of the Knias is actively working against the Ussuran war effort. Although everyone knows that Aleksi v'Novgorov hates Ilya bitterly, she cannot believe that the Knias would allow his people to be butchered for old rivalries. Someone else is responsible – but Ketheryna has yet to prove her theories. Ilya has no idea of her suspicions, for if she told him, would most likely have a hundred heads removed – innocent and guilty alike – within hours. Until she can prove such treachery and unmask those responsible, Ketheryna remains silent. She uses her contacts among the servants and lesser boyars to track troop movements and supplies, aware that eventually something must fall into her hands.

Only then will she act.

Aleksi Pavtlow Markov v'Novgorov

Son of Markov v'Novgorov, Aleksi is now ruler of powerful Rurik and Knias of Ekatnava, Donskoy and the lands of an ancient people. He watches as a foreign power invades his lands, turning his people into refugees from Montegue's armies, and yet he is not disturbed in the least.

All of Ussura knows that Aleksi fights this war for his people, and not for the Gaius. There is no love lost between the two men, and the only reason that Ilya has not placed Aleksi on a spike for treason is because the Gaius does not have popular support in Rurik. Should he act against Aleksi, the province might well revolt – and a revolution in the middle of a war is the last thing Ussura needs.

Aleks considers Ilya to be a blasphemy against Ussura. He is of the boyar, yet he is Gaius. And if a boyar is to rule Ussura, it should not be this useless, vengeful beast. Aleks regrets that his father, Markov, did not simply destroy Ilya when he had the chance. If Aleks is given the same opportunity, he will not be so generous.

When Aleks was eighteen, the Gaius emerged from his captivity and wreaked a horrible revenge on his tormentors. Aleks watched with his mother as Ilya fed his father to their dogs. Although he openly showed controlled anger, in truth, he was not perturbed. Markov's death fueled Aleks's own ambitions – to become a god.

It sounds ludicrous, but Aleks believes he knows the way. He conversed through coded letters with a man in Vodacce named Caligari, a man with similar views and ideals. Together, they have come to an understanding, and the information they share has taken Aleks further than he ever dreamed. He has no designs on Ussura – who would waste time on the politics and nations of mortal man when one can become an immortal being?

Matushka is not infallible; she can be tricked. After all, Ilya is Gaius. If she is not infallible, then she is neither omnipotent nor omniscient. If she can be tricked, then she can be destroyed, and another can take her place. The only question is... how? Aleks's search for an answer consumes his every waking moment.

In the meantime, he fights a war against the invading Montaigne – a war of insanity and foolishness. He has no dislike for Montegue, though the man's ludicrous invasion has interrupted Aleks's immense ambitions. Aleks is willing to throw hundreds of muzhik in Montegue's path and let them sacrifice themselves against Montaigne swords,



Aleksi Pavtlow Markov v'Novgorov

as long as he can continue his true work. Besides, the war keeps Matushka too busy to pay attention elsewhere.

Aleksi is a tall man, wiry and muscular despite his slender build. He is a taciturn ruler, allowing his advisors to handle all but the most important decisions of the province. His eyes glow a brilliant green with the power of his Pyeryem – he has mastered many forms other than his family's spirit skin. Historians consider him one of the most dangerous Knias ever born in Rurik, taking the form and function of the Dire Wolf as readily as breathing. He may be the most dangerous man in Ussura, restrained only by his limits of the war and his long-term ambitions.

It would be best not to anger him.

Staver Siev Aryaov v'Vladimirovich

Veche, dark land of tyrants and blood. The very name brings to mind images of insanity and crumbling keeps on dark mountaintops. Their Domiator, the Knias of Veche, rules from the city of Siev, on the edge of the haunted forests that ring Veche's cold heart.

And as befits the ruler of such country, Knias Staver is completely mad. He is an older man, nearly 70, and yet shows no signs of becoming physically infirm. He has a firm grip on his territory despite his madness, and when he chooses to integrate himself into the politics of Veche, he always acts with an iron hand and a clear mind – surprisingly lucid for a man who isolates himself beneath the grand palace at Siev, building thousands of small, intricate clockwork gadgets.

Forty years ago Staver served as an important but unremarkable diplomat. His parents, though eccentric, rarely interfered in the political climate of Veche, allowing the boyars and Voevods to run the country almost entirely without Knias control. However, Staver was impressionable, and looking at the rising fortunes of Rurik and Somojez he became determined to bring Veche out of the superstitious dark ages. Though filled with pagan ideals and strange magic, it had strength that few outside its borders could see. Staver believed he could import new technologies, encourage the Orthodox church, and bring about a new era of enlightenment for his shadowed land.

He traveled through Vodacce, Avalon and Eisen, looking for scholars to return with him. Few accepted his proposals, but he continued to search. Eventually, he sailed into the Crescent Empire, hoping to find academics there who would aid him in his quest.

What he truly found there drove him mad.

Staver returned to Siev on the 50th anniversary of his parents' marriage. At first, all seemed well. He announced that he would marry his childhood sweetheart, a boyar from Malaya, and that he was ready to accept the crown of the Knias. Then he demanded that the servants clean the caverns and iron prisons beneath the palace at Siev for his

own use, and moved an entire caravan of equipment from Cathay and the Crescent Empire into the chambers as soon as they were ready. The guards who escorted the caravan from Malaya were all blue-turbaned Crescents. After moving the equipment into the lower dungeons, the Crescents burned the entire caravan, and committed ritual suicide the following night as Staver watched in silence.

Since then, he has all but vanished beneath the lower dungeons of the Siev Palace. No others have entered, and boyars know better than to trouble him when he descends those terrible stairs. He rarely leaves the city, save to attend meetings of the Knias Douma, and even then he returns as quickly as he can. For more than thirty years he has never



Staver Siev Aryaov v'Vladimirovich

left Ussura. Every five years, a blue-turbaned emissary from the Crescent Empire visits him, then commits suicide. Three years later, Staver sends a return envoy into the Crescent Empire, to some unknown destination. These messengers never return.

His madness has not had an entirely negative effect. Staver has rebuilt the palace at Siev from a crumbling museum into a marvel of modern technology. Obsessed with clockwork, he has designed elaborate patterns of mosaic tiles throughout the hallways and created new rooms and stairwells. Occasionally, he brings his work from below the palace into his common chambers — clockwork wonders with strangely moving parts: krashenka eggs that sing or spout small metal flowers, or cunning toy soldiers that march and fire puffs of smoke at intervals. Yet for all his marvelous creations, Staver seems eternally dissatisfied. Nothing holds his interest for long, save whatever mysteries he keeps ensconced in the dungeons.

Staver has a son and a daughter, both of whom grew up with their mother at Valaamzhensky Palace in the Mountains of Smoke. He had little to do with their upbringing, and they have turned into more traditional Vechens. Apraksia is a tall, thin woman with none of her mother's grace but all of her father's brilliant mind. She defied his offhanded choice of husband, and has since been "exiled" to the small city of Koloi. His son, Fveryot, was born surgically after his mother attempted to hurl herself from the Valaamzhensky Palace walls. Raised by muzhik servants, he has fallen deeply into the myth and superstition of their homeland. Fveryot embraces ancient Veche ritual and practices traditions that have not been kept since the time of the last Tomiech Domiator.

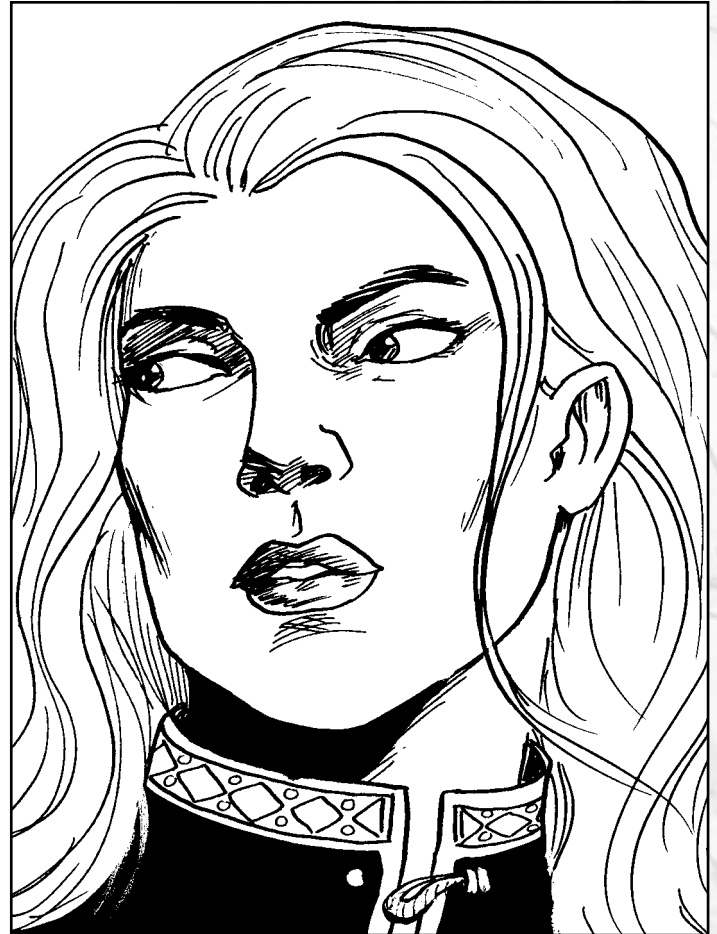
Staver publically claims Fveryot as his heir; his daughter has been entirely removed from the ruling lineage of Veche until she repents. The people of Veche dread Fveryot's ascendancy, and expect that it will mean a return to the dark ways and old customs of their grandparents' days. Staver rarely rises from his crypts and dungeons long enough to care.

Tamara Breslau Fyodnava v'Riasanova

The ruling Knias of Gallenia is a no-nonsense woman with intellect as well as beauty. She was born in Breslau during a celestial occurrence known as the Night of the Dragon – a Cathayan festival that occurs only once every five hundred years. Shortly after the child's fortuitous birth, an "emissary" appeared through the Firewall and traveled to bless the child in the Sud'ya tradition. As a gift, he gave her father a sword and instructed him to present it to the little girl when she reached the proper age. "She will be strong at arm, and strong in mind. She shall know the light of truth, but she will die in darkness." With that, he turned and left, and the court of Gallenia found themselves unable to stop him. He has not been seen since.

The Cathayan's words have haunted Tamara since her birth, and shaped her life. Her mother refused to allow the child to ever be placed in complete darkness, and Tamara has always had a candle, fire, or other source of light illuminating her chambers, even while she sleeps. Servants received royal commands to keep the child's fireplace constantly stoked while she was growing up. Living at the edge of the Firewall, she has never known true night and never experienced real darkness of any sort. An adept fencer, Tamara earned the strange Cathayan's sword by the time she was fourteen, and has worn it constantly ever since. Her first love affair ended disastrously, when she learned the meaning of the prophecy's first proclamation.

No one can lie to Tamara. It is impossible. Speakers can think of the lie, but by the time it passes their lips, they find that they have spoken only the truth – or they have not spoken at all. This strange gift – and the early incidents it caused – convinced her father to pass the duties of the Knias to Tamara, rather than to his oldest daughter or first-born son (a year younger than Tamara). This has not bothered Tamara's sister, Dauntaina, who never cared for rulership, but Tamara's younger brother Dreng (her father's only son) thought differently. He would have seized the throne shortly after their father's death had he not spontaneously told his sister about the arsenic in her wine. When she responded by asking him how he knew, he blurted out, "Because I poisoned it, you idiot."



Tamara Breslau Fyodnava v'Riasanova

Rather than sentencing Dreng to death or imprisoning him, Tamara allowed the youth to reside with their mother in the Sud'ya convent at Astradastan in the southern mountains. The young man, now nearly 30, resents his sister's post and has tried to escape on numerous occasions during his 10-year "retreat." Thus far, he has not succeeded.

Tamara keeps a lonely life, unable to bear the protestations of unfaithful lovers compelled by the prophecy to reveal their baser indiscretions. She has no husband, and does not live in the official Gallenian capital of Sredbirskyoye. Instead, she remains in Breslau, and keeps the Firewall as her companion.

She has two goals in life: first, to find the true Firebird, the creature whose spirit skin she carries as Knias. It has not been seen in years, though it once flew over Breslau as often as the seasons changed. Tamara considers its absence a bad omen, and believes that the Firebird must be located and freed from whatever has held it captive for so long. Her second goal is to aid the Gaius however she can. He is the only man who has never lied to her, and despite their difference in age, Tamara respects him. Though cruel and tyrannical, Ilya fiercely defends Ussuran beliefs and history. She knows that the other Knias kept her in the dark for the first years of her rulership, and resents them for it. When she received Ketheryna's letter about Ilya, she helped free the young Prince from his captors. The two have a mutual respect, and Tamara intends to honor it unto death.

Her goal causes her to watch the young beauty at Ilya's side with both gratitude and hatred. Ketheryna has proven an ideal wife; something Tamara could never achieve. It only adds to Tamara's resentment and distress. Though she has no reason to dislike Ketheryna and every reason to like her, she keeps an icy shoulder turned toward Ilya's bride.

The beauteous Tamara is in her mid-thirties but appears younger, and despite her cold stoicism, resonates with intelligence and energy. She wears her long hair loose and dresses in lightweight clothing. The infamous Ussuran cold never bothers her, and only the fiercest blizzards can compel her to wear heavy furs. The Cathayan's mysterious sword hangs on her hip at all times. She rarely unsheathes it without drawing blood.

Borin St. Andresgorod v'Pscov

Borin is a small, portly man whose common looks conceal a cunning mind. He is the first son in a tremendously large family – his father had three wives and seventeen children. Of the children, only six had the gift of Pyeryem, and the rest were summarily sent into distant Eisen, where various noble families adopted them. Borin cannot easily remember where most of them went, much less to find what became of them after they left. He doesn't care, so long as they don't show up on his doorstep begging for money.

Since an early age, Borin wanted to be a swordsman. An injury with an axe ruined his plans to be Ussura's greatest fighter, and instead he turned his strategic cunning toward a more financial goal. He is without a doubt the wealthiest man in Ussura, and probably one of the richest individuals in the world. As with most misers, he refuses to part with an ounce of his money.

Although the Knias of Somojez technically commands the Tyomny, Borin is bored by their posturing. He shares the Gaius's fascination with Eisen soldiers, and employs three legions of Eisen mercenaries to "instruct the Tyomny in their duties with the blade." Though Ilya seems pleased with their "education," the decision has not gone over well with the native Somojans, nor with Borin's troops. Matushka's wrath and Montegue's passage have blackened the northern lands of Somojez, a Montaigne governor rules Odyesse, and yet Borin does little besides wrangle his Tyomny into sparring matches against Eisen mercenaries. He has arranged for trade to continue in the small village of Govny (just west of Odyesse) during the Montaigne "impasse," but while this has allowed the muzhik in the north to be fed, it does little for their country's pride.

Without proper aid from their penny-pinching Knias, the Tyomny have struggled against Montegue: outgunned, outclassed, and forced to retreat at every turn. Borin claims that if he can find a vein of dracheneisen on his side of the Drachenbergen mountains, he can force Fauner Pösen of Eisen to ally with him against the Montaigne in return for the mine. To expedite this goal, Borin has hired several groups of scouts and miners (the least expensive, of course – usually nothing more than Eisen fortune-hunters wishing to become Barons) to scour the western edge of his provinces.

Borin's family holds the spirit-skin of a legendary Drachen. This creature has no equivalent in Ussuran myth, and presumably surrendered its skin to an early Knias (most legends place this victory in the hands of Svyatogor Muron, hero of ancient Somojez). These same legends state that the Drachen's spiritual essence keeps the Firbor giants imprisoned beneath the Drachenbergs.



Borin St. Andresgorod v'Pscov

Whatever those legends might say about his family, Borin ignores them. He is far more interested in politics and commerce to worry about war and myths. At night, he rises from his bed to count his gold, stored in secret coffer throughout each of his palaces. His two wives ignore his strange routines, and speak to no one of it; his five children are raised by private schools throughout Ussura and Montaigne, and know little of their father, his obsessive greed, or his political issues.

The Tabularius of the Faith is, ironically, not a very faithful man. Too consumed with commerce and gain, he rarely attends public church services, and spends his time organizing his merchants in Vodacce, Montaigne, and

Eisen. With ports on both ends of Somojez and holding the reins from the rest of Théah into the central Ussuran provinces, Borin has a great deal on his hands. He retains a personal bishop to come and take his prayers twice a week – a session that the servants say consists of the bishop reading aloud from the Canon of the Prophet, while Borin ignores him and does accounting.

Koshchei

“Clever father, clever daughter; clever mother, clever son.”

– Ussuran proverb

Over a thousand years ago, Koshchei was born.

He remembers the first Knias Douma, the first Gaius, and the formation of five kingdoms into a unified nation. He ruled Molhyna in the early sixth century, and was by all accounts a perfectly normal man at the time. When Matushka came to him in 523 with her wishes for unifying Ussura, he vigorously opposed her, hoping to forge his own kingdom into a mighty power. He continued his opposition, even after Matushka proved her power by wiping out Johann von der Velde’s invading army. Then she took him aside and whispered a few words to him in private. Whatever she said sobered him, turned his face as pale as chalk, and rapidly changed his vote.

Shortly thereafter, Koshchei abdicated his throne in Molhyna in favor of his son, Franczek. He laid some conditions on his abdication, however. He himself would retain the seat on the Knias Council, and would speak for Molhyna in that body. The new ruler would control internal working in Molhyna, and see to it that things continued to progress. Franczek, not as ambitious as his father, accepted this compromise, and let it be decreed that his heirs would have power solely over Molhyna. No Pietrov would sit on the Knias Dhuma until Koshchei selected a replacement.

Eleven centuries later, the arrangement remains the same. Koshchei has not aged a day since then. He has watched countless descendants grow old and die, and sat on the Knias Council among countless rivals and allies. He makes no fuss about it, does not try to hide it as others might, and

never cares to explain the oddness of his condition. “I have no time for it,” Koshchei said once when a young Castillian courtier rudely questioned him.

Koshchei is enigmatic, but not distant. He can be found from time to time, poking his nose into all the “inconsequential” business of the court as he has done for the last thousand years. He appears in strange places, to comfort a barmaid whose lover has left her, or to speak words of wisdom to an eight-year old who has been beaten by larger children. Sometimes, these strange episodes have some subsequent impact – the boy grows up to be a mighty general, or the girl is actually a lost daughter of the Rurik line. Other times, it does not – a merchant he once met



Koshchei

simply returns to his former life, ending his days telling the story of how Koshchei the Undying came to his shop for a trinket and stayed the night by his fire.

Koshchei was one of the first practitioners of true Pyeryem, having been instructed by Matushka herself. He occasionally tutors young children all over Ussura who show great promise with Matushka’s gift. He is known to be a powerful sorcerer, beyond his ability with Pyeryem. He can cast strange rituals, speak in foreign tongues, and summon beings created of fire, ice, stone, and the terrible winds of the east. Some say that he stole these abilities from the Cathayans, but Koshchei merely snorts in derision at their whispers. “Théah had sorcery long before it had Senators,” is all the answer he deigns to give.

Although Koshchei is legendary for his family loyalty, he has made no move against the Gaius for Ilya’s muttered threats toward the late Knias Drako v’Pietrov. Perhaps he believes Ilya never had the opportunity to carry through his plans of revenge – Drako died shortly before Ilya was freed – or perhaps he recognizes Ilya’s complete disinterest in Drako’s son, Vladimir. Either way, Koshchei seems a mild supporter of the current Gaius – or at least, something other than an active dissenter. He leaves Valdimir to govern Molhyna in peace, and seems unconcerned by the chaos the younger v’Pietrov has created. Perhaps he takes a long-term view of the situation.

To some, Koshchei is a demonic figure. He has survived more than fourteen assassination attempts over the last few centuries – most notably from King Léon XIII of Montaigne, father to the modern day Empereur. He has been shot, stabbed, poisoned, thrown into a river, and choked – all to no avail. The next morning, he simply reappears with his faithful raven companion, unharmed and completely well. For the most part, Koshchei seems amused by these attempts, and in the last few decades, his enemies have apparently given up.

Several times a year, Koshchei vanishes into the Azov forest for days or weeks at a time. He claims to visit Matushka’s city within the Thrice-Tenth Kingdom, and though he does not bother to substantiate his claim, no one disputes him.

Koshchei has had countless wives and numerous lovers. His appetites for human pleasures have not diminished over the years, though he is not currently married. Koshchei has a pet raven that follows him and carries his messages throughout Ussura. Some say the raven is Matushka herself, or some Leishii spirit that descended from one of his more lascivious liaisons. The raven appears capable of speech, but rarely does so. No one save Koshchei himself knows the raven's name; perhaps it has none.

Koshchei is tall and thin as a bone, his fingers agile and dextrous. He appears to be in his mid-forties and carries a staff at all times, resting his weight upon it and letting his raven land on the hooked upper end. His clothes are wealthy, but not extravagant, and he always wears a raven-feather cloak. He prefers black and dark blue to other colors, but has occasionally worn the colors and crest of his native Molhyna. He spends most of his time in the deep snowy wastelands, keeping to himself and saying little to outsiders. Sometimes he walks through the firewall into Cathay, and returns months later without a word of explanation. Not even the most doting Pietrov child can drag a word from him about his journeys there. When Koshchei grows bored, he simply moves on – no chains can bind him, and his will is indomitable. When he becomes angry, terrible things happen. Rumors are enough to keep most of the boyars and muzhik of Ussura from testing the ancient sorcerer's powers.

Vladimir Goroduk Drakov v'Pietrov

Drako Goroduk Stanimirov v'Pietrov, Vladimir's father, was the most fearsome butcher ever to sit an Ussuran throne. Fond of extended torture sessions and bloody executions, Drako's people dreaded and despised him on a universal scale. His unfortunate heir had a tough act to follow.

Drako died on Vladimir's 30th birthday, five years ago. Much to the relief of the muzhiks, the younger Pietrov proved calm and genteel, showing a surprising mental resilience in face of a terrifying upbringing. The people slowly came out of hiding, and life improved. Vladimir governed with a revolutionary idea: treat people fairly and

they will work hard and be obedient. For four years, the theory worked.

A year ago, something went wrong at Pietrov Castle. A gunpowder explosion rocked the fortress, killing Vladimir's infant daughter and very nearly killing the entire family. No one knows the reasons behind it even now, but Vladimir apparently took it as an assassination attempt. He then ran completely amok. Overnight, it seemed, he recruited the butchers and maniacs of his father's old guard, the Oprechnina, and restored them to service. Midnight executions returned – boyar and muzhik alike could be ripped from their homes at any time and impaled in their yards. Fear settled over Molhyna like a thick blanket,



Vladimir Goroduk Drakov v'Pietrov

smothering the fledgling hope in which the people had come to believe.

Drakov has sequestered himself in Pietrov castle and does not leave it. He has contact with the Knias Dhuma only through an intermediary and lets "Great Uncle Koshchei" deal with the outside world. Vladimir has no control over his subject boyars whatsoever. The Oprechnina continues to collect tribute (in women if there are insufficient goods to meet the obligation), but the boyars otherwise have license to act as they see fit. He has not moved to respond to Jyrgal Timurbek's establishment of Kosara in any way.

The muzhik tell spectacular stories of sin, and depravity at the castle. No one has seen or heard from v'Pietrov's wife since the explosion. The family chaplain has vanished, and Pietrov will not allow a replacement to enter the castle, even to recover the body. Local priests try to comfort their flocks, but their words cannot stem the tide of new tales that emerge from the castle periodically. No one dares approach the v'Pietrov directly save the current Chamberlain (and commander of the Oprechnina), Paregorii Kalenikov. Under Vladimir's rule, Molhyna has become a chaotic mess.

Vladimir is tall and slim, with an expression of impatience and repressed violence that could explode at any moment. His hair is long and loose, and he does not wear the beard common to Ussuran men, favoring instead long, drooping mustaches.

Parigorii Nizhne Kalenikov

The captain of the v'Pietrov's Oprechnina, and the v'Pietrov's Chamberlain, Kalenikov effectively rules Molhyna now. He is a minor boyar in his own right, though he never visits his home province. He lives in castle Pietrov now, directing Molhyna as best he can.

Kalenikov came to his position more or less honestly. A cunning warrior, he was drafted into the Oprechnina shortly after Vladimir's father, Drako — known for brutal oppression, a horrific temper, and a violent hedonism that



Parigorii Nizhne Kalenikov

made every Molhynan father fear for his daughters — took the Molhynan throne. Kalenikov advanced in the ranks of the Oprechnina with little guile. He served well, killed those who stood in his way, and was rewarded accordingly. Each step he took through the ranks introduced him to more of his lord's evil appetites... and twisted him that much more.

After 15 years, he took command of the Oprechnina, where he was placed in charge of satisfying the v'Pietrov's sick fetishes. He sent out raiding parties to find victims for Drako's whimsical tortures and recruited men who would do evil things with only a gesture for instruction. Vladimir retained Kalenikov as Captain of the Guard when he took the throne, though the young boy dismissed most of the

Oprechnina, calling them useless for the way he wished to rule. Kalenikov kept his own council, and has continued served as before, with quiet loyalty.

A year ago, an explosion ripped through Castle Pietrov. Vladimir took it as an assassination attempt and went into a maddened seclusion. Kalenikov found himself assuming the same position he had occupied under Drako — regent of a maniac. He continues to keep his own council, particularly concerning the Oprechnina, which he once again commands. He also continues to keep Molhyna running in the absence of effective rulership.

Kalenikov's Oprechnina consists largely of bullies and thugs, with a few outstanding psychotics who fortify its dark reputation. Many are Kalenikov's comrades from the "good old days." Composed as it is from the dregs of humanity, the Oprechnina is not a very efficient organization, and near-worthless for doing anything more than enforcing ruling edicts — a well-trained army could toss them aside like toys. Kalenikov commands the rabble as best he can, though they remain largely uncontrollable, and he can barely manage the province well enough to keep tribute flowing in. Other boyars have considered deposing the v'Pietrov altogether, but Kalenikov and the Oprechnina keep such talk just that — talk. Despite his shaky political skills, however, he keeps the province limping along into its uncertain future.

Parigorii Kalenikov is a bent, haggard old man, balding and shriveled. He has seen and done so many unspeakable things that even his soul is tired. His overall bearing is one of bone-crushing fatigue. There are bags under his eyes, and his face is deeply lined. He continues to wear his Oprechnina colors with as much pride as he can muster, and tries to present himself the way he believes a competent ruler should. It has never occurred that he might abdicate his position in favor of someone more qualified. The Knias ordered him to serve as regent, and until the Knias relieves him, that is exactly what he'll do.

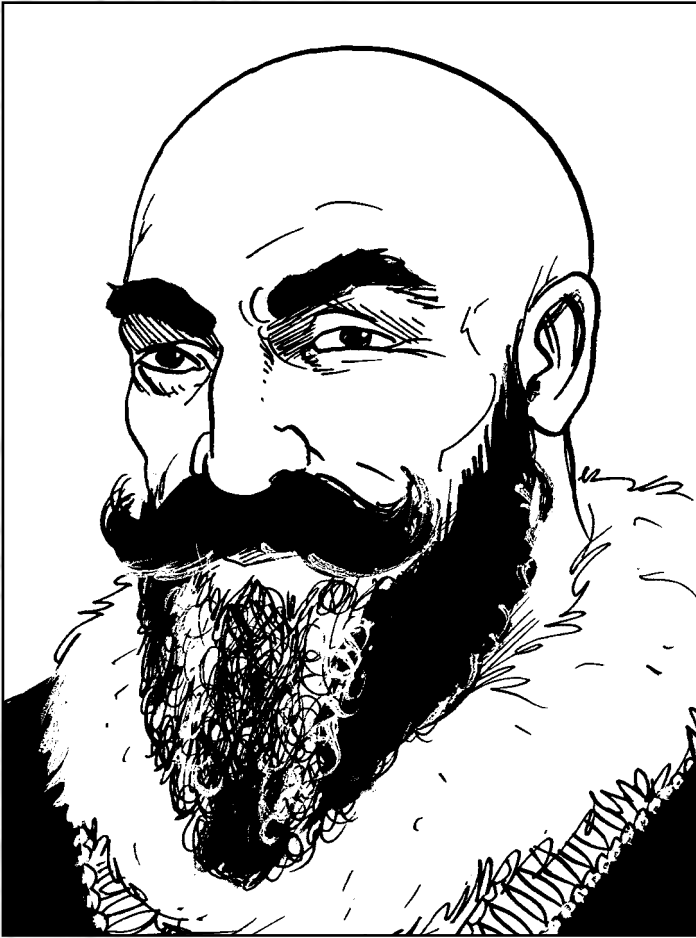


The Muzhik

Pyotyr Siev Andropovich

Pyotyr, captain of Ilya's stelets, is truly the salt of the earth. Born a muzhik, his honesty and forthright labor have earned him a position, a steady wage, and the respect of his men. He was once a poor woodcarver with little to his name, but through his endurance, he foiled an attempt on the Gaius's life a short while after Ilya was crowned. He was viewing a parade in Pavtlow when the Gaius's ceremonial carriage burst into flames. While the guards and onlookers watched in mute horror, Pyotyr burst from the crowd, dove into the carriage and pulled the young Gaius to safety. The two suffered no more than minor burns. Ilya had his guards executed, then gave Pyotyr a place among the stelets as a reward for his valor. He trained hard, worked to befriend his comrades, and in a few short years had advanced to the head of their ranks. By his own honest work, he became their leader.

He originally served as the Gaius's bodyguard, but when Montegue's armies invaded, he had to shift his duties to deal with the new threat. Initially, he wanted to fight at the front, but the Gaius forbade him to leave Pavtlow; Ilya felt that his Eisen mercenaries were sufficient to stop the Montaigne advance. Pyotyr obeyed his superior and remained in the city, though it was clear that he wished to do much more.



Pyotyr Siev Andropovich

Unfortunately, Montegue's steady advance has granted him that wish. With the Montaigne moving towards Pavtlow, he has been forced to act more directly. Pyotyr has developed a strong tactical mind, and knows exactly what Montegue's plans are. The thrice-cursed foreigner intends to march to Pavtlow, seize the city and the Gaius, and demand that Ussura surrender. But Pyotyr isn't going to allow his country to roll over without a fight. He's already working with Drutsky Kethna Pastovich, leader of the gathering army in the forest south of Pavtlow, and intends to make the foreign dogs pay for their impudence.

Pyotyr is not a courtier. He doesn't care about politics. Right now, his only goal in life is to throw the Montaigne out of his

Gaius' country. He fully intends to take Montegue's head and ride through the streets of Pavtlow with it, but he knows his limits. Montegue's men are well trained. They are well armed. They are incredibly loyal. And worst, even Matushka does not seem to be able to keep them from steadily pushing toward the heart of Ussura. If she cannot stop the Montaigne, then what hope does a simple woodcarver have?

Pyotyr is a huge, muscular man; one of his lieutenants once referred to him as "a barrel with fingers." He keeps his head shaven clean, but grows his beard thick and long. He speaks very slowly and thinks carefully before saying anything. Many people believe him slow because of this, but in truth, he simply values clarity over speed. He can deliberate on a problem for hours, but his solutions are always intelligent and reasonable. Despite his lofty position, he can be friendly and personable to those who know him. He possesses fearsome skill with an axe and can fire a gun as well as any man, but remains a muzhik woodcarver at heart. "Work hard," he says, "and Matushka will provide."

Nona Basulde

Nona, daughter of Mirona, Sanat of Vitzi Basulde, has seen a great deal. Even so, she is a young sanat — only fifty-eight years old, with the appearance of a woman in her late thirties. She has only been sanat for eleven years, since her mother deferred the title to her. It was her decision, and a surprisingly wise one, to lead the vitzi into northern Eisen ten years ago. The Fhidelis had heard countless grim tales coming from that war-torn nation, but Nona said then, as she says now, "helping others is worth the risks." That venture led to her daughter Renate's marriage to Piorgi Curara (see below), and their consequent happiness. It also accounted for the growing size and prosperity of the caravan.

As a youth Nona volunteered herself to serve her vitzi by taking a servant's wage. Her mother (then sanat) opposed the idea, but Nona persuaded her to let her try. The experience finally earned her mother's respect. Nona took a servant's position with the Caligari family in Vodacce, which she held for almost three years. Her duties were minor, and her status lowly, even for a servant. It is unlikely



Nona Basulde

any of the Caligari family remember her, since she strove to be inconspicuous while learning everything she could. When she finally left, however, she wasn't sorry to go. She may be experienced with Vodacce but she apparently retains no affection for the country at all.

After her sacrifice in service to the vitzi, Nona asked to be fostered to another vitzi – the Narpana. The War of the Cross had begun, which limited the Narpana's traveling routes. During her time with them, she met her husband Jules and they had three children. The oldest, their son Cesar, chose a dangerous path and refused to recognize the danger he put his people in, so Nona has disowned him. It's been thirteen years since she last saw Cesar; last word was

that he had named himself head of a band of criminals in the underworld of far-off Charouse. Her youngest son Rene has fostered himself to the Talajit and has so far dodged all attempts at marriage. Nona's true pride is her second child Renate: quiet, perceptive, possessing wisdom worthy of a sanat. Renate has also given her two grandchildren to spoil.

The caravan's adopted healer, Chavi, has recently pushed for a journey to Vodacce, something Nona has forbidden. Chavi is a Naditi whom the Fhideli found in shock on the road ten years ago. She constantly asks after her lost daughter, and believes she can find the girl in Vodacce. Nona knows that even if Chavi's daughter still lives, finding her will be exceedingly difficult, since the Vodacce view their women as possessions. Chavi is determined, and may travel there on her own if the caravan will not travel with her. Nona doesn't want her to go without aid, and has begun teaching her the language – both to prepare her and to delay her departure until Nona can think of something else.

Handsome for a grandmother, Nona has a tall willowy frame, black hair that she wears in braids with gold and carved horn beads woven throughout. Rumor has it that Nona has received two visits from Matushka in the last three years. The Gaius himself has heard these rumors, and seethes with jealousy that a low-born vagabond receives counsel that should be his by right.

Piorgi Curara

Piorgi began life as a young Fhideli trying to learn the blacksmithing trade in the Vitzi Curara. Unfortunately, it was the middle of the War of the Cross and Eisen was becoming more and more hostile toward the people. The caravan was in Densel, in southeastern Pösen, when Objectionist forces came to lay siege to the town. The oncoming army fired a cannon at the caravan, which they thought was a fleeing enemy, and the vitzi was badly damaged. Several dozen people were injured by the blast, including Piorgi's uncle, the vadin. The old man asked Piorgi, then a youth of eighteen, to see that the caravan got to safety. In the following weeks while his uncle and others fought fevers and infection, Piorgi took charge and led the



Piorgi Curara

Curara out of Eisen. His ability to handle the crisis impressed many people including Renate, daughter of the sanat of Vitzi Basulde, whom they met on the road.

Renate and Piorgi quickly formed a bond of affection. At the time, a young man named Stasch was wooing Renate rather unsuccessfully. Stasch had hopes of marrying the new Sanat's daughter, and thereby becoming an obvious candidate for vadin, but he had no real affection for her. For the next several weeks, as the two caravans traveled together, Piorgi and Stasch clashed on several occasions. Stasch would accuse Piorgi of improperly shoeing his horse; Piorgi would complain about the amount of shot in the venison Stasch provided. Eventually, Renate made her

choice. She asked her mother to consider the marriage to Piorgi. Piorgi's uncle, Lech, had recovered from his wounds and was ready to retake the reins of Vitzi Currara. He was very proud of his nephew's leadership during a crisis, and was simply bursting when Piorgi was asked to become vadin of the Basulde. The marriage took place quickly, and inside of a few months Piorgi went from apprentice blacksmith to vadin of the largest Fhideli caravan in the world.

As they traveled the rest of the way out of Eisen, the Basulde came upon a most disturbing phenomenon. It happened three times, and each time was the same. The wagons would roll up to a village, seemingly no different from any of the hundreds like it. The Vitzi's musicians and tumblers would announce their presence and lay down their busking hats, but no one would come out. At first the people of the vitzi grew angry; this wasn't the first time that prejudice had denied them a meal. Then someone would notice an open door, or a cooking pot boiling over. The people of the village were simply gone. Half-eaten food lay spoiling on tables, while dice and coins were scattered on the floor of the taverns as if in the middle of a game. A few dogs and other animals could be found wandering about the village, but the Fhideli found no sign of the hounds' masters.

That was ten years ago. Since then, the Basulde have grown and prospered under Piorgi's leadership. In addition to their other activities they have quietly sought answers to the mystery of the abandoned villages, but have failed to turn up any clues. Piorgi believes that his caravan discovered those villages for a reason, however, and that fate will one day lead them to the answers.

Today, Piorgi is twenty-eight years old, of average height, with medium-length black hair and a full beard which he keeps neatly trimmed. He and Renate have two children: a daughter, Natalia, and a son, Rue. Piorgi would never admit it to anyone, but Rue is his favorite. Every Jivanti and seer who meets the boy takes note of the curious birthmark on his collar bone, like a staring eye; the mark of some great destiny. His doting grandmother Nona tells these people

that he is a beautiful child, and that is all the destiny he needs.

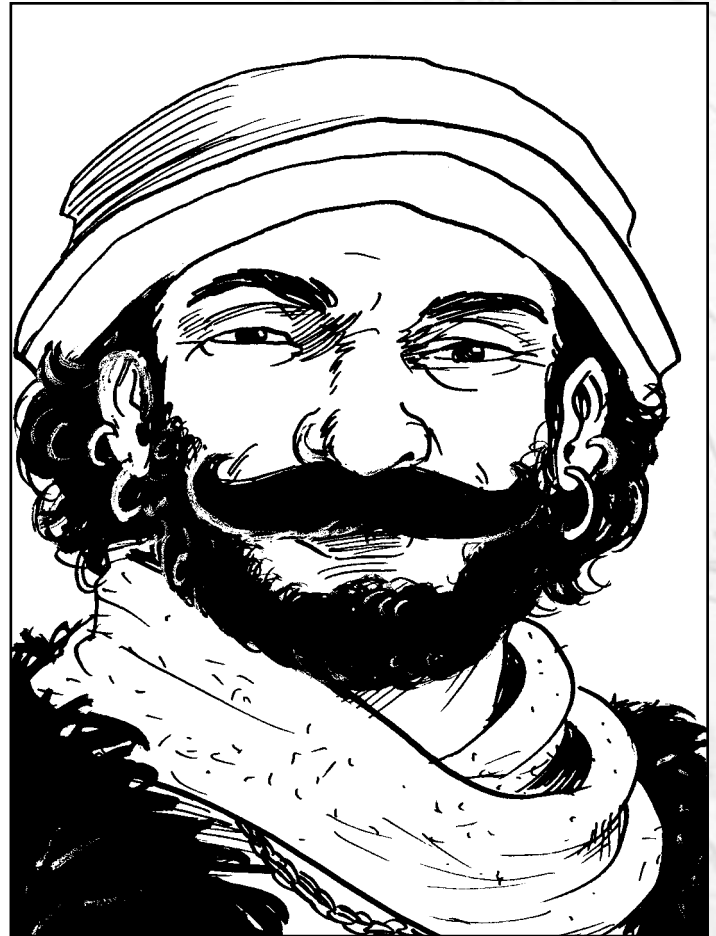
Jyrgal Timurbek

A wild Kosar chieftain, Timurbek is a fearsome raider and storied fighter. His great-grandfather was an outcast Crescent horseman who made his way into Molhyna and fell in with a Kosar band. The wily foreigner fought his way to leadership of the group, and made himself wealthy raiding in Molhyna, Gallenia and Veche. He kept his identity a secret from his foes, covering his face with a cloth during his attacks. This flair has stayed with the band, and the Masked Kosars are now feared even more than the normal sort.

Jyrgal was born to leadership of his clan, and relishes his office. His rule is absolute, his judgments final. He has made his name known to the enemies of his people, and now they speak of Timurbek the Masked Kosar in fearful whispers around low-banked fires in well-secured inns. His people support him fanatically, as he has brought them glory and wealth.

The government of Molhyna is so fragmented that no real resistance can be raised against him. Jyrgal has overthrown a minor boyar and established a province for the Kosar people near the shores of Lake Vigil. He claims to have determined (though no one can say how) that the area of Kosara belongs to his people, and that he is thus reclaiming what should have been his all along. The v’Petrov cannot raise an effective counterforce with his other boyars in such disarray, and the move has thus gone unchallenged. The boyars of Veche and Gallenia, who have felt the sting of Kosar raids in the past, are negotiating a coalition treaty to clean out what they view as a festering boil in Molhyna. They have the quiet support of the Gaius, who provides them with funds and political encouragement.

For his part, Jyrgal welcomes such a challenge. Not only will it further prove his prowess on the battlefield, but when he destroys the Veche/Gallenia forces, it will bring legitimacy to his kingdom and force Gaius Ilya to recognize his peoples’ independence.



Jyrgal Timurbek

Timurbek is himself an unassuming-looking man, of middling weight and build, and bearing the curly black hair of his Crescent ancestry. He does not dress with any particular panache or grace, but still wears the ear- and finger-rings worn by all Kosar men, adding a thick gold chain around his neck as his badge of rulership. A magnetic charisma offsets his unspectacular demeanor, forcing those around him to pay attention. He is a powerful orator, a skilled fighter, and a cunning general. He is also a ruthless butcher, and has slaughtered entire villages in the name of ethnic purity. Though his recent “legitimacy” has tempered such atrocities, native Molhyni still fear his name.





Drama

The Destiny Spread

Fate Witches have a particular form of reading they use to give their querent a general idea of his destiny. They use a 5-card spread from the Sorte deck in a cross formation to accomplish this. The Ussuran Fhidelis use a similar method with their own (non-sorcerous) fortune-telling techniques.

The first card is the querent's Strength. This embodies his most noble quality.

The second card is the querent's Weakness. This shows his greatest flaw.

The third card is the querent's Past. This shows an important event that helped make him who he is.

The fourth card is the querent's Present. This shows his current situation.

The fifth card is the querent's Future. This shows him an important event that is fast approaching in his life that he should be prepared for.

Normally, the first and second cards are selected from the Greater Arcana, while the other three cards are selected from the two suits from the Minor Arcana that are the most significant to the querent. Fate Witches traditionally leave the Court Cards out of these readings, since they signify events that cannot be controlled.

The Destiny Spread in Hero Creation

To use this system properly, you need a Tarot deck. Perform this reading right after assigning Traits and Nationality to your Hero, but before assigning anything else. Separate out the Major Arcana, shuffle them, and put them in one pile. Next, pull out the two suits that are most significant to your character — here, Cups and Staves — leaving out the Page, Knight, Queen, and King cards. Ussurans have a strong affinity for the suits of Cups and Staves: Cups because of their powerful emotions, and Staves because of their deep respect for Matushka.

Shuffle the two suits together into a pile. Next, lay out the Destiny Spread as shown below. You must choose to focus on either your Strength or your Weakness. If you choose your Strength, your Hero gains the Virtue corresponding to that card, and you pay 10 HP for performing the Destiny Spread. If you choose your Weakness, your Hero gains the Hubris corresponding to that card, and you gain 10 extra HP to build your Hero with. Finally, consult the Past, Present, and Future charts to see what your Hero gained (or lost!) from those draws.

If you don't have a Tarot deck, it's hard to determine your Strength or Weakness at random, so have your GM select one. Then roll once each on the Past, Present, and Future charts (odd — Cups/even — Staves, then a die for the card number).

Past

These are the events that have shaped your Hero and made him who he is. Some of them may still hang over his head.

Ace of Cups: What started as an amusing contest of wits turned embarrassing for your father when someone of lower status outsmarted you. As a result you were sent away from home for more education. *You gain the University Advantage and a 1-point Defeated Background for free.*

Two of Cups: A foolish squabble in the height of winter cost you the heart of the one dearest to you. *You gain a 1 point Lost Love Background for free.*

Three of Cups: You gained a reputation for telling a good tale on those long winter nights. Your audiences showed their appreciation with drinks, but to tell a good tale you've got to be able to hold the liquor till it's done. *You gain the Able Drinker Advantage for free.*

Four of Cups: The only things that have ever excited you were discovering new things and places. *You gain the Linguist Advantage for free.*

Five of Cups: Trouble seems to follow you like snow follows the north wind. You've grown used to it but it can



still spell disaster for others. *Gain the Foul Weather Jack Advantage with your choice of Background for free.*

Six of Cups: As a child, you became lost in the woods in spite of the warnings against wandering too far from home. You were found by a very old woman – at first, you were terrified that Matushka had come to punish you! As it turned, out the old woman was a Tibesti; she and her people took you in. You lived with them for some time as they traveled, and ever since you have had a touch of wanderlust in your heart. *You gain a 3-point Fhidel Connection Advantage for free.*

Seven of Cups: When you were a child, people used to think you were always dreaming. You’ve always found it easy to be on your own, and the creativity just flows through you. *Should you purchase the Artist Skill, gain one additional point in the Knack of your choice for free.*

Eight of Cups: As a youth, you loved to spend your time hunting. It was while hunting that you met the young Tibesti. Your friendship grew into love, but when you suggested that your lover leave the Tibesti and come live with you, it all fell to pieces. *You gain a 1-point Gadjo Background and a 2-point Lost Love Background for free.*

Nine of Cups: As a youth, you possessed a beautiful voice, so you were sent away for training. *Gain the Performer skill with an additional point in the Singing Knack for free.*

Ten of Cups: You’ve always had an affinity with the outdoors and nature, so it came as no surprise to your parents when you displayed unusual knowledge of animals. *You may purchase Pyeryem sorcery for 5 HP less than the listed cost (minimum 0).*

Ace of Staves: When you were a child your sister disappeared. No one talks about it much – it is whispered that Matushka took her – but you are determined to find her some day. *You gain a 2-point Hunting Background for free.*

Two of Staves: You were adopted. Your family never told you, but you are sure of this anyway. Someday you’re going to find out who your parents were. *You gain a 3-point True Identity Background for free.*

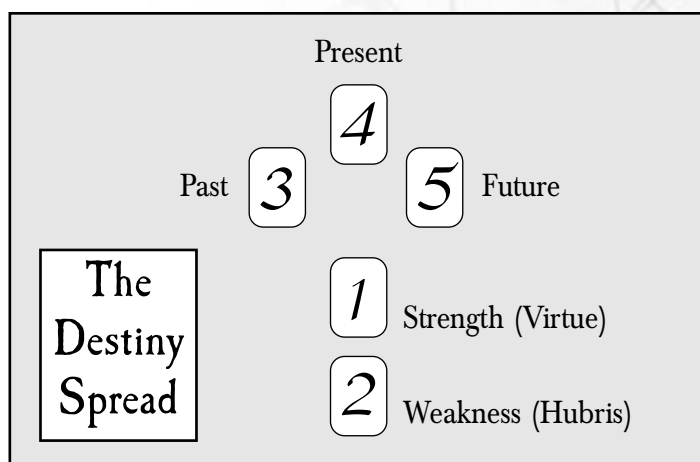
Three of Staves: You were once the object of some humiliating jokes, and ever since one particularly unpleasant event you have been afraid of parties. *You gain a 1-point Fear Background for free.*

Four of Staves: Your father was a priest in the Ussuran Orthodox Church, and he wanted you to follow in his footsteps, so you have spent your life preparing to serve. *You gain the Ordained Advantage for free.*

Five of Staves: With five older siblings, you knew you would have to make your own way, so you asked early on for an apprenticeship with a fisherman. *You gain the Sailor Skill for free.*

Six of Staves: As a child one of your most vivid memories is of your grandfather berating your mother for trying to curb your use of your left hand. Because of his words you have never been ashamed since. *Gain the Left-handed Advantage for free.*

Seven of Staves: You were a very sick child. Your father had the resources to call for the very best healers and none of them were able to help. Then a Tibesti woman offered to help and in his desperation your father agreed, offering her anything she wished that was in his power to give. She said, “Let’s wait and see.” After weeks of labor your health returned, and your Father then thanked her and asked her to leave. Her response was cryptic: “I pray you guard this child well, for no other child of yours shall live to see its sixth year.” You have had eight siblings since then, all of



whom have died before turning five. The ninth, your youngest sister, is now five. *You gain a 2-point Obligation Background for free.*

Eight of Staves: You have a bad habit of not knowing when to keep your mouth shut. Consequently, as a youth you made an enemy who used his power to deplete your family's wealth. *You gain a 3-point Nemesis Background for free.*

Nine of Staves: You vowed as a child to never complain about anything. As a result, you have an unusually high tolerance for pain. *You gain the Toughness Advantage for free.*

Ten of Staves: Your mother was afraid for you as a child, but would not tell you why. She died before you could persuade her to speak. Ever since then, there has been only one thing that trips you in life. You are stricken with an inability to speak when you most desperately need to. *You have a free 2-point Cursed Background.*

Present

These events represent situations that your Hero could find himself currently entangled in. They will have to be dealt with soon, whether he likes it or not.

Ace of Cups: Your uncle has just named you heir over your brother and his own son. *You gain a 1-point Inheritance Advantage (which may be raised with Hero Points) and a 1-point Nemesis Background.*

Two of Cups: People have always found you riveting. Making friends and lovers has always been easy for you, but so has making enemies. Just recently, though, your love has abandoned you for your enemy. *Gain the Dangerous Beauty Advantage, a 1-point Lost Love Background, and 1-point Nemesis Background.*

Three of Cups: After deciding to pursue life as a bogatyr, you thought you would have to wander a great deal before finding patronage, but you have found an employer who values your service. *Gain a 4-point Patron Advantage and a 1-point Vow Background.*

Four of Cups: You spent last winter working outdoors. It was grueling work, but it seems to have thickened your skin. *Gain the Toughness Advantage.*

Five of Cups: Six months ago you woke up in the middle of a Tibesti caravan with no memory of your past. The Tibesti took you in but they had no idea who you were. *Gain a 1-point Fhidel Connection Advantage and a 1-point Amnesia Background.*

Six of Cups: You recently made some new friends, but they aren't well liked. Their reputation seems to be rubbing off on you. *Gain the Scoundrel Advantage.*

Seven of Cups: Six months ago you were accused of a serious crime. As a result, you spent a great deal of time in a very dark prison cell before your innocence was proven. *Gain the Keen Senses Advantage.*

Eight of Cups: You always had a soft heart. Last week you helped out a poor servant in need. You didn't know he was a thief who stole several valuable objects from his Master's home. Now they're looking for you as well. *Gain a 2-point Hunted Background.*

Nine of Cups: Out of boredom, you recently left home. On your way to Vodacce, you met a Tibesti who bears a striking resemblance to you. The resemblance was uncanny — even your own father would mistake this fellow. Ever since you left his company you've been running into people who mistake you for him — and it seems he's in trouble of some sort. *You gain a 3-point Mistaken Identity Background.*

Ten of Cups: Design and artistry have been your passions for years. This week you were commissioned to create an impressive public work to be presented at your town's five hundredth anniversary. It is a great honor and they have given you some of the money up front to pay for supplies. *Gain two hundred guilders in additional income and a 2-point Obligation Background.*

Ace of Staves: Just recently you have vowed to serve a Voevod. Your duties remain simple but are clear. *Gain a 3-point Vow Background.*

Two of Staves: You never used to have trouble drinking liquor, but last night you woke up outside your stable and you have no memory of how you got there. Your purse was stolen as well as some family papers of great importance, so now you must track down the thief. *Gain a 1-point Hunting Background.*

Three of Staves: You have a gift for making mountains out of molehills that Matushka might even envy. Just recently, your beloved tried to kill you — and this isn't the first crazy thing life has thrown at you. *You have the Foul Weather Jack Advantage with the Background of your choice.*

Four of Staves: You spent this last winter with those wandering people, the Tibesti. They have a very interesting outlook on life and you have struck up a fine rapport with them. *Gain a 1-point Tibesti Connection Advantage.*

Five of Staves: A brawl in an inn turned more violent than you had anticipated, and now you're wanted by a boyar for the death of one of his retainers. *Gain a 3-point Hunted Background.*

Six of Staves: After helping a traveler to fight off some brigands, in gratitude he gifted you with a thin bladed dagger (he called it a "dirk" in his foreign tongue). *You gain a MacEachern Blade (see Avalon, page 91. MacEachern blades have the power to damage supernatural creatures.)*

Seven of Staves: As a bogatyr you have lately been bound to serve a powerful family. In addition to your other duties, your lord has charged you with a long-term mission: find his daughter, who disappeared from her rooms almost ten years ago. *You gain a 2-point Hunting Background.*

Eight of Staves: After many years of study and dedication you have finally earned your place in the world. *Gain the Ordained Advantage.*

Nine of Staves: You've been working hard in the fleet for years and your dedication has finally paid off. *You gain the Ship Ownership Advantage.*

Ten of Staves: Inadvertently, you have irritated the wrong person. Just what they intend to do about it remains to be seen. *You gain a 1-point Nemesis Background.*

Future

These are events that are looming in your Hero's future. They may have been caused by choices he made in his past or the choices he has yet to make. These predictions are all purposefully vague. Your GM will work out the specifics of how they come into play.

Ace of Cups: A passion to last a lifetime will come to you. (Romance 2)

Two of Cups: Sometimes those who are most like you can only inspire you to greater heights. (Rivalry 2)

Three of Cups: You must face your fears if you are to survive. (Fear 2)

Four of Cups: Sometimes being indebted to someone can be good. (Debt 1)

Five of Cups: Sometimes, losing a friend will break your heart; other times it inspires great heroism. (Vendetta 1)

Six of Cups: You will receive an invitation to join something larger than yourself. (Membership Advantage)

Seven of Cups: Romance may not be a good project for you. (Lost Love 2)

Eight of Cups: Revelations do not come easily. (True Identity 2)

Nine of Cups: Proving your innocence is sometimes difficult. (Hunted 2)

Ten of Cups: When friends turn to foes it is wise to start choosing your enemies. (Nemesis 2)

Ace of Staves: Only perseverance will help you find what you're looking for. (Hunting 2)

Two of Staves: Life presents unexpected twists. (Mistaken Identity 2)

Three of Staves: Business acumen can earn you more than wealth. (Nemesis 2)

Four of Staves: Someone will find you worthy. (Inheritance Advantage)

Five of Staves: There is very little that cannot be undone. (Curse 2)

Six of Staves: Recognition comes with responsibility. (Obligation 2)

Seven of Staves: Someday all will know your worth. (Citation Advantage)

Eight of Staves: Look for friends in unexpected places. (Tibesti Connection Advantage)

Nine of Staves: Give your trust if you wish to receive it. (Vow 2)

Ten of Staves: Everyone strives for something. (Defeated 2)

New Pyeryem Rules

New Pyeryem Knacks

The following animal Knacks represent additional creatures whose skin a Pyeryem user may bargain for and use as per the sorcery rules on pages 215–219 of the *7th Sea Players' Guide*. Boons marked with an asterisk (*) require GM approval. They theoretically only belong to certain Knias, and GM may disallow use of them if he or she feels they unbalance the game.

Asprey

TN: 20

Boons: Armor (+10 to TN to be hit), Attack (0k2 Bite), Brawn –1, Flight, No Grasping Limbs, Speed

Notes: Armor and Brawn –1 are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations. Flight and No Grasping Limbs are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations.

Boar

TN: 15

Boons: Attack (0k3 Gore), Brawn +1, No Grasping Limbs, Speed

Notes: Speed and No Grasping Limbs are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations.

Boca

TN: 10

Boons: Armor (+10 to TN to be hit), Brawn –1, Leaping, No Fine Manipulation

Notes: Armor and Brawn –1 are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations. Leaping and No Fine Manipulation are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations.

Drachen*

TN: 45

Boons: Armor (+10 to TN to be hit), Attack (0k3 Bite), Attack (0k2 Claw), Brawn +3

Duck

TN: 15

Boons: Flight, Hold Breath, No Grasping Limbs, Swim

Notes: Flight and No Grasping Limbs are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations.

Firebird*

TN: 30

Boons: Armor (+10 to TN to be hit), Attack (0k3 Bite), Flight, No Fine Manipulation

Notes: Flight and No Fine Manipulation are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations.

Fish

TN: 10

Boons: Breathe Water, No Grasping Limbs, Swim

Notes: Swim and No Grasping Limbs are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations.

Frog

TN: 15

Boons: Hold Breath, Leaping, Swim, No Fine Manipulation

Notes: Swim and No Fine Manipulation are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations.

Goat

TN: 10

Boons: Attack (0k2 Gore), Brawn +2, No Grasping Limbs

Notes: No Grasping Limbs and Brawn +2 are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations.

Hinde

TN: 35

Boons: Armor (+10 to TN to be hit), Attack (0k2 Gore), Finesse +3, Leaping, No Grasping Limbs, Speed

Notes: No Grasping Limbs and Finesse +3 are considered to be one Boon for Partial Transformations.

Horse

TN: 15

Boons: Armor (+5 to TN to be hit), Brawn +2, No Grasping Limbs, Speed

Notes: Brawn +2 and No Grasping Limbs are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations.

Monkey

TN: 20

Boons: Finesse + 1, Climb, Falling

Raven

TN: 15

Boons: Armor (+5 to TN to be hit), Flight, No Fine Manipulation

Notes: Flight and No Fine Manipulation are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations.

Reindeer

TN: 10

Boons: Attack (0k2 Gore), Finesse +1, No Grasping Limbs, Warmth

Notes: Finesse +1 and No Grasping Limbs are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations.



Snake

TN: 20

Boons: Attack (0k2 Bite), Burrow, Climb, Finesse +1, No Grasping Limbs, Silence, Speed, Poor Hearing

Notes: Attack and Poor Hearing are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations. Speed and No Grasping Limbs are considered one Boon for Partial Transformations.

Songbird

TN: 15

Boons: Armor (+10 to TN to be hit), Brawn -3, Finesse +2, Flight, No Fine Manipulation

Notes: Armor and Brawn -3 are considered a single Boon for Partial Transformations. Flight and No Fine Manipulation are considered a single Boon for Partial Transformations.

Turtle

TN: 15

Boons: Armor (+10 to TN to be hit), Finesse -1, Hold Breath, No Grasping Limbs, Swim

Notes: Armor and Finesse -1 are considered a single Boon for purposes of Partial Transformations. Swim and No Grasping Limbs are considered a single Boon for purposes of Partial Transformations.

New Boons

Breathe Water

You can breathe water as if it were air. You do not suffer the effects of drowning in water, but you do suffer them when out of it.

Poor Hearing

You roll two fewer dice for Perception rolls involving hearing.

Making New Animal Knacks

At some point a Pyeryem practitioner may wish to take the skin of an animal not listed here or in other sourcebooks.

Use the following rules when developing such new Animal Knacks.

In order to make a new Animal Knack, select the animal in question, and work with the GM to determine what Boons the creature will have to grant as part of the Knack. Negative Boons must be paired with a positive Boon; that is, any Boon that has a purely detrimental effect, such as Brawn -1, No Grasping Limbs or Poor Sight, must be paired with a beneficial Boon, such as Flight or Finesse +2. This pair is considered to be one Boon for Partial Transformations.

Once you have determined the Boon, you must determine the TN for the Knack. The TN is equal to 5 plus the total of the modifiers based on the Boons picked for the Knack. Consult the table below to determine the modifiers for the Knacks that have been chosen.

Pyeryem Boon Table

Boon	Modifier
Armor (+5/+10)	+5/+10
Attack (0k2)/(0k3)	+5/+10
Brawn	+5 per Rank increased/ -5 per Rank decreased
Breathe Water	+10
Burrow	+5
Climb	+5
Falling	+5
Finesse	+5 per Rank increased/ -5 per Rank decreased
Flight	+10
Hold Breath	+5
Howl	+5
Keen Hearing	+5
Keen Sight	+5
Keen Smell	+5
Leaping	+5
Night Vision	+5
No Fine Manipulation	-5
No Grasping Limbs	-10
Poor Hearing	-5
Poor Sight	-5
Silence	+5



Speed	+5
Swim	+5
Warmth	+5

The Hero with the new Knack must seek out the animal of the desired type and bargain for the Knack (as per the *Players' Guide*, page 215). Particularly rare or powerful animals may require an extensive search, perhaps forming the basis for an entire adventure. The GM has veto power over any animals which he doesn't feel are appropriate (dinosaurs, for example, or jellyfish). Animals similar to one already detailed (a dog, for example, a beast closely related to the wolf) should adhere as closely as possible to the previous creature.

New Backgrounds

Animal Animosity

At some point, you did something to anger a very important member of one animal species. Now every member of this species is hostile to you. Under no circumstances can you ever obtain the spirit skin of a member of this species. The Rank of this Background determines the threat posed by the animal and its frequency. Rank 1 animals include small, harmless creatures such rabbits, songbirds, and mice. Rank 2 animals include larger beasts with certain desirable attributes, such as snakes and owls. Rank 3 animals include the largest and most fearsome fauna, such as wolves and bears. Supernatural animals, such as Drachen and griffons, cannot be chosen for this Background; if you've earned their enmity, you'll be dead within a month.

Gadjo (non-Fhideli only)

You have interacted with the Tibesti and had an unfavorable result. They now have an exceedingly poor opinion of you, and the feeling is presumably mutual.

Several factors may have contributed to it, and the severity ranges from being considered an insensitive gadjo (1 point), to a dishonest abusive gadjo who takes advantage of others' prejudices (2 points), to a gadjo who has actively tried to harm some Tibesti (3 points).

Memlo (Fhideli only)

You have been defiled. Maybe it wasn't your fault; perhaps some gadjo is responsible, or perhaps you spent too much time among them, but the effect is the same. Your people consider you unclean, and you have only a limited number of ways in which you may have the defilement removed: Vayu, solitude, or sacrifice. Your sanat may advise you on which method is best for cleansing. The points you invest in this Background determine the degree of your defilement. At level 1, the trespass was minor: a gadjo woman may have touched you inappropriately once in public. At 2, the offense is more severe: perhaps you scandalized the camp with frequent and indiscreet public displays of affection. Level 3 is reserved for only very serious transgressions, such as adultery or prostitution. Level 4 (Foul Weather Jack only) denotes a crime which is never spoken of in polite society (we hope your Hero was framed).

New Skills

Acrobat

Similar to Performer, the Acrobat skill represents the ability to perform dextrous feats such as tumbling, tightrope-walking, and juggling. Though intended as a form of entertainment, the Acrobat skill can come in handy during more pressing circumstances, such as the need to cross a chasm using only a thin line or the ability to leap from a building with minimal harm.



Basic Knacks

Balance: Quite simply, this is the Knack of not falling down, even under adverse conditions. This is used as the Defense Knack for those fighting aboard a ship at sea, or in situations where the footing is uncertain (such as walking a tightrope or standing on a rickety stairwell). The GM will give you the TNs for performing certain actions on board a sailing vessel, or with other special circumstances.

Footwork: Footwork is the art of putting yourself where your enemy's weapons aren't. This Knack can be used as your Defense Knack even if you don't have a weapon.

Advanced Knacks

Break Fall: Adventurers tend to do a lot of falling, but you've learned how to do it *right*. You know how to absorb impact with your shoulders and how to roll with the fall (of course, that won't help you if you fall into a spiked pit). For every Rank in this Knack, you take one fewer die of damage when falling (minimum 0).

Circus: You have some training in several of the traditional circus acts: fire eating, sword swallowing, or even just drawing a crowd.

Contortion: A performer with this Knack can bend and twist his body into shapes that Theus surely never intended. While primarily used to amaze and amuse an audience, the character may also use this to get into or out of tight spots.

Juggling: This Knack is very easy to learn, but can still astound the uninitiated. It represents your Hero's ability to keep a number of objects in the air, seemingly defying gravity. Juggling three balls is easiest, with TN of 10. More difficult tricks (such as more items, larger, oddly shaped, or even dangerous items, or complicated maneuvers) count as calling a raise for each new factor added to the trick. For instance: juggling five knives one-handed would require 4 raises (one for each item over three, one for the danger, and one for one-handed).

This Knack is also considered an Advanced Performer Knack.

Leaping: You can jump higher and farther than most people. This can come in handy when exploring dusty tombs or fleeing across rooftops. In addition, you use this Knack as your Defense Knack while leaping.

Lifting: There's a right way and a wrong way to lift heavy weights. Do it the wrong way, and you're liable to hurt yourself quite badly. This Knack allows you to lift great weights with less risk to yourself.

Rolling: Whether sliding or rolling across the floor, this is the Knack you use. This can be handy to use tables momentarily as cover, or slip under a descending wall. While sliding or rolling, you use this Knack as your Defense Knack.

Stunt: One of the most important aspects of an acrobatic performance is the teamwork and precision with which the entertainers move. An acrobat with this Knack has learned to depend upon and be depended on when it comes to timely catches, throws, and assists (ever try to build a one-man pyramid?).

Swinging: You have learned to swing adroitly from ropes, chandeliers, etc. If someone attacks you while you are in midswing, you must use this Knack as your Defense Knack.

Falconer (Civil)

The ancient sport of falconry is dying out in the rest of Théah, but it continues to thrive among Ussura's boyars. You know how to handle and train falcons and other birds of prey. You can care for them, raise them, and keep them healthy. You know how to hunt with them and can procure meat in the wilderness. You can also entice your bird to perform more "civilized" tricks, such as flying through a hoop (or an open window).

Basic Knacks

Bird Handling: This Knack allows you to care for your falcons. It also allows you to use a trained falcon for hunting. It is a measure of your knowledge and technique in using the tools of the trade, such as hoods, falconer's gloves and the signaling devices used during the hunt.

Advanced Knacks

Animal Training: This Knack allows you to domesticate animals and train them to perform tricks, or to attack on command. Suggested rules for Animal Training can be found in the *GMs' Guide* on pages 136–137.

Fortune Telling

This skill consists of various means of divining the future — palm reading, card reading, knowledge of omens — as well as ways to convince a paying customer that the divinations are true. Unlike the techniques used by *sorte strega*, Fortune Telling is non-sorcerous, relying on traditional folk techniques rather than any supernatural power. There is no guarantee that any predictions gleaned by the skill will come true, and practitioners learn to speak in vague terms, allowing their subjects to fill in the particulars.

Note: The fate witches of Vodacce rarely use the Fortune Telling skill. They consider it a low-class aping of their very real sorcerous powers (which are covered by the *Sorte* ability). A fate witch who uses Fortune Telling is like a world-renowned ballerina dancing on a street corner for change.

Basic Knacks

Oratory: Sweet words of praise flow as easily from your lips as whispered words of poison. Oratory allows you to convince your listeners more easily of the truth of any argument.

Palm Reading: This skill involves knowledge of what each of the specific lines of the hand mean — not just the head, heart and life lines, but the more obscure marks determining such details as children and financial success.

Advanced Knacks

Bones: Casting the bones involves careful selection of the bones (usually by the client), then applying the fortune-teller's knowledge of the meaning of the patterns created and the interaction between them. This is possibly the oldest medium for fortune telling and one of the most difficult. It is also often used in omens.

Card Reading: Cards are fairly new to the Tibesti. They use a unique deck, unknown elsewhere in Théah, which some believe come from the Crescent Empire. Reading the cards requires knowledge of the traditions and symbols, and of course some understanding of the dual nature of each card. The ability to extrapolate is also helpful, as it is in most other Fortune Telling Knacks.

This Knack has no connection to the card reading powers of fate witches. Though similar on the surface, it uses entirely different techniques which do not readily translate from one form to the other.

Cold Read: This is the art of deducing things about a person from his or her appearance and mannerisms. Handedness might be determined from a callus upon a knuckle, while a nervous twitch could reveal much to an observant eye. With this Knack you can always enter a conversation with at least a little information about the other person. More often than not, this Knack will be used in Contested Rolls against the Resolve of another, or against one of his other Knacks.

Haggling: Being able to bargain is only the beginning for a person who wishes to become a successful procurer of valuable goods. You must also know how to haggle — remaining aware of all the elements of a bargaining discussion at any time, and using them to your advantage. Of course, you must be better at it than your opponent, for he is reading the same signs you are...

Occult: With the occult, there is precious little hard knowledge to be learned. You have acquired some of it and know how to use it, be it a trivial fact about a certain brand of sorcery or the solution to an ancient puzzle.

Omens: This involves predicting the future on a grand scale. It must encompass events and choices far larger than any one person, so a proper omen is often sweeping and obscure.

Other (specify): This is a catch-all Knack that covers many varied methods for divining the future, from tea-leaves to rune-stones, from entrails to bumps on the client's skull.

Hand Axe (Martial)

While no longer commonly used in other nations, the hatchet remains a staple weapon in Ussuran combat. Those who practice this skill are proficient with hatchets, throwing axes, and other one-handed axes. Many of them learned to use it as a practical tool, and found it relatively easy to transfer their knowledge for combat purposes.

Basic Knacks

Attack (Hand Axe): Attack is simply the ability to hit your enemy with a hand axe.

Parry (Hand Axe): Parrying is the act of putting your axe between yourself and your enemy's strikes. This Knack can be used as a Defense Knack while you have a hand axe in your hand.

Advanced Knacks

Throw (Hand Axe): You may throw a hand axe as an attack. When you do so, use this Knack instead of your Attack (Hand Axe) Knack. The Range for such an axe is 5 yards plus your Brawn.

Shield (Martial)

Anyone can hold up a shield, but a soldier trained in its use can turn it into an offensive weapon as well. Due to the similarities between bucklers and shields, you may use one-half of your Parry (Buckler) Knack (rounded down) instead of the Parry (Shield) Knack when using a shield, whichever is higher. Similarly, you may use one-half of your Parry (Shield) Knack (rounded down) instead of the Parry (Buckler) Knack, if it is higher.

Basic Knacks

Parry (Shield): Parrying is the act of putting your shield between yourself and your enemy's strikes. This Knack can be used as your Defense Knack while you are using a shield.

Advanced Knacks

Attack (Shield): Attack is simply the ability to hit your enemy.

New Knacks

Advanced Servant Knack

Drive Sleigh: Driving a sleigh is different from riding a horse or driving a carriage. The animals must be hitched up, prevented from scraping the sleigh along obstacles, and made to work as a team. Worse, the sleigh can be difficult to stop, so it presents a danger to those who are not quick on their feet. You have learned to deal with all these things.

Advanced Performer Knacks

Shill: The shill is an accomplice to the performer, planted in the crowd to make the performer look good. Sometimes a crowd may need a little prompting for applause; sometimes a convenient question from the throng can spark apparent brilliance on stage; and occasionally, onlookers need to be convinced that someone can win at the cups and balls.

Memorizing: This Knack is used when a character wishes to recite, repeat, play, or mimic something that has been played, sung, spoken, or performed in front of him. The TN to memorize something is the same as the TN to perform the action in the first place. Obviously, the longer the original piece, the harder it is to memorize; a bawdy tavern joke would have a TN of 10 – both to tell and to memorize – while the entire content of a historical drama would have a TN of 30.

Memorizing is also considered an Advanced Courtier Knack and an Advanced Spy Knack. At the GM's discretion, previously created Heroes with either the Courtier or the Spy Skill may be granted the Memorizing Knack at a rank equal to their Wits. The GM may adjust the rank up or down if he or she sees fit.

New Swordsman Schools

Bogatyr Swordsman School

Country Of Origin: Ussura

Description: While the typical fighting style of the Ussurans in times of war employs hatchets behind a shield wall, this is not so effective in individual combat. The Bogatyr style of fighting makes use of a full-sized woodsman's axe and forgoes the use of the shield. Its practitioners are known for their ferocity and courage, and indeed the word "Bogatyr" refers to the wandering knightly class which constitute some of Ussura's greatest heroes. During times of war, the peasants are gathered and armed, and given minimal training in how to form a shield wall and work as a unit. Most Bogatyrs work independently from the peasants, seeking out and fighting the members of the opposing army who are better than the typical enemy soldier, especially the commanders. The Bogatyrs who do work with a unit usually work behind it, keeping the peasants in line by ensuring that they fear the Bogatyrs more than the army marching towards them.

The Bogatyr school is currently a source of political tension between the Swordsman's Guild and the Gaius. The Guild refuses to grant membership to practitioners of any of Ussura's anachronistic fighting styles. On the other hand, the Guild wishes to operate in Ussura, selling their services there freely. The Gaius has made it clear that the Guild may only operate within Ussura's borders if the Bogatyrs formally join the Guild. After much political wrangling, the situation settled into an unspoken compromise. Bogatyrs are considered members of the Swordsman's Guild while they are in Ussura or on a seagoing vessel flying Ussura's flag, but not in any other situation.

The strength of this school is its overwhelming ferocity and intimidating techniques. Opponents rarely wish to engage a howling Bogatyr in combat. The weakness of this school is its reliance on offense over defense. Cautious, patient

opponents may catch the Bogatyr while he is recovering from a swing, or following through on a swing that missed.

Basic Curriculum: Hunter, Heavy Weapon

Swordsman Knacks: Lunge (Heavy Weapon), Pommel Strike (Heavy Weapon), Throw (Heavy Weapon: Axe), Exploit Weakness (Bogatyr)

New Swordsman Knack

Throw (Heavy Weapon: Axe): You may throw an axe (Heavy Weapon-sized, not a hand axe) as an attack. When you do so, use this Knack instead of your Attack (Heavy Weapon) Knack. The Range for such an axe is two times your Brawn in yards.

Apprentice: Apprentices of the Bogatyr School practice swinging their axes with great accuracy. They get a Free Raise when attacking with an axe.

Furthermore, students of this School are considered members of the Swordsman's Guild while within the borders of Ussura or on a vessel flying that nation's flag. They do not have any of the advantages of membership in the Guild when they are abroad. Consequently, they get five Knacks from the Hunter Skill at Rank 1 instead of three for having the Skill in their Basic Curriculum.

Journeyman: Journeymen of the Bogatyr School strike incredibly forceful blows capable of inflicting grievous injury on even the sturdiest of foes. They roll and keep an extra die when rolling damage with an axe (+1k1, for a total of 4k3 before adding Brawn).

Master: Masters of this School have a reputation for savage ferocity in combat. They often wear skulls, fangs and claws from wild animals they have slain, and they shout fiercely at the beginning of combat, unnerving their enemies. Increase the character's Fear Rating by 2. If he does not already have a Fear Rating, he now has a Fear Rating of 2. The character also gets 2 Free Raises to any attempt to resist the effects of Fear.

Buslayevich Bowman School

Country Of Origin: Ussura

Description: The archers of Ussura are respected throughout Théah, not because they have developed a special school of archery like the Goodfellow School in Avalon, but because archery is a way of life in Ussura. They see it less as a form of combat than as a means of staying alive, hunting and killing for their food with silent efficiency. Most Ussuran archers have inhuman patience. They draw a bead on their target, aim carefully, and fire only when they know the shaft will fly true.

This technique does not apply to the disciples of Volkh Buslayevich, however.

Buslayevich was a bandit who used his bow from horseback. He would thunder out of the woods, firing his bow quickly and accurately, grab what he wanted without slowing his horse, and ride off at top speed. Those few who survived his assaults said that he attacked swiftly and departed even more rapidly than he arrived. He taught his children his methods, and they taught others, and soon his ways became emulated throughout the nation.

During rare times of war, horse-mounted archers constitute an elite cavalry raiding force. The Buslayevich School teaches horsemanship and a reflexive style of archery which allows the student to fire quickly without sacrificing much accuracy. In fact, its students are surprisingly accurate despite the school's philosophy that the archer should merely point a bow at his target rather than carefully aim.

The weakness of this school is its reliance on instinct, speed and maneuverability. As effective as these traits are, they can be turned against the student by someone with a superior understanding of the terrain and the ability to force the archer into positions that limit his options.

Basic Curriculum: Archer, Rider

Swordsman Knacks: Charge (Bow), Horse Archery, Trick Riding, Exploit Weakness (Buslayevich)



New Swordsman Knacks:

Charge (Bow): Students of the Buslayevich School try to hit early and often, then withdraw to a place of safety. You may lower one of your Action Dice by your Rank in this Knack (to a minimum of 1) just before Phase 1 of the first Round of each combat.

Horse Archery: This replaces the Attack (Bow) Knack when firing a bow from horseback. This is the same as the Horse Archery Knack in the Players' Guide, but it is considered a Basic Knack for students of the Buslayevich School.

Trick Riding: Trick Riding lets you stand while riding (TN 15), do handstands on horseback (TN 20), hang off one side of the horse for cover (TN 20), and other flashy tricks. A well-trained mount (GM's discretion) may reduce such Target Numbers by 5. This is the same as the Trick Riding Knack in the *Players' Guide*, but it is considered a Basic Knack for students of the Buslayevich School.

Apprentice: Students of the Buslayevich School are the best mounted bowmen in the known world. Apprentices of this School get a Free Raise to all of their Horse Archery rolls, and to any attempt to control their horses without using reins.

Students of the Buslayevich School do not gain membership in the Swordsman's Guild for free. Instead, they get one extra Rank in one of their Swordsman Knacks for free.

Journeyman: Journeymen of the Buslayevich School have expanded their expertise with horses to such an extent that they can easily outperform other riders. The student gets a number of Free Raises equal to his Mastery Level for all Trick Riding and Animal Training rolls, and one Free Raise to any Chase rolls he makes while on horseback.

Master: Masters of the Buslayevich School often accomplish feats of horsemanship and archery that seem inhuman. The student gains one free Rank of Horse Archery, raising it to a 6. Furthermore, at the start of each battle, he gets 3 extra Drama Dice that can only be used while he has a bow in his hand or while he is on horseback. These dice never become experience points and are lost at the end of the battle if they have not been used. Also, he gets one more Free Raise to any Chase rolls he makes while on horseback (for a total of two).

Dobrynya Wrestling School

Country Of Origin: Ussura

Description: Ussurans are famous for being hardy and tough. The warriors who dedicate themselves to the study of the Dobrynya School have chosen to embody these qualities. Their fighting style does not require weapons, nor does it rely on fancy tricks or deceptions. It teaches its students to endure pain, to persist in spite of hardship, and to come out of a fight victorious by virtue of endurance and tenacity, leaving their enemy literally crushed.

These wrestlers practice intensely in the cold outdoors, often with little clothing on. They adapt to the hardships of their environment. They run at least a mile into the woods

every morning. They practice their techniques by finding trees of the right diameter, removing their shirts, and embracing the trunk in a bear hug. They apply as much force as they can for an hour or more, straining with all their might against the tree. Then they run back. They do these things regardless of the cold, or the snow, or the rain, or any other concerns of the weather.

The fighting style of the Dobrynya School is simple, but effective. The wrestler grapples with his opponent and places him in a bear hug, then squeezes the life out of him. This may take a long time, but the student is patient and strong enough to wait and let time and pressure take their course.

The weakness of this school is that its practitioners must get close enough to grab the opponent and maintain a hold on him. Opponents who can avoid the wrestler's grasp have a definite advantage.

Basic Curriculum: Athlete, Wrestling

Swordsman Knacks: Bear Hug, Disarm (Wrestling), Fortitude, Exploit Weakness (Dobrynya)

New Swordsman Knacks

Bear Hug: Whenever your opponent attempts to break a hold you have placed him in and fails, or a Round ends, roll a number of dice equal to this Knack, keeping only one. Your opponent takes that many Wounds, which he must immediately test against. This is the same as the Bear Hug Knack in the Players' Guide, but it is considered a Basic Knack for students of the Dobrynya School.

Fortitude: The character has accustomed his body to severe punishment, increasing his tolerance for pain. For every Rank he has in this Knack, the character gains a +1 to all of his Wound Check rolls.

Apprentice: The student has developed an advanced understanding of the principles of wrestling. He knows the best way to hold his opponent, and how to apply strength and leverage to his maximum benefit. An Apprentice of the Dobrynya style of fighting gets a Free Raise to any roll he makes for the Grappling and Escape Knacks. Also, reduce

the damage the character takes from weather by one kept die (-1k1) per Mastery Level.

Students of the Dobrynya School do not receive free membership in the Swordsman's Guild. Instead, they get an extra Rank in one of their Swordsman Knacks for free.

Journeyman: At this level, the student has learned to grip his opponent like a vise, and reflexively tightens his grip when he experiences pain. Whenever the character takes Wounds that inflict fewer than two Dramatic Wounds, anyone that they currently are holding takes Wounds as from a Bear Hug. In addition, the character gets a Free Raise to any roll he makes for the Disarm (Wrestling) Knacks.

Master: Masters of the Dobrynya School can withstand incredible physical punishment. Whenever you fail a Wound Check, divide the amount you failed by in half (rounding down) before suffering any additional Dramatic Wounds. In addition, years of crushing enemies into submission have given you a grip like an iron vise. Gain an extra Rank of the Bear Hug Knack, increasing it to 6.

New Advantages

Accurate Archer (3 Points, 2 for Ussurans)

You are a natural with the bow, and rarely miss your targets. Years of practice have left you able to judge distances and the wind accurately. You gain a Free Raise for all Attacks made with a bow, whether on foot or from horseback.

Animal Affinity (2 Points, 1 for Ussurans)

You get along very well with animals and vice versa. While this will not save you from an angry bear, it will help you

train a domesticated animal. You get a Free Raise for all Animal Training rolls.

Barterer (1 Point)

Ussura still depends largely on the bartering system, although Duomas have local currency and the guilder has begun to make inroads. Haggling occurs in every marketplace, and experienced shoppers can bargain for hours. You have a combination of experience and persistence that naturally lends itself to such proceedings, and almost always come out ahead on trades. You get a Free Raise to any Haggling rolls you make.

Cold Climate Conditioning (2 Points, 1 for Ussurans, Highlanders, and Vestenmannavnjar)

You are used to cold weather. When you take Wounds from cold weather, you roll one less die (-1k0) for Wounds. Unfortunately, you are not used to warm climates. When you take Wounds from hot weather, you roll one more die (+1k0).

Fhideli Connection (3-5 Points)

At one point your character spent some time with (or was possibly adopted by) the Fhideli. This means that you have spent some time in Ussura if not originally from that country. The potency of this Background determines how much your character really knows about the Fhideli's life and how welcome he would be back among them.

3 Points: The Fhideli know and trust you, and you are considered a friend at nearly any of their camps.

4 Points: You were actually adopted into a vitzi and learned to live as a Fhideli. The Language: Fhideli advantage costs 2 points for you instead of 4.

5 Points: Not only were you adopted by a vitzi, but they also entrusted you with their deepest secrets. You may take the



Language: Fhideli Advantage for 2 points, and you know the truth about Vayu. A word to the wise, however; a Hero this respected who betrays the Fhideli may earn themselves a 3-point Cursed background, subject to GM approval.

Language: Fhideli (4 Points, 2 for Naditi)

The language the Tibesti speak among themselves grew along completely different paths than those spoken by the rest of modern society until three hundred years ago, and since then it has absorbed and adapted pieces of almost every other language on Théah. As a result it is a difficult tongue for the gadjo to master but Fhideli can pick up new languages fairly easily considering their differences.

Written Fhideli is a cryptologist's nightmare, since it is always written phonetically in the language of the host nation. Therefore, an Ussuran Fhideli script would seem like gibberish to a native Ussuran.

Second, a Fhideli character begins the game with two languages; Fhideli and the language of his or her host country (almost always Ussura).

Language: Old Fhideli/Naditi (2 Points, Fhideli only)

This is the language that was spoken by the Fhideli in ancient times. These days it is only used in Vayu rituals, and occasionally by obstinate sanats.

No written form of Naditi survives today.

Membership: Stelets (4 Points, Ussurans only)

You belong to the Gaius' elite guards, charged with enforcing his laws throughout Ussura. Though most spend their lives within the nations' borders (and some never even leave Pavtlow), the Gaius has sent a select few into foreign nations on important missions. Such stelets make excellent

Heroes, pursuing the Gaius' interests across the face of Théah. Stelets wear green uniforms emblazoned with Ussura's golden sigil. Units from different provinces sometimes sew their native crest onto their shoulders.

Membership Requirements

- Ussuran nationality.
- Brawn and Resolve of at least 3.
- 10+ HP (5+ if belonging to the Bogatyr School) spent on the Hunter skill, including a Survival Knack of at least 2.
- No fewer than three Martial skills.

The Gaius prefers members who are proficient in the Bogatyr school, the Buslayevich school, or any schools originating in Eisen, but this is not a requirement for membership.

Duties

All stelets are expected to enforce the Gaius' laws throughout Ussura, defend the Ussuran people from all threats, protect the Gaius himself from harm, and pursue Ussuran interests abroad.

Benefits

The Gaius pays for the stelets' room, board, and equipment for as long as they serve him. In addition, they receive a stipend equal to 20G per month. They serve as the law within Ussura's borders, and can expect a modicum of respect from both the boyar and muzhik. Finally, they can appeal to other stelet in time of need, though they are also expected to return the favor if a stelet comes to them asking for assistance.

Membership: Tyomny (2 Points)

You belong to Somojez's Dark Guards, the Tabularius's personal military and defenders of the Orthodox faith. The Tyomny train in the city of St. Andresgorod before moving on to duties under either the Patriarch or the Somojez Knias, and serve the Church tirelessly all across Ussura. Technically, the Knias has final say over the Tyomny's activities, but his decisions rarely conflict with the Patriarch, and few Tyomny are foolish enough to disobey their spiritual leader's dictates.



Membership Requirements

- Wits and Resolve of at least 2.
- The Ordained Advantage (Ussuran Orthodoxy only).
- The Fencing Skill, with Attack (Fencing) and Parry (Fencing) Knacks of at least 3.

Duties

Defend the Orthodox Church from its enemies, obey the Somojez Knias, and protect the faithful from all threats.

Benefits

All Tyomny have room, board, and equipment paid for by the Ussuran Orthodoxy. In addition, they may claim sanctuary in any Ussuran Orthodox Church in the world, and may request assistance from other Tyomny in times of trouble. As representatives of the Somojez Knias, they may enforce the laws in his province, arresting and detaining criminals if necessary. Finally, as ordained priests, they may perform weddings, baptisms, and other functions designated for Church officials.

Pain Tolerance (4 Points, 3 Points for Ussurans)

You are highly resistant to pain. You become Crippled when you have taken a number of Dramatic Wounds that is one higher than your Resolve rather than equal to your Resolve. The number of Dramatic Wounds needed to render you unconscious is unaffected. In addition, you get a Free Raise to all efforts to resist interrogation based on torture.

Sensitive Bones (2 Points)

At some point, you suffered a serious injury. Although it has healed now, it is sensitive to changes in the atmospheric pressure. You keep an extra die (+0k1) when rolling for the Weather Knack.

Showmanship (5 Points, 3 for Fhideli)

You have flawless timing and an ability to work crowds that borders on the uncanny. You long ago determined that anything worth doing was worth doing stylishly. You move, speak, fight, and even eat with flair. While this has obvious uses on the stage or working a crowd, it also has applications elsewhere.

Any action performed in front of an audience that would earn the character one or more Reputation points earns one extra. Additionally, the character has a Free Raise on any use of the Repartee system that succeeds. In other words, if the roll would fail, it fails, but if it succeeds, it counts as if the player had called a raise. If the player calls an additional raise, then a success and raise counts as a success and two raises, etc. When attempting to affect more than one person, the player must choose whether take a Free Raise or affect an additional target.

Ussuran Accent (0 Points, Ussuran Only)

An accent is an identifying characteristic or characteristics in the way a person speaks. Only a Hero fully proficient in the language can identify accents. Language Acquaintance and Pidgins are no help, and non-Ussurans may never have an accent. There are five primary accents in Ussura: Gallenia, Molhyna, Rurik, Somojez, and Veche. The wandering Fhideli have their own language (with an easily identifiable accent) and do not fall into this scheme.

Gallenia: This wild, foreign-sounding dialect is almost a language unto itself. It emphasizes soft, lilting sounds and its users speak with a clipped tone. *Gallenia residents are considered enigmatic and wise, owing to their proximity to Cathay.*

Molhyna: This accent has developed among the plains and steppes of far eastern Ussura. It is guttural and sharp, and even other Ussurans consider it a bit uncouth. *Because of their distance from other nations, Molhyna speakers are considered near-savages: foreigners on the edge of the world.*

	Gallenia	Molhyna	Rurik	Somojez	Veche
Avalon	3	3	2	3	2
Castille	2	3	3	3	2
Crescent	2	2	2	1	2
High Eisen	3	3	3	3	3
Eisen	3	2	2	2	3
Montaigne	3	2	3	3	3
Théan	3	4	4	3	3
Teodoran	2	2	1	1	2
Ussura	0	0	0	0	0
Vendel	2	2	2	2	3
Vodacce	2	2	3	2	2

Rurik: This accent has developed in Ussura's heart, home of the Gaius and the meeting place of the Knias council. *This is the Ussuran accent described in the Players' Guide.*

Somojez: This accent reflects influences from Eisen and the Crescent Empire, as well as northern Vodacce. *Other Ussurans consider residents of Somojez very cosmopolitan, and their accent is similar to those of western nations.*

Veche: Veche has traditionally housed refugees and cast-offs from other areas in Ussura, brought there by war or the will of Matushka. Its accent is soft and flowing, representing the amalgamation of countless different speech patterns. *Veche's frightening past has left its residents with a slightly sinister reputation. The accent is considered a cause for slight unease.*

New Equipment

Hatchet

A hatchet is a small, one-handed axe commonly used for chopping wood. When used as a melee weapon, it inflicts 2k2 damage. When thrown, it has a range of 5 yards + the thrower's Brawn, with no modifier for Short Range and a -5 penalty for Long Range.

Shield

A shield is similar to a buckler, but much larger and heavier. The wielder relies on its size for protection, while a buckler can be moved quickly to deflect incoming blows. Due to the size of a shield, the TN to be hit by non-firearm ranged attacks (e.g. bows or crossbows) is increased by 10 when using one. If a character bashes another person with a shield, it inflicts 1k1 damage.

New Rules

Busking (An Addition to the Repartee System)

Trait Used: Performer Knack + Applicable Trait

TN: Target's Resolve x5

Busking is an age-old tradition of artists and performers "passing the hat" to make a living. Basically, a performer or troupe spontaneously begins entertaining passers-by or a gathered crowd, with the intention of making a bit of money. The performer often has an instrument case, a pot, or a hat on the ground in front of him, and invites people to toss in a coin or two in appreciation. This can be very lucrative in a tavern or a busy plaza, but the busker must always be on the look-out for potentially disapproving authorities, who may see it as a form of begging.

One Busking attempt takes a full hour. This represents the performer sizing up the audience, trying to feel out the crowd's mood, and changing tunes and/or stunts to suit the scene. A character cannot attempt to busk a completely hostile crowd (such as enemy soldiers or prisoners). If a test is successful, subtract the TN (including any raises) from the number rolled. Multiply the result by 1 cent. This is the amount of money the busker earns for the hour. This amount can be increased by 1 cent for each Raise the character calls, including Raises for multiple targets. Busking can only be used on Henchmen and Brutes, never Villains.





Lifeblood



Player

Role-playing Pyeryem

"All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."

– George Orwell

Pyeryem is one of the most misunderstood sorceries in *7th Sea*. While it is easy to imagine stepping through portals or summoning fire, actually *becoming* a different creature can be very difficult to fully comprehend.

Pyeryem users do more than simply adopt the physical form of another creature. Yes, your hands may shrink, your arms may grow feathers, or your nose may elongate. But your entire perspective of the world changes. If you become a horse, you lose a significant amount of vision directly in front of your forehead. A cat? You must look at the world in black and white. A bird? Imagine the sensation of unsupported flight – something that has set mankind to dreaming for thousands of years. Learning Pyeryem is like opening a passage to a new universe of sounds, scents and experiences. The world seems bigger, and your mind sees everything differently. Role-playing the experience takes a certain shift in sensibilities.

Assume for a moment that you are a Pyeryem sorcerer, transforming into the shape of a fox. First, look at your hands. Imagine them shrinking, each finger losing distinction. It feels like your knuckles have swollen – they

lose their flexibility, their skill. The palms grow thick, too thick to feel through easily. Then your back begins to hunch, curving as your hips tilt strangely. When your legs point at a natural 90-degree angle, you fall to your hands and knees, feeling your legs shrivel and your bones compact. At the same time, your arms grow out, away from your body. Your elbows twist and bend, and your wrists lock. Your tail sprouts through your pants, brushing against your legs as your clothing is absorbed into the fox's fur. Feeling strangely naked, you look up at the chair you once sat in, and it is huge – reaching twice your height. Your nose stretches forward, your skull curving and elongating, and several new teeth sprout in your jaw. Then, you recognize scent – scent such as a human never knew. Imagine a blind man waking up to find that he has sight. How do you define the first sight of the color green? That is how it feels to smell your first trace-scent, to sniff the air and know *exactly* who has been here, and how long ago.

The transformation complete, now you must learn to walk like a fox. It isn't easy, coordinating every step with your arm movements. Leap forward, landing always on your hands, and don't compensate for the length of your legs – they aren't long any more, remember? Learn to bark, because you've lost the capacity to speak. Don't pick things up – your hands don't work that way any more, and besides, how would you carry it? Strap something heavy to your back, and you feel like your spine is breaking.

Machines, even carriages, seem magical and terrifying. Your instincts have begun to take over – without them, your mind wouldn't be able to understand the strange smells and feelings you are experiencing, or to balance the unfamiliar weight of your body. You have to relax, and allow the instinct of your new form to guide you – but at the same time, you have to prevent the fox from taking over. If that happens, your human mind could be lost forever.

When the time comes to cast off your spirit skin and return to your human form, you have to go through the process again. Your haunches stretch, throwing you terribly off balance as your forelegs shrivel and shrink. Your padded paws lose their strength, and your fingers elongate into

ribbons of bony flesh. They don't work together any more, but flex separately, like some strange claw. Your spine thickens, and you can hardly twist your body around – something in your hips tilts, and you fall to the ground, unable to support your heavy rear body on your spindly forelegs. Your nose shrinks, your eyes lose focus, and the world seems to fade away. It is almost surreal, how much information you lose, yet the colors around you seem more vibrant. Sounds fade, smells are forgotten, and you sense a great chill come over you as your warm fur becomes loosely hanging shreds of woven fibers.

All this, and more, is part of the magic of the Pyeryem sorcerer. Truly becoming another creature is one of the greatest joys – and the greatest dangers – of Pyeryem.

The Dangers

It is sometimes unsafe to use Pyeryem for extended lengths of time. When a sorcerer spends too long within the spirit-skin of an animal, his own thoughts and memories begin to

fade, and he starts to lose himself more and more to the animal. This process can take weeks, even months – but Pyeryem sorcerers learn to recognize the feeling, and revert immediately, sometimes even swearing off Pyeryem for a few days or weeks to make sure their mind remembers their true form.

Symptoms include feral behavior even when not in animal form, a reluctance to sleep or travel in any form other than an animal, and long periods of silence or fugue. Normal animals often avoid a Pyeryem sorcerer who has gone “feral” – they sense the strange sickness that has come over him, and shy away from it as they would from a predator. Green-eyed animals occasionally appear in the Ussuran wilderness, creatures with no memory of their lives as a human, and no desire – or knowledge how – to return to their former selves.

It is possible for these feral sorcerers to be returned to society, but only through the intervention of another Pyeryem sorcerer, who must convince his feral colleague to



relinquish the spirit skin. This can become quite a battle, as the feral sorcerer fights to maintain his animal form, his mind refusing to accept the memories and intellect of his former life. In extreme cases, it can result in the death of one or both of the participants.

Stronger animals – animals of myth and legend – are said to be even more dangerous. Their spirit is so strong that the change obliterates the human soul within the body. Ussuran legend says that some of the first Drachen were such sorcerers. Bound by magic and power they could not control, their souls shriveled and died, and their half-changed bodies created a new race of terrible creatures. These tales are legends, and nothing more, but the dangers they illustrate are real. Ussuran sorcerers should keep them in mind when they travel the world in a body that is not truly their own.

Simplicity, Not Stupidity

Have you ever walked into your room, looked around, and realized “There’s just too much junk here that I never even use?” That’s how most Ussurans feel – all the time.

Many people in Théah consider Ussurans bumpkins – stupid, exaggerated caricatures of farmers and woodsmen with no teeth and less brains. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Ussurans understand advanced culture and technology as well as anyone; they just don’t see the need for wasteful things, and refuse to spend their lives collecting junk.

For example, look at Montaigne clothing. It’s full of ruffles, lacy bits, floppy silk frills, and yards of clinging, hanging, cluttery ribbon that has no more use than a flintlock to a fingerless man. Ussurans think that’s not only wasteful, it looks foolish. Where a Vodacce might spend time admiring the dress’s golden thread, all an Ussuran can think is “How many servant women wasted countless hours stitching that floppy mess *on*?”

Simplicity, not ignorance, is the heart of Ussura. Need a clock? Why bother with some spinning whirlygig when a sundial works fine – or a candle, when it is cloudy –

cheaper, easier to fix, and less chance of breaking in the harsh Ussuran frost.

Politics and most “culture” are seen the same way. What use is it? Will it help organize taxes, or help with threshing wheat? Probably not. Ussurans understand politics, and respect the titles of nobility outside their own land. However, most Ussuran boyars have calluses on their hands from the years when they pitched in. They know how to work as peasants, as well as how to organize and lead as nobility – and for that, their people respect them. A flashy, lace-covered Castillian nobleman will find no such respect in Ussura. One look at his soft, dimpled hands, and the peasants know he may be “noble,” but he’ll likely starve when the winter comes.

Not all technology is useless to Ussurans, however. Most Ussuran households contain the finest saddles, axeheads, muskets and other genuinely *useful* items. They know a great deal about such things, and can hold advanced discussions – some that even surpass genuine craftsmen from other countries.

Travelers to Ussuran homes sometimes pull out their latest “find,” expecting to impress some witless peasant with the cunning and ingenuity of modern technology. Telescope? Who needs it? How far can you see with it when you’re surrounded by trees? Such items are just clutter, plain and simple. If it speeds the day’s work, or aids in the harvest, an Ussuran will like it, and most likely, already has one. Otherwise, it’s no more interesting than a children’s toy.

Ussurans, however, are unfailingly polite to guests, and will “ooh” and “aah” obligingly when one of their out-of-country visitors starts babbling about such frippery. It isn’t that the Ussurans have never *seen* a compass before, or a new carriage wheel. In many cases, they will make a great fuss over the item for the sake of their guest. If he leaves it with them to “honor their house,” they’ll just put it in the closet with the three others they haven’t bothered to look at, and life will go on. Stories are even told about Ussuran con men who use such tactics in order to swindle foreign merchants.



Simplicity keeps Ussurans happy, and they see no need to exchange it for gaudy trinkets. At the end of the day, while the Montaigne noblewoman is spending three hours changing into her nightgown and curling up in her cold stonecraft bed by a tepid lamp, the Ussuran lady retires to her exceptionally warm bed and revels in the roaring light of her cooking fire. While the Montaigne noblewoman fiddles with her clock, trying to make it chime, the Ussuran sleeps peacefully, knowing that the rooster will crow at dawn.

It always has, and it always will.



Players should stop reading now. This section of the book contains material for the GM only. Ignoring this warning will spoil countless surprises for you during the game.

Matushka

"Speak to the earth, and she shall teach thee."

– Canon of the True Prophet, XII.8

Matushka. The spirit of the Ussuran woodlands. The Goddess of nature, ancient crone of winter and laughing maiden of spring. Fiend from the Syrneth wastes, leading

innocents away from the Vaticine church, and turning their souls to unforgiving Legion.

She has been called all these things, and more. But what is she really?

Matushka's history since the rise of man has been dealt with in Chapter One, but the truth about her origins goes back far before the time of the Numan Empire, before the primitive tribes of Cathay and northern Ussura. Matushka's origins are not, in fact, anything close to human, and she remembers the birth of humanity. She remembers the times before humanity when the Sidhe and the Syrneth fought to control the world. Numerous races, long ago forgotten and lost to history, still live in Matushka's memory. The Thalusiai, a young and arrogant race of upstarts, came and vanished in a mere breath of Matushka's eternal life. She considers all of the Syrneth young races, and their descendants – trapped forever on the far side of the Barrier – are no more than children to ancient Matushka.

The Razhdost

The Razhdost were the first race of Syrneth, and lived upon the world while it was still forming. The world then was a barren place, empty of greenness or animal life, and its land existed as a single great continent. The Razhdost began to create life, calling forth strange beings from the ground and drawing down the stars in order to fill the seas. They poured themselves into this new creation, leaving behind the ways of their race and the bonds of man and woman. Although they never had children, neither did the Razhdost die, and thus they lived in an eternal tapestry with no ending. As they shaped their art, created nature and populated the empty world of Théah with all manner of creatures. Aeons passed and the world began to move. Slowly, one by one the immortal Razhdost vanished.

Realizing that their existence was threatened, the Razhdost tried first one, then a thousand means of repopulating themselves – but to no avail. They turned to their own creation, triggering a reaction that brought forth all manner of new sentient life upon Théah. Thus were the Syrneth



races born — the Thalusiai, the Domae, and many more. Some prospered, some failed, and some did not survive the process of creation.

Still the Razhdost were dying. With the cold logic of alien beings, they began to prepare for the inevitable. They planned to leave Théah, allowing their new races to continue natural evolution, develop, and live without their guidance. One race, however, refused to let them go peacefully. The Thalusiai felt that the Razhdost were leaving without teaching them the final secrets of creation. They sabotaged the final spell of the Razhdost, intending to prevent their masters from leaving Théah. Then the Razhdost would have no choice but to teach the Thalusiai how to create sentient life — allowing them to rule Théah with a race of slave beings at their command.

But the Thalusiai did not realize the ramifications of their sabotage efforts. When the Razhdost opened the portal to step into the Beyond, a huge series of earthquakes and cataclysms ripped across Théah. The continent tore into pieces. The oceans parted, and strange, uncontrolled magic poured into the dying world. New beings from bizarre realities seethed into the breach as the universe tried desperately to right itself. Thousands of Razhdost died as their cities crumbled and uncontrolled power ravaged Théah. Unable to direct themselves into the Beyond, the Razhdost prepared one final spell to seal the portal and protect Théah from their own dark fate.

But they did not expect the reactions of the Syrnych. Watching as the Razhdost opened a portal that caused a massive cataclysm, and then again as their masters began to cast a further spell, the creations of the Razhdost rebelled against them. In fear, the Thalusiai struck out against the Razhdost, not understanding that they were trying to preserve Théah. Other races joined in the attack, trying to destroy them before they could complete their spell.

The attack almost succeeded. All but one of the Razhdost were defeated, destroyed. Their blood stained the portal to the Beyond and drowned thousands of their enemies in its tide. But the last few members of the Razhdost escaped the

massacres long enough to undo the damage, to close the rift and restore the balance to reality.

Only one Razhdost survived. As the younger Syrnych races celebrated their victory and turned to their own devices, the she traveled through the shattered world, mourning the loss of her people and their creations. Finally settling in the wasted ice plains that would one day be Ussura, she kept herself apart from the rest of the world, hardly noticing the Syrnych squabbles, the rise of the Sidhe, the banishment of the Thalusiai beyond the portal. Her own sorrow and grief, and her sense of loneliness, consumed the young Razhdost and filled her with sorrow.

Her name was Matushka.

Matushka's Goals

It is difficult to really role-play the goals of an ancient, immortal, truly powerful being with almost ultimate control over nature in a limited region. Still, Matushka has emotions, feelings, and drives, and her goals can be simplified into a few brief sentences.

First, she knows a great deal about the Syrnych — from their creation to their release. She knows what they are, what they do, and she knows that they wish to destroy the human race and conquer the world that the Razhdost created. This isn't a hypothesis: Matushka *knows*. They will return, and she intends to be ready when they do.

Secondly, Matushka understands evolution as no other being does — from the creation of entire worlds and races to the growing connection she has with the ecosphere and animals of the world, she can see humanity growing and evolving, reaching farther and farther into the unknown. Matushka wants to help humanity evolve naturally, and she wants to gently guide them toward wisdom and peace. This, however, is a long-term goal, and not something easily accomplished without harming the natural evolution of Théah.

Another of Matushka's goals is far less benign. She knows that Porté is tearing open a barrier that holds back horrible

powers, and she understands that it must be stopped at all costs. All of the powers of the Bargain strengthen and serve the Sryneth – but Porté will one day set them free. Because of this, Matushka's most immediate goal is to eradicate Porté sorcery. She isn't blind; only certain members of the Montaigne nobility have the power. Others despise it even as she does. Matushka is choosing her allies carefully, and working to destroy Porté without alerting its users to their true power and the risk they present. It is a dangerous balance, but she will do anything to advance this goal.

NPC Secrets

The following section details the secrets and hidden backgrounds of characters described in the Hero section of this supplement. Because these details were considered too critical or too revealing for players to read, they have been included here.

Ilya "Grozny" Sladivgorod Nikolovich: Villain



Brawn: 5
Finesse: 3
Wits: 3
Resolve: 5
Panache: 2
Reputation: -75
Background: Vendetta
Arcana: Ruthless

Advantages: Ussuran (R/W), Eisen (R/W), Théan (R/W), Appearance (Intimidating), Connections, Indomitable Will, Noble (10)

Courtier: Dancing 1, Diplomacy 4, Etiquette 1, Fashion 3, Oratory 3, Politics 3, Scheming 3, Sincerity 3

Hunter: Ambush 3, Animal Training 4, Fishing 3, Skinning 4, Stealth 3, Survival 4, Tracking 2, Trail Signs 2

Scholar: History 4, Law 4, Mathematics 1, Philosophy 1, Research 1, Theology 2

Archer: Attack (Bow) 5, Fletcher 4, Horse Archer 5, Snapshot 4, Trick Shooting 4

Bogaty (Apprentice): Lunge (Heavy Weapon) 3, Pommel Strike (Heavy Weapon) 2, Throw (Heavy Weapon: Axe) 4, Exploit Weakness (Bogaty) 2

Dirty Fighting: Attack (Dirty Fighting) 5, Attack (Improvised Weapon) 3, Kick 4, Parry (Improvised Weapon) 2, Throat Strike 3

Hand Axe: Attack (Hand Axe) 3, Parry (Hand Axe) 2, Throw (Hand Axe) 3

Heavy Weapon: Attack (Heavy Weapon) 5, Parry (Heavy Weapon) 4

Pyeryem (Master): All Knacks 5

As Gaius, Ilya has the Pyeryem ability to take the form of the great Arkanun tiger – the only person in Théah who can do this. He requires no TN (he automatically succeeds), and the form has the following Boons: Attack (Bite 1k3), Attack (Claws 1k2), Brawn +3, Climb, Keen Smell, Leaping, Speed, Warmth, No Grasping Limbs. Attack (Claws) and No Grasping Limbs are considered a single Boon for purposes of transformation.

Ilya Nikolovich has nightmares that wake him up in the middle of the night, shouting for his father. He has had them since he was nine, when he watched his hair turn white in the mirror. At that moment, two horrible things happened to young Ilya. First, he knew that his parents were dead, and secondly, he saw his own future. His fate was a terrible one.

The rumors that Ilya has never met Matushka are wrong; he met her the moment his hair turned white. As he stared into his golden mirror, the face of an ancient crone appeared. She showed him the cruelties that would befall him at the hands of the boyars, and she showed him the slaughter of Ussuran peasants at the hands of a foreign army. Finally, she showed Ilya his own body, pierced by knives and fallen to the marbled tile in his own throne room in Pavtlow. Then Matushka spoke, and the words chilled the boy to his soul. "You are nothing to me," she whispered as her image vanished into smoke. When the Novgorov guards broke down the

door to the screaming child's chamber, the mirror's surface had already turned to ice.

Ilya genuinely loves his wife, Ketheryna, but he sees her as a too-merciful fool whose kind nature will one day be ruined by the horrors of the true world. He shelters her as much as possible, listening to her pleas of mercy and then quietly commanding his guards to slaughter those who displease him. One day she will understand.

Ilya's primary political support comes from loyal Gallenia, and a fanatic following within the Orthodox church. While Ussuran animals bring news to Ilya as they have with previous Gaius, Matushka herself has never backed Ilya, nor has he ever been able to call upon her wisdom (though he maintains the Gaius's potent powers). Ilya suspects that Matushka's final vision will soon come true – and he fears Montegue's army like nothing else in the world.

He trusts only three people: Ketheryna, Tamara, and his personal confessor, Pontiff Grigori Malenkov of the Ussuran Orthodoxy. He distrusts all other human beings, to the point of paranoia and madness. Eventually, Ilya will go mad, and when he does, Ussura will crumble. His instability has already begun bearing fruit. Ilya plans to remove the Patriarch in three months and appoint Grigori to his position. He is currently arranging for a series of "accidents" to clear the path for Grigori's succession.

Ilya fears Matushka, but would never admit it. Though she has never actively tried to remove him from his throne, he knows that she hates him for his father's treachery, and that he will never live up to her expectations. He covers up his fear by being a cruel and callous ruler, tyrannical and remorseless. The peasants still love him for reasons that he cannot fathom, but he knows that they will ultimately turn against him.

Just like everyone else.



Ketheryna Fischler Dimitritova: Hero



Brawn: 2
Finesse: 4
Wits: 5
Resolve: 3
Panache: 6
Reputation: 65
Background: None
Arcana: Inspirational

Advantages: Ussuran (R/W), Eisen (R/W), Montaigne (R/W), Théan (R/W), Appearance (Blessed Beauty), Connections, Legendary Trait (Panache), Noble

Courtier: Dancing 3, Diplomacy 4, Etiquette 4, Fashion 4, Gossip 3, Lip Reading 3, Oratory 3, Politics 4, Sincerity 3

Hunter: Fishing 3, Stealth 1, Tracking 2, Trail Signs 2, Traps 1

Scholar: Astronomy 2, History 5, Law 5, Mathematics 2, Natural Philosophy 3, Occult 4, Philosophy 2, Theology 4

Athlete: Climbing 3, Footwork 2, Leaping 2, Long Distance Running 3, Sprinting 2, Swimming 4, Throwing 1

Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 2, Parry (Fencing) 2

Ketheryna is conflicted, confused, and desperate. She doesn't love her husband, but fears and pities him. When she first married Ilya, the Emperor of Eisen tried to blackmail her into becoming his pawn, and she refused. Ever since, she has been afraid for her brother's life. Any one of the other Eisenfürsten may have been behind the Emperor's demands, and any one of them may remember her disloyalty to her country. But now she is Ussuran, and she has sworn loyalty to her adopted country. Like most Eisen, her word is her bond. Her Avalon companion, the elderly Sir Thomas, keeps her apprised of events overseas, and her connections to the muzhiks make her aware of nearly every major event in Ussura. In this way, she keeps a closer eye on events and politics throughout the world than any other boyar or Knias in Ussura.

During her time alone while waiting for Ilya's return from imprisonment, Ketheryna learned to fight, to defend herself, and how to rule a country. It wasn't deliberate, but she

wished to ensure both her safety and longevity – if Ilya did not return, Ketheryna had considered offering her services to the next Gaius as a political advisor. Now she uses her skills to sneak military tactics to the embattled men within the forests near Pavtlow, and to find ways to feed the starving muzhiks of Rurik and Somojez.

She prays in the Pavtlow Cathedral three times a week, kneeling humbly and sincerely before the statues of Matushka and the First Prophet, and begging them for wisdom. Occasionally, animals come to her bearing scrolls of information about the Montaigne invaders; in addition, her pet cat – a stray she nursed back to health after it had been savaged by a dog – has a certain way of helping her be in just the right place at the right time, to overhear important conversations among the boyars. She knows where to credit such assistance and ensures that she makes the most of it.

Ketheryna has one more secret, one she shares only with her trusted maid, Leonore. When she arrived in Ussura as a young maid, her eyes were as blue as the sky and remained so until four months ago, when she rescued her cat from its attacker. Ketheryna awoke the next morning to find that her eyes had turned greener than emeralds – more shockingly bright than even the Gaius's most powerful sorcerer. When Ketheryna told Leonora, her maidservant contacted a powerful group of women known as Sophia's Daughters. Through Leonora, they have supplied Ketheryna with a philter that changes her Pyeryem-laden eyes back to blue, hiding their true color from the court. The Daughters have assisted Ketheryna on more than one occasion, and she has begun to trust them. Even Matushka seems to encourage their covert assistance, and storms do not harm their emissaries as they travel secretly to Ketheryna's side.

They may be her best hope to save Ussura.



Aleksi Pavtlow Markov v'Novgorov: Villain



Brawn: 4
Finesse: 3
Wits: 5
Resolve: 3
Panache: 3
Reputation: 45
Background: Vendetta
Arcana: Deceitful

Advantages: Ussuran (R/W), Teodoran (R/W), Théan (R/W), Combat Reflexes, Membership (NOM), Noble, Scoundrel, Servants

Courtier: Dancing 1, Diplomacy 4, Etiquette 4, Fashion 2, Gaming 2, Gossip 3, Oratory 2, Politics 4, Scheming 4, Sincerity 5

Hunter: Ambush 3, Animal Training 3, Skinning 4, Stealth 5, Survival 4, Tracking 5, Trail Signs 3, Traps 3

Athlete: Break Fall 2, Climbing 3, Footwork 4, Leaping 2, Swimming 3, Side-step 2

Commander: Incitation 4, Leadership 5, Logistics 3, Strategy 3, Tactics 3

Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 5, Parry (Fencing) 5

Firearms: Attack (Firearms) 4

Rider: Mounting 3, Riding 4, Trick Riding 3

Pyeryem (Master): Fish 3, Kodiak Bear 5, Man 5, Red Fox 4, Snake 5, Snow Leopard 5, Speak 5, Wolf 5

Aleksi is assisting Montegue. Quietly, with no more than subtle troop movements and mislaid directives to his men, he allows the Montaigne to move forward toward Pavtlow. The Knias hopes that once Pavtlow is destroyed and the Gaius is removed (hopefully at the point of a bloodied sword), Matushka will be forced to cease supporting Ilya's claim to the position. The Gaius will be destroyed, Pavtlow's influence will be ruined, and the five Douma will be free to unite under a ruler of noble blood... and that ruler, of course, is Aleksi v'Novgorov.

But as huge as it is, this is not Alexi's greatest scheme. He holds a secret that his entire line has kept since its inception. To understand its implications you have to go back to a

time of legend, long before Matushka came forth from her cave — back to the time when the Razhdost were shaping the world. They tampered with everything, creating races, creatures, animals and flora for their new world. They created, mutated, and altered with impunity, ignoring their creatures' cries for mercy. And in among it all, they created a sentient creature that escaped them. That creature was the first Wolf.

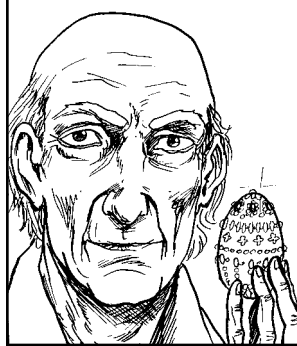
Wolf hid from the Razhdost when the Barrier shattered and the various Synchron races warred. It only emerged when the battles ended and the Razhdost were all dead. It believed that its nightmare had ended, until it discovered that one of its torturers had survived the war. The thought filled it with anger and it vowed to destroy the last of its hated oppressors.

Wolf searched for Matushka for centuries before finally discovering her cave. It lacked the power to confront her directly, so it joined her "guardians" in the hope that one day it would have the chance to destroy her. Wolf allowed the First Prophet to best it, hoping that the human would kill the last of the Razhdost. When he did not, Wolf joined Matushka's other creatures and offered his spirit skin to her new people, always looking for a chance to wrest her life from her bones.

That skin has passed down from one Knias of Rurik to the next, and with it, each has gained the cunning — and the hatred — of the first Wolf. Some have ignored its call, others were frightened by it. Aleks, like his father, has embraced it as a source of infinite power. Where his father, Markov, tried to hurt Matushka by torturing and enslaving her chosen Gaius, Aleks is determined to fulfill the Wolf's ultimate quest: to kill Matushka. The spirit skin allows him to move beyond the notice of the Little Grandmother or her creatures, and protects his true thoughts from even her most cunning spies. Thus, the Wolf has lived within the breast of its prey for more than a thousand years.

Matushka is not infallible. She can be overcome. And when he defeats her, he will feed upon her ancient bones and claim her power. It is all just a matter of time.

Staver Siev Aryaov v'Vladimirovich: Villain



Brawn: 2
Finesse: 4
Wits: 5
Resolve: 2
Panache: 2
Reputation: -35
Background: Fear
Arcana: Focused

Advantages: Ussuran (R/W), Teodoran (R/W), Théan (R/W), Noble, Servants, Toughness

Artist: Drawing 4, Sculpting 3

Courtier: Dancing 4, Etiquette 2, Fashion 2, Oratory 4, Sincerity 3

Hunter: Ambush 3, Stealth 2, Survival 5, Tracking 3

Scholar: Architecture 5, Astronomy 5, History 2, Mathematics 2, Occult 4, Philosophy 1, Tinker 5

Firearms: Attack (Firearms) 3

Pyeryem (Adept): Boar 4, Cat 4, Goshawk 3, Man 4, Owl 4, Snake 3, Speak 3

Staver's Tinker Knack represents his knowledge of repairing or constructing mechanical objects. See *The Invisible College*, page 80, for more information.

It's all true. Staver is stark raving mad. He has been since he was 29, and became trapped in a Setine puzzle-maze for nearly three months. The maze lay deep within the Crescent desert, guarded by a group of blue-turbaned tribesmen known as Coruscites that worshiped its secrets. Staver and his group convinced them to allow the Ussurans to enter the maze as sacrifices to their god. Only Staver made it out again. The ordeal broke him as much as the puzzle did — when he nearly starved, he ate his fallen companions. He learned to hunt rats, and to avoid the clockwork creatures that roamed the maze's shifting corridors. He avoided the incredible traps through luck and raw will, and when he finally found the exit, he had been twisted in both mind and body.

The Great Maze broke his mind, driving him into fits of paranoia coupled with a desperate need to understand and duplicate the clockwork machines he found there. Because he survived, the blue-turbaned Coruscites considered him a prophet of their god. They returned him to Ussura in a caravan filled with tribute from the Coruscites, as well as samples of the great puzzle, and strange items of every imaginable make and function. Some moved by themselves, others seemed to keep perfect time or cause strange disturbances in other mechanisms.

When he is lucid, he comes out of his catacombs and rules Veche as best he can, desperately hoping to stave off another bout of madness long enough to give his people hope and justice. It rarely lasts, but Staver has been able to rule his Douma this way for over thirty years, with the help of carefully chosen advisors and trusted guards.

Every five years, the Coruscites send a messenger to revere Staver's name and make certain that he is still alive. The messenger informs Staver of any changes in the maze's great puzzle, and then – as a sacrifice to the “prophet's” status – the messenger kills himself in ritual suicide. If one of these blue-turbaned messengers should come to Veche and find Staver dead, they will take one of his children, kidnap him, and carry him to the great maze. There, the child will have to undergo the same test as the prophet – but they will most likely not have their father's luck and will die within the maze as the other 12 members of Staver's party did.

Staver knows this. It is the primary reason he sent his daughter away, and no longer claims her as his blood. By treaty of his will, his son Fveryot will be crowned as his heir for five years. At the end of that time, the crown is to be taken from Fveryot and returned to Apraksia, with a letter that explains everything. Staver hopes that five years will be enough for the Coruscites to come and take Fveryot away. He has no real love for the boy, believing Fveryot to be the product of his wife's infidelity. She committed suicide by leaping from the roof of the palace when Staver produced proof of her affair... along with her lover's severed head. Staver has ignored the boy since his birth, convinced that the child is not his own. He is most likely correct.

If Staver's plans go correctly, Apraksia will be saved from the Coruscites because she is no longer his daughter, and Veche will be trusted to a woman with the dedication and knowledge to do what Staver desired from the time he was a boy: bring the land out of the dark ages into a new period of enlightenment. Staver could never complete his dream for Veche. Not after the Maze.

In a way, Staver truly is a “prophet” of the Setine. Their presence, and the presence of their machines, triggers his madness. He reacts to constellations and patterns in the stars that only he can see, and currently endeavors to remodel the palace at Siev into an exact replica of the Great Maze. Even he does not know what the palace will become when he is finished, only that he is driven to create it as he is driven to make his clockwork krashenka, toys, and weapons – all hidden deep below the palace.

Tamara Breslau Fyodnava v'Riasanova: Hero



Brawn: 3
Finesse: 5
Wits: 3
Resolve: 4
Panache: 2
Reputation: 43
Background: Cursed
Arcana: Exemplary

Advantages: Ussuran (R/W), Théan (R/W), Faith (Sud'ya), Membership (Sophia's Daughters), Noble
Courtier: Dancing 2, Diplomacy 2, Etiquette 2, Fashion 3, Gossip 4, Oratory 2
Hunter: Skinning 4, Stealth 4, Survival 3, Tracking 3
Streetwise: Scrounging 3, Socializing 1, Street Navigation 4, Underworld Lore 3
Athlete: Climbing 3, Footwork 4, Leaping 2, Sprinting 3, Throwing 2
Commander: Ambush 2, Leadership 5, Strategy 5, Tactics 5
Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 5, Parry (Fencing) 5
Knife: Attack (Knife) 5, Parry (Knife) 5
Rider: Animal Training 3, Mounting 3, Ride 5

Pyeryem (Master): Firebird 5, Goshawk 5, Owl 5, Man 5, Songbird 3, Speak 5

Tamara is a hero – but just. Her too-high ideals and overriding passions too often get in the way of doing what’s right, and so she is left doing... whatever’s left.

She is a master of the sword and a ferocious military commander as well as a loyal advocate of the dying Sud’ya tradition. She will do anything to revitalize the faith, though she must step carefully around Orthodox Church. Darkness terrifies her because of the prophecy and her mother’s conniption fits, but she is too stubborn to show it. She hates her ability to determine the truth; though it makes her an exceptional ruler, it has also alienated her from all society except her simpleminded sister, Dauntaina, who is too straightforward and well-meaning to lie to her.

Two years ago, her brother escaped the monastery at Astradastan. Tamara hasn’t spoken of it to anyone, preferring the illusion of safety. Still, she fears Dreng, and if the Orthodoxy protects him, he could legitimately challenge her for the throne. In order to prevent this, she stays close to the Gaius and holds the trust of her boyars close.

She also fears that she may be in love with Ilya, and she knows that he is going mad. In her soul, she understands that the two of them are not meant for each other, but that does not stop her from looking at Ketheryna with hatred and resentment. Though the Daughters ordered Tamara to aid Ketheryna in any way possible, the Gallenian chafes at their restraint. She has belonged to their order since she was a child, and they have protected her from many dangers, even risking their lives to save hers. Tamara cannot fail her sisters in this endeavor, but their loyalty to Ketheryna – who doesn’t even belong to the society – galls her.

Now, the Daughters are hinting that they wish for Tamara and Leonore to induct Ketheryna into the Daughters of Sophia. If they decide that Ketheryna should join their order, Tamara will likely need to lead her through the ritual initiation and indoctrination, making her a sister in blood and oaths. Tamara wishes they had asked her to kill the young wife of the Gaius instead. It would have been easier.

Borin St. Andresgorod v’Pscov: Hero



Brawn: 2
Finesse: 2
Wits: 5
Resolve: 2
Panache: 2
Reputation: 13
Background: True Identity
Arcana: Fortunate

Advantages: Ussuran (R/W), Able Drinker, Left-Handed
Courtier: Dancing 1, Diplomacy 1, Etiquette 3, Fashion 2, Oratory 5, Politics 4, Sincerity 5

Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 2, Parry (Fencing) 2

Merchant: Accounting 5, Appraising 5, Hagglng 4, Innkeeper 2

Scholar: History 2, Mathematics 1, Philosophy 1, Research 4

Streetwise: Scrounging 1, Shopping 3, Socializing 4, Street Navigation 3, Underworld Lore 2

Pyeryem (Apprentice): Man 2, Mouse 2, Speak 1

“Matushka, help me. This isn’t my fault.” Those words have rung in Borin’s mind since he was sixteen years old. He repeats them every morning and every night, like a mantra. Or, more accurately, they ring in *Valerii’s* mind. Because Borin isn’t Borin at all.

When he was nineteen, just over fifteen years ago, he was a young merchant living in a small city named Tokisatan. By some strange coincidence, his features were identical to the similarly aged Knias of Somojez. The same Knias who had just snuck out of the palace with three young guardsmen in order to get drunk. The same Knias who was killed in a barfight on the evening that his Tyomny companions stumbled into Valerii’s shop.

When they saw the resemblance, the Tyomny kidnapped Valerii, mugged him, beat him, and threatened him with the deaths of his father and two brothers if he did not do as they wanted – rule Somojez as Borin until they could figure out “another plan.” Valerii faked the incident with the axe to cover “Borin’s” sudden lack of fighting skills, and he



stopped going to church in the Orthodoxy to cover the fact that he was brought up in the Old Ways, and knew almost nothing about the Canon of the Prophet.

Valerii knew two things: how to be a merchant, like his father, and how to lie. He's done both for so long that he's the wealthiest man in Ussura, and can deceive his own mother without breaking a sweat. The only person he can't fool is himself. He's expected to be a military leader, yet he knows nothing about commanding. He's hired Eisen mercenaries to try to cover his lack of knowledge, but he doesn't understand how to effectively govern his troops. All the knowledge the Knias of Somojez learned from childhood was lost on the day the real Borin died.

Being the Knias was easy, at first. All he did was increase trade, watch the accounts of the Douma, and occasionally make a judgment on some domestic dispute. Not too hard. For nearly ten years, he tried to enjoy the job, hoping that the Tyomny would eventually let him "off the hook" and fake Borin's death. He did so well, however, that his captors have continued to force him to be the Knias and rule the Douma. It almost succeeded... until Montegue came, and the ruse began to fall apart.

Rather than fight the Montaigne, Valerii tried to buy them off. It didn't work. He tried to pay Eisen to invade Somojez and drive out the Montaigne. That didn't work, either. He's finally arranged to continue trade through the small town of Govny, trusting Matushka to fight his battles for him. It's humiliating, but at least Montegue didn't come any farther south. Borin has hired scouts to look for dracheneisen on the western end of his territory, hoping to use it to force the Eisenfürsten to help him with the Montaigne.

Since he became Knias, two of the three Tyomny that placed him on the throne have died fighting the Montaigne. The third, a wily captain named Usor Dalovich v'Kaplov, has eluded even the toughest Montaigne patrols, and currently leads a well-fought guerrilla war just south of Odyesse. Valerii isn't sure whether he should be glad that the Somojans are winning, or depressed that Usor won't die, so he can slip away. Usor has told Valerii that if he doesn't continue to serve as Knias for the rest of his life, the captain

will have him hunted down as a traitor, and hanged for impersonating the Knias. So he continues his charade, desperately trying to put the country together, and failing miserably.

Valerii has a little ability with Pyeryem – enough to make his eyes green, and to turn into a mouse. It isn't the fierce Drachen of his "ancestors," but it is enough to keep him safe from questioning. By now, everyone is so used to his lax and confused rulership, that they don't even ask. He's deathly terrified of the great Drachen, which lies under the palace at Sousdal in some sort of enchanted slumber. When he sleeps in the palace, it whispers and mocks him in his dreams. He awakens in sweats and shivers, and must go and count his money in order to sleep once again. The Drachen knows who he is, and takes delight in torturing him – after all, this Knias is as much a prisoner as the Drachen itself.

Due irony, indeed.

Koshchei



Brawn: 2
Finesse: 5
Wits: 6
Resolve: 2
Panache: 4
Reputation: 95
Background: None
Arcana: Intuitive

Advantages: Avalon (R/W), Castille (R/W), Crescent (R/W), High Eisen (R/W), Eisen (R/W), Montaigne (R/W), Teodoran (R/W), Théan (R/W), Ussuran (R/W), Vendel (R/W), Vodacce (R/W), numerous offshoots and dialects, Indomitable Will, Legendary Trait (Wits), Linguist
Skills: Koshchei is considered to have every Skill in the game, and all Knacks at Rank 5.

Pyeryem (Master): all Knacks from each Trait at 5

Sorcery: Koshchei has mastered several other forms of sorcery (equivalent to Sorte and *El Fuego Adentro*), at the same level as his Pyeryem abilities. Know one knows where



he acquired them, and he has yet to teach anyone their secrets.

Koshchei is neither a Hero nor a Villain. He's been around too long to conform to normal dictates of morality.

It is difficult to talk about Koshchei without taking in the full spectrum of what he's seen and done. A thousand years is an astounding amount of time to live through. The implications stagger the mind. He has met every Gaius in Ussuran history. Seen every war. Attended every meeting of the Knias Douma. He has watched forests grow from saplings, and seen lakes dry up into deserts.

And he isn't going to die.

The wily scholar-king used Matushka's own blood to unlock the secrets of immortality. He willingly embraced the despicable things they demanded of him to keep his beloved Molhyna safe. He eats babies, bathes in the blood of maidens, and does a whole host of other grotesque things to keep himself alive. This is Koshchei's great tragedy: the loss of his soul to save his nation.

When Matushka took him aside into the other room long ago at the first meeting of the Knias Douma, she showed him a terrible secret. She showed him exactly what lay at the bottom of Lake Vigil, and she told him that if he and the others did not agree to her plan, she would stop protecting Molhyna. And then she took him to the ruins of the last Razhdost city, and let him see them for himself.

Koshchei is Matushka's balance, the only one who has seen all of her machinations and truly understands what she is trying to prevent. And he is immortal because of her. At the bottom of Lake Vigil lies the final and most complete Syrneth site on Théah, built on the ruins of the last Razhdost city. It is the most complete because it is still inhabited. The Vodyanoi of Lake Vigil are actually Syrneth, who have adapted to life in the peculiar habitat of Lake Vigil. They never surface, but the mobile islands on the lake are actually their great clockwork ships that can come to the surface to collect episura (which the Vodyanoi base much of their diet on). They have fought a silent futile war against

Matushka for eons, and Grandmother Winter has never permitted them to escape the lake.

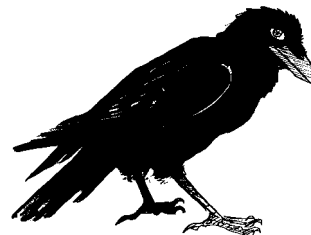
During her conference with Koshchei during the Pavtlow convention, she informed him that if he did not back Ussuran union, she would cease her repression of the Vodyanoi, who would then bring their great engines of destruction to bear on the impudent humans who were occupying their land.

Koshchei agreed to back the Ussuran union on one condition: Matushka would continue to stifle the Vodyanoi until he, Koshchei, died. Matushka agreed, figuring Koshchei incapable of living beyond the next century. But when he struck the deal with her to ally Molhyna with the newly forming Ussura, he insisted on sealing it with blood – Matushka's blood. And with a sip of her essence, he gained the ability to live forever. He can die, but he will always be reborn, thus keeping Lake Vigil's inhuman denizens from ever threatening his beloved Molhyna.

Koshchei was initially quite pleased with his apparent cunning, but when he revealed his ruse to Matushka, the old crone only laughed. "Immortality isn't a blessing. It is a curse. Soon, too soon, you will see the *truth*. And then, you will never again be able to escape it." A thousand years later, Koshchei is beginning to understand.

He knows full well what is happening to the v'Pietrov (see page 119), but chooses not to intervene... at least not yet. Koshchei has been around long enough to know that human evil is fleeting, and that whatever damage Kalenikov does can be repaired in the fullness of time. Should things get too far out of hand, he is prepared to step in, but for now, he merely watches and waits.

He's learned how to do it so well.



Vladimir Goroduk Drakov v’Pietrov: Scoundrel



Brawn: 4
Finesse: 4
Wits: 2
Resolve: 1
Panache: 2
Reputation: -12
Background: None
Arcana: None

Advantages: Eisen (R/W), Théan (R/W), Ussuran (R/W), Noble, Scoundrel

Courtier: Dancing 1, Diplomacy 2, Etiquette 3, Fashion 1, Oratory 2, Politics 4, Scheming 4, Sincerity 2

Hunter: Fishing 2, Skinning 4, Stealth 3, Trail Signs 2

Streetwise: Scrounging 3, Socializing 1, Street Navigation 2

Dirty Fighting: Attack (Dirty Fighting) 3, Attack (Improvised Weapon) 3, Eye-gouge 2, Kick 2, Throat Strike 2

Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 4, Parry (Fencing) 3

Firearms: Attack (Firearms) 2, Reload (Firearms) 1

Knife: Attack (Knife) 3, Parry (Knife) 3

Drakov isn’t the bloodthirsty madman people think. In truth, he’s a frightened paranoid whose delusions of assassination are being fed by Kalenikov, the commander the Oprechnina, who truly controls Molhyna now. Vladimir gets all his information and news from the Oprechnina, and has no idea how bad things are in the province. The Oprechnina and Kalenikov also screen Vladimir from outside contact – it would take breaking and entering now to see the v’Pietrov.

Vladimir remains hidden in his palace and terrified to leave it. He has no visitors, no friends, and no lovers. He sits by the window and mutters, filling pages upon pages of parchment with letters to his dead wife. He is fractured, confused, and cut off from reality. Kalenikov feeds him at random times during the day, convincing the Knias that it is dinnertime, even when the morning sun shines. He wakes Vladimir with loud gongs at odd hours, prevents him from ever sleeping a full night, and sends false “assassins” into Vladimir’s chambers from time to time to keep him

paranoid. Like any other man under the circumstances, Vladimir is starting to fall apart.

If someone doesn’t help him, he will soon be lost forever.

Parigorii Kalenikov: Villain



Brawn: 1
Finesse: 3
Wits: 4
Resolve: 4
Panache: 2
Reputation: -56
Background: None
Arcana: Ruthless

Advantages: Ussuran (R/W)

Doctor: Diagnosis 4, Examiner 5, First Aid 3, Quack 1, Surgery 5

Spy: Bribery 4, Conceal 4, Cryptography 3, Forgery 4, Interrogation 5, Poison 4, Shadowing 5, Sincerity 5, Stealth 5

Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 5, Parry (Fencing) 5

Firearms: Attack (Firearms) 4, Reload (Firearms) 4

Heavy Weapon: Attack (Heavy Weapon) 4, Parry (Heavy Weapon) 4

Knife: Attack (Knife) 5, Parry (Knife) 4

Rider: Mount 5, Ride 5

Kalenikov is considered Old, as per the rules on page 167 of the *GMs’ Guide*.

Kalenikov is an irredeemably evil man who has finally reached the position he knew he could never claim legally – absolute control over Molhyna. Everything he has done, and every unspeakable act he has performed, has been directed toward attaining his current position. Drako was too crazed to be controllable, but Kalenikov dances Vladimir like a puppet on a string. He feeds Vladimir’s paranoia extensively – he is the only person Vladimir trusts. Under Kalenikov’s counsel, Vladimir has even ordered the execution of his own wife. (Rather than killing her, Kalenikov took the woman into a separate wing of the castle, where he has secretly kept her alive for his own

pleasure. He regularly laments her “death” with the v’Petrov.)

Kalenikov also holds complete control over the Oprechnina. They obey him without question, partially out of respect for his intellect, and partially because they know they could never hope to oppose him individually. He is a skilled torturer, a virtuoso with a knife, and knows more about causing pain than any other man in Molhyna. Crossing Kalenikov is a good way to end up vanishing in the night.

Kalenikov cares for nothing but his own personal gain and pleasure. Timurbek’s coup, the unhappy muzhiks, and the gradual collapse of Molhyna as an entity do not concern him in the slightest. He used to worry about Koshchei, but the old sorcerer has never lifted a finger to stop him. He fully intends to live the rest of his life in decadent opulence, and then die. Nothing more.

Pyotyr Siev Andropovich: Hero



Brawn: 4
Finesse: 2
Wits: 3
Resolve: 5
Panache: 2
Reputation: 32
Background: Obligation
Arcana: Loyal

Advantages: Eisen, Ussura (R/W), Able Drinker, Commission, Indomitable Will, Membership: Stelets

Artist: Woodcarving 3

Hunter: Fishing 2, Stealth 4, Survival 3, Tracking 4

Merchant: Hagglng 2, Weaver 2

Athlete: Climbing 3, Footwork 2, Leaping 2, Sprinting 3, Swimming 2, Throwing 3

Bogaty (Master): Lunge (Heavy Weapon) 5, Pommel Strike (Heavy Weapon) 5, Throw (Heavy Weapon: Axe) 5, Exploit Weakness (Bogaty) 5

Commander: Incitation 3, Leadership 5, Strategy 4, Tactics 3

Firearms: Attack (Firearms) 3, Reload (Firearms) 2

Hand Axe: Attack (Hand Axe) 3, Parry (Hand Axe) 3, Throw (Hand Axe) 4

Heavy Weapons: Attack (Heavy Weapon) 5, Parry (Heavy Weapon) 5

Wrestling: Bear Hug 3, Break 4, Escape 3, Grapple 3

Pyotyr genuinely loves his country, and wants to believe that his Gaius is a good man. It is a hard belief to hold, given Ilya’s contradictory orders and false pride, but Pyotyr is a stubborn man. Although the Gaius has expressly forbidden him to remove any stelets from Pavtlow, he has ways of getting around that. He believes that the Gaius is stupid or mad to rely on aid from Eisen, and while his loyalty never wavers, he will do whatever he can to save his country from the Montaigne.

He currently works to aid the armies gathering south of Pavtlow – he couldn’t turn his back on them. After all, they are being led by Pyotyr’s own son, Drutsky Kethna *Pyotrov*. In order to disguise his origins (and to keep Pyotyr safe from the Gaius’s anger), Drutsky changed his name and hid his birth when he began to gather the armies.

Pyotyr is trapped between his loyalty for the Gaius and his love for his son. He sends what aid he can, primarily by assisting and giving troop information to Ketheryna’s secret scouts. He is fiercely loyal to Ketheryna, and still tries to be everything that is expected from the captain of the stelets. However, he has one last trick up his sleeve for Montegue: if the Montaigne armies begin to siege Pavtlow, they will find themselves surrounded by flames.

Pyotyr has arranged for as many civilians as possible to evacuate the city and head for Tremult. In their wake, he has filled their houses with gunpowder, lumber, alcohol and cloth. The Gaius and the stelets have a way out of Pavtlow beneath the royal palace, to a boat that lies moored in a secret dock on the Ekatnava river. When Montegue takes the city, it will explode with a light that will be seen clear to the ocean.



Nona Basulde: Hero



Brawn: 1
Finesse: 3
Wits: 5
Resolve: 5
Panache: 2
Reputation: 80
Background: Rivalry (Gaius)
Arcana: Inspirational

Advantages: Eisen (R/W), Fhidelì (R/W), Naditi, Ussuran (R/W), Vodacce (R/W), Indomitable Will, Linguist
Doctor: Diagnosis 2, First Aid 1, Surgery 3
Fortune Telling: Bones 3, Cold Read 5, Hagglìng 4, Occult 3, Omens 3, Oratory 5, Palm Reading 4
Performer: Acting 1, Dancing 3, Jugglìng 1, Singing 2, Storytelling 3
Streetwise: Scrounging 2, Shopping 2, Socializing 4, Street Navigation 1
Servant: Accounting 2, Etiquette 3, Fashion 1, Gossip 4, Menial Tasks 3, Unobtrusive 1

Nona left her service with the Caligari family after she had “accidentally” spilled the Prince’s soup. Vincenzo never forgives carelessness in his servants; never mind that it was the second time she had quietly intercepted a poisoning attempt. Of course she never let on that she knew someone was trying to poison the Prince; why should she become the object of suspicion?

Nona believes that she knows who the Naditi are and what they represent. She knows that this knowledge is dangerous, though, and so does not share it with anyone – not even the Naditi. Some of them may eventually determine their origins, but at least she won’t help them along the way.

Nona knows that Chavi intends to leave the vitzi soon to search for her daughter. She is quietly trying to convince her that her daughter will be easier to find among the Basulde, as that seems to be where most of the Naditi are appearing. But Chavi is gaining support from many of the younger members of the clan, and Nona may have to let a small

group go out questing in order to prevent the loss of even more strong backs in addition to their best healer.

For herself, Nona lives in terror that Matushka will return again and give her another task. Three years ago, the Crone brought a tiny baby boy to Nona and told her to see to the child’s upbringing. That same night, Nona’s daughter, Renate, gave birth to her second child. Nona served as midwife, and was heartbroken when the child was still-born. Not wanting to cause her daughter any more pain, she substituted the baby Matushka brought, and the unsuspecting parents named him Rue. She buried her real grandson in an unmarked grave and has never said a word of this to anyone, except to Matushka when the crone visited the next year.

She is aware that the Gaius resents her, but cares little about Ilya’s wrath, and more about Grandmother Winter’s. For all his power, the Gaius is merely mortal, and Matushka isn’t. Nona didn’t get where she is today by not understanding the difference.

Piorgi Curara: Hero



Brawn: 4
Finesse: 2
Wits: 3
Resolve: 4
Panache: 3
Reputation: 75
Background: None
Arcana: Exemplary

Advantages: Fhidelì (R/W), Ussuran (R/W), Eisen (R/W), Connections, Keen Senses
Athlete: Breakfall 1, Climbing 2, Footwork 3, Sprinting 2, Swimming 1, Throwing 2
Artist: Musician (Balilika) 3
Archer: Attack Bow 3, Fletcher 2
Hunter: Animal Training 2, Skinning 2, Tracking 3, Trail Signs 3, Traps 3
Merchant: Appraising 3, Blacksmith 5, Hagglìng 4

Performer: Acting 1, Cold Read 3, Dancing 1, Juggling 2, Oratory 4, Singing 2, Storytelling 2

Rider: Ride 3, Trick Riding 2

Wrestling: Break 2, Escape 2, Grapple 3

Piorgi is that rarest of Tibesti: a man with no secrets. He is exactly what he seems to be — a courageous, resourceful, compassionate leader and family man. That is to say, he has no secrets of his own. He of course keeps the secrets of those who confide in him, including Nona. When anyone wishes to point to what is best among the Fhidel, they point to Piorgi.

Jyrgal Timurbek: Villain



Brawn: 3

Finesse: 5

Wits: 3

Resolve: 5

Panache: 4

Reputation: -46

Background: Hunted

Arcana: Overzealous

Advantages: Keen Senses, Scoundrel

Criminal: Ambush 4, Gambling 3, Quack 1, Scrounging 4, Shadowing 5, Stealth 5

Hunter: Fishing 3, Survival 5, Tracking 5, Traps 4

Archer: Attack (Bow) 5, Snapshot 4, Trick Shooting 4

Athlete: Break Fall 3, Climbing 3, Footwork 4, Long Distance Running 5, Sprinting 4, Swimming 3, Throwing 4

Commander: Diplomacy 3, Incitation 5, Leadership 4, Logistics 4, Strategy 5, Tactics 5

Rider: Animal Training 3, Mounting 5, Ride 5

Buslayevich (Master): Charge (Bow) 5, Horse Archery 5, Trick Riding 5, Exploit Weakness (Buslayevich) 5

Timurbek has no real secrets, and in fact believes very strongly that he is doing the right thing. He loves his people dearly, and sees the establishment of their own province as a good thing, even if it means the deaths of the Ussurans

currently living there (he believes the punishment should fit the crime, and feels that the Ussurans deserve some bloodshed after centuries of oppressing his people).

His plans concerning fealty are still uncertain. He does not know what to make of the Gaius, and if Ilya can demonstrate to Timurbek that Ussura can be strong and fair, Jyrgal may decide to keep his people loyal. If not, he will likely attempt to go it alone, declaring complete independence and defending his new nation as best he can.

New Monsters

Many nations of Théah boast strange monsters and ravenous beasts that threaten visitors and travelers. While Ussura is no different, it is unique in the fact that many of its creatures threaten only the uneducated. Creatures of the woodland, spirits of nature and myth, must obey ancient rules of decorum and behavior. Travelers who know that Leshii may not tell the whole truth, or that the Talking Beasts must obey the rules of nobility, find Ussura a much safer place than the wilds of other nations. But woe to those who do not study the ancient legends, and learn from their lessons... for those travelers may never return from the Ussuran woods.

Leshii

Brutes

Threat Rating: 2

Usual Weapons: Whips (Medium)

TN to be hit: TN 25

Skills: Attack (Whip) 5, Shadowing 5, Stealth 5, Tracking 5

The Leshii are the most common spirits in Ussura, and tend to stay in abandoned houses, small groves, or caves at the edge of mountain ranges. Fastidious creatures, they always bathe in the morning when the sun first touches the horizon. If you stop a Leshii from bathing — either deliberately or by accident — they grow angry.



The Leshii are pranksters, wicked to humans because they believe humans are imperfect and they like to prove it. Sometimes they appear as green-skinned men or women of various ages, sometimes as talking birds or small animals. In many stories, each Leshii has a magic whip, created out of the oldest rowan tree in the world, and they beat travelers who cannot answer their riddles.

If bested in a riddle contest or otherwise tricked, Leshii occasionally grant a magic apple to their rivals. These apples have various abilities, from granting youth, beauty, wealth, or health, to bringing misfortune, changing a man into a donkey, or forcing the eater to speak only the truth. Only another Leshii can remove such a curse, and it usually involves another riddle, or a quest of some nature.

Leshii rarely fight except to defend themselves, but they are not weak warriors. With their barbed whips, they can do a great deal of damage, and they know the woodlands of Ussura like no other creature. Leshii whips are far more painful than mortal whips (thus their higher damage), and cannot be used by anyone save another Leshii.

Talking Beasts

Brutes, Henchmen, Heroes and Villains

TN: As normal beasts

Brawn: As normal beasts

Finesse: As normal beasts

Resolve: As normal beasts +1 (maximum 5 without modifier)

Wits: As normal beasts +2 (maximum 6 without modifier)

Panache: As normal beasts +1 (maximum 5 without modifier)

Attack Roll: As normal beasts

Damage: As normal beasts

Skills: As normal beasts; Speak Ussuran

The talking beasts of Ussura are few and far between. Matushka's presence grants them the ability to speak and reason like a human, much in the same way she grants Pyeryem to worthy nobles of the human courts. These

beasts always appear as ideal specimens of their type – swift wolves, cunning foxes, and beautiful birds – as befits the nobility of the court.

Talking Beasts form a rough hierarchy – like the humans – headed by the Beast Court. Four King (Wolf, Bear, Cat and Wolverine) rule over the Court, occasionally joined by a fifth, the Firebird (though she does not deign to “rule” the beasts of the air, as is her right). The Beast Kings serve as the leaders of their people, and also listen and sit in judgment over the other beasts of the forest.

The creatures of the court of the Beast Kings have the ability to speak, and an understanding of basic human politics and reason. They can be found throughout Ussura, though they tend to stay in unpopulated areas; each one controls a certain region, much like their human counterparts. Each one has a title of some sort (typically mimicking human boyar titles, such as Voevod, Grand Duke, or Bogatyr) and considers himself a noble boyar of Matushka's lands. They expect to be treated with respect and manners. Still, for all this, they remain animals – prone to eat their meat raw, seek sustenance in the hunt, or lie in a sunny place on a warm afternoon.

Snow Maiden

Brutes

Threat Rating: 3

Usual Weapons: Medium (Teeth)

TN to be hit: 20

Skills: Attack (Teeth) 3, Dancing 5, Seduction 7

The Snow Maidens are unique, short-lived creatures of the Ussuran winter, though some living in Molhyna's far north are said to be as immortal as the unmelting snow. Born when the first snow falls, these magnificent creatures melt away again when the last snow is gone. During the winter, they dance in the trees, creating snow in their wake (their fabulous parties bring blizzards when so many of them gather together). According to legend, men are easily seduced by Snow Maidens, and women by their consorts (Ice Youths), as their beauty is unmatched in all the world.



Despite their appearance, they have cruel and cunning natures, and deliberately seduce humans to stay out in the cold and dance the night away under a frozen moon. Ussurans refer to deaths from exposure as “dancing with the Snow Maidens.”

Ice Youths and Snow Maidens are not truly human, nor are they subject to Matushka’s power. Some scholars consider them relatives of the Sidhe, but no conclusive link to the Avalon faeries has ever been found. They feed on the frozen flesh of their prey, and only mimic human behavior in order to gain new victims. A sure way to spot one is to note the rows of sharp teeth in their mouth, much like a shark’s, which they try to hide.

Any fire-based attack which strikes them immediately causes them to dissipate. They will not approach a raging bonfire, but may feed on the flesh of a traveler’s horse, if the beast is not near the fire’s warmth.

Legends speak of a palace of ice and bone far to the north where the sun shines only six months out of the year. In that palace lives an ancient maiden known as the Snow Queen. She is said to steal away small children for her amusement, transforming them into Snow Maidens and Ice Youths for her court.

Zalozhniy

Hero

TN to be hit: Varies by Skill

Brawn: As in Life

Finesse: As in Life

Resolve: As in Life +1 (maximum 6 without modifiers)

Wits: As in Life

Panache: As in Life +1 (maximum 6 without modifiers)

Attack Roll: Varies by Skill and Weapon

Damage: Varies by Attack

Skills: Any, Ranks 1-5; All languages (R/W)

Warriors who have died defending Ussura, and all Stelets who die in the line of duty, are reborn within the city of Murom within the Thrice-Tenth Kingdom. There they serve Matushka in protecting the most sacred places in Ussura.

These loyal guardsmen become members of an elite spiritual force known as the Zalozhniy, serving Matushka and awaiting the day of reckoning, when they will be called forth to fight for Ussura once more — similar to the Vestenmannavnjar myth of the Valkyries.

They are joined by those loyal Ussuran soldiers who have grown too old to make it through the winter, or whose spirits were laid to rest within the Azov forest (although they receive a lower rank and less prestige within the Zalozhniy). Ussurans refer to the Zalozhniy as the Knights of the Forest, a spiritual force that defends the deepest glens and most sacred places of Ussura.

The Knights of the Forest are said to be clad in shimmering golden scale mail covered with etchings of ivy and leaves. They will fight to the death to defend the sacred places of Ussura, and may even mistake a party of friendly Heroes for enemies if they do not have a native Ussuran in the group. The knights can understand any speech, and are often accompanied by an animal on their journeys and quests.

Zalozhniy do not remember their past life, though they appear as a perfect version of their former incarnation at their prime. Attempting to make a Zalozhniy remember past events (before their death) or accept their previous obligations and duties will likely drive them mad. If this occurs, they will attack those who forced such knowledge on them, fighting to the death. Their armor tarnishes and turns to salt as they are lost to insanity, and their body turns to ash when they finally die forever.

Creating a Zalozhniy: The best way to create a Zalozhniy is to create him or her as a living character first, and then kill him or her, using the conversion rules above. Although Heroes, Zalozhniy are not recommended for use as player characters, though an Ussuran player’s Hero who dies under the right circumstances may become reincarnated as an (NPC) Guardian.

Ussura

1. Pavlow (pg. 31)
2. Breslau (pg. 35)
3. Sredburskoye (pg. 36)
4. Eniseisk (pg. 38)
5. Kuzetsk (pg. 39)
6. Sladivgorod (pg. 39)
7. Ekaternava (pg. 42)
8. Donskoy (pg. 42)
9. St. Tremult (pg. 43)
10. St. Andregorod (pg. 44)
11. Sousdal (pg. 45)
12. Odvesse (pg. 45)
13. Yariyk (pg. 46)
14. Siev (pg. 49)
15. Malaya (pg. 50)
16. Kuloi (pg. 50)
17. Podshivsk (pg. 50)

Proliv Iaya

Molhyna

Ozero Bodrustovany
(Lake Vigil)

Ozero Medyyed
(Bear Lake)

Gora Soridgrastov

Deryanny Forest

Reka Ekaterina

Rurik

The Firewall

Proliv Volog

The Azov Forest

Veche

Gallenia

Gora Bolshoi

Somojez

Bushka Gora (Drachenbergs)

Proliv Minov

Proliv Paterya

Ussuran Kosar

Traits

Brawn	3
Finesse	2
Wits	2
Resolve	3
Panache	2

Advantages

Cold Climate Conditioning	(1)
Inheritance (Horse)	(2)
Toughness	(3)
Ussuran Accent: Molhyna	(0)

Civil Skills

Hunter

Fishing 2, Stealth 2, Survival 3, Tracking 3, Trail Signs 1

Martial Skills

Archer

Attack (Bow) 3, Fletcher 1, Horse Archery 2

Fencing

Attack (Fencing) 1, Parry (Fencing) 1

Knife

Attack (Knife) 1, Parry (Knife) 1

Polearm

Attack (Polearm) 3, Parry (Polearm) 1

Rider

Animal Training 2, Mounting 3, Ride 3, Trick Riding 1

Income: 12G starting (equipment only)/4G per month.



Ussuran Stelet

Traits

Brawn	3
Finesse	2
Wits	2
Resolve	3
Panache	2

Advantages

Accurate Archer	(2)
Membership: Stelets	(4)
Noble	(10)
Swordsman's Guild	
(Ussura Only)	(0)
Swordsman School	(25)
Teodoran (R/W)	(2)
Ussuran Accent: Any	(0)
Ussuran (R/W)	(1)

Arcana: Rash

Civil Skills

Courtier

Dancing 1, Etiquette 1, Fashion 1, Oratory 1

Hunter

Ambush 1, Stealth 1, Survival 2, Tracking 2, Trail Signs 1, Traps 1

Scholar

History 1, Law 2, Mathematics 1, Philosophy 1, Research 1

Martial Skills

Archer

Attack (Bow) 2, Fletcher 1

Bogatyr School

Lunge (Heavy Weapon) 1, Pommel Strike (Heavy Weapon) 1, Throw (Heavy Weapon: Axe) 1, Exploit Weakness (Bogatyr) 1

Heavy Weapons

Attack (Heavy Weapon) 1, Parry (Heavy Weapon) 1

Income: 60G starting/20G per month



Ussuran Thief

Traits

Brawn	2
Finesse	3
Wits	2
Resolve	2
Panache	2

Advantages

Connections (2)	(4)
Ussuran Accent: Any	(0)
Ussuran (R/W)	(1)

Civil Skills

Pyeryem (Full-Blooded)

Speak 1, Man 1, Mouse 1, Raven 1, Red Fox 2

Acrobat

Break Fall 1, Balance 1, Footwork 2

Spy

Shadowing 1, Stealth 1

Streetwise

Socializing 1, Street Navigation 1

Martial Skills

Athlete

Break Fall 1, Climbing 1, Footwork 2, Sprinting 1, Throwing 1

Dirty Fighting

Attack (Dirty Fighting) 1

Knife

Attack (Knife) 1, Parry (Knife) 1

Income: 21G starting/7G per month

